



## **The Account of Communication Students in Navigating Ways of Learning in the COVID-19 Milieu**

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### **Abstract**

As the world was grappling with the onset of the pandemic, COVID-19, academic institutions had the challenge of ensuring uninterrupted academic sessions. In Pakistan, too, the academia faced many hurdles to shift to the online mode of teaching, which needed spontaneous troubleshooting for academic efficacy. This paper discusses the insights of media education in the post-pandemic landscape of Pakistan. It investigates students' perspectives on mentoring approaches deployed by communication and media teachers and their favorable outcomes. By conducting students' interviews, the study explores how they navigated their paths of learning, and what kind of challenges they found hard to encounter. By interpreting our findings in the context of Mentoring Enactment theory (MET) and an extension of Social Penetration Theory (SPT), we outline the experiences of students in online learning. The paper not only explicates the current situation of digital learning in Pakistan but also highlights and recommends areas of improvement in pedagogic skills. Although online learning has accelerated the digitization of academia in Pakistan, there are serious concerns about the quality of learning. Another notable finding of this study is the role of social media—particularly WhatsApp—in performing the role of an intermediary when most universities were either reviving their LMS or were establishing them from scratch.

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, media education, online learning, Pakistani media education, the pandemic, digitization of academia.*



## **Introduction**

This paper explores the issues of learning faced by Pakistani students (only communication studies students from universities in Punjab) after COVID-19 struck Pakistan in the March of 2020. As universities and higher education institutions across the world switched abruptly to online learning, Pakistani universities also adopted remote learning methods to continue the ongoing semesters in higher education institutions. Within many disciplines in Arts and Humanities, Mass Communication demands more practical considerations. For this reason, a frantic shift to online learning created new challenges and problems for the students of media studies in the country. Thus, in this article, we investigate how media students in Pakistani universities traversed their learning paths and what kind of challenges they found hard to encounter. In other words, here we examine the response of media and communication studies students to online learning in the aftermath of COVID-19 outbreak.

All three authors of this paper are communication educationists; thus, observing and confronting with students' problems during the pandemic was a point of departure for us to write this essay. Having faculty positions in a private university, our teaching experiences during the pandemic convinced us to investigate problems faced by students in online teaching and probe into matters of potential challenges and emerging possibilities, if any. According to the Punjab Higher Education commission (PHEC)'s website, there are seventy-five universities/higher education institutions (HEI) in the province of Punjab at the time of this writing (Universities & Sub-campuses, 2021). There are forty-seven public universities in the province out of which sixteen are offering Mass Communication education. Similarly, out of twenty-eight private universities in the province, thirteen universities (eleven of these private universities are in the metropolis of Lahore) are offering programs in the Mass Communication discipline. In terms of nomenclature, the majority universities have named their departments as Mass Communication, with some exceptions as Media Studies or Communication Studies. For our essay, however, we'll call it the education of media and communication.

To understand the problems of online learning for media and communication students, and to outline the challenges of emergency online learning, we engage in a qualitative methodological framework. Specifically, to determine media students' perspectives and experiences related to online teaching in the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak, we



employ the methodology of respondent interviews. Furthermore, we interpret our findings in the context of Mentoring Enactment theory (MET) and an extension of Social Penetration Theory (SPT). By outlining the experiences of students in online learning, we not only explicate the current situation of digital learning for media students in Pakistan but also highlight and recommend areas of improvement in pedagogic skills.

In Pakistan, a sudden shift to online learning was challenging (Hoodbhoy, 2020; Mulji 2020; Razzaque 2020; Husain 2021) and exposed many areas that need upgrading. The analysis of situational factors for distance learning of media students can be twofold. First, the analysis of factors that students faced because of their circumstances at home, family, and available resources; second, this also encompasses how teachers of media studies managed and carried out their pedagogic duties during a chaotic online shift. In the former case, students faced difficulties related to having/finding a quiet space at home, irregular power/internet supply, access to technology and a high-speed internet etc. For teachers, the problem of being conversant with technology and delving into new ways of student assessment and engagement were a few challenges that compounded the overall situation. Here, we must clarify that for this research, we only investigate the intensity of the situation from students' standpoints. In other words, this paper only considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning of media and communication students.

### **Literature review**

#### **Academic response of communication studies students to the pandemic—a global overview**

Let us now review the available literature on *Pandemic Pedagogy* (italicized because referring to the Facebook site). A considerable amount of research studies started pouring into academic journals of almost all disciplines soon after the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. Williamson et al. (2020) have argued that scholars from myriad disciplines will study the effect of the pandemic in years to come (p. 107). This seems true as COVID-19 brings repercussions that are economic, political, and psychological in nature. Among several concerns that communication scholars have envisioned for students include the increased digital divide (Aziz et al., 2020), the emerging power of the Ed-Tech industry (Williamson et al., 2020), the widening inequalities (Nadaf, 2021), especially for females (Bari, 2020; Lawless, 2021; Shahid & Arfeen, 2021), and the interruption of traditional pedagogic structures (Berry, 2020).



The instant transition to remote learning methods created a huge disturbance in educational institutions. Several research studies (Berry, 2020; Daniel, 2020; Schwartzman, 2020) have contended that the onset of COVID-19 disrupted teaching and learning activities at universities and demanded a hasty adoption of online mode of teaching from instructors. Schwartzman (2020) argued for the pandemic to be a ‘transformative’ component for the field of education (p. 503). The whole turmoil interfered with students’ learning prospects, especially by barring them from the congenial environment of face-to-face learning. This is reflected in students’ letters (Ashfaquzzaman, 2020; Mose, 2020), published in *Communication Education*, wherein students have voiced their fears and concerns regarding online learning in the face of pandemic. The students’ sufferings, thus, merit an analysis of their experiences to identify the impact of COVID-19 on the educational landscape of a developing country such as Pakistan.

As COVID-19 engendered depression, fear, anxiety, and trauma, many scholars (Auger & Formentin, 2021; Lederman, 2020) in communication turned their directions to study emotional distress caused by the pandemic and especially its effects on people belonging to academia. An intriguing fact about the teaching of communications during the pandemic has been some scholars’ (Cotich, 2020; Dean, 2020; Mukhopadhyay, 2020) ambivalent feelings. For example, although Anderson (2020) agreed that online teaching has let students continue their education, she also maintained that remote learning has deprived students of socialization, care, community, and an idea of a shared space. This is especially true for most Pakistanis where many students are first-generation pupils, and thus, the school offers them a unique place of learning with peers, fellow students, and teachers. Such a situation warrants investigation, particularly from students’ viewpoints.

### **Academic response of students to the pandemic in Pakistan**

To discuss the response to online teaching in Pakistan in the aftermath of COVID-19, let’s first look at the situation of online teaching/learning in the pre-pandemic period. In this context, Sangi (2008)’s research is relevant to knowing the status of online learning in the country. Although Sangi’s study presents this analysis from the perspective of assessments, the author’s findings are still relatable. Sangi (2008) identified that only two universities in Pakistan—Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), and Virtual University of Pakistan (VUP)—offered an education at a distance (p. 193). The situation was somewhat similar during



the onset of COVID-19 in the country. This is evident from Hodgson & Shah (2016)'s study, who have argued that the use of technology by faculty in Pakistan largely depended upon the availability of institutional technological infrastructure and teachers' understanding and conception of technology (p. 13). With that, Hodgson and Shah (2016) also alluded to the lack of good technological facilities in Pakistan. This explains that the emergency online teaching in Pakistan posed challenging circumstances to both students and teachers.

By and large, the communication studies departments in Pakistani universities lack resources and technological infrastructure. Having said this, it should also be noted that in comparison to media and journalism schools in Europe and the United States, Pakistani media education institutions are newer, and hence, under-developed. Hafeez and Nauman (2020) alluded to the same fact in their study and argued that it would be unfair to demand the same international standards from Pakistani media institutions (p. 293). Here, it must be noted that Hafeez and Nauman's article was published in January 2020—only two months before COVID-19 (and ensuing remote learning) struck the country. For this reason, Hafeez and Nauman's research is pertinent to the understanding of the pre-pandemic technological situation in Pakistan.

An important fact to consider here is that "Communication Education" in Pakistan is an emerging/developing area of inquiry. For this reason, it is hard to find any significant research study on the problems of teaching media and communication, let alone study(ies) on the impact of COVID-19 on the learning of communication. Overall, there are a couple of studies that outline some details of difficulties faced by students during the pandemic period. Khan (2021) contended that many universities in Pakistan were using a Learning Management System (LMS), i.e., Moodle or Blackboard even before the pandemic; however, the use of LMS was largely confined to attendance, registration, or sharing of teaching materials (e.g., PowerPoint slides, pdf files). Khan (2021) further emphasized the role of social media—particularly WhatsApp—during the pandemic for letting teachers and students continue their teaching and learning respectively. Social media has been especially helpful for students who found formal communication difficult and overwhelming.

In addition to studying the digital divide, the pandemic pedagogy has sparked some scholars' interest in examining how online teaching has affected female students—a relatively disadvantaged section of students in



the patriarchal culture of Pakistan. While outlining the situation of digital disparities in a discussion paper, Shahid and Arfeen (2021) have maintained that digital access and development are gendered in Pakistan (p. 12). Similarly, they further argued that given Pakistan's cultural set-up, a digital divide exists within homes whereby the lack of economic empowerment in females essentially affects their digital access (p. 16). Overall, students' experiences, regardless of their gender, need to be examined to fathom the effects of COVID-19 on their learning. Thus, this paper contributes to the scholarship of Communication Education in Pakistan by examining students' perspectives.

While there is a plethora of discussion in media on the effects of emergency digital learning on students in Pakistan (Neda Mulji, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Faisal Bari, Ayesha Razzaque), there is still a dearth of empirical research in this field, especially for the students of media and communication studies. For this reason, pushing this discussion further, we engage in a qualitative research method of respondent interviews to explicate the online-remote learning experiences of media and communication studies students. Our analysis will not only be a contribution to the existing—albeit scanty—scholarship of Communication Education in Pakistan but will also outline potential risks and prospects of online teaching of this discipline in the country.

### **Methodology**

As mentioned earlier, to determine how the pandemic affected communication and media students' learning, we have used the respondent interview technique. Based on fourteen interviews conducted with graduating (senior) students only, we study the challenges and difficulties faced by students in online learning during the pandemic. For our interviews, we reached out to graduating students only, i.e., students who were in the final year of their undergraduate programs. Essentially, we set out to examine the two main questions: (a) How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the learning of communication and media studies students? (b) In terms of learning, what strategies/tools/approaches have worked the best for students? In other words, the second question investigates students' perspectives on mentoring approaches deployed by communication and media teachers and the favorable outcomes of these approaches.

As the sample size is “terra incognita” in a qualitative study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 129), we initially aimed at interviewing 25 respondents, and then depending on the insights that we gained during the interviewing



process, we altered the number of respondents to fourteen after which student responses ceased to surprise us. More specifically, we approached the departments of all universities that offer media and communication education and interviewed students based on their willingness to participate. Some universities, such as the University of Jhang, the University of Okara, and the University of Narowal, have departments that are only a couple of years old, and thus, having no graduating seniors at the time of this research, we didn't include students from these universities. We especially focused on the HEIs that have established communication and media studies departments in terms of faculty, students, and infrastructure. Thus, our respondents were from all major university departments in the province.

All the interviews were semi-structured and ranged in length from 35 minutes to 47 minutes. Given the COVID situation at the time of research for this paper, all interviews were conducted online—using Zoom or WhatsApp tools. The authors of this paper conducted interviews with students in the months from April 2021 to January 2022. The questions asked from respondents focused on the idea of the utility of online learning and its associated challenges. Additionally, a couple of questions during the interviews also inquired about the deployment of pedagogic tools/approaches by universities or mentors and the effectiveness of these resources. For a thorough analysis of educational experiences during the pandemic, we chose students from three semesters: (a) Spring 2020 (the semester that was disrupted by COVID-19); (b) Fall 2020 (the semester when the precarious situation of COVID-19 prevailed); and (c) Spring 2021 (a semester held under the impending peril of COVID-19 and its variants). The students responded arbitrarily to the questions asked during the interview and answered questions in their entirety.

Before we delve into our discussion of students' responses, we must clarify our choice of students and semesters. First, let us explain the reason for selecting only graduating (senior) students for our study. As the final years of study programs are fraught with job market concerns or higher studies preparation, students, at this stage, usually face time and deadline pressures. Relationally speaking, students in their freshman or sophomore years do not face pressing demands of timely completion of their studies or job prospects. For this reason, senior students could be the best respondents to our research questions for this study. Second, as for the choice of semesters, starting from the onset of COVID-19 to the writing of this paper, there are three semesters in total that fall in line with the given time period. As we do not mean to dovetail the experiences of students in all three



semesters, we chose students randomly from the three semesters. In what follows, we'll explicate media and communication students' concerns from the interview responses and further discussion in the light of Mentoring Enactment Theory and an extension of Social Penetration Theory.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

### **Enduring Pandemic in higher studies**

As educational institutions were held in abeyance after March 2020, the first thing that students suffered from was the situation of uncertainty and unpredictability. Almost all students responded that uncertainty and a fear of the unknown were some initial thoughts that occurred to them when they first heard of educational institutions' closures. In the interviews, we also solicited students about the kind(s) of fear that they had after the beginning of online learning. Many final-year students, who were enrolled in project/practical-work oriented courses (such as Radio/TV broadcasting, online journalism, and documentary making) responded that their biggest concern was the quality of their projects and learning that was going to be compromised because of distance learning. The majority of students had access to devices for online learning, however, in many cases, the devices were neither personal (shared by siblings or other family members) nor were they specialized (laptops/desktop computers equipped with required software). Even some students reported that they had to take their online classes through cell phones for which they had to buy internet packages. Moreover, working on class assignments and presentations on a cell phone was harder than on a computer. The lack of/limited access to computers was a deterring factor in student learning.

### **The Effects of Pandemic on the Learning of Skills for Media and Communication Students**

Although the pandemic affected students regardless of their age, stage, and subject, its effects on the students of media and communication were intense for the learning of necessary skills. As the learning of skills in Mass Communication requires hands-on training and practice, many students shared their concerns about the absence of practical work or the unavailability of essential equipment for audio/video projects. While responding to a question related to 'reaction to online learning,' a student from the University of Sargodha said that she had registered for a course on Film Studies before the start of the pandemic. But as universities were closed, she couldn't do the important 'fieldwork.' "All I could do in such a situation was rely on narratives and reviews," the student responded. Thus, the majority of students argued that although online education facilitated



their theoretical learning, it wasn't, however, helpful for their practical learning in the course. Consequently, students' overall learning in courses that need fieldwork was affected the most.

Another important response related to skill learning was from students who come from remote areas of the country to universities for higher studies. The access to technology-related equipment is even lower for students who come from remote areas of Gilgit Baltistan, interior Sindh, and some areas in the province of Baluchistan. Additionally, dormitories and student accommodations were closed, and thus, many students couldn't stay in the same cities where their universities were located. Being away from their peers, instructors, and technology, the pandemic posed many challenges, especially for those students who came from underserved and under-resourced areas of the country. In this sense, the pandemic exacerbated the already prevalent phenomenon of the digital divide in the country.

### **The problems of Learning intensified by weather**

The severity of the pandemic lasted for more than a year and a half. Many geographical regions of Pakistan have harsh weather, i.e., extreme cold in winter and extremely hot in summer. In their responses, many students argued that extreme weather compounded their overall learning prospects by making things harder for them. For example, a student from Forman Christian College in Lahore shared her concerns on attending online classes in the midst of a summer semester when the heat was quite intense. The student said that she had only one air-conditioned room in the whole house wherein she'd have other family members in the surroundings, talking, eating, or sometimes watching TV. Thus, focusing on the lecture(s), or even answering/taking part in class conversations was very difficult for her. The student further shared that often she would sit in a non-airconditioned room bearing the intensity of the weather only to make her online learning a success. Here, we must mention that almost all students responded about the severity of weather affecting their online learning possibilities. Especially students in the northern areas of the country had several issues related to inclement weather. Some of the concerns voiced by students from hilly areas of Pakistan included poor connectivity and limited mobility, etc.

### **Social Media Sites—Saviors in the pandemic**

The most intriguing finding of this research is the role of social media to further the learning process in higher educational institutions. All



students, with no exception, argued about the advantageous role of social media—particularly WhatsApp—in their responses. The first semester during the pandemic (Spring 2020) was the most difficult time claimed by most students. As the educational institutions' closure happened in the mid-March of 2020 (the middle of the semester), almost all students responded that social media (especially Facebook and WhatsApp) was their first resort. Here, Khan (2021)'s research is pertinent to mention the fact that in the beginning, WhatsApp appeared to be more pervasive and helpful than electronic mails or Learning Management Systems (LMS). In our interviews, the majority students responded that WhatsApp was already in place for faster and stronger communication, both with faculty and peers, when their universities were still developing or reviving the LMS to ensure a smooth online learning experience for students.

Although students generally referred to the overall usefulness of social media during the beginning of the pandemic, it must be noted that the majority emphasized the utility of WhatsApp as a faster, safer, and more reliable tool of communication. According to a student from the Islamia University of Bahawalpur, WhatsApp was easily available, manageable, and accessible for both teachers and students. Sometimes teachers would also send lecture recordings on WhatsApp, which will be available to students for later usage regardless of their internet or electricity availability. A student from the University of Sargodha also reported that for many courses, the department chair or anyone from the administrative staff were also part of the class WhatsApp groups to ensure smooth and regular transmission of online knowledge. In pre-pandemic higher education, even if Pakistani universities had an LMS in place, either students were oblivious to that, or they wouldn't consider it for their learning. After the pandemic, there was an intervening period during which universities established, revived, and updated the LMSs. That interval was filled in by social media for the majority of Mass Communication students. Thus, social media (particularly WhatsApp) proved to be a student-savior for many months to come.

### **Consideration of Future Possibilities**

The pandemic suddenly flung universities into online experiences. We asked our respondents whether they see future possibilities associated with this online learning process or if they see any bright side in the process of being online. Overall, Mass Communication learners think that the pandemic gave rise to the use of online technology, especially for learning purposes. A student from the Government College University in Faisalabad



argued that sudden online learning made them learn, explore, and try new things, which consequently, enhanced their interest in the idea of digital learning. Moreover, experimenting with technology and online tools enhanced students' heuristic capacities. In this context, another student from the University of Sargodha shared that online learning experiences improved his literature searching skills for class assignments, research reports, and other exams. In the pre-pandemic period, although many Pakistani Mass Communication students were familiar with social media and other entertainment-related sites on the internet, it was the first time they became inquisitive about educational prospects on the internet.

Another positive aspect related to online learning is the possibility of multitasking. Since our sample included only graduating seniors, most of them were concerned about developing the experience sections in their curricula vitae. For this reason, there were a couple of respondents who argued that online learning saves time for commuting and campus preparation. Thus, this gave them more time for hands-on training in their career-related fields such as blog/content writing, web development, profile building, editing, etc. By and large, online learning made the student body conscious of digital opportunities and possibilities.

### **Communication in Online Learning—Theoretical Underpinnings**

To situate the findings of this study, we essentially considered the theories of communication in developing relationships. As in this case, the process of communication occurred online, and the traditional theories of relationships do not suffice the mentor-protégé online interaction. As a theoretical framework provides 'orientations' or 'sweeping ways' to fathom the happenings around us (Neuman, 2014, p. 85); thus, we initially considered Kalbfleisch (2002)'s Mentoring Enactment Theory (MET). However, a major limitation of Kalbfleisch's work is that it doesn't consider MET in the context of online communication. In other words, Kalbfleisch (2002) outlines several situations (such as motives, human connection, and cultural set up, etc.) that can impede or affect student learning. However, Kalbfleisch's analysis is devoid of discussion on mentor-protégé relationship in an online context.

Here, a relatively recent article by Mason and Carr (2021) in *Communication Theory* calls for urgency in the revision and expansion of existing communication theories on relationships in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC). While commenting on theoretical considerations in the context of CMC, Mason and Carr (2021) argued that studying relational maintenance in online situations has been—



albeit not completely absent—relatively ignored by many CMC researchers (p. 4). In this context, Mason and Carr (2021) suggest the reconsideration of the Social Penetration Theory (SPT). The SPT, originally proposed by Altman and Taylor (1973) characterizes relationships as processes that occur in varying stages (Miller, 2002, pp. 154-155). Mason and Carr (2021) have attempted to reconsider SPT and have suggested that SPT's extension can be applicable to CMC in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

Both MET and Mason and Carr (2021)'s SPT extension appear to address the challenges and perspectives of online learning for Media and Communication education during the COVID-19 period. However, in this case, the former is devoid of online consideration, whereas the latter lacks the mentor-protégé consideration. In other words, the SPT (along with its extension) needs to be revisited to consider its application to online communication of media and communication students for learning purposes. This is an area that is timely, urgent, and now indispensable in the post-pandemic situation more than ever.

### **Conclusion**

The researchers in this paper aimed at looking into the challenges and prospects that the students of media and communication faced during the COVID-19 period in the province of Punjab in Pakistan. We have essentially studied how communication students responded to the situation where they were restricted to homes and suffered from the fear of face-to-face interaction because of the spread of the contagion. At the time of writing this article, the Omicron variant still looms, and the virus threat is far from over. In this study, we have only outlined the problems and difficulties of students who were able to continue their studies, and thus, graduated. We didn't come across any student who faced parting with his/her educational experience. In any case, we cannot ignore the possibility of dropouts. As our respondents revealed unawareness of students who could've abandoned their studies in the pandemic, we were not able to know about this during our research.

Among many stakeholders (faculty, administrative staff, students) of a Higher Education Institution (HEI), we've focused only on students. At the same time, the effects of the pandemic on faculty and staff cannot be precluded. Both went through many structural and functional changes during the spread of COVID-19, and this profoundly affected their output and productivity. This, however, was not the focus of this study, and thus, can be a future consideration. As we investigated only the problems and



challenges of media and communication students in Punjab, we were outlining the factors that may have influenced the learning. The most shared concern by the majority of respondents was the quality of learning—already discussed as the learning of *skills* in students. If media and communication students were not able to develop the *skills* that they are required to attain for future careers, this potentially leads to a downgrade in quality.

The pandemic's adverse effects on educational quality have gained international importance. A few months before the spread of the Omicron variant, the *New York Times* published an editorial outlining the detrimental effects of the pandemic on school children. Whilst discussing the grave concerns for children, the newspaper argued that the effects have been 'catastrophic' for poor children (The Editorial Board, 2021). This article was written in an American context. The effects of COVID-19 may have been worse for Pakistani educational circles where resources are meager and access to technology is unequal. How exactly the pandemic has affected the already mired quality of education? We yet have to see that.

Another notable finding of this study is the role of social media—particularly WhatsApp—in performing the role of an intermediary when most universities were either reviving their LMS or were establishing them from scratch. For this reason, WhatsApp can be considered the savior of higher education in the country. WhatsApp was not only helpful for academic learning, but it also proved to be useful for providing a space for sharing, empathizing, and cooperating in educational activities. With that said, social media was equally beneficial for teachers as well through Facebook pages (such as *Pandemic Pedagogy* and *Higher Ed Learning Collective*), live streaming of training events, and chat/messaging options.

While online learning has enabled education even during the hardest days of the pandemic, it has exposed many chasms and fissures in the higher education landscape that need to be filled. With that, online learning has accelerated the digitization of academia in Pakistan. Several respondents argued that online educational experiences honed their digital communication and internet search skills. This means that online education has given rise to the digital inclination of academia in the country. Simply put, something that started as a stopgap has opened the possibility of new avenues in digital learning for our students.

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