

## **Social Learning Sites in Higher Education: Needs and Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to find out student's experiences towards learning through social learning sites (SLSs) such as YouTube, blogs, Wiki-spaces classroom, Edmodo, Skype, Academia.edu, Research Gate etc. in sharing and learning new things or ideas in higher education and the challenges they faced. The participants of the study were students of BS Hons (Final semester) and MS from Lahore College for Women University, Lahore. 23 semi structured in-depth interviews and 2 focus group discussions with students were conducted. Thematic analysis was used to analysis the narratives of participants. The study concludes that SLSs are playing important role in social interaction and making new connections around the world. SLSs are of vital importance in distance education because it helps to take online lectures/notes from forums of different universities around the globe. Students are using SLSs for different learning purposes like to access online libraries, E-learning, E-books, exploring various databanks for research purposes etc. Shortage of computer Labs, outdated computers, weak internet connections, lack of competency in handling latest software were some of the challenges faced by students hampering the effective use of SLSs. The study recommends immediate and serious steps need to be taken by government and administration to improve quality of education at the college level. Students must be encouraged and facilitated to use SLSs keeping in view its benefits.

**Keywords:** SLSs (social learning sites), student learning, higher education.

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## Introduction

The online platforms like Social Learning Sites (SLSs), e-learning, social networking services, or social media are used by people, particularly youth to interact with other people who have same interests in personal activities but they came from different backgrounds (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008; Wang, Chen, & Liang, 2011). There are unlimited SLSs available on internet, that it becomes a difficult choice, which one to follow. Twitter created in 2006, is one of the most popular social networking site. Mostly users share information with the help of micro blogging. A blog or weblog is an online journal, where different types of people participate for dialoging about a particular topic (Du & Wagner, 2006). LinkedIn is another networking site which was launched in May, 2003. Usually LinkedIn people associate with other users in their work keeping a list of contacts of those peoples they trust and know. (Papacharissi, 2009). IDL (Integrated Digital Library) is advanced systems which gives simple and one step access to all electronic resources. We can search and browse all databases, e-books, e-journals, and references in digital library by subject or alphabetically. In 2005, YouTube was launched that is a video-sharing website. It allows people to share user generated videos which are created by worldwide groups of different peoples. Academia.edu is an online community that helps academics around the globe to connect to each other and follow latest research in their domains. Similarly, ResearchGate is a professional network for academia. There are more than 400,000 members using this site free. The members can upload research papers, share new research, and search for job opportunities and event happenings around the world etc.

SLSs has become very popular way of getting access to the latest developments in education. Students has gradually started using these technologies to enhance their learning performance (Dror, 2008). Studies have indicated that 90% and above college students use social networks in America. Alexander (2008) stated that Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and other SLSs are very essential to support online learning that occur through the community networking such as chatting, wall posting, tagging and content sharing. Yang (2009) stated that blogs increase the critical thinking of students. Gruber (2009) concluded that social media conformed its ability that it enhanced the communication among or between students, people and different industries. Institutions of higher education as an industry best suited to adapt social media. It also provide students an opportunity to get feedback from their follow students. The growth of SNSs is rapid in higher education, and colleges and

universities has started adopting them as an opportunity to improve or support academic activities (Wheeler & Yeomans, 2008; Rosmala, 2011). Kevin & Lori (2010) stated that distance education is growing as a very important means of coaching. The use of education-based SLSs is most effective in distance education courses as a technological tool for improved online communications among students in higher education.

Learning with online technologies is a difficult task. There are many challenges students face in the use of SLSs in education such as privacy, taking up time, poor computer labs, lack of support, low internet connections, and miscommunication etc. Studies have shown that users had deep reservations about privacy of their personal information on online sites, but be less than vigilant about safeguarding it (Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini, 2017). The study conducted by (Anderson, 2007) showed that the amount of time spent by individuals online effected their health. Spending more time on SLSs could affect the way the genes operate within the human body, and weakens the immune and hormone levels and function of arteries. In addition, it also has an impact on mental health. Moreover, the excess use of SLSs could cause lack of motivation towards learning, as sometimes it becomes boring sitting in front of computer for a long time, especially when the internet connection is very slow. Furthermore, all the students don't get same opportunity to get benefits of learning through SLSs. They face difficulty in communicating their views through SLSs. The students weak in writing skills find it extremely difficult to continue on SLSs. Thus, some of these challenges relate to individuals whilst others are related to technologies, teachers and educational authorities. There have been reluctance shown by the teachers, particularly at the college level to shift to the new technology, lack of preparation by the authorities to understand the needs of the students, no planning to equip students to this new technology are some of the issues among others. At higher education levels, both teachers and students have to understand that these social technologies are influential to learning. More efforts are required to get maximum use of social media and online technologies in the educational activities. (Hemmi, 2009).

In Pakistan, the use of Internet is increasing day by day. There are about 20 million internet users in the country. And 2.2 percent internet users belong to Pakistan from the total internet users of Asia (Group In, 2011). The researchers had found positive impact of social media and social networks on education and students of Pakistan (Tariq, Mehboob, Khan, & Ullah, 2012). The study further indicated that at higher level of education, social media was very important tool for communication among students and teachers. Social media filled the gaps in

communication that existed for many years. Facebook, Twitter and other sites are more helpful and beneficial for gaining knowledge. Ali (2014) concludes that in 1980s, the libraries in Pakistan started to use word processors and spread sheets. Rafiq and Ameen (2012) stated that digital media has become very popular around the world and the same is happening in Pakistan. The terms of digital transformation and e-initiatives like e-health, e-Government, e-information portals and digital libraries etc. are getting popular in Pakistan. Shabir, Mahmood, Hameed, Safdar, Muhammad & Gillani (2014) stated that in Pakistan, social media like Facebook, Twitter etc. are being used as research tools. Ahmed, S., Mustafa, Ullah (2016) stated that due to the expansion in social networks, the social networking sites provide users enough or much more services to maintain their relationships. Ahmed, Zahid, & Shoaib (2016) found that YouTube is one of the most popular websites worldwide and in Pakistan. It is localized in 76 languages and receive more than 1 billion unique users visiting to watch over 6 billion hours of videos every month and uploading 400 hours of videos every minute.

However, in spite of importance of use of online technologies, the colleges/ universities had failed to integrate ICTs/SLSs into teaching and learning. They are using these advance technologies just to replicate the traditional practices and content. Effective integration requires a transformation process at the higher education level, where all stakeholders must involve to re-examine the existing structures and practices. Bates (2000), stated if universities and colleges are to successfully adopt technologies for teaching and learning, drastic steps need to be taken. Indeed, the effective use of technology requires a revolution in thinking about teaching and learning. There is need to restructure universities and colleges – that is changing the way higher education institutions are planned, managed and organized. ICTs/SLSs provide a great opportunity to raise the quality of teaching and learning processes. Colleges are the base for strong higher educational skills. But, unfortunately, this level is ignored the most in our country. The teaching-learning process is more teacher-centered than student-centered. No systematic efforts are taken to transform this process in the era of unlimited possibilities. Students on their own are challenging the rigid outdated system of education, and demanding seriousness from the authorities to overhaul this system. Many of the developing countries have been shifting to new technologies to improve their learning process successfully (Anderson, 2007).

Summing up, all the major stakeholders in an institution must be aware of the existing ICT facilities, services and their importance in

relation to their specific tasks. Tusubira and Mulira (2004) concludes that the authorities were mostly ignored of the ground realities and had vague information about computer labs and other online technological facilities. Lack of awareness goes along with attitude. Positive attitude towards ICTs is widely recognized as a necessary condition for their effective implementation (Woodrow 1992). Full involvement of all stakeholders in the implementation process is a key to addressing awareness and attitude problem. Formally organized awareness programs, visits to similar institution where success has occurred, and short trainings can contribute to raise the awareness and change the attitude of stakeholders towards facilities and services. This research aimed to find out the popularity of SLSs for educational purposes among students. Further, the difficulties students faced in the access and practice of SLSs in higher education. This study will be helpful in understanding the needs of students in higher education in this period of advance learning and technology. This study is based on students' experiences and bring forward challenges they face and their solutions.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Understand students' views about the importance of SLSs in higher education.
2. Explore students' experiences in the access and use of SLSs in higher education.
3. Find out the challenges students face in learning through SLSs in higher education;
4. Suggest steps at the policy level to address students' needs towards effective use of SLSs in higher education.

### **Method**

The interpretive approach was used to get in-depth information about the phenomenon of students' learning experiences in using SLSs in the Pakistani socio-cultural context. The phenomenological design was used to achieve research objectives of the study.

### **Participants**

There were 23 students from different departments of LCWU. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. Only those

students who had been using SLSs for educational purposes were part of the study. Furthermore, the researchers also conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs). However, the participants in FGDs were both using and not using SLSs. The FGDs provided very fruitful information regarding the needs of the students for using SLSs effectively. There were almost 8-12 participants in each group within the age range of 20-24 years.

### **Research Instrument**

The researchers conducted interview with each participant for about 20-30 minutes duration. The FGDs were of about 60 minutes each. The interviews and FGDs were conducted both in English and Urdu languages. The interview protocol was based for tentative broader questions. There were mainly 3 questions addressed in the initial interview protocol, (i) what students think of SLSs as an important source of learning in higher education? (ii) What type of challenges students face in using SLSs? and (iii) what steps must be taken at the policy level to address students' needs in the effective use of SLSs? Then after some interviews, researcher developed some sub themes from the field data. It was an iterative process to consult the theory and then go back to the data, make some changes and again go to the field. Audio recording was used to record the data. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

After transcribing 23 interviews and 2 FGDs, the data was coded and categorized. The researchers categorized the data with the help of three major themes and twenty-five sub themes derived from the responses, similar phrases of participants in depth interviews and focus group discussions. The steps in qualitative analysis included (i) preliminary exploration of the data by reading through the transcripts and writing memos, (ii) coding the data by segmenting and labeling the text (iii) using codes to develop themes by suggesting similar codes together (iv) connecting and interrelating themes and (v) constructing a narrative (Creswell, 2002). The researchers also gave pseudonyms during writing of analysis with their original age and use participant's narratives. The findings from the in-depth interviews and FGDs were integrated to draw conclusions

## Emergent Themes from the data

Table 1

*Major themes and sub themes*

Themes	Sub themes
Importance of learning through SLSs for Students	a. Flexibility b. Repeatable c. Social interaction & new friendships d. Convenience & Accessibility e. Authentic & Accurate Information f. Academic confidence g. Bright future prospects
Challenges faced by students in using SLSs	a. Security & Privacy b. Attitudes towards E-learning c. Time-consuming d. Distraction e. Too much rely on SLSs f. Lack of Technical Support g. Poor Infrastructure h. Lack of Administrative Support i. Localization of content j. High Cost of Internet k. Accessibility/ Low Band width l. Computer Illiteracy
Policy Measures for effective use of SLSs in higher education	a. Transforming Higher Education b. Professional development (students, teachers & staff) c. Update & sufficient computer labs d. Technical support/ Strong internet connection; subsidized students' packages e. Provision of Funds/ Soft loans to students f. Subscription of Data bases/ Journals

## Importance of Social Learning Sites in Higher Education

### Flexibility

Flexibility is one of the most attractive features of online learning. The combination of face-to-face and e-learning makes learning process very interesting. Most of the participants stated that social learning sites

gave a vast variety of knowledge about every field of life whether it is related to education or household. In FGDs, participant further discussed the importance of different search engines in learning like, Wiki-classroom, Kindle, and Edmodo etc. Another participant expressed, *“we have online interviews and surveys, we just put the topic on a certain page regarding our research and people comment on our question”* (Hira, 21). Many participants used SLSs for filling questionnaires for research purposes through different sites as well as for online polling of different questions.

### **Repeatable**

The SLSs provides a great opportunity to see an information/video again and again for the purpose of memorizing. Hence, the SLSs offers a learner a possibility of repetition, which is mostly not available in the conventional classroom situation. *“I download the material, I want.... and retrieve it later”* (Rida, 20).

### **Social Interaction/Friendships**

Participants indicated that in social interaction, SLSs play an important role in this era. Almost everyone has accounts on one of these sites. Now people share good relationships with strangers with whom they make friends through social media. Two-third of the participants said that their interaction with teachers, fellows, colleagues as well as family was totally dependent upon SLSs. They used it to exchange different types of information as well as their syllabus and reading materials. They were able to collect information from all around the world. A participant shared her experience, *“...when I was working on my ACP project (Active Citizen Program), I had to interact with many people who were conducting the same program in Britain as well as in US, so I made many new friends and interacted with them. In this way, we got the chance to know more about culture and there was a big culture exchange and exposition as well”* (Rida, 20). It is a major source to connect with people around the world as it also helps in connecting with those family members and friends who were far away from us. One of the student said that, *“It’s a platform from where you can interact with people, can give your suggestions, can indulge in debates, and can exchange the ideas”* (Amna, 20). Two-third of the participants also thought that these sites are used for enhancing friendships because we are able to make friends from all around the world.



### **Convenience & Accessibility**

One of the participants shared, *“I think it is the biggest advantage that students can take from SLSs and come on, it’s free and you can Google (search) anything through internet. If you have a query and want to know it, just write a single word and you will access a lecture about what’s taught in Harvard and Gayle, you can access that... I have access that in the same way”* (Bisma, 23). Participants expressed that SLSs helped in time saving as you can find anything in just one click. When we compared it with previous use of libraries, it has been very useful. As one participant mentioned, *“Sites are easy in assess but in libraries we have to go and search for different books, it is difficult to find different books”* (Ramsha, 22). Moreover, they expressed that through YouTube, we were able to attend lectures on any topic easily without any cost. Participants were of the view that nowadays the study of higher education is totally depends upon SLSs as it helps in making assignments, presentation as well as notes which were given by teachers. Further explained that, *“Social learning sites were firstly used mostly for distance learning but now it has become a necessity. It helps us to download online books, articles etc. and it is an easy way to get education which is not available and also you can study ingroup”* (Amna, 20). Participants also discussed about the importance of taking online classes as well as online exams.

### **Authentic & Accurate Information**

Participants further discussed about the validity of data from internet as compared to libraries. One of the participant mentioned that, *“If we want to advance our studies or we want to compete with other countries, then obviously we need to do our studies through internet”* (Iqra, 24). Another participant shared her views, *“I use Facebook for learning purpose because I have liked so many pages which are very informative, which are very much my kind of things which I like. So, I like reading quotations”* (Maria, 24). About half of the participants used SLSs to get authentic literature such as articles from Academia.edu, ResearchGate and various other online libraries. *“We use Research Gate and J-store for journals and other sites which are authentic and authentic thesis are also available on HEC website”* (Aman, 22).

### **Academic Confidence**

In Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participants expressed that some students were not so much talkative so, they could share their thoughts through chatting and online discussions. The group shared the example of a girl who was very introvert and hesitate to talk in public, however, she was very expressive in group chatting on Myspace and other forums. One participant shared her views in the words, *“SLSs are basically a tool for freedom of expression for every individual. Every individual has access to give opinion about anything and talk bluntly about any issue. They may belong to any age group or class and they are free to talk.....”* She further explained that, *“...You can judge everyone’s opinion and also their mentality. Social media marketing is very amazing. Through social media now you can start your business at home”* (Hira, 21). Participants also expressed that SLSs plays an important role in highlighting new talent through different videos and people are able to get jobs through these videos. People are able to start their business at small levels using E-commerce.

### **Bright Future Prospects**

All the participants agreed that SLSs would play an important role in the future education in Pakistan. Those institutes/colleges who are not focusing on this technology will not be able to compete with others. One participant thought, *“It will play a big role because now everywhere is internet and technology... without this we don’t have anything now. If any institute don’t use it they will backside themselves, so it will play very important role in future and is playing at present as well”* (Maria, 24). Participants further discussed that it was also important in competition with developed countries to use SLSs. Another participant shared, *“It will play very important role, but it depends on usage..... If you are using it in proper way with good use of SLSs, it will help to compete with developed countries. Now it is important to use these things because now in developed countries they are using SLSs very much”* (Bisma, 23). In focus group discussions, participants also talk about the ways to promote the use of internet and SNS in schools and colleges also like universities in future, because it would be an important part of future education system.

## **Challenges in Effective Use of SLSs**

### **Awareness and attitude towards E-Learning**

All the participants agreed that they use SLSs on their will. Rubina (20) stated, *“Teachers themselves don’t use SLSs.... I think they even don’t knowhow to use this rich online resource”*. Another participant shared in FGDs, *“there is no environment to use SLSs for learning...most of the students don’t use computers at all...they think it’s for fun and waste of time”* (Nourain, 20). These statements of students clearly show non-seriousness of authorities towards the use and promotion of SLSs in their college.

### **Accessibility/ Low Band Width**

Two-third of the students complained about the difficulty in the access of SLSs. *“In college, we have the online facility and I try to complete my work, while being in campus. I don’t have Wi-Fi connection at home”* (Rubina, 20). Another participant differed and said...*“Although we have facility of online in college, but its bandwidth/speed is very very slow. I couldn’t do my work here, I always work at home”* (Maria, 23). Almost all the participants in FGDs also complained about the bandwidth/speed of the internet. *“I rely more on books, which are in hand, than online resources.....there is no guarantee if they will work on time or not??”* (Nourain, 20). Thus, one of the biggest challenge students faced in using SLSs is the access to internet and even if the service is available, its bandwidth is very slow. This makes the process of downloading a single article a very lengthy one. Further, all the participants from the outstations agreed that the internet connections at their home towns are also very weak, which further adds to the problems of these students.

### **Poor Infrastructure**

The students faced problems due to old computer systems in the computer Labs. The systems are not compatible with the latest versions of soft wares, creating problems for students. *“I don’t have personal laptop, computers here (college) are from the previous century”*, (Rabia, 21). Another student expressed, *“it’s just waste of time to sit in the computer Lab.....I prefer to sit Library rather...”* (Fouzia, 22).

### **High Cost of Internet**

Almost all the participants agreed that most of their pocket money was spend in paying for the internet connection at home. One of the student shared, *“I’m able to manage my internet connection with my pocket money.....tries to do downloading in college”* (Amna, 20). In campus, students have very limited free time, and as shared by students, it takes long to download articles in this limited time at a very slow speed. *“I’m thinking for a while to update or change my computer.....to be compatible with latest software needs....but don’t have the money”* (Hira, 21). Some of the students also criticized Chief Minister Laptop Scheme as they don’t got laptops.

### **Distraction & Time-Consuming**

About half of the students shared that although the SLSs are very effective in learning process, but they don’t understand how to get exact information. One of participant in FGDs expressed, *“...every time I tried to get help from SLSs, I get lost.....It’s very de-tracking and time consuming. I’ve finally stop using these sites”* (Lubna, 23). Same views were of another participant, *“It’s very rare that I’m able to get exactly, what I need. It’s always that I end up somewhere else”* (Parveen, 22).

### **Lack of Administrative & Technical Support**

The participants shared in FGDs that they had learnt by themselves or through friends how to use internets, particularly, educational websites. *“No training or sessions were arranged for using SLSs in our college. Our teachers also don’t help us...”* (Rohi, 20). This challenge faced by students also limits the use of SLSs in higher education.

### **Computer Illiteracy**

Although most of students generally know how to manage computers, but still a large number of students, particularly, coming in rural areas, have difficulties in handling computers. Many of the students cannot operate basic computer programs like Microsoft Word or PowerPoint. Further, web literacy is also a challenge for many students. *“I don’t have specific programs to open my downloaded files... I don’t know how and from where to get these programs/soft wares”* (Amna,

20). *“There is no one in college to help us....they don’t answer our queries”* (Lubna, 23). Because of the non-availability of proper softwares/programs, participants found it difficult to use SLSs.

### **Localization of Content**

More than two-third students faced the challenge of understanding the online material available in the local context. One of participant outburst *“.....it’s not an issue for science students, but I always find it difficult to understand my psychology context without local examples”* (Maria, 23). Another participant added, *“I don’t understand how to defend my arguments without any examples”*, (Rohi, 20). *“The online content is very difficult to understand. I mean it’s written in very difficult English”* (Parveen, 22).

### **Privacy & Security**

Presently, the social networking sites, which are also being used for educational purposes like Facebook, Twitter, Instant messenger and blog etc. are open for anyone who wants to participate. The participants of the study expressed their worries in this aspect. *“I’ve heard that people (females) get harassed online.....my family is very strict, I can’t afford such things....it’s better to avoid”* (Lubna, 23). Although, it’s up to the individual how much information to be shared online, but almost all of the participants agreed that personal information shared online is not safe. *“How safe is my information while I register online? ....and who will use it for what purpose....can’t be guaranteed by anyone”* (Gul, 20). Therefore, privacy was one of the main obstacle faced by students. All the students unanimously stated that no sessions ever conducted by college to inform students about safety protection measures at the internet.

### **Policy Measures**

#### **Accessibility/ Strong Internet Connections**

The students were very expressive, in sharing their needs to maximize the use of SLSs. The students very much realized the effectiveness of SLSs but want authorities to facilitate them. *“The speed of internet downloading must be very fast like in other developed*

*countries of the world*”, one of the participant Rubina (20) demanded. This was the need of almost every participant, the researchers interviewed.

### **Professional Development**

The capacity building of both teachers and students is a great challenge in the effective and efficient use of SLSs. The computer literacy must be made part of the courses taught. *“We are not given any assignments or projects to do by using SLSs, I use them for my own benefit”* (Aman, 20). *“I want to learn computer, but no course is offered at the college”* (Sadia, 22). Many of the students also urged to learn new softwares, but again no training is offered at the college. Both the teachers and administrators need to work together.

### **Subsidized Student Packages**

The students stressed to provide internet connections on subsidized rates. The participants clearly stated that they can't afford to have net connection easily. The government has to come forward and take-up this need of the students to improve the quality of higher education.

### **Providing Soft Loans to buy Laptops/Computers**

Another important challenge in the use of SLSs is the lack of computers/laptops with the students. The students mostly work at home and particularly when they are out of town. It is important that they have personal computers to work at homes. Again, the government have to come forward and work on this need of the students seriously. This is very difficult for girls, specifically, to buy computers. *“I could not have money for my whole life to buy a laptop, but if provided soft loan, maybe I can think about this...”* (Rashidha, 21).

### **Technical Support: Up-to-date & Sufficient Computer Labs**

One of the participants said, *“There must be more computers in the Computer Lab. Everyone can't afford to have laptops”* (Asma, 20). Rohi also confirmed this statement by adding, *“Whenever I went to the Computer Lab, it's always full.....girls were just sitting there, and chatting.....they don't give space to the ones who really want to work”*

(Ayesha, 22). Further, the computer labs must also provide update soft wares and programs needed to use SLSs. *“If I’m able to get latest softwares from my college, it will be like a dream comes true”* (Rubina A, 23).

### **Subscription of Journals/Databases**

All the students stressed that at college level, most of the online libraries, journals and data bases available were not subscribed by the college. Hence, they were not able to read the full article. *“My brother studies at University, he helps me to download full articles”* (Rubina, 23). The other participants also suggested that this facility must be provided free of cost even when they are working at home.

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

This paper aimed to identify and analyze the access and practice of SLSs by students in learning through SLSs in improving quality of higher education. Further, the purpose of the paper was to highlight major challenges faced by students and steps to be taken by higher authorities to meet the needs of students. Thus, the study informs both research and practice about which factors to give priority when designing and/or researching e-learning. The study got significant importance in the Pakistani context, where the concept of learning through SLSs is relatively new and requires immediate attention by the authorities. In the present setting, where use of SLSs is very new among students, particularly at the college level, the students were in a state of confusion. They were fully aware of the importance of learning through SLSs, they lack support and guidance both from teachers and administrators.

All the students overwhelmingly agreed over the benefits of using SLSs in higher education. They admit it as a major source to connect with people around the world. This finding is consistent with the previous researches also. Ahmad, et al., (2016) stated that SLSs provide a lot more services to the users than expanding social connections or for the maintenance of relationships. Osharive (2015) also concluded that social learning sites helped people to be better informed, enlightened, and keeping abreast with world developments. Paul (2013) stated that SLSs promotes interaction between the people and the students of different places and universities. Kevin, et al., (2010) stated that distance education as a primary means of instruction is expanding significantly at the college and university levels. The present study also highlighted the

advantages of using SLSs for improving quality of education in higher education as perceived by the students. The students told that SLSs helped in getting new updates about new technologies and advancements in education. They are beneficial for sharing different things with peers and others, and can do online group studies resulting in the development of creativity and analytical skills. Students shared their experiences of using various SLSs, preparing assignments, participating in online discussions etc.

The study clearly indicates that not all the students at the college level were using SLSs. There were majority of the students who were not computer literate and just wonder how they can benefit from SLSs. In the FGDs, the students very opening explained the reasons of not using this advance technology. One of the major and foremost challenge was computer literacy. Female students coming from distant areas mostly don't know handling of computers and specifically, web-based knowledge. It is worth mentioning here that there is difference between operating Facebook, YouTube or Myspace etc. and using SLSs for higher education. It's a skill to find out the material needed for study without wasting time. Further, hardly any assistance was being provided by teachers or administrators in this regard. Moreover, even those students who could manage computer operations, were not competent enough to use SLSs effectively. They definitely need training to maximize their potentials in this field. The college authorities must arrange specific training workshops both for the teachers and students. It is very evident from this study that due attention by the college authorities was not given to improve quality of learning by using SLSs. It's mostly students' individual efforts to take advantage of this advance technology. As shared by the participants, there was no persuasion by the teachers to use SLSs in completing projects or assignments. This casual attitude both by the teachers and administration actually hinders the improvement of quality education. The college level provides a base to the students to pursue higher levels of education.

There is a lack of proper services available at the colleges for encouraging students to use SLSs. The computer Labs were ill-equipped meeting the demands of modern technology. Moreover, there was a shortage of computers and those available were mostly outdated. The study found that students also faced problem in getting latest versions of the softwares and programs. About two-fourth of the students did not possess their personal computers/laptops. The college timings were very limited; libraries and computer Labs also get closed according to the office timings. No special arrangements were made by the colleges to



open Computer Labs for students after the office hours. This situation also limits the use of advance technology in higher education. As mentioned, majority of the students did not possess personal computers, and even those who have this facility, do not have internet connection facility at home. There are no special packages available for students to use internet for educational purposes at cheaper rates. The government must introduce this facility for students, if we intend to improve the quality of higher education. Further, strong internet connections have also become the need of the hour. The students become frustrated and lose interest in SLSs if the bandwidth was very slow. This facility is directly related to the quality of education. Moreover, provision of computers/laptops on soft loans is another area needing attention of the government. Such policy measures must be initiated by the authorities for facilitating students. Serious efforts must be taken to promote use of SLSs in schools and colleges to improve the teaching learning process in Pakistan.

In the recent years, there has been a tremendous increase in the adoption of e-learning in higher education in the developing countries. And extensive research has also been undertaken to explore its impact for institutions, practitioners, and students (Holtham & Courtney, 2005). However, the focus of most of the research has been on designing e-learning courses, teaching pedagogy, tutor interventions etc. The objectives have been mostly teacher-centered rather than student-centered. The reason is very obvious as this technology is relatively new and some of its domains remained under researched. In the last decade some attempts have been made to evaluate the e-learning programs from students' perspective also. Moore and Aspden (2004) taking a student-centered approach undertook an evaluative study examining the blended e-learning experience of students at Sheffield Hallam University. The researchers concluded that students had concerns over the access of internet, printing costs and low level of ICTs skills. Further, studies exploring students' experiences showed low participation of students due to issues around time and time management (Allan, 2004), access to a SLS from home and institution (Atack and Rankin, 2002) and lack of clarity about the task (Moore & Aspden, 2004). Importantly, the reasons may also be highly individual but collective also. Mason and Weller (2000) report on a large scale data set of students from the UK Open University, "*Reading though all the feedback data from students and tutors is like standing at the apocryphal Spaghetti Junction and watching cars going every which way. Some students call for more group work; others want none at all. Some are disappointed in the course*

*content; others find it the perfect marriage of both vocational and academic skills. Advice fumes the air.” (Mason and Weller, 2000, p. 197).* Hussain (2007) conducted a survey of 387 students in their final undergraduate year at the Virtual University of Pakistan. He concluded that majority of students (over 90%) found SLSs very beneficial in their studies. The further reported problems faced by students like difficulties in accessing computers, electricity failures, non-friendly learning environments, and lack of support by teachers. More than 90% students also shared personal health issues such as backaches, computer vision syndrome, headaches, finger joint pain and dizziness due to long periods sitting on computer mainly due very low band width. Although, amidst the varied experiences of students towards SLSs, it is not possible to ignore them. Students’ experiences are valid and important in forming an effective policy towards a sustainable development of e-technology in the country.

The findings from this study would help to provide a preliminary platform for research on the use of SLSs in educational settings. Students had very clearly identified the potential benefits of using SLSs in higher education, as well as challenges they face and ways to overcome these challenges. Results from this study provide new directions on how to best utilize SNSs to meet the needs of students. Ozkan and McKenzie (2008) reported that teachers need to engage students more with a modern approach to learning and social networking technologies can provide such opportunities. The SLSs such as Edmodo, Research Gate, also provide an alternative to teachers over the conventional methods of teaching. They can give exposure to their students to the myriad of educational benefits associated with using SLSs. Further, the concern of students over privacy and safety can be addressed by putting appropriate checks on the registered sites (Brady, 2010). Furthermore, the incorporation of SLSs into education will have a positive impact on the higher education. Based on students’ responses, it is evident that they are calling for the incorporation of e-learning technologies into educational practices. Finally, attitudes on e-learning should be considered. In Pakistan, SLSs are considered beneficial, but it is still not regarded as a proper tool for delivering education; it is still second best and not perceived to be ‘as good as’ traditional face-to-face teaching.

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