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TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL MEDIA INTEGRATION IN PRIVATE COLLEGES OF KARACHI: A QUALITATIVE THEMATIC STUDY

Komal Malik Shivji[1], Dr. Meher Rizvi*[2]

[1]*Research Associate, Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan*
*[2]*Associate Professor, Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, Pakistan*

[1]komal.malik25@alumni.aku.edu, *[2]meher.rizvi@aku.edu

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Corresponding Author: *
Dr, Meher Rizvi

Abstract

This qualitative study examined teachers' and students' perceptions of social media integration in teaching and learning at two private colleges in Karachi, Pakistan. Guided by connectivism (Siemens, 2005) and Kietzmann et al.'s (2011) social media honeycomb framework, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers and focus group discussions with 8 students and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that teachers recognized the pedagogical value of YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp for enhancing learning, engagement, and communication, but concerns about distraction, privacy, workload, and professional boundaries constrained integration. Students valued teachers' accessibility, responsiveness, and supportive online communication. Three key themes emerged: teachers' beliefs influenced adoption, professional and institutional concerns constrained integration, and constructive digital engagement strengthened teacher–student relationships and learning motivation. The study highlights the contextual importance of responsible social media integration and offers implications for teacher professional development and institutional digital-learning policies in Pakistani educational settings.

Introduction

Background

Social media platforms have become embedded in the daily lives of young people worldwide, and Pakistan is no exception: recent estimates place the number of adult social media users in the country at roughly 54.38 million, or about 38.9% of the adult population (DataReportal, 2024). For students transitioning from secondary school into higher education in the Pakistani system, the intermediate or "college" level spanning Grades 11 and 12 (Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, 2023) social media is frequently used for informal learning because it is perceived as more engaging and accessible than traditional instruction (Khan & Raza, 2021). Yet the purposeful, pedagogically grounded integration of these platforms into college-level teaching in Pakistan remains inconsistent (Khan & Raza, 2021), and many teachers report feeling unprepared to use social media confidently and effectively in their teaching despite having access to the technology itself (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010; Ali & Hameed, 2024).

The bulk of existing research on social media in education has examined either teachers' or students' perspectives in isolation, and has concentrated on secondary or university levels rather than the intermediate college context that bridges the two in Pakistan (Khan & Raza, 2021).

Comparatively little work has examined how teachers' stated beliefs about social media are experienced and interpreted by the students they teach within the same institutional setting (Arshad et al., 2022).

Research Problem and Gap

Teachers' perceptions of social media vary widely: some regard it as a valuable pedagogical resource, while others are wary of its potential for distraction and its erosion of their own digital confidence (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). This variability matters because teachers are primary mediators of whether and how any technology enters the classroom (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). At the same time, students — as the intended beneficiaries of any such integration — have their own interpretations of teachers' digital behavior that are rarely solicited in the same study as teachers' own accounts. This creates a gap: much has been written on teachers' or students' views of social media separately, but comparatively little research has paired the two perspectives within the same classrooms to examine how teacher belief becomes manifest in practice and how that practice is, in turn, read by students (Arshad et al., 2022).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore, qualitatively, how teachers at two private colleges in Karachi perceive the integration of social media into their teaching, and how students at the same colleges perceive their teachers' use of social media. Two research questions guided the qualitative phase of the parent thesis and are addressed in this paper:

1. What are teachers' perspectives regarding the integration of social media at the college level?
2. What are students' perspectives regarding their teachers' use of social media integration?

A third research question in the parent thesis — how teachers connect with social media at the classroom level, operationalized through structured classroom observation — was answered quantitatively and is reported in a companion paper (see also the Discussion section below for how the two strands relate).

Literature Review

The Role of Social Media in Education

The evolution from static, read-only Web 1.0 content to the interactive, user-generated Web 2.0 environment enabled the emergence of social media as spaces where users construct public or semi-public profiles and build networked connections (Ellison et al., 2007). In education, this interactivity has been leveraged to share resources, sustain communication outside class hours, and create virtual communities that extend academic collaboration beyond the physical classroom (Kemp, 2023; Černá & Borkovcová, 2023). Researchers broadly agree that social media carries genuine pedagogical potential, but caution that its educational value depends heavily on how deliberately and ethically it is integrated by teachers and interpreted by students (Arshad et al., 2022; Aziz & Hashmi, 2023).

Teachers' Perspectives on Social Media Integration

Prior qualitative studies suggest that teachers' attitudes toward social media in education are varied and often coexist with genuine concern. Aydoğmuş et al. (2023), studying 25 primary and secondary teachers in Turkey, found generally positive attitudes toward social media's capacity to improve interaction, tempered by worries about classroom discipline and distraction. Jackson (2022), interviewing 53 teachers in Mississippi, similarly found positive views of social media's power to encourage interaction, alongside a call for more structured professional guidance. Alharbi (2024), examining Saudi EFL teachers, reported that teachers saw platforms such as Instagram as effective for language learning specifically. Collectively, these studies depict teachers as cautiously optimistic — recognizing social media's instructional value while wanting clearer institutional support and professional development (Ansari, 2022).

Students' Perspectives on Social Media Integration

Where students' views have been studied, the picture is broadly positive but nuanced. Muyingo (2021), using a quantitative survey of international

students in Turkey, found generally favorable attitudes and reported that roughly 68.2% of students used platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and WhatsApp more than twice weekly for peer academic discussion. Rinda et al. (2018), in a mixed-methods case study in Indonesia, found that students appreciated Instagram specifically for vocabulary development and peer feedback in writing instruction. These findings suggest that students' engagement with social media for learning is not incidental but is shaped by specific platform affordances and by the quality of teacher facilitation (Junco, 2012; Selwyn, 2016).

Factors Shaping Perceptions and Challenges to Integration

Teachers' and students' perceptions of social media are shaped by digital literacy, device and internet access, institutional support, and personal motivation (Al-Khalidi & Ghoneim, 2023). Professional-boundary concerns are a recurring theme: teachers frequently seek to maintain distance between personal and professional online identities, which can itself shape how much they communicate and engage with students digitally (Zaman et al., 2026). In the Pakistani context specifically, studies in Lahore, Karachi, and Skardu report that both teachers and students use social media largely informally in academic contexts, with teachers citing time constraints, infrastructure limitations, and lack of institutional support as key barriers (Ali & Hameed, 2024). Broader challenges include the digital divide associated with socioeconomic disparity (Khan, 2024) and the frequent absence of institutional policy clarifying expectations for ethical and professional online conduct (Shahzad, 2024).

Despite this growing body of work, few studies have jointly examined teachers' and students' perspectives within the same institutional setting, and even fewer have done so at the intermediate/college level in Pakistan specifically — a gap this study addresses directly (Arshad et al., 2022).

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in connectivism (Siemens, 2005), a learning theory that conceives of learning as the formation and navigation of connections among people, information, and digital technologies, and that emphasizes the capacity to locate and evaluate current knowledge over the static possession of existing knowledge. Through a connectivist lens, social media functions as an active learning network in which teachers and students co-construct and circulate knowledge (Tang & Hew, 2022).

To operationalize teachers' and students' perspectives within this framework, the study adapted six dimensions from Kietzmann et al.'s (2011) social media "honeycomb" model — originally developed for business and marketing contexts — to the educational setting: (1) sharing and access to information, (2) engagement, (3) communication, (4) transparency and reputation, (5) presence, and (6) relationship. These dimensions provided a structured lens for thematic analysis while remaining sensitive to participants' own framing of their experiences, consistent with connectivism's emphasis on relational rather than purely content-based learning.

Methodology

Research Design

The parent study employed a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) within a pragmatist paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), in which qualitative data collection preceded and informed a subsequent quantitative phase. This paper reports exclusively on the qualitative strand — semi-structured teacher interviews and student focus group discussions — which was designed to generate an in-depth, contextualized understanding of teachers' and students' subjective perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at two private colleges in Karachi, Pakistan, purposively selected because their teachers were known to use social media for teaching and learning and because the institutions were accessible and willing to participate in both phases of the parent study. Teacher participants (N = 10; five per college) were purposively sampled

according to two criteria: teaching Grade 11 or 12, and willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview and to have their classroom observed. Student participants for the focus group discussions (N = 8; four per college) were purposively sampled current students of the interviewed teachers who were available and willing to participate; students unavailable due to final examinations, or who were not taught by the interviewed teachers, were excluded. Teacher demographic characteristics (subject taught, grade level, gender, age, and years of experience) are summarized descriptively in the results; pseudonyms are used throughout to protect participant identity.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data source for teachers' perspectives. Two interview guides were developed (see thesis Appendices A and B): the first explored teachers' general beliefs about, and experiences with, social media in teaching; the second probed teachers' perspectives dimension by dimension, following the six-dimension framework described above. Each interview lasted approximately 25–35 minutes. Teachers at College 1 completed a single combined interview session (five interviews in total), while teachers at College 2 completed both interview rounds separately (ten interviews in total), for fifteen interview sessions overall.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs), one per college, were conducted with four students each to explore students' collective perspectives on their teachers' social media use (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Krueger & Casey, 2015). The College 1 FGD was conducted face-to-face; the College 2 FGD was conducted online because of the students' final-examination schedule. Interview and FGD protocols followed Merriam's (2009) recommendations for ethical conduct, consistency, and rapport-building.

Data Analysis

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Thematic analysis followed Merriam's (2009) four-stage procedure: (1) organizing the data, (2) segmenting and reassembling excerpts, (3) developing initial codes, and (4) developing and refining themes. Codes were organized within the six a priori dimensions of the conceptual framework while remaining open to emergent sub-themes (e.g., language accessibility within "sharing and access," tone and approachability within "relationship" and "presence").

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was supported through the use of two independently piloted interview guides, verbatim transcription, and iterative re-reading of transcripts to check interpretive consistency. All procedures received formal ethical clearance; permissions were obtained from college principals and the Ethical Review Committee, and informed consent (teachers) and assent plus parental/guardian consent (students) were secured prior to data collection. Data were stored securely on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher, and interviews and FGDs were conducted in comfortable settings to encourage open, honest disclosure (Fraenkel et al., 2012).

Results

Findings are organized by the six dimensions of the conceptual framework. For each dimension, teachers' perspectives are reported first, followed by students' perspectives on the same dimension. Because this is a qualitative study, no numerical descriptive or inferential statistics are reported here; frequencies of observed classroom practice by dimension are reported separately in the companion quantitative paper.

Sharing and Access to Information

Teachers across both colleges converged on the instructional value of YouTube for combining audio and visual explanation, particularly for abstract concepts. One teacher explained that "audio and video work together" to increase participation, while another described inserting short clips into lessons specifically to enhance conceptual understanding. Language accessibility emerged as a related sub-theme: one teacher

emphasized that Urdu-language content, or clearly paced English content, ensured that "every child understands." Instagram's short-form content (reels, memes) was valued by some teachers as memorable and useful for simplifying difficult topics, while others deliberately avoided such content, citing syllabus pressure or concern that informal content could undermine classroom seriousness. Several teachers described welcoming student-contributed resources into WhatsApp groups, framing this as a way to foster peer learning while still emphasizing relevance and credibility.

Engagement

Teachers described using social media to move students from passive to active participation — for example, by assigning students to create memes, short videos, or digital posters related to class content, or by inviting reflective online discussion. Motivational effects on students were reported inconsistently: some teachers observed increased engagement when they modeled active participation in subject-related groups, while others saw no clear effect. Students corroborated this pattern, describing both official, teacher-led groups and unofficial, student-created groups used to exchange notes and coordinate around assignments; several noted that a teacher's visible activity in these spaces "motivates me to study, but not always, it depends."

Communication

WhatsApp emerged as the dominant platform for teacher–student academic communication, valued by several teachers for enabling instant clarification, especially around examinations. However, teachers were divided on where to draw professional boundaries: some described setting explicit norms (e.g., replying only during school hours) that students were reported to respect, while others found the volume and timing of student messages intrusive on personal time and preferred to limit WhatsApp use altogether. Students similarly reported mixed communication preferences, generally favoring WhatsApp for academic queries but preferring in-person conversation for more personal or sensitive matters; several noted that their willingness to reach out online depended heavily on a given teacher's perceived approachability.

Transparency and Reputation

Teachers described actively managing the boundary between personal and professional online identity, most commonly by avoiding religious or political content that could be perceived as controversial. Approaches diverged: some teachers curated a limited but intentional professional presence, while others avoided posting altogether to sidestep any online image management. Across both stances, teachers described a shared responsibility to model composure under criticism and to remind students informally to verify the credibility of information they encounter online, even without formal digital-literacy instruction. Students, for their part, interpreted teachers' online posts as reflections of teachers' values and interests, and reported following particular accounts less for personal inspiration than for perceived credibility of the content shared.

Presence

Teachers described divergent orientations toward maintaining an online presence. Some viewed active presence — for example, commenting on students' achievements — as a deliberate act of encouragement and recognition. Others preferred a more distant approach, citing a wish to avoid unnecessary professional risk. Students generally experienced teachers' presence, when it occurred, as a sign of care and availability, particularly noting that teachers' responsiveness tended to increase around examinations, which students interpreted as reassuring evidence of dedication.

Relationship

Several teachers described social media as a meaningful space for sustaining relationships with both current and former students, citing examples such as being tagged in former students' achievement posts, or deliberately acknowledging and encouraging students' digital assignments as a way of building confidence. Other teachers expressed more guarded views, citing privacy

concerns, the practical burden of maintaining separate personal and professional accounts, and skepticism about the authenticity of online self-presentation more broadly — one teacher noted that "nobody, even students, [is] real on social media," questioning whether relationships built there reflect genuine connection. Students, meanwhile, consistently associated teachers' online accessibility with feeling valued and supported, but were equally clear that tone mattered as much as accessibility itself: advice delivered in a "strict" or overly serious tone online was described as intimidating rather than supportive. When teachers were perceived as unapproachable, students reported turning instead to senior students, whom they viewed as more relatable because of shared recent experience with the same academic system.

Cross-Cutting Pattern: The Link Between Teachers' Beliefs and Practice

Across dimensions, teachers who expressed broadly positive beliefs about social media's educational value — valuing openness in sharing, engagement, communication, transparency, relationship-building, and academic presence — consistently described more extensive and varied integration practices than teachers who expressed cautious or restrictive beliefs. Teachers with more restrictive beliefs, by contrast, tended to describe integration limited to formal announcements or none at all, most often citing privacy, workload, or distraction concerns. This qualitative pattern is consistent with, and is quantified independently through structured classroom observation in, the companion paper; the present study reports it here strictly as an interpretive pattern grounded in interview data, not as a statistically tested association.

Discussion

The findings indicate that teachers at these two Karachi colleges hold varied, sometimes co-existing, beliefs about social media's instructional value — broadly optimistic about its capacity to make learning interactive and relatable, yet concerned about classroom discipline, distraction, and the erosion of professional boundaries. This dual orientation echoes Wang and Zhan (2022), who similarly found that college teachers viewed social media positively for teaching while raising concerns about classroom control and professional boundaries, and stands in partial contrast to Ansari (2022), who reported that the absence of clear guidelines for students' social media use in academics was associated with disengagement. Read together, these findings suggest that teachers' ambivalence is less a rejection of social media's pedagogical value than a call for clearer institutional guidance on its responsible use.

The finding that teachers' practices varied by dimension — more consistent integration around sharing, engagement, and communication than around relationship and presence — aligns with the broader literature on teacher beliefs and technology adoption. Tondeur et al.'s (2017) systematic review of qualitative studies found that teachers' comfort and confidence with technology, and the fit between technology and their existing teaching philosophy, are strong predictors of adoption; teachers in the present study who described greater digital confidence similarly reported broader integration across dimensions. Likewise, Olaniyan and Uzorka (2024) identified leadership support and access to professional development as critical enablers of technology adoption in higher education, which resonates with several teachers' explicit calls in this study for more structured training rather than informal self-teaching.

Students' emphasis on tone and approachability as more important than mere digital accessibility is a notable extension of prior literature, which has tended to focus on frequency and platform choice (e.g., Muyingo, 2021) rather than the relational quality of teacher–student digital interaction. This finding is well explained through connectivism (Siemens, 2005): when one node in a student's learning network — the teacher — becomes less accessible or less approachable, students do not disengage but instead redirect toward alternative nodes, most commonly senior students. This adaptive network behavior, rather than reflecting disobedience or disinterest, illustrates connectivism's core premise that learning persists

through whichever connections remain most viable within the network. It also echoes Aydoğmuş et al.'s (2023) Turkish findings that teachers with positive social media beliefs were more likely to remain approachable and to foster engagement beyond the classroom, and stands in contrast to Jackson's (2022) U.S. findings that many teachers restricted their use of social media strictly to formal announcements out of professional-boundary concerns — a pattern also visible among the more cautious teachers in the present sample.

Theoretically, these findings extend the application of Kietzmann et al.'s (2011) honeycomb model — originally a marketing and business framework — into an educational setting, demonstrating that its six dimensions can meaningfully capture the varied ways teachers and students experience social media as an instructional and relational tool, not merely a communication channel. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that professional development for social media integration should address not only technical skill but also the interpersonal and ethical dimensions of digital presence — tone, boundary-setting, and responsiveness — that students identified as decisive.

Conclusion

This study explored teachers' and students' perspectives on social media integration in teaching and learning at two private colleges in Karachi, Pakistan. Teachers' beliefs about social media were found to be diverse and, in many cases, internally ambivalent — recognizing its pedagogical potential while remaining cautious about distraction and professional boundaries. Students, in turn, valued teachers' digital accessibility and, more specifically, the tone and approachability with which that accessibility was delivered, often seeking alternative sources of guidance when teachers were perceived as unapproachable online. These findings jointly illuminate a gap identified in the literature: how teacher belief becomes manifest in classroom-adjacent practice, and how that practice is read and responded to by students within the same institutional context.

Implications

For teacher professional development, the findings suggest that training should move beyond platform mechanics to address the relational and ethical dimensions of digital teaching presence — particularly tone, responsiveness, and boundary-setting — since these, more than platform choice, appeared to shape students' willingness to engage. For institutional policy, colleges may benefit from developing clear, shared guidelines for professional social media conduct that give teachers the confidence to engage digitally without fear of compromising their professional image, addressing a concern voiced by several teachers in this study. For future practice, department- or college-level communities of practice in which more digitally confident teachers share strategies with more cautious colleagues could help narrow the wide variation in integration observed across teachers within the same institutions.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It was conducted in only two private colleges in Karachi, and findings reflect the subjective, context-bound experiences of a small purposive sample (10 teachers, 8 students); they are not intended to generalize to other institutional types (e.g., public colleges) or regions. College 1 did not permit a second round of teacher interviews, meaning teacher accounts from that college were gathered in a single, combined session rather than the two-part protocol used at College 2, which may have limited the depth of follow-up probing available at College 1. As a qualitative study relying on self-report and group discussion, findings may be shaped by social desirability, particularly in the focus group setting where students discussed their teachers' practices in the presence of peers. Finally, because this paper reports only the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods study, it cannot independently verify the relationship between the beliefs reported here and teachers' actual observed classroom practice; that relationship is addressed empirically, through structured observation, in the companion quantitative paper.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future qualitative research should extend this design to public-sector colleges to examine whether the patterns observed here — particularly the divide between digitally confident and cautious teachers — hold across institutional types with differing resource levels. Comparative studies across different districts or regions of Pakistan would help establish whether the specific concerns raised here (e.g., professional-boundary anxiety, language accessibility) are context-specific or more broadly characteristic of the national college-level context. Future work could also incorporate follow-up interviews with teachers after classroom observation, which time constraints prevented in the parent study, to explore more directly how teachers reflect on the gap, where one exists, between their stated beliefs and their observed practice. Finally, future research could extend participant groups beyond teachers and students to include academic leaders and policymakers, whose institutional decisions shape the conditions under which teachers' beliefs can or cannot translate into practice.

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