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Unveiling Social Networks: Exploring Campus Life at Public Sector Universities in Pakistan

Maryam Saeed

MS-linguistics and literature, COMSATS University, Islamabad, Pakistan

| ***Corresponding Author** | maryamawan000111@gmail.com |

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the social networks of students in the public universities of the Federal Capital of Pakistan. Social networks provide students with a set of resources as well as support that is important to students' development, both academically and personally. In the case of universities in Pakistan, little is known about how these networks are formed, maintained, and what the significance of these networks may be for students. We know social networks can facilitate students' intellectual and emotional well-being; the lack of knowledge about social networks is a significant issue. The study uses a qualitative method. Undergraduate students were interviewed to successfully gain in-depth understandings of how social networks operate or develop along with the factors that are affecting them. The purpose of the study was to look at how students develop and manage their social networks, the significance of their social networks for their academic and personal lives, and the role of campus space and policy within the development of social networks. The findings of this study are based on interviews and provide a comprehensive view of the social networks of students at public colleges in Pakistan's Federal Capital. These findings underscore critical factors influencing social network development and maintenance as well as their respective contribution to the students' personal and professional growth.

| **KEYWORDS** | Social Networks, Universities, Social Space |

Introduction

Social networks or communities can provide vital access to support, resources and opportunities to collaborate or work together, and thus have a significant influence on student's academic success, personal development, and career opportunities. Nonetheless, the existing literature on the development or functioning of social networks in public universities in the Federal Capital of Pakistan is limited. Therefore, this study will investigate the social networks of students in public universities as well as examine the facilitators and barriers to developing these networks, and finally present the implications for academic and personal development.

Although cross-cultural experiences might enhance student experiences at public universities in Pakistan, they may present barriers for developing networks. Understanding how students work through barriers related to their experiences will inform how we may better identify barriers and improve student experiences, so that outcomes may be maximized through social networks. While social networks can enhance students' overall mental health and wellbeing through access to supports such as information, emotional support and academic assistance, they may also serve to connect students to profession networks that in some cases may positively impact and support career mobility, advancement and job searches. In regard to method, this study employs

qualitative strategies, specifically utilizing in-depth interviews, to develop a holistic understanding of dynamic social networks. It also examines how institutional policies and campus context contribute to these networks. With a more comprehensive understanding of these environments developed, public Universities may be better able to create more conducive environments for student networking and well-being.

Literature Review

A variety of social, cultural, and academic factors that shape the university experience can be found from studying students' social networks in public sector universities, especially in the capital of Pakistan. To understand students' practices of establishing, maintaining, and utilizing their social networks, this literature review presents the research already conducted in the field and discuss a critical gap in the research that warrants future research design. This review does not claim to be an exhaustive synthesis of the literature, but it does synthesize some relevant concepts using phenomenological methods. Ali and Khan (2018) examine the relationship between academic achievement and social integration in Pakistani university undergraduate students. Their findings suggest students who participate in extra-curricular activities and have well-established social networks are likely to achieve academically. Ali and Khan (2018) contend that social integration provides value to learning by providing requisite emotional support, and better access to sharing resources. But, Ali and Khan (2018) present a gap in the understanding of network formation dynamics because their research primarily focuses on the outcomes of social integration rather than the individual processes of social networks being constructed and maintained.

Hassan and Iqbal (2020) study the social networks forming process first-year students experience in Pakistan's public sector universities as they go through the early challenges of establishing their social networks. The authors note three core obstacles to social network formation: cultural plurality, socioeconomic inequity amongst students, and formal confinement due to strict formal institutional policies that afford limited public spaces for informal socialization.

Therefore, the research indicates that if administrators want to help student engage in networking, it is important to create an environment that is friendlier and appealing. While the research presents interesting ideas regarding barriers in developing networks, it does not include data on how these student networks form, or what strategies they employ the navigate these barriers.

Nawaz and Kausar (2021) researches the impact of physical and infrastructure components of universities on the development of students' social networks. Their research suggest that well-designed campus spaces such as dining halls, sport and recreation centre, and common study space greatly facilitate social interaction, and create active, supportive social networks. Their research thus provides interesting implications for university stakeholders by acknowledging that physical environments play a role in developing social connectivity between individuals. However, they do not offer insight in regard to the connection between physical and other social aspects in regard to the development and maintenance of networks.

There is also phenomenological research which studies the ways in which students navigate their social networks. This research (eg. Moustakas, 1994), offers a framework for investigating students' subjective experience and integrating the major elements of their social experiences. By drawing attention to the importance of an individual phenomenon,

phenomenology can add depth to our understanding of how students engage with social networks.

Research on student social networks from a phenomenological approach has not yet fully developed; what has been researched has focused on more general sociological or psychological issues rather than the particulars of an individual student 's experience. Furthermore, research on social capital theory such as Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986) highlights the role of social networks in the provision of support resources for both professional and personal growth. They describe networks as being important for gaining access to valuable knowledge, psychological support, and educational products. While these authors provide a theoretical framework to think about the benefits of social networks they do not address the challenges of how students create and maintain these networks within the public universities in Pakistan.

Despite several studies conducted, these specific aspects of social network creation and functioning are unclear with regard to particular student communities spanning within Pakistan 's public sector universities .Most of the studies address constructions and results associated with emotional well being, or academic performance very little studies deal with understanding the mechanics of the networks. Even fewer account for how individual strategies ,institutional structure illustrated by the regulations and constraints of the university and how the physical landscape of their "campus" interacts to generate a network.

There is not much to report about the nature and quality of emotional and professional development that takes place within these networks, despite their potential to contribute positively to future career opportunities, emotional well-being and academic accomplishments when it comes to the context of public Universities. This issue highlights the necessity of possessing a deep understanding of the social networking opportunities and challenges presented within public University contexts.

Material and Methods

Data was collected using qualitative data collected from one-to-one interviews with students. This allows insights into student experiences and the education context and the context whereby students' network, in-depth detail. A qualitative methodology was employed to study of the establishing and maintaining of social networks by public sector university students in the Federal Capital of Pakistan. To utilize qualitative methodology allows examination of students' subjective experiences in depth and offers a level of understanding about the dynamics of social networks in a context specific to students. Interviews will obviously be effective for gaining rich, first-person stories in phenomenological research as noted by Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell (2007).

This study evaluates students' social networks of public universities in Federal Capital of Pakistan, through the lens of phenomenology. Van Manen (1990) described phenomenology as "the study of lived experience and the ways we understand those experiences in order to understand a phenomenon" and this will help inform our processes for gathering and analyzing data so that we can capture the students', lived, in the world, experience.

Phenomenology, sees the account of what lays behind experience as perceived by the people themselves, in order to understand what people experience and understand about their world. According to Creswell (2007) and Polkinghorne (1989) the data collection for phenomenology research encompasses interviews with participants, and

interviewees are the primary participants. Researchers who conduct these types of research studies remain distanced from it, by interpreting and writing descriptions of participants lived experiences.

Phenomenology highlights the essence of how students develop, maintain and utilize social networks at public universities in Islamabad. This satisfies the purpose of the phenomenological description, a descriptive phenomenology examines both its essential features and the world of subjects..

The main method selected by phenomenology is in-depth interviews because phenomenology is interested in acquiring a rich, first-hand narrative of participants' lived experiences. As Van Manen (1990) explains, this method can be extensive travel into students' perspectives as they describe their social networks.

Analysis Method

The analysis was proceeded according to the phenomenological analysis steps suggested by Moustakas (1994), as follows:

Interviews verbatim: All interviews were transcribed to verbatim to provide the participants' words.

Reading and re-reading of transcripts: Really examining the transcripts to analyze key phrases and statements.

Generating themes and coding: Meaningful quotes were coded in the way that reflects the primary ideas on the participants' experiences.

Writing descriptions: Writing rich descriptions of the objects in a manner that delineates how/what the students comprehend/did with their social networks.

Validity and Reliability

Member verification was used to ensure validity, which is when people check themes and descriptions to ensure their accuracy. This process aims to ensure that the conclusions of the study represent the experiences of its participants'.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher gathered qualitative data from students using semi-structured interviews. This method aligns with a phenomenological approach, which emphasizes participants' in-depth, first-person accounts of events (Van Manen, 1990). The interview guide was somewhat broad and covered a variety of topics on social networks, including, but not limited to, strategies for network formation, the role of institutional policies, and the impact of social networks on participants' learning outcomes and personal development.

In phenomenological research, it is important to sample homogeneously to ensure participants have similar situations and experiences regarding the phenomenon of study (Moustakas, 1994).

Manage Data

Storage: All data (interview recordings) was stored in a secure place and organized in password-protected digital files (backed up to an encrypted external drive).

Analysis: Qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic coding and narrative analysis.

Integrity: I had conducted ongoing data audits to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data collected. By means of a rigorous data collection process, I aimed to ensure the study provided a rich and thorough understanding of the social networks of students enrolled at public sector universities in the Federal Capital of Pakistan.

Analysis of Data

Moustakas (1994) outlines the steps for phenomenological analysis, ensuring that significant statements and themes are accurately identified and described through the following steps Transcription, Immersion, Coding and Theme Development. Data analysis is conducted by using the thematic analysis. Narrative analysis was used to explore the life experiences of students with their social networks. This approach involves capturing and understanding the event from the perspective of the people who are experiencing it (Moustakas, 1990)

To ensure that the voices of the participants were accurately portrayed, the study focuses on the unique insights they shared about their university social networks. By presenting transcript portions in their original, unmodified format, the researcher preserved faithfulness to the phenomenon.

Importance of Social Networks

- Alex mentioned, "Social networks help us in touch, particularly at large public universities where it's easy to feel lost in the crowd."

- Mia echoed this sentiment, stating, "Social media networks support you in being in touch and informed of events occurring on campus."

Interpretation

In a large university context, social networks are essential for keeping in touch and staying informed, as both Alex and Mia noted. This shows that social networks are an essential tool for helping students deal with the challenges of university life and avoid feeling alone.

Academic and Personal Benefits

- Alex highlighted that social networks support educational activities: Study groups that can be formed online are essential during the time for exams."

- Mia also mentioned academic benefits: "I have started a group on WhatsApp with my classmates to share notes, talk about assignments, and even discuss plans for studying in a group."

Both students utilized social media for academic benefits. The fact that study groups can be made, and resources can be shared online is evidence of the value social networks have for academic support. They can promote personal well-being if they lead to a sense of connection and community.

Struggles in Large University Environment:

Alex commented that he felt overwhelmed: "It could be too much. Because of the number of students, sometimes getting your support can be tricky."

- Mia had similar frustrations: "It can be frustrating sometimes when you are dealing with the admin side of things also. And sometimes it could be hard to find the right kind of support when you need it."

Due to the size of the university, both students had trouble navigating challenges such as paperwork and difficulties accessing support services. These difficulties highlight the necessity for larger universities to provide greater support systems to assist students in effectively solving these problems.

Recommendations for Improvement

- Alex suggested, "More assistance programs would be beneficial, particularly for first- year students. Maybe more work should be put into developing local communities within the main university."

- Mia recommended, "Increased accessibility to support services would be very beneficial. Additionally, developing more organized avenues for student interaction, such as small networks focused on interests or mentorship programs."

Mia and Alex suggested expanding the university's support services and establishing smaller, regulated communities. The goal of these recommendations is to improve the environment at university, especially for new students.

Integration of Social Networks into University Services

- Alex stated, "Better integration of social networks into student services by the university, such as the creation of official departments or interest-based organizations, might have a significant impact."

- Mia added, "It would be extremely beneficial if the institution could use social media more effectively to establish official groups or platforms where students could interact and access content with simplicity."

According to both students, social network connection might greatly improve interaction and resource accessibility within university services. Student navigation of campus life could be improved by official university-endorsed places or venues that facilitate communication and support more efficiently.

The thematic analysis emphasizes how important social networks are to improving students' academic and personal experiences at Pakistani public universities. Social networks boost academic success, help students feel connected, and provide a feeling of community.

However, the scale of the university and the simplicity of access to support services make it hard for students. Students suggest establishing smaller communities, expanding support services, and incorporating social media into formal university programs as solutions to these problems. Enhancements could facilitate students' achievement in both their academic and personal lives by helping them understand campus life.

This study, which involved interviews, has yielded results that show us how students at public universities in Pakistan create and use social networks. The study has provided evidence that social networks that were created and maintained significantly co-relate with some aspects influencing the personal and academic developments of undergraduates.

Importance of Social Networks

There is a crucial role of social networks in keeping students informed and connected in higher education universities as both Mia and Alex emphasized. Social networks are thought to be essential for both educational and social advancement.

Personal and Academic Benefits:

Benefits: Alex and Mia join groups by using social networks to find roommates and navigate the campus. These networks give them a sense of community and belonging.

Educational Benefits: The two participants brought attention to academic benefits like studying in groups, exchanging ideas or even accessing some study materials through social networks and these were also used by their professors for updating purposes.

Overall Campus Experience

Positive Experiences: Both participants enjoyed diverse campus activities and clubs, which enhanced their university experience. Alex enjoyed cultural festivals and the debate club, while Mia valued her involvement in the environmental club.

Challenges: They faced challenges like feeling overwhelmed by the large university environment, bureaucratic hurdles, and difficulties in finding support.

Conclusion

The study illuminates the key role social networks play in the academic and personal advancement of university students in Pakistan's public sector institutions, particularly in the Federal Capital. The findings demonstrate, through phenomenological inquiry, that social networks serve as important tools for individuals facing large, sometimes daunting, institutional environments, because they provide emotional assistance, academic group involvement, and facilitate connection to additional professional and co-curricular opportunities. The institutional context also suppresses social networking opportunities by marginalizing informal space, maintaining strict administrative control and institutional openness, and the sheer number of students within an institution. Participants in the study (Alex and Mia) saw the benefits of social connection, and identified the struggles they encountered forming those connections in large public universities.

Both participants suggested structured improvements, such as providing better support services, forming small community groups, and developing a more formal inclusion of social networks within the university system. The findings highlight the importance of institutional support and developing space to support inclusive, supportive, interactive social contexts that allow for maximal student potential. The implications of this knowledge can be useful to educational policymakers and administrators if they are interested in developing opportunities for student engagement, retention and overall development through beneficial, intentional social networks. They should anticipate the

barriers to social networking and develop active processes, plans and strategies (rather than adopting an incidental process).

Recommendations

Support Services: Both participants suggested the need for more accessible support services, especially for first-year students.

Smaller Communities: Creating smaller, structured communities within the university could help students feel less lost.

Integration of Social Networks: Better integration of social networks into student services could enhance connectivity and resource accessibility.

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