Social Networking as a Learning Resource for Persons with Visual Impairment

Rukhsana Bashir[1], Ghulam Fatima[2], Misbah Malik[3], Mahwish Safdar[4]

[1, 2] Department of Special Education, [4] Institute of Education and Research, University of the Punjab, [3] Division of Science and Technology, University of Education, Lahore, PAKISTAN.

[1] rukhsana.dse@gmail.com, [2] missfatima_dse@yahoo.com, [3] misbahmalik907@yahoo.com, [4] mahwishsafder@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Social networking sites are designed to foster social interaction in a virtual environment. Social networking facilitates communication and interaction among people by creating, sharing, and exchanging information and ideas posted in the profile. It allows users to choose friends and post public messages on one another's walls. People can make different academic groups to share professional information and knowledge. Persons with visual impairment are also using social networking but limited research is available about how persons with visual impairment interact on social networking sites. The main objectives of this study were to 1) identify types of social networks used by persons with visual impairment 2) describe how persons with visual impairment use social networking websites. Thirty five (35) persons with visual impairment (selected through snowball sampling technique) from different universities of the Punjab province participated in this study. A self-developed structured interview schedule with five open ended questions was used to elicit responses from subjects of the study. Data were analyzed by using codes and deriving themes from information gathered from persons with visual impairment. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations were made.

Keywords: Social networking, virtual environment, persons with visual impairment, academic groups

INTRODUCTION

With hundreds of millions of users worldwide, social networks provide great opportunities for social connection, learning, political and social change, as well as individual entertainment on a large scale. Social networking services are defined as Web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system. These individuals articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd & Ellison 2007). Young people are consuming, producing, sharing and remixing media. This has led to the claim that today's young people are "producers" who actively produce and consume media (Bruns, 2008). This participatory media environment enables young people to engage in creative content production, empowering them with new means of creating and sustaining connections with others (Bennett 1998 & 2003; Coleman, 2005).

Support received from social networks can buffer stress and improve coping in all stages of life. Many studies have stressed the close relationships among personal network characteristics and the mental and physical health of adults (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Cauce et al., 1994; Robinson, 1995). There is an evidence of a broad range of benefits to young people associated with the use of Social networking i.e. Media Literacy, Formal Educational Outcomes, Informal Education and Learning, Creativity, Individual Identity and Self-Expression, Strengthening Social Relationships, Belonging and Collective Identity, Building

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and Strengthening Communities, Civic and Political Participation, Self-Efficacy and Wellbeing (Collin, P., Richardson, I. and Third, A. 2011).

The view that online and offline social networks can affect learning engagement is consistent with a number of well-established theories emphasizing connections between individuals. Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) asserts that learning happens via learners' interactions enabling negotiation of meanings. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) asserts that individuals learn by observing others (models) and by copying behaviors perceived to lead to desirable outcomes. The theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) suggests that an individual's behaviour is affected by subjective norm— the perceived beliefs of the individual's peers. Nonetheless, learning thus attained may differ from what instructors aim to achieve; for example, social networks may be used to learn strategies for achieving formal success by superficial learning with minimal learner engagement.

Several studies examined the networks of persons who were chronically ill or had a (physical) disability. Their results regarding the effects of disability on relationships are summarized by Lyons et al. (1995) including reduced network size, reduced social contacts, changes in social space, remodeling of the network, including other persons with health problems and professionals in the network, higher percentage of kin members, lower number of friends, less shared activities, and increased value of relationships. Earlier research shows that visually impaired Dutch adults feel dependent on other persons and have lack of mobility and social contacts (Habekothe and Peters, 1993).

Limited research is available about persons with visual impairment interacting on social networking sites. Online sites are often considered innovative and different from traditional media such as television, film, and radio because they allow direct interaction with others. Persons with visual impairment being important segment of society, require to have close interaction with their own community and general public as well to become useful members of society. Today, the world has taken the shape of a global village due to information communication technologies and social media. The persons with visual impairment cannot remain socially isolated in this era. Keeping into consideration the importance of issue the present study "Social networking as a learning resource for persons with visual impairment" was conducted.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify different types of social networks used by persons with visual impairment.
2. To describe use of social networking websites by persons with visual impairment.
3. To find out problems faced by persons with visual impairment in using social networking sites.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology can be discussed under the following headings:

Population of the Study

It was a quantitative type of research. The population of study consisted of all persons with visual impairment (students and professionals).

Sample of the Study

Table 1 gives a detail of demographics of respondents.

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Table 1. Demographics of the Respondents

Variables	*Details*	*%*	*Description*
Gender	Males with Visual Impairment	91.4	Majority of the respondents (91.4%) were male
	Females with Visual Impairment	8.6	
Level of Severity	Blindness	80.0	Majority of the respondents (80.0%) were blind
	Low Vision	20.0	
Age of the Respondents	20 – 25	14.3	Majority of the respondents (62.9%) were between the age of 26-30 years
	26 – 30	62.9	
	31 – 35	8.6	
	36 – 40	5.7	
	41 – 45	8.6	
Status	Student	48.6	Majority of respondents (51.4%) were working in public and private institutes
	Working	51.4	
Province	Punjab	97.0	Majority of respondents (97.0%) belonged to Punjab province
	KPK	0.03	

Sample of study comprised thirty five students and working persons with visual impairment (Male: 91.4% & Female: 8.6%) selected through snowball sampling technique from twelve major cities of the provinces of Punjab and Khyber PukhtoonKhah (KPK). Among these thirty five persons with visual impairment, 80% were totally blind and 20% were low vision. Their age ranged between 20-45 years (20-25=14.3%; 26-30=62.9 %; 31-35=8.6 %; 36-40= 5.7%; 41-45=8.6%). Out of thirty five (35), 51.4% persons with visual impairment were working in different public and private institutions whereas 48.6% were enrolled in different degree programmes. Most of the participants (97%) belonged to the province of the Punjab and only (03%) were from the province of KPK.

Instrument of the Study

A self-developed structured interview schedule with five open ended questions was used to elicit responses from persons with visual impairment. The questions were about types of social networks, purpose of using these networks and problems faced by persons with visual impairment in using these social networking websites. The interview schedule was got validated by some distinguished persons with visual impairment.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected personally by the researchers through conducting meetings with the local respondents and on telephone from persons residing in far flung areas of the two provinces. The participants were assured that confidentiality and anonymity will be observed.

INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

Responses to each question are being presented in tabulated form.

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Question No 1: What kind of media tool you use for social networking?

Table 2

Responses	*Frequency*	*Percent*
Facebook	15	42.0
Twitter	1	2.00
LinkedIn	2	5.00
Skype	9	25.0
YouTube	2	5.00
Email	6	17.0
Total	35	100

Majority of persons with visual impairment (42.0 %) responded that they used Face book as media tool for social networking. (25.0 %) answered that they used Skype and (17.0 %) were using email. (5.0 %) were connected with LinkedIn and YouTube and only (2.0 %) were using twitter as media tool for social networking.

Question No 2: How much time you spend on using social media?

Table 3

Responses	*Frequency*	*Percent*
Several times a day	17	48.5
Once a day	7	20.0
Several times a week	6	17.1
Once a week	2	5.7
Rarely	3	8.6
Total	35	100.0

Majority of persons with visual impairment (48.5 %) replied that they used social media several times a day, (20.0 %) answered that they got engaged with social media once, (17.1%) responded that they used social media several times a week, (8.6 %) were of the view that they rarely used it and (5.7%) used social media tool once a week.

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Question No 3: For which purpose you use social networking?

Table 4

Responses	*Frequency*	*Percent*
To Connect With People	6	17.1
To Collaborate And Share Ideas, For Experiences And Interests	11	31.4
For Educational Purpose	13	37.1
For Entertainment	2	5.7
To Build New Social Communities	3	8.6
Total	35	100.0

Majority of persons with visual impairment (37.1 %) used social media for educational purpose. (31.4 %) used it for sharing of ideas and experiences, (17.1 %) used it to connect with people, (8.6 %) used to build new social communities and (5.7%) used it for entertainment.

Question No 4: What kind of activities you perform by using different social networks?

Table 5

Activity Performed	*Responses*		
	Yes (%)	*No (%)*	*To Some Extent (%)*
Communicating with relatives	68.0	25.0	5.0
Communicating with friends	72.0	20.0	5.0
Looking at or posting photos	37.0	37.0	25.0
Looking at videos and sharing with others	37.0	28.0	25.0
Sending or receiving messages	71.0	20.0	8.0
Responding to/reviewing events/invitations	60.0	37.0	2.0
Adding or removing friends	71.0	17.0	11.0
Play games	48.0	34.0	17.0
Enjoy music	62.0	25.0	11.0
Forming new social and academic groups	48.0	40.0	11.0
Commenting on photos	42.0	40.0	17.0
Creating events and sending invitations	42.0	28.0	28.0
Getting academic information from others	80.0	5.0	14.0
Posting notes	51.0	22.0	25.0
Registered in on line courses	51.0	37.0	11.0
Participate in on line seminars/conferences	57.0	31.0	11.0
Getting contact information (email address, phone number, etc.)	48.0	40.0	11.0

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Table No 5 depicts the activities performed by persons with visual impairment by using social networks. Majority of respondents (68.0%) used social media to communicate with relatives, (72.0%) used it to communicate with friends, (71.0%) used social media to send or receive messages, (60.0%) used it respond to invitation and review events. (71.0%) answered that they did use it to add or remove friends. (62.0%) replied that they did use it to enjoy music. (80.0%) used it to get academic information from others. (51.0%) responded that they used to use it to post notes. (51.0%) persons with visual impairment answered that they did use social media for getting registered in on line courses. (57.0%) responded that they used it to participate in on line seminars/conferences.

Almost half of respondents (48.0%) replied that they used social media for playing games, forming new social and academic groups and getting contact information (email address, phone number, etc.) from others. A few of respondents (37.0%) answered that they used social media for looking at or posting photos, looking at videos and sharing these with others.

Question No 5: Which kind of problem do you encounter while using social media?

Table 6

Problems	*Frequency*	*Percent*
Message reading and typing	15	42.0
Not orientation to internet usage	9	25.0
Could not read newspaper on net because of non availability of JAWS software in Urdu	27	77.0
Could not comment on pictures and videos posting on face book	25	71.0
No difficulty	4	11.0
Installation of JAWS programs	20	57.0

Table 6 indicates the problems faced by persons with visual impairment during use of social networks, (77%) persons with visual impairment reported that they were facing major problem of non- availability of JAWS software in Urdu, (71.0%) responded that they faced difficulty in pictures and comments posting on face book and (57.0%) persons with visual impairment reported that JAWS software was not installed in computers, (42.0%) replied that they could not comment on pictures and videos posting on face book, (25%) reported that they are lacking in knowledge of internet usage and (11.0%) said that they face no difficulty while using social media.

FINDINGS

The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. Majority of persons with visual impairment (42.0 %) reported that they used face book as media tool for social networking.
2. Almost half of persons with visual impairment (48.5 %) use social media several times a day.
3. (37.1 %) persons with visual impairment were of the view that they used social media for educational purposes.
4. A large number of persons with visual impairment (80%) replied that they used social media to get academic information from others.

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5. (72.0%) persons with visual impairment did use social media to communicate with friends.
6. Almost half of respondents (48.0%) used social media for playing games, forming new social and academic groups and getting contact information (email address, phone number, etc.) from others.
7. (77%) persons with visual impairment reported that they were facing great difficulty in using social media due to non-availability of JAWS software in Urdu reading.
8. Most of persons with visual impairment (71%) could not comment on pictures and videos posting on face book.
9. (71.0%) used social media to send or receive messages and adding and removing friends.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, social networking is playing a vital role in the social, academic, personal and professional uplift of persons with visual impairment. Most of these persons use the tool of face book for social networking. It is a proven fact that a large number of persons with visual impairment use social networking for the acquisition of academic information, to communicate with friends and relatives, for sending and receiving messages, adding or removing friends, enjoying music, responding to events and invitations and participating in on line seminars and conferences. Almost half of persons with visual impairment use it for playing games. A few of persons with low vision use to look at photos and videos and share these with others. A great number of persons with visual impairment were facing difficulties on account of unavailability of JAWS software in Urdu. Furthermore, JAWS software has not been installed in computers in most of the institutions which aggravates the situation. In addition to this, theycannot comment on pictures and videos posting on face book because images are not found by jaws software.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made on the basis of major findings:

1. Persons with visual impairment should be encouraged to use all tools of social networking as the present study has shown that most of these persons are using only facebook.
2. Computer laboratories should be made disability friendly equipped with modern information technology resources for persons with disabilities in general and for persons with visual impairment in particular.
3. JAWS software in different languages should be installed in computers used by persons with visual impairment.

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