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Understanding Student Perceptions of Online Learning in Pakistan:A Qualitative Exploration During COVID-19

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Abstract- *A discontinuous transition from traditional classroom instruction to online learning is one of the numerous ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic has affected Pakistan's educational system. As the only viable strategy to combat COVID-19, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan recommended that colleges transition to online instruction. This study examines how students perceive online learning, specifically in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, in light of the sudden and recent occurrence of this shift. Furthermore, the present investigation examines the contrasting perspectives of male and female students regarding this novel pedagogical approach. A qualitative methodology is employed in this study to accomplish this objective. Methods of data collection include focus group discussions, interviews, and mind mapping. Utilizing the interpretivist paradigm, the data gathered through focus groups and interviews is subsequently analyzed qualitatively. The conclusions derived from the qualitative data are further corroborated through the application of mind map results. Male and female perspectives on online learning differ substantially, according to the study's findings. Male students held a more favorable perception of online learning in comparison to their female counterparts. Nonetheless, every single student shares a number of characteristics. Furthermore, online learning was embraced by the majority of students due to the global pandemic.*

Keywords: Online learning, Pakistan, COVID-19, Student perceptions, Qualitative research

How to Cite

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Introduction

COVID-19, a potentially fatal virus that damages the respiratory system, was designated a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 12, 2020 (WHO, 2020). According to the Red Crescent (2020), social isolation is essential for preventing the spread of the epidemic and protecting individuals from its lethal consequences. Physical instruction and learning were subsequently suspended in all academic institutions. Students were briefed on the possibility of studying in front of a screen while at home. In Pakistan, conventional classroom methods continue to be extensively employed, notwithstanding the prevalence of online learning prior to the plague. The transition from conventional to online learning has presented significant challenges for colleges in Pakistan. Both instructors and learners encounter obstacles when attempting to implement online learning. Despite Faculty Support and Capacity-Building Trainings provided by HEC (Academia, 2020), students continue to encounter challenges. The provinces of Pakistan are not distributed resources equitably. Remote students must surmount formidable challenges, such as inadequate access to digital resources and technology, in order to capitalize on this momentous transition (Rafiq et al., 2020). Given the prevailing conditions, it is imperative to assess the states of readiness and perspectives of students regarding online education in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Society as a whole has been profoundly impacted by the proliferation of new communication channels and technologies (Sutton) (2013). A transition from traditional to virtual learning environments has been identified as a consequence of technological innovation (Dennis, 2020). E-learning, also known as online learning, is an example of a computer-mediated education. Multiple digital platforms are utilized to furnish instruction in online learning.

E-learning is an extensively adopted method on a global scale in the twenty-first century (Holmes & Gardner, 2006). Digital resources are utilized to the student body's advantage to the utmost degree possible. E-learning is met with a contrasting reception in Pakistan (Hussain, 2007); for a variety of reasons such as limited access to resources in remote areas, inadequate computer literacy, unreliable connectivity, and insufficient training, the majority of students still prefer conventional learning environments. However, female students face further challenges when exclusively pursuing their education online (Goulao, 2013). Their residences are generally not conducive to learning and they have difficulty managing their time. Male students are more at ease with online learning, however, due to its adaptability and simplicity (Latchem, 2018). Moreover, e-learning is predominantly utilized as a strategy to enhance the learning capabilities of students who are registered at conventional educational establishments, according to Jethro, Grace, and Thomas (2012). Class participation consists of group work, face-to-face communication with instructors, peer assistance requests, social skill development, and the appropriate utilization of digital resources. E-learning cannot always adequately address the

psychological, emotional, and motivational needs of students; therefore, it is possible that completely eliminating the traditional classroom environment would be counterproductive (Kanwal & Rehman, 2017). Furthermore, proficient utilization of diverse software applications to access educational materials is an essential technological competency that students must possess in order to facilitate effective learning (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008). Moreover, the potential consequences of inadequate technology utilization include the development of computer phobia among students, thereby impeding their academic progress (Cheurprakobkit, Hale, & Olson, 2002). Pupils who possess the necessary computer literacy should be the only ones exposed to e-learning. Despite extensive scholarly investigation into the efficacy of online learning (Nguyen, 2015), its challenges (Rana, Rajiv & Lal, 2014), and the instructor's role in e-learning (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007), there remains a need to explore students' perspectives on online learning. The perspectives of male and female students in Pakistan regarding online learning have been the subject of limited investigation (Ashong & Commander, 2012). Recently, every aspect of life on earth has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Education is also influenced by this. In schools with a sizable student body, social separation can be challenging to enforce. The decision to transition from conventional classroom-based instruction to online instruction was rendered by the Pakistani Higher Education Commission. The transition from traditional classroom instruction to online instruction is traditionally challenging for the majority of colleges in Pakistan due to resource constraints. Additionally, the extent to which instructors and learners are prepared for this abrupt transition to digital learning has not been determined through an official survey. The present study endeavors to examine the perspectives of Pakistani students regarding online education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in regard to this transition. Further investigation is sought to ascertain the extent to which gender influences and intersects with students' perceptions. Data analysis is conducted using a constructivist grounded theory.

Subjects of Research

What are the sentiments of students regarding the sudden transition from conventional classroom-based learning to online instruction in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic? • In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, what are the distinguishing and similar perspectives of male and female students regarding online learning?

The Objectives of the Study

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, investigate the perspectives of students regarding online education. Examine how male and female students perceive online learning differently and similarly in the context of COVID-19.

An assessment of the scholarly works

The revolution in education has been brought about by the rapid development of information and communication technologies. Consequently, e-learning has garnered considerable acclaim as a means of enhancing academic prospects. Classroom and extracurricular communication between instructors and learners have been facilitated by e-learning. Moreover, this instructional approach has fostered a greater sense of autonomy in learning by allowing students to direct and supervise their own education. Ong and Lai (2006) and Welsh et al. (2003) define e-learning as a computer network technology that enables individuals to obtain instructions and information via the Internet. E-learning can also be described as an educational approach in which information is distributed through electronic means, including the internet and various technological platforms. E-learning is therefore the application of technology in a pedagogical capacity (Masrom, 2007).

Rapid expansion of e-learning in the education sector is attributable to its cross-sector applicability. It permits significant contributions to learning from both instructors and pupils. Online education offers the advantage of providing education without the need for physical travel. (Srivastava & Agarwal, 2013) He or she may engage in independent study at their place of business or residence. Progress can be made at any moment and in any location. Etherically, e-learning has consequently transformed the conventional learning approach, which mandates physical presence at a designated location at a predetermined time. E-learning has evolved into the most effective and efficient method of instruction, transcending the limitations of distant or remote learning due to technological advancements. Additionally, synchronous interactive environments, asynchronous interactive sessions, self-paced, impure study, and other methods of e-learning implementation are discussed. Individual schedules govern the times at which participants participate in the asynchronous interactive sessions. By engaging in synchronous interactive scenarios, pupils are able to exchange information in real time (Ryan, 2001). Nevertheless, incorporating digital tools into the classroom is not a straightforward endeavor. Intensive training is required to establish a prosperous environment supported by a wealth of meticulously crafted resources (Khan, 1997). In order to develop, construct, and design e-learning programs, therefore, one must have an in-depth comprehension of how students perceive online learning. It is advisable for them to enhance their understanding of the effectiveness of their online resources through further investigation. Successful learning is fundamental to the learners' motivation; therefore, the students' perspective is critical. Without the students' motivation to learn, it would be impossible for education to progress. (Koohang & Durante, 2003) Educators must conduct a critical evaluation of diverse online teaching strategies in order to guarantee that learning is effective.

Challenges Associated with Online Learning

Despite its numerous benefits, e-learning is not without its limitations. The learner must possess a considerable degree of self-discipline and motivation in order to succeed with e-learning, which is a form of independent study (Serwatka, 2003). When learning in person, students are encouraged to motivate and inspire one another. Their exertion in surmounting the challenges was tremendous. Motivation is considered an essential element that empowers individuals to achieve their objectives, as stated by McKeachie (2002). Technology enhances and optimizes the learning process for students. A possibility exists that the concepts will be comprehended more thoroughly due to the assortment of resources. (McKimm, Jollie & Cantillon, 2003) As a consequence, pupils develop increased autonomy and involvement. However, success cannot be achieved solely through the implementation of technology if it is not pedagogically designed in a sound manner (Downing, 2001). The establishment of appropriate infrastructure and the meticulous formulation of institutional policies are critical for facilitating teachers' proficient utilization of technology.

E-learning is being integrated into higher education with the aim of assisting students, and this emerging phenomenon is significantly transforming the course of higher education (Concannon, Flynn & Campbell, 2005). Building technological infrastructure, faculty training, graduate competency, and student satisfaction with digital tools are a few of the challenges that must be surmounted prior to the successful integration of technology into higher education (Surry, Ensminger & Haab, 2005). In addition, obscure strategies and the exorbitant expense of technology have contributed to the demise of several universities (Elloumi, 2004). (Kilmurray, 2003) Numerous universities are encountering difficulties in attaining their goals due to the frequent inadequacy of online courses to meet the needs of students. (Hara, 2000) Consequently, further research is required to address these concerns with an emphasis on online education that is tailored to the requirements of the learners. Online education requires effective instruction and learning, as well as adequate research, operational theories, strategic planning, and meticulous online course development. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020); Hodges et al. (2020); Vlachopoulos (2020) assert that inadequate course design and ineffective strategies will lead to the demise of online higher education.

Variations in Online Education Based on Gender

Online education is further complicated by gender-related concerns. Different genders experience a distinct climate in distance education. Female students who attend classes online have the capacity to attend to both academic and domestic responsibilities (Kramarae, 2003). However, there are instances where they must prioritize household obligations over their academic pursuits. The online learning experiences of male and female students differ significantly in numerous respects due to the

aforementioned discrepancies in obligations. More research is required to identify similarities and differences between the online performance methods of the sexes, according to scholars (Chyung, 2007; Price, 2006), despite the absence of significant differences. Once predominately utilized by men, the internet is now a technology in which the gender gap has diminished. As per recent surveys (Kramarae, 2003; Price, 2006), the number of female students in the online student population exceeds that of male students. Divergences were identified in several domains, including self-motivation, flexibility, face-to-face interaction, adaptability, and student nature, among others, when Sullivan (2001) compared the online learning experiences of male and female college students. Male and female students' online learning experiences differ substantially, according to another study by Price (2006). Female learners exhibit greater self-assurance and autonomy in comparison to their male counterparts. Additionally, there are differences in the interactions between male and female students. In the realm of online communication, Gunn et al. (2003) have observed that female involvement and contribution diverge from that of males. Women send and read a greater number of texts than men. In contrast, null findings regarding gender differences were reported in studies conducted by Astleitner and Steinberg (2005) as well as Ory, Bullock, and Burnaska (1997). The findings of research pertaining to gender differences are therefore inconsistent. The learning experiences of male and female students vary contingent upon the circumstances. As a result, further investigation is necessary to examine the similarities and differences in viewpoints between male and female students.

COVID-19 and the Learning System

Instances of the educational system being vulnerable to external threats have been brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). In addition, the utilization of digital resources to deliver education presents a multitude of logistical obstacles and behavioral modifications (Ribeiro, 2020). In higher education, however, the use of digital technologies is not novel. While instructional technology is utilized in various ways by postsecondary educational institutions, there are numerous challenges that must be overcome in order to successfully implement digital technologies in the classroom (Kopp et al., 2019). Feldman (n.d.) delineated several challenges associated with digital learning in his address to students amidst the pandemic. These challenges encompass the subsequent points: (i) the preponderance of instructors being unprepared to deliver high-quality education remotely; and (ii) the potential negative impact of fear of the pandemic on students' academic performance. Cameron and Green (2019) outlined the essential requirements for the successful implementation of digital transformation, which included an operational management system, accurate and suitable strategies, adequate administrative proficiency, and more. Upper education was profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rapid transformations transpired in response to the challenges posed by online education. Until recently, online education was

considered merely disruptive (Strielkowski, 2020). However, that perception has since evolved. Educational establishments have been forced to close on a global scale due to the plague. To maintain the continuity of education amidst the current closure, academic institutions have devised an online learning environment. The majority of institutions in Pakistan were unprepared for this abrupt transition, whereas many colleges and universities around the world are encouraging online learning and students appear to be enjoying it. Moreover, the implementation of e-learning in Pakistan is hindered by several challenges, such as social isolation, limited student-teacher interaction, and connectivity issues. Geographically isolated students are deprived of internet connectivity. Online learning was not widely acknowledged as an essential element of formal education in the majority of Pakistani institutions until the Covid-19 pandemic. Amid the ongoing lockdown, all educational establishments in Pakistan have been compelled to suspend operations and transition to online tutorials. Video conferencing, e-tutorials designed for continuing education, and pre-recorded e-lectures are among the numerous online strategies under consideration to enhance the efficacy of e-learning.

Moreover, several innovative pedagogical tools have been implemented, such as LMS, Google Classroom, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. As both educators and learners continue to acclimate to this novel system, this period is of the utmost importance. Students' perceptions of this online learning environment must be thoroughly investigated. It is crucial to comprehend the effectiveness of different approaches in order to guarantee the success of online learning. Determining whether gender disparities exist in perceptions of e-learning and how undergraduate students in Pakistan perceive online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic are the objectives of this article.

Methodological approaches

Within the framework of interpretivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), this study examines the diverse meanings and interpretations of the participants. Inductive analysis is employed to generate a wealth of enlightening data through the qualitative method, which places an emphasis on comprehending perspectives (Thomas, 2006). This study applies a qualitative methodology to analyze and interpret the perspectives of male and female students with respect to online learning.

Acquiring Data

Thirty undergraduates enrolled in public institutions in Pakistan and aged 18 to 23 were the subjects of this research. Data collection methods included mind maps, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. The aforementioned two research instruments were utilized to gather the perspectives of both male and female participants regarding online learning in the context of COVID-19. With the exception of the interviews with each respondent, which lasted approximately thirty minutes, the focus group discussions

lasted roughly two hours. To analyze the gender-based disparities in the perceptions of the respondents, fifteen male and fifteen female students were selected. Furthermore, as study data, mind maps depicting participants' perspectives on online instruction in the context of COVID-19 were also requested of a subset of the participants.

Analyzing Information

In preparation for the analysis of the data, the focus group discussions and interview dialogues were transcribed. As an inductive process, themes are derived from the data using constructivist grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Every line of the data was coded utilizing this method (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006) so as to comprehend the perceptions of online learning among male and female participants. Upon discovering a sequential relationship in the data, the investigator assessed and examined the outcomes of the initial coding. Subsequently, during concentrated coding, codes that recurred quite frequently were determined to be pertinent. The investigators subsequently endeavored to ascertain similarities between the coded data sets. In order to define the relationships among the recently derived categories obtained from the data, Charmaz (2014) ultimately utilized lexical coding. As an additional step, content analysis was applied to the thought maps.

Discussion of the Findings

Congruent with constructivist grounded theory, the subsequent themes emerged within the dataset. The readiness of learners to participate in online courses is a crucial aspect that must be considered, according to Smith, Murphy, and Mahoney (2003). Conclusions regarding the students' level of readiness were also derived from the statistics. The prevailing viewpoint among students regarding the decision to provide online courses was captured in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was believed that the authorities should have considered the students' level of preparedness before abruptly transitioning from a traditional to an online learning environment. A quick course to assist students in utilizing virtual spaces for learning should have been established, according to 78% of females, by the authorities.

Certain students may find it challenging to participate in online learning due to the new skills and approaches required for active engagement (Luyt, 2013). According to the students, online learning was deemed acceptable in light of the ongoing pandemic. However, they believed that it could be enhanced in terms of effectiveness through meticulous planning and concise instruction. 63% of male students believed that Pakistani authorities should have considered connectivity issues and student readiness prior to mandating the complete transition from traditional to online learning. In conjunction with the conclusions gleaned from the interview data, the male and female mind maps provided supplementary insights. Explanatory materials include the corresponding mind maps of the students.

Adequate computer proficiency

(Eisenberg et al., 2002) Both instructors and learners must possess computer literacy in order for academic instruction to be successful. Proficiency in the attributes and requirements of online learning environments is imperative for instructors. The aspects of remote learning should be considered in the design of courses. Regarding the course material, the research participants were of the opinion that it had not been revised to correspond with the requirements of online learning environments. The material was difficult to comprehend due to the professors' adherence to the same outline. The shift from conventional classroom environments to online learning necessitates both time and effort (Li & Irbyan, 2008). The allocation of time was regrettably insufficient for the educators. Students must also possess technological proficiency in order to learn effectively (Bawden, 2001). Superior authorities may still employ more effective strategies, despite the fact that transitioning to online instruction appeared to be the only viable option in light of COVID-19. Internet access is limited among a minority of undergraduates who originate from disadvantaged environments. Because they lack computer literacy, they have considerable difficulty keeping up with virtual education. Divergent viewpoints existed between boys and girls with regard to computer literacy.

Predominantly, the males have acquired computer literacy as a result of their extensive technological exposure. Girl users are, however, more illiterate on computers as a result of their restricted exposure. The issue of computer literacy appears to have a disproportionate impact on girls who reside in remote areas. "I reside in a region of KPK where not all households have internet access," said one of the female research participants. Girls, even when the technology is present, tend to allocate their time to domestic responsibilities rather than using it. The utilization of mind maps facilitated the process of triangulating the results. Although concerns related to computer literacy were acknowledged by both male and female students, the females raised these issues more explicitly.

Difficulties in Communication

The communication difficulties encountered by students subsequent to the sudden transition from conventional classroom-based learning to online instruction were elaborated upon by the majority of focus group participants within the framework of the pandemic. Faculty-student communication has been enhanced, according to sixty percent of students, since the transition to online instruction. Pappas (2014) states that educators assume a greater facilitative role in this approach to learning. Furthermore, it was the conviction of the female students that although engagement between students and teachers had increased, interaction between students had diminished. Positive interpersonal relationships are consequently unattainable for students. Contrarily, boys refrained from addressing this particular concern. Girls feel

more at ease in traditional classroom environments as a result of social interactions, whereas boys are more comfortable with online learning, according to the findings. Similar conclusions are supported by the mental map. Online learning is more relaxed and efficient, according to the lads. Despite the current circumstances, every single student believed that it was the most optimal course of action. The subsequent data points depict the perceptions of boys and females regarding online learning.

Responsibility and adjustment

An intriguing motif pertaining to accountability and adaptability was also unveiled in the data. Ahead of discussing the timetable adjustment, students were ecstatic. As an alternative to scheduling their courses at a time that is most convenient for them, many students who struggle to rise early have embraced online learning. Nonetheless, divergent perspectives on flexibility were observed among the student body. 70% of the young men found the classes to be sufficiently adaptable. The thirty percent of men, however, were not fond of this flexibility. They desired to adhere to a predetermined schedule in order to avoid anomalous situations.

Like-minded females comprised the majority. An additional pupil raised the issue of the precipitous and rapid transition that occurs between conventional and online learning environments. Consequentially, both educators and learners are bewildered regarding online education. Academically, students are inadequately prepared to utilize virtual learning environments. Students could still benefit from a brief tutorial on how to utilize virtual space effectively, despite the fact that it was the only way to continue learning in the event of a pandemic.

The instructor's responsibility

Author Brooks (2003) asserts that instructors play a vital role in an online teaching-learning environment. Numerous participants emphasized the significance of teachers in the efficacy of online education, particularly in light of COVID-19. Regarding the role of the instructor, there were no substantial differences observed between the perspectives of male and female students. Nearly all of the participants stated that the efforts and contributions of their teachers made it simple for them to adapt to the new method of learning. In order to facilitate effective online learning, instructors should commence by discussing their course structure and instructional tactics (Kebritchi et al, 2017). Instructors who gave a comprehensive explanation of the new standards, their teaching methodology, the course structure, and the assessment criteria at the outset made their students feel more at ease.

Assessment and Evaluation

Additional issues associated with online learning include assessment and evaluation instruments (Kearns, 2012). It is imperative for educators to meticulously construct equitable and satisfactory evaluation strategies (Williams, Howell & Hricko, 2006). In Pakistan, a novel approach is the whole switch to online education with the aim of preserving social distance. As a consequence, it is taking longer for the higher authorities to develop a final test and evaluation policy (Young-Powell, 2020). Students are confused and irritated by the quick alterations to the exam policies. However, compared to female understudies, male students exhibit greater skepticism regarding assessments (Flaherty, 2015). Universities are considering about open book exams in the current worldwide pandemic environment; sadly, students are not accustomed to this kind of exam. Analytical and critical thinking abilities are necessary for open-book exams (Doghonadze, 2018).

Summary:

The purpose of the study was to investigate how students perceived online education. Additionally, an investigation on the disparities in perceptions between male and female pupils was conducted. Based on the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative technique, the study came to the conclusion that while e-learning is appealing, it can also be difficult for students. Computer-mediated learning is an efficient method for students to learn, but it requires careful preparation and strategy (Muirhead, 2001). All students cannot afford digital resources at home, so teachers and students should be well prepared to use digital resources for successful teaching and learning (Hall & Batty, 2020). In light of Covid-19, HEC made the choice to provide e-learning; while this seemed like a wise move, not all students found the transition to be straightforward. Due to global circumstances, the majority of pupils embraced this method of instruction. Nonetheless, the views of male and female pupils toward e-learning were less alike and more dissimilar. When compared to female students, masculine students had a more positive attitude toward online learning. Women find it more difficult to schedule time at home for their courses. Even while students have embraced this new method of learning, it can still be challenging for them to explain e-learning to their families. Even though the students initially found the abrupt transition to e-learning difficult, they eventually came to terms with it since they saw it as a straightforward way to continue their education. Because they don't want to squander time, pupils were against taking vacations. On the other hand, in order to get the most out of this exercise, students supported brief training for both instructors and students. Prior to making any changes to the manner of instruction, a carefully thought-out training program for both instructors and students should have been set up. It also may have given pupils other options if they didn't have access to digital resources in their hometown.

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