Cultural Barriers and Gender Differences: A Qualitative Study of Issues Associated with Online Education in Pakistan

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Abstract

COVID-19 has emerged as a disaster for people around the globe. Consequently, it has changed the way we live and do things in our everyday lives. This study analyzes the experiences of online education of university students during COVID-19 pandemic. It further explores the ways in which gender effects the online education of the students. The study was conducted in four conveniently selected universities of Lahore, Punjab. In-depths interviews were conducted with 16 research participants and data were analyzed by employing thematic analysis approach. The study found that students, particularly females, were facing loads of hurdles in attending online classes, including non-availability or frequent disconnection of internet, electricity load shading, lack of knowledge about using technology for online education, and time management. This study not only presents lived experiences of students but also suggests some constructive measures to address and curtail the challenges that are being faced by students during online education.

1. Introduction

The Current situation of COVID-19 pandemic has broadly affected almost all spheres of life. However, the crisis it has brought for educational institutions and students is unprecedented. To maintain the social distancing rule and minimize pandemic's damage, governments around the world announced the closing of educational institutions including schools, colleges and universities towards the start of 2020 (Toquero, 2020).The educational institutes in Pakistan also had to close their operations and freeze their semesters. In a result numerous exams were postponed and scores of students botched to enroll themselves in the new sessions at the start of the first of COVID-19's first wave (Mailizar et al., 2020). Consequently, the pandemic forced students and institutes to move to the online education. But there were many obstacles and hurdles in the

conversion of the traditional education system into online education system. Many of the government and private institutions were not able to afford new technologies as moist of them were running at small scale with low budgets, while many parents did not have up-dated versions and modern technologies to be able to help their children to participate in online sessions. Similarly numerous mentors and teachers also lacked facilities of technology (Crawford & Glowatz, 2020). Later, for the survival of education system, the institutes started utilizing available resources and technology to impart education to the students (Kaur, 2020).

The challenges with the online education intensify when we talk about developing countries like Pakistan where people are not trained to use modern technologies (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). On the one hand, educational institutions in the country are unable to digitalize their conventional systems and internet is not accessible to the students particularly living in rural areas (Salam, 2017). There isn't any doubt that lack of access to cheap and fast internet connections has created limitations during the COVID-19 crises in the way of online education. People who live in the rural localities or marginalized areas are affected more harshly than those living in urban areas (Chung et al., 2020).

Furthermore, an extensive discussion has aroused about the quality of online education. Many educationists believe that there is a dire need to ensure quality of online education and to deliver equal quality of online learning to all the students. So, in order to determine the failure or success of online education, measures such as online course development, faculty training and development and pedagogy are taken into considerations. Lack of face to face interaction between students and teachers is a main concern in the online education since the student counseling also requires face-time (Rovai & Downey, 2010).

1.1   Objectives of the study

1. To explore the experiences of online education of university students during the COVID-19pandemic.
2. To analyze the ways in which gender effects the online education of the students.

2.   Review of Literature

Education is among most affected facets of daily life and routine learning activities. The world has witnessed a strident paradigm shift in education favoring the online education during restrains of COVID-19 pandemic (Shetty et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of online education and teachers' capability to teach via digital means like ZOOM and other Apps is debatable. The rapid and sudden transformation from conventional education system to virtual or online learning during COVID-19 has also greatly impacted the attitudes of students towards education and learning (Verma et al., 2020).

Traditional way of learning has an in person interaction between students and teachers. This gives a feeling of togetherness to the students as well as teachers and motives the students to learn in a better way by sharing knowledge and opinions however, few of the aspects are absent in online education (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). On one hand, the long spells of online classes can effect eyes of the students as well as teachers and cause other health issues; on the other hand, a decrease in the outdoor activities, communications and group projects can cause social isolation among individuals (Verma et al., 2020).

While using the online platforms for learning, there are a few factors that can be considered hitches in process of learning for students for example diminished motivation to learning in students, delays in feedback by the teachers as teachers are not always available online to answer

the questions and help out the students. Apart from this, students may feel isolated because of the absence of physical classes and interaction with their classmates (Yusuf & Al-Banawi, 2013).

During COVID-19 crises, both students and university administrations faced a number of challenges. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD),a few prominent challenges that universities around the world had to face include ensuring a balance between online classes and non-digital activities since the absence of balance can affect the health of the students for spending numerous hours in front of computer or mobile screens. Moreover, focusing and analyzing students' emotional health and supporting them throughout the period of online learning was another challenge faced by the students. And universities also need to understand the fact that not all students have access to speedy and uninterrupted internet connections so they need to collaborate with students and provide them the needed support (OECD, 2020). Besides, universities around the world also struggled with keeping the course content relevant to the emerging circumstance and also with recruiting and acquiring students in the new classes (Marinoni et al., 2020).

Students also faced a number of challenges while attending online classes during the COVID-19 crises. A study conducted to know and analyze the perspective of students on online learning identified that students faced challenges like connectivity, accessibility, social and gender issues and unavailability of the up-to-date devices required to attend online classes (Aboagye et al., 2020).

Along with all other problems, COVID-19 crisis has burdened parents' responsibility in different ways. Now, their leading responsibility is to provide students up-dated gadgets such as android mobiles and laptops to attend online classes and submit class assignments. So students from poor backgrounds are facing more problems as compared to those who belong to well-off families. This can be owing to the differences in non-financial parental funding, students' digital skills, and parents' lack of resources It is also observed in many countries that native students or a particular country and migrant students face inequalities in terms of online education (Pietro et al., 2020). Parental involvement as well as reliable and continued internet connectivity is the integral for the success students in online education system. Furthermore, this is also the responsibility of parents to ensure students' focus on their online classes and assignments (Baytiyeh, 2018).

3. Methodology

The present study followed the interpretivist approach to explore and analyze the experiences of university students during COVID-19 crises. Interpretivist approach is used in social research for qualitative data, usually employing methods such as participant observation, focus group discussion and unstructured interviews for data collection (Berger & Luckman 1967). This study was conducted in four conveniently selected private and public universities of Lahore. For the collection of data, in-depths interviews were conducted with 16 research participants including 9 females and 7 males. Interview guide was used as a tool of data collection. Data were collected at the time of complete lockdown in Lahore, thus it was not possible for researchers to conduct face to face interviews with the participants, and consequently in-depth interviews were conducted and recorded via telephone and Zoom App. The data were analyzed by employing thematic analysis approach. The interviews were conducted both in Punjabi and Urdu languages and were subsequently transcribed in English. The transcribed data were reviewed many times by researchers to identify the relevant themes. The data were categorized on the basis of differences and commonalities across emerging themes.

4. Results

The findings of the present research are based on the analysis of the qualitative data. The interview guide's questions were divided into two parts. First part was comprised of personal information and socio-demographics characteristics of the respondents including gender, age, marital status, type of family, geographical location, and educational status while the second part was designed to gain in-depth information about experiences of students regarding online education. Demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in the table below, followed by the major themes.

Table: 1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	7	45%
Female	9	65%
Age(in years)		
20-24	12	75%
25-28	4	25%
Marital Status		
Married	2	13%
Unmarried	14	87%
Family Type		
Joint	9	65%
Nuclear	7	45%
Geographical Location		
Urban	10	63%
Rural	6	37%
Educational Level		
Bachelor	13	81%
M.Phil.	3	19%
University		
Private	5	32%
Public	11	68%

The table 1 illustrates that there were seven male and nine female participants so their percentage was 45 and 65 respectively. Since all the study participants were students, so their age ranged from 20 to 28 years. However, most of the students (75 percent) were in the age group of 20-24 years while other 25 percent belonged to the age group of 25 to 28 years or above. The results show 87 percent of the participants were unmarried and just 13 percent were married. The majority i.e.65 percent of the participants was living in joint family system and other 45percent participants were living in nuclear family. Most of the research participants (63 percent) belonged

to the urban areas while other 37 percent were rural residents. In terms of education, 81 percent of the respondents were pursuing bachelor degree and other 19 percent were doing M.Phil.

4.1 Daily routine during lockdown

During COVID-19 pandemic everyone faced numerous complications in their daily routine particularly university students because following the government orders, universities started to offer online classes which was unprecedented for students. Thus, the students faced various types of obstacles in attending these online classes along with managing daily routine matters in the household. Although a few students were satisfied with the way online classes were being conducted as they said they were comfortable to attend online classes at home. However, most of the students reported that they were not able to attend online classes properly and on regular basis which negatively impacted their academic performance. Participants reported that there was a lot of mess created in daily routine due to COVID-19 since almost everyone was stuck at home and there was merely any routine to wake up early in the morning and fulfill household responsibilities which also created difficulties for students to attend online classes. A female participant argued:

> Sudden vacations and closure of institutes for the unknown period drastically affected daily schedule of almost everyone but student are affected more severely as compared to people from other spheres of life. Vacations have made our life unscheduled and changed our daily routine. When universities introduced online classes, it was initially troublesome for me to attend online classes and follow the hectic routine.

A few participants reported that they used to participate in online classes as mere spectators in order to get away with low attendance rate. Most of the study participants shared their daily routine during the interview which completely reflected that they did not take online classes seriously which not only had an impact on their understanding but also affected their academic achievement. A few students stated that they faced electricity issue as their internet devices were connected with electricity and at the time of classes, there used to be electricity load shedding, consequently, they were not able to concentrate on studies properly. A female participant contended:

> You know there is no fixed timing for electricity load shedding in Pakistan. There is power outbreak every time you sit in front of laptop to take online class. When there is no electricity, the internet router is also turned off so attending class is not possible.

This indicates that particularly female students face more difficulties due to electricity load shedding since male students could go outside of their homes to get internet access or hotspot but females were not permitted to go out. Most of the online classes were conducted in the morning times and females reported to have responsibilities to complete their daily tasks such as cooking and washing of utensils and clothes at homes.

4.2 Lack of resources

Idea of online classes was initially welcomed by most of the students as they perceived this kind of learning more substitute than physical classes during pandemic. But, lack of resources, slow internet connection and unavailability of gadgets such as laptop as well as lack of privacy created continuous disturbance in their online classes at home. In these circumstances, online classes rather became a burden for the students. A female participant stated:

> Unavailability of resources such as gadgets, proper internet and electricity create hurdles for students in gaining online education

successfully. Inaccessibility of modern communication resources like laptop and android mobile phones makes this situation worst for Pakistani students. Especially rural students suffer the most since overall environment in Pakistan's rural areas is unaccommodating for online education.

A number of students couldn't attend online classes regularly due to tight schedule of the classes and connectivity issues. Students reported that it was quite a difficult task for them to find a proper place and privacy at the home during online classes which caused trouble for them. Female participants argued that it was difficult for them to perform their daily chores and manage online classes simultaneously. Same was the case with male students. A male participant argued:

Online education is considered a mere formality by my parents. They think I can perform all the household chores while attending my online class. They simply don't take it as a serious work. I am usually asked to perform outdoor tasks during my online classes. This traditional attitude towards online education will take sufficient time to change.

Apart from this, most of the female students reported that they were not even permitted to sit in a separate room with laptop and internet facility. Most of the families were not supportive and students had to bear numerous issues due to lack of family's understanding of online learning.

4.3 Understanding issues

Research participants also shared their experiences regarding understanding issues in online classes. They reported that reading material provided by the teachers via WhatsApp and Zoom App was not sufficient for better understanding of the key concepts. Subjects such as statistics and mathematics were far more difficult to study online as compared to theoretical fields like social sciences since aforementioned subjects demand face to face interaction for better understanding. Similarly, students also faced a lot of problems in studying applied subjects and practical as they were not able to perform practical during online classes. A male participant argued:

We face frequent understanding-related issues since it is our first exposure to online learning. We are attending classes through Google meet, searching material on Google scholars, discussing concepts on Zoom and submitting assignments via Gmail. So all in all, it is a tiring process which we have never experienced before. On top of this, teachers are also not familiar with Apps like Zoom and Google meet etc., they struggle to manage their classes which ultimately impact our learning.

Students' understanding was impacted by another factor – the long online classes. Most of the students reported that they never got a chance to interact with their teacher as well as their class mates during online classes. A female participant contended:

There is merely any interaction between students and teachers in the online classes. Teachers just prefer to deliver their lectures; they don't engage students in the discussion as they used to do in the physical classes. I learn more in discussions rather than by listening to a lecture thus this kind of online education is adversely impacting my learning.

This signifies that the classic tradition of 'group studies' is also spoiled by online classes that ultimately impacted students' learning. Apart from learning difficulties during classes, online exams were nothing but a mere formality for students as many of them reported that they used to copy paste the answers from internet during exams.

4.4   Online versus traditional classes

With all the issues discussed above, online education is still considered as a substitute to the traditional education. It can be beneficial for those students who may not be able to attend physical classes not only due to pandemic but several other reasons as well. A number of participants reported that if issues are resolved, students could exploit this opportunity of online classes for their benefits. A female participant argued:

> *The online education is somewhat a replacement of traditional education but it has many issues however if these issues are addressed, students can use online spaces for better learning and growth. It would be beneficial for us to stay at home and get degrees with a meager cost but for this, information technology in the country needs massive improvement.*

If issues are resolved, online classes can give university students more autonomy over their learning and permit them to work at a personalized pace however most of our study participants claimed that physical classes were more productive for them.

> *I am waiting for the lockdown to end. There can't be any substitute to the physical classes. Apart from numerous other issues, students of my age are trained to take physical classes from their childhood. We will have to unlearn our 20 odd years to get adjusted with the online classes.*

Participants reported that if they were given an option to choose between online or in-campus classes, they would definitely go for physical classes since this format allow them to socialize and learn from each other as well.

4.5   Gender difference in online classes

Results of the present study clearly indicate that both male and female students equally faced resource constraints such as internet connectivity, computer and privacy issues. Nevertheless, females had to face cultural issues too. For example, female students were not allowed to go outside of their homes to attend online classes even if they were facing internet connectivity issues. Female students were also not allowed by parents to visit their fellow students' places for group discussions and study. Female participants reported that they were not allowed to sit in the separate room to attend classes while electricity load shedding was another issue which badly impacted their learning. A female participant contended:

> *Our male class fellows had solutions to the problems, for instance, power outrage and internet connectivity since they were free to go out of their homes anytime but we (females) have suffered a lot. Online education can be beneficial for only those girls who belong to well-off families and can afford modern technologies as well as tools. Online education would damage academic and professional careers of middle and lower class female students.*

This signifies that government and universities need to provide at least basic equipment and gadgets to the students in order to ensure smooth and equal education for both sexes. This also indicates that country's IT infrastructure needs to be updated on war footings.

5. Discussion

The study found that students' routine was adversely affected during the pandemic days which ultimately effected their learning and overall performance. Rehman (2020) argued in his

study that millions of students were badly affected after the deadly COVID-19 forced government to closedown educational institutions in Pakistan. Moreover, teachers' and students' technical proficiency regarding the usage of online applications like Zoom was also a main factor shaping the overall learning and efficiency of online education in Pakistan. Majority of the study participants reported that they and their teachers were not well trained and equipped to smoothly run online classes thus their online learning was less affected as compared to physical classes. Emmanuel-Frenal (2017) emphasized that it is necessary for students as well as for teachers to enhance their technological skills in order to make online learning more effective. Better technical skills can enable teachers and students to gain updated knowledge and information via internet and interact with each other in an effective way. The study found that both male and female students faced hurdles because of lack of online support, internet issues and power broke down etc. However, female students face more obstacles since they were assigned different gender roles at the households. They were supposed to perform household chores and depended upon males members for internet connectivity (Asanov et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2020; Mishra, 2020).

In online classes, teachers must engage students through expressive and recurrent activities that help students to be focused on whatever is being taught. Huggett (2014) highlighted the importance of meaningful activities in online classes to make them more effective and interactive. The lack of immediate response by the teacher and issues of understanding were also found to be the challenges in online classes during pandemic. These kinds of issues were also reported by Basilaia & Kvavadze (2020), Farooq et al.(2020)and Doyumgaç et al.(2021). Hence teachers should be careful to answer the queries of students immediately. Further, teachers should engage more and more students in the discussions to enhance students' understanding in the online classes. The findings of this study can be very valuable for the relevant government institutions and non-governmental organizations in designing the course contentsand structure for the online classes in future.

6. Conclusion

The present study focused on the challenges faced by university students during online classes due to COVID-19 pandemic. It also explored gender specific issues faced particularly by female students during online classes. In the light of study findings, it can be concluded that both male and female students faced difficulties and resource constraints such as lack of online support, internet issues and power break down. However, female students experienced more challenges because of the patriarchal sociocultural norms and structure of Pakistani society. Female students were dependent on men for availability of internet connection and they were restricted to their houses. Most of the students had no private place to attend online classes which added to their hitches this is why they were not satisfied with this new learning format. This study suggests that online education in Pakistan might not achieve the desired results until and unless students are provided with basic facilitates and female students are not empowered to independently manage their internet connection and go out of their house when needed. It can be concluded that if students, especially females, are not provided with required support and resources, they might not be able to get maximum benefits of online teaching.

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