

Chapter 14

COVID–19 and the Digital Identity of Faculty: Pakistani Universities as a Case in Point

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ABSTRACT

Based on Bennett’s theoretical framework, “The Digital Practitioner,” rooted in Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need, this mixed-method study investigated the digital identity of the Pakistani universities’ faculty in the COVID-19 context. The data revealed that the faculty is willing to adopt digital identity with modesty, empathy, and positivity while the negative feelings like fear, risk, and mistakes have been accepted with optimism. The implications of the study guide the policymakers in academia to reflect on the teachers’ digital identity and address their fears and challenges through institutional support and proper professional development opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the new coronavirus wreaked havoc on everything from global markets to social rituals (Schulten, 2020). It has also tremendously affected teachers’ professional lives and, unfortunately, will most likely have a long-term impact on future academia. Regardless of the fact whether the faculty is prepared for it (McMurtrie, 2020), they were asked to switch towards online teaching by creating and implementing a new mode of studies catering online education system (HEC, 2020). However, conducting online classes on a national level proved to be a herculean task (Desai et al., 2020). Technologically advanced countries have well-placed e-learning and e-education system, but this is not the case in most low-income countries like Pakistan (Farooq, Rathore and Mansoor, 2020). Despite a variety of challenges, Pakistani universities managed to switch from traditional in-class face-to-face education to online teach-

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ing (Shah et al, 2020). Thus, on a short notice, faculty all over the country started teaching in front of the computer screen and their student took their classes while being at home. Consequently, researchers and educators started investigating the impact of this pandemic upon the daily operations of academic activities worldwide (McAleer, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Kong, 2020; Stein, 2020).

It's also important to know the context of Pakistan's educational institutions. The standard of higher education in a third-world country like Pakistan is not pleasant (Abbasi, 2020). In Pakistan, there are 211 universities, 128 of which are public and 83 private (HEC, 2020). One private university and twelve public universities are reserved for women only. Pakistan, being a patriarchal society, favors a separate school system for women, which appears to be out of reach due to financial constraints (Shahnaz, 2021). This desire, however, is met by a notable network of Islamic institutions known as Madrasas (Mushtaq, Sadiq, and Ijaz, 2014), which not only provide a segregated education system for both genders, but also free tuition and boarding to students (Zaidi, 2013). The government, on the other hand, backed public institutions as a matter of national interest (Akhtar & Kalsoom, 2014); nevertheless, private universities rely on their own funds to exist. Nonetheless, considering Pakistan's financial crisis and current austerity plans, government funding for public sector education, which accounts for nearly 70% of operating expenditures, is grossly inadequate today. The government of Prime Minister Imran Khan, which took office in 2018, slashed the higher education budget by 37% in 2019, withholding the amount previously provided to the HEC (Higher Education Commission). The government has set aside Rs. 58.50 billion for the fiscal year 2019-2020, even though the universities' real needs are Rs. 103.5 billion. Universities in the public sector are unable to pay salaries and pensions to their employees due to a lack of funds. In order to keep costs under control, public universities have recently increased tuition fees and banned recruitment (Khattak, 2020). As Pakistan is far behind in the cutting-edge area of technology, the slogan of the present government was "*Digital Pakistan*" which remained only a dream as according to initial assessment of HEC, out of 205 universities, only 40 universities are well equipped to carry out online classes successfully (DAWN, 2021).

Education and identity are inextricably bound together as there exists a strong relationship between teacher's beliefs and practices and their effect on pedagogical practices in class (Nykqvist & Mukherjee, 2016). Therefore, the professional identity of teachers can be regarded as the basic of educational awareness and professional knowledge (Voinea & Pălășan, 2014). Teachers' identity is constructed as a response to the needs of the students they teach. The need for access to digital resources increased in early 2020 due to which the term 'digital identity has been recognized. Consequently, researchers and teachers started paying attention to the relationship between teacher's educational identity and the use of the latest technologies to facilitate student-oriented learning (Dexter & Anderson, 2002; Ertmer, 2005; Judson, 2006; Kaplan & Flum, 2012).

1.1 Purpose of the Study

In Pakistan, the slogan of HEC (Higher Education Commission) for next 10 years is "Smart Universities" and it plans to extend the Smart Campus project to all the public sector HEIs by 2025. Furthermore, since the early 2020, Pakistani universities have switched from traditional in-class face-to-face education to online teaching due to COVID-19. The online transition took place without any guidance, with little or no preparation, with the uncertainty whether this situation is permanent or temporary and with the untrained teachers who were supposed to go online sources to get the instructions related to online classes in case of any trouble (Cutri, Mena & Whiting, 2020). This whole situation created chaos like

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