

# A Low-Cost Socio-Culturally Situated Mental Health Intervention for the Well-Being of Pakistani Young Women: A Reflective Narrative

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## Abstract

The paper sets out to briefly discuss mental health challenges faced by Pakistani young women, and brings out an innovative solution through a multidisciplinary approach, i.e., socio-culturally situated low-cost digital intervention. The paper begins with an overview of mental health issues. It then sheds light on the scope of open education and innovation in Pakistan. Finally, through a reflective narrative approach, I have explored my personal journey of becoming a networked practitioner, and how an open educational website emerged to intersect the needs of Pakistani young women. Data is gathered from 137 reflective diary entries and analyzed through narrative analysis approach. Digital literacy and open networking practices have shaped my digital identity and allowed me to embrace open scholarship. Networking and collaboration have helped me filtering Open Educational Resources (OERs). Further, collaborative activities encouraged participants to become the co-producers of resource development. Overall, an adaptation of low-cost technology has potentially helped participants to reflect and embrace their personal identities.

## Introduction

Pakistani society follows a patriarchal culture, where most of the personal, social, and economic decisions are dominated by men. Within the existing Pakistani social structure, women's role in decision making and personal choices are scarce and insignificant, rather the vacuum is filled by male decisions. Women are expected to remain submissive to patriarchal decisions to sustain their social security. Tabassum<sup>1</sup> underlines, 'The prevailing and overarching patriarchal culture through socialization and strict control reduced any chance of raising voice for protest and retaliation by women to almost none'. This factor

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<sup>1</sup> Naima Tabassum, *Women in Pakistan Status in Socio-Cultural and Politico-Legal Domains* (Islamabad: Higher Education Commission, 2016), 7.

discourages women to share their health issues and seek remedies thereafter unhesitatingly.

Mental health is significant aspect of an individual's well-being. It is recognized as the most important element in constitution of self-identity. There is a shocking increase in the prevalence of mental health challenges among Pakistani youth. One of the newspapers reported, 'Around eighty million Pakistani were suffering from the physiological, neurotic disorder which results in spiritual, physical, mental and emotional illness all over the country'.<sup>2</sup> In the recent years, mental health issues have been on rise among young Pakistani women, too, particularly those belonging to disadvantaged communities.<sup>3</sup> In a survey carried out in 2017, 44% of the entire population reported a high frequency of depression; among these 57.5% were women.<sup>4</sup>

Pakistani women are affected by depression and its associated risk factors due to socio-economic and cultural barriers. In Pakistan, psychiatrists have identified the oppressive family and community environment as a significant reason behind mental health issues in Muslim families.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan lacks gender-sensitive policies capable of breaking the vicious cycle of patriarchal culture. In addition, cultural conditioning and unavailability of social support system have confined women in social isolation. There is also lack of awareness among female learners about mental health due to the stigma associated with mental

<sup>2</sup> Pakistan Today, '80 million Pakistanis suffering from physiological, mental illness: Dr Ayesha', *Pakistan Today*, 21 May 2017. Available at: <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/05/21/80-million-pakistanis-suffering-from-physiological-mental-illness-dr-ayesha/>, accessed 23 December 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ashfaq Yusufzai, 'Concern over growing mental health problems among youth', *Dawn*, 22 October 2018. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1440470/concern-over-growing-mental-health-problems-among-youth>, accessed 23 December 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Hafsa Sarfraz, 'Let's talk about depression', *The Express Tribune*, 6 April 2017. Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1376547/lets-talk-depression/>, accessed 23 December 2018.

<sup>5</sup> S. A. Sohail, A. A. Syed, & A. Rahman, 'Mental Health in Pakistan: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow', in H. Minas and M. Lewis (ed.), *Mental Health in Asia and the Pacific, International and Cultural Psychology* (Springer, 2017), 17-37. Available at: [https://www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda\\_downloaddocument/9781489979971-c2.pdf?SGWID=0-0-45-1603679-p180209945](https://www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda_downloaddocument/9781489979971-c2.pdf?SGWID=0-0-45-1603679-p180209945), accessed 23 December 2018.

illness.<sup>6</sup> To meet this need, a culturally-appropriate mental health awareness intervention is believed to have a positive impact on their well-being.

### Scope of open education and innovation in Pakistan

Open Education (OE) underpins the philosophy of freedom of information<sup>7</sup>. It follows the principles of diversity, accessibility and openness. There is a wider shift in the landscape of open education. It now covers an extensive variety of practices such as open publishing, open-source software, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and archiving. The development of Open Education Resources (OERs) has accelerated the concept of innovation in open education. It has catalyzed the production of diverse open resources, which can be reused, revised, remixed, customized or redistributed in a variety of ways. A wide range of resources is available at low or no cost for diverse online communities. Example, Open Learning Exchange (OLE) has developed free quality learning resources, especially for those living in the parts of the world undergoing active conflict. The OE movement has also supported digital literacy in disconnected areas through innovative online devices. Example, APTUS is an innovative device, available through the Commonwealth of Learning, which has facilitated e-learning in remote areas across the world.

Another emerging innovation in OE is the creation, adoption and implementation of open education policies. For example, The United States has launched The Open Book Project in Arab League to translate global books in the Arabic language. A few universities, such as Stanford University, have adopted open institutional policies to promote innovative pedagogical practices for learners to participate in the co-

<sup>6</sup> Sara Saleem Damani, 'Mental Illness in Pakistan: A Subject of Stigma, Ridicule, and Cultural Insensitivity' [Blog], *Journal of Pioneering Medical Sciences Blogs*, 2018. Available at: <http://blogs.jpmonline.com/2018/01/28/mental-illness-in-pakistan-a-subject-of-stigma-ridicule-and-cultural-insensitivity/>, accessed 21 January 2019. Also see: Shehr Bano Kazmi, 'The compromise on mental health', *Daily Times*, 8 April 2018. Available at: <https://dailytimes.com.pk/229479/the-compromise-on-mental-health/>, accessed 29 October 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Weller, "The Digital Scholar Revisited", *The Digital Scholar: Philosopher's Lab*, 1:2 (2018), 52-71. Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/55721/1/dig%20schol%202018.pdf>, accessed 22 February 2019.

creation of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> However, many countries like Pakistan have not yet adopted open education policies.

However, open education is an emerging concept in Pakistan. There are a few innovative ways to introduce open education such as collecting OERs on a particular subject and introducing them through a blog, learning management system or a website. Yet, there are several challenges in the way of introducing open education such as leadership challenges, institutional policies, security issues, lack of access to digital technologies, lack of technical skills shortage of online resources in regional languages, and lack of awareness as well as willingness to engage in open educational practices. In my viewpoint, OE grows favourably if it is supported by technology as well as context. For example, in Pakistan, women abstain from sharing their mental health challenges with others due to sociocultural barriers. But they have access to mobile and computer technology, which can be used to expand educational access and equity practices. I strongly believe that by using innovative strategies, contextual open resources and secure online platforms, we can maximize the meaningful participation of learners in an online learning environment.

Keeping in light the context, potential of technology, networking, and open educational resources in Pakistan, the present study has taken an innovative approach to design an inclusive intervention to meet the needs of young Pakistani women.

### Research design

I have used a reflective narrative approach to shed light on my networking journey for designing a mental health awareness website. Participants comprised two groups: (a) male and female students enrolled in one of the postgraduate modules, titled: 'The critical researcher: educational technology in practice' (2018) at The Open University, UK, and, (b) Pakistani undergraduate female students from one of the public sector universities, located in Karachi, Pakistan. Twenty participants were selected from the UK, whereas twenty-eight were selected from Pakistan through multi-stage sampling (criterion and convenient). Consent letter was signed for voluntary participation. They collaborated through closed WhatsApp groups, video calls and via face-to-face

<sup>8</sup> George Veletsianos and Royce Kimmons, "Assumptions and challenges of open scholarship", *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13:4 (2012), 166. Available at: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1313/2304>, accessed 12 February 2019.

discussions. I also used Open Studio, Cloudworks, Twitter, closed Facebook groups and few other online platforms for collaboration. I piloted website from September 2018 till January 2019 with seven female learners, enrolled in 'Research Method' course at the selected public sector university.

Data is gathered from my 137 reflective diary entries, maintained from April 2018 till January 2019. Data is analyzed through narrative analysis approach. As Polkinghorne<sup>9</sup> suggests: 'The researcher can defend the appropriateness of the meaning attributed to the words and phrases of the text by providing the context in which they were made'. (p.478). He further suggests the readers to make own judgment about the worthiness of research claims. I first assessed the needs of Pakistani females through a sociocultural lens. I then explored ways to introduce sustainable strategies. Finally, I collaborated with participants to design a contextual website. My knowledge claims are supported by literature and personal experiences. Relative validity of my claims rests upon the judgment of readers.

### Limitations

The study is confined to my experiences; therefore findings should be perceived as a suggested intervention. The website does not cover all areas of mental health. It includes limited user-generated content. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with limited participants. Therefore, its efficacy cannot be generalized to all Pakistani women belonging to disadvantaged communities or groups, however, it presents a model and a pilot effort which can be tried in other settings and by other innovative researchers.

### The project

I undertook this project as a part of my study module, titled: 'The critical researcher: educational technology in practice'. My project has evolved over time through personal experiences, critical reflective practices, peer reviews, consistent networking, and feedback of Pakistani women, who aspire to combat mental and emotional violence without face-to-face interaction. My interest in this project comes from my mother. She never raised her voice to discuss her psychological issues with others due to the cultural shame of sharing. There are many women like my mother, who

<sup>9</sup> Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Validity Issues in Narrative Research", *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol.13, No.4, 2007, pp. 471-486. Available at: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/f87f/81aff20792f4e9332b96c24cd705b072eec7.pdf>

are not empowered to respect their wellbeing. My project aims at empowering Pakistani young women of disadvantaged communities regarding mental health. They have been facing identity crises due to patriarchal values, prejudices and socio-cultural constraints. However, social policy interventions do not focus on such women, so their problems remain unaddressed. Further, they lack self-empowerment due to the culture of 'sharing as shame'.<sup>10</sup>

In Pakistan, the use of social media among young women is growing. They have built online communities for their emotional and mental well-being. However, online spaces particularly Facebook, Twitter and blogs are subjected to socio-cultural disapproval due to the conservative mindset. These platforms are also unsafe due to rising harassment and cyber-bullying. I networked with a few female students at my workplace, who expressed that there was a lack of availability of diverse learning resources on mental education in the university libraries. Further, mental health education was not yet introduced as a subject at any academic level. They feared to browse websites to look for mental health resources due to privacy issues. Further, these young women did not have any secure platform to learn and discuss their own mental health for their well-being. They suggested having a secure platform on mental health awareness without relying on physical interaction due to widespread prejudice and gender stereotyping.

Due to shortage of culturally appropriate mental health resources, absence of social counseling units, and a desire to have a virtual platform for empowerment, the need to design a low-cost multimedia object is further justified. It means to have a website with contextual open educational content through the lens of intended participants.

The project website had five main sections namely awareness, empowerment, speak out inspirational stories, chat rooms, and drop in your love. Culturally appropriate OERs, Creative Commons licensed videos and podcasts, and other reliable contents were reviewed, filtered and compiled on 'Depression'. A few collective activities have been incorporated to harness collaboration to create user-created content. For example, under the section, 'speak out inspirational stories', I have invited everyone to add an inspirational story about how they have coped with depression or mental stress. Similarly, under the section 'skills', there is a link under tips to cope with depression, where individuals can

<sup>10</sup> Huma Yusuf, 'Gendered debate', *Dawn Newspaper*, 24 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1434687>, accessed 20 February 2019.

add advice to support Pakistani women. I have also added links to free open courses. My site is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution. My digital intervention resonates with a broader theme of ‘Open Education’. This openness in open education “is not a simple binary choice, and there are degrees of openness”.<sup>11</sup> In my project, openness refers to reliable and culturally appropriate online contents.

Within the context of open education, I have selected ‘innovation’ as a theme. I view innovation as a continuous process of bringing creative answers to the challenge. My project framework is based on Roger’s ‘diffusion of innovation theory’, combined with local literature. According to this theory, “innovation, communication channels, time, and social system” are important elements for the diffusion of innovation.<sup>12</sup> This theory is the most appropriate one to adopt and diffuse innovative ideas, i.e., the use of low-cost technology for educational purposes, through interaction with a specific population.

I assume my project as being innovative because:

- (1) This is the first open initiative to support the well-being of female learners living in the socially constrained society;
- (2) It offers awareness and skill-based training on mental health through the available OERs and user-generated contents; and
- (3) It is designed while keeping in mind the views of the female learners, and their socio-cultural context.

### My networking journey

My entire networking journey was built on the premises of connectivism.<sup>13</sup> I fostered digital association with people and resources through informed, sustained and conscious networking. My learning journey resonates with Vygotsky’s social development theory<sup>14</sup> and

<sup>11</sup> Martin Weller, *Degrees of Openness* (The Open University, no date).

<sup>12</sup> Ismail Sahin, “Detailed Review of Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations Theory and Educational Technology-Related Studies based on Roger’s Theory”, *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 5:2 (2006), 1-10. Available at: <http://www.tojet.net/articles/v5i2/523.pdf>, accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>13</sup> George Siemens, “Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age”, *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2005. Available at: [http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan\\_05/article01.htm](http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan_05/article01.htm), accessed: 28 February 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Levs Vygotsky, “Interaction between learning and development”, *Readings on the Development of Children*, 23:3 (1978), 34-41. Available at: [https://www.oerafrica.org/sites/default/files/L%20%26%20L%20reader\\_section%20one-reading\\_4.pdf](https://www.oerafrica.org/sites/default/files/L%20%26%20L%20reader_section%20one-reading_4.pdf), accessed 19 February 2019.

learning circle model.<sup>15</sup> I developed learning communities to interact, share diverse experiences, and receive critical feedback through deep reflection. Further, my reflective journey reverberates with Reader-to-Leader Framework.<sup>16</sup> Initially, I joined social media platforms to read others’ viewpoints and learn how others interact and benefit each other. I then started networking with others. Finally, I took ownership and started collaborating with local and global participants.

I took consent and created a closed WhatsApp group to network with intended participants. They helped me complete a project based on our common concern—helping Pakistani women. I tentatively planned to carry out an open educational project on mental health awareness for youth, but peer feedback assisted me to delimit its scope. I then decided to compile OERs on mental health for Pakistani women living in conflict-ridden areas. Further topic exploration, reflection on project limitations, consistent feedback and networking with participants considerably helped to narrow down the project plan. This approach was guided by the idea of Shelton:<sup>17</sup> “Education not only needs new ideas and inventions... these new solutions must also scale...to serve large portions of specific underserved populations”.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Riel, *Learning Circle Model - Online Learning Circles*, 2014. Available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/onlinelearningcircles/Home/learning-circles-defined>

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Preece and Ben Shneiderman, “The Reader-to-Leader Framework: Motivating Technology-Mediated Social Participation”, *AIS Transactions on Human-Computer Interaction*, 1:1 (2009), 13-32. Available at: <https://aisel.aisnet.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=thci>, accessed on 01 March 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Jim Shelton, “Education innovation©what it is and why we need more of it” [Blog] *Spuntik Post*, 2011. Available at: [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/sputnik/2011/09/education\\_innovation\\_what\\_it\\_is\\_and\\_w](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/sputnik/2011/09/education_innovation_what_it_is_and_w)

Figure A: Initial Website Plan

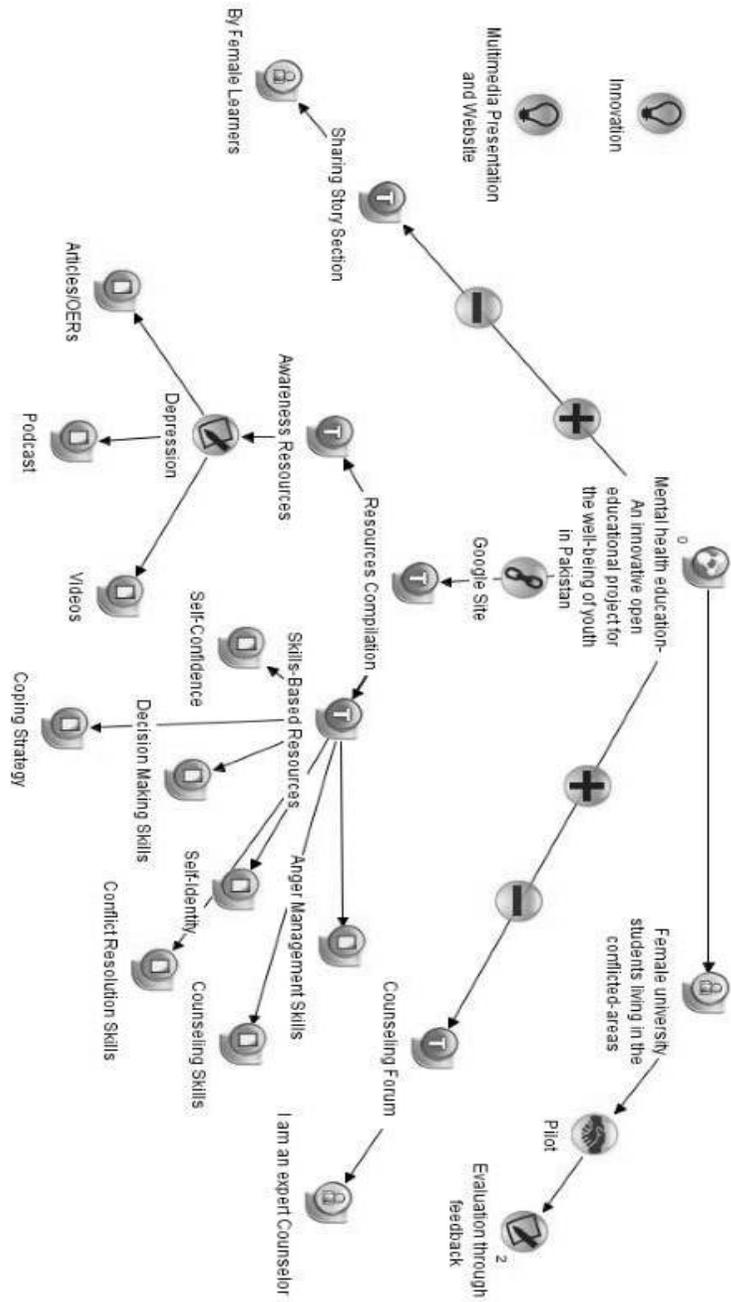
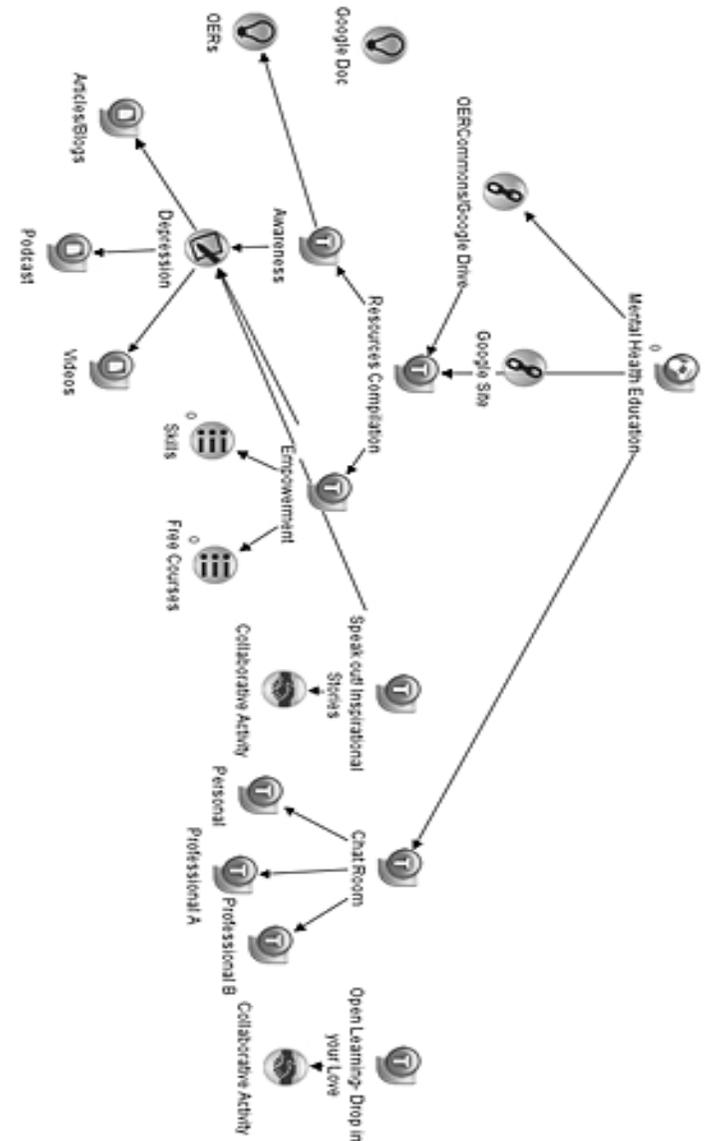


Figure B: Final Website Plan



I shared the selected format, i.e., a website with participants. Few of them recommended me to design a simple website using Google sites or Wordpress. I chose google sites as it is easy to navigate. It has a function of embedding multimedia objects and web links. It is also compatible with most browsers and android mobiles. Participants also suggested me to keep bandwidth, monitoring mechanism and people's reflection in mind.

Earlier, I chose website sections and content myself. But then I looped participants via WhatsApp to learn about their expectations. I also had a face to face conversation with Pakistani participants. They recommended including contents like symptoms of depression and motivational documentaries. Such inputs have helped me to look at the project through the lens of intended participants.

I gained skills to locate and evaluate OERs. I drew upon OERs on mental health through platforms like OER Commons, Creative Commons (CC) Search and National Institute of Mental Health. OERs are licensed under CC. They allow individuals to share and adapt content for wider accessibility. Further, countries like Pakistan, where there is a dearth of resources on mental health, people can benefit from OERs. Literature<sup>18</sup> suggests that a lack of human interaction is a drawback of OER, but they served as strength for my target population, as they preferred networking with the content for learning about mental health. However, there are a few limitations, like, OERs are unavailable in Urdu—a native language of Pakistan, which could have accessibility among learners, who prefer reading in Urdu. OERs are created and distributed digitally, but it may be a barrier for those who lack internet connectivity. Some parts of Pakistan have weak or no internet connectivity, which might affect content accessibility among females beyond selected participants. Another challenge is finding credible resources. There is no central repository to search for OERs. Thus, it might be a challenging task for individuals to locate reliable resources unless they are informed. I read literature<sup>19</sup> on OERs credibility to identify pertinent contents on mental health. Some open materials lack

<sup>18</sup> Rory McGreal, "Special Report on the Role of Open Educational Resources in Supporting the Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education Challenges and Opportunities", *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18:7 (2017). Available at: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/3541/4433>

<sup>19</sup> University of Texas Libraries, *Open Educational Resources: Selecting OER*, 2018. Available at: <https://guides.lib.utexas.edu/OER/select>

clear licensing conditions.<sup>20</sup> I have used some open contents on my website, but could not locate license conditions. Lastly, some open resources need content refinement to make it culturally appropriate, but Non-Derivative license does not permit distributing the modified material. Thus, individuals may end up developing contents from the scratch. In my project, open online resources are supplemented by user-generated contents, gathered through networking.

While gathering resources, I experienced challenges like limited open content, culturally inappropriate literature, and missing creative common attributes. I first collected resources that required adaptation. A few educators at my workplace volunteered to filter relevant resources. I also planned to develop resources with local mental health community members, but could not succeed due to time constraint. But, digital networking connected me to user-generated content. For example, one of the participants introduced me to her blog posts on depression<sup>21</sup>. Another suggested me some open online resource.<sup>22</sup> I also networked with an organization to use their web content on mental health<sup>23</sup>. The idea of collaboration has blurred boundary between acquisition and participation and has encouraged individuals to become the co-producers in resource development process.

Twitter has been used by academic researchers for various scholarly purposes. It is a great source of sharing academic news and research findings with others. It can also be used to discover new information in multi-disciplinary fields. I followed a few groups like @mentalhealth, @depression, @MindCharity, and @CareForHealth00, to gather novel information on mental health. One of the key functions of Twitter is the use of hashtag. We can build a professional network with any person or a group using hashtags. But one should have the skills to build a strong network. I used hashtags such as #openuniversity, #H818, #openeducation, and #mentalhealth, and received attention of few scholars like the associate lecturer of the Open University @ANLecturer. They helped me gathering content on mental health. Some other scholars also reviewed my website and provided valuable suggestions. One of the designers, @BostonStephens recommended me to resize and adjust the

<sup>20</sup> (Brent, Gibbs and Gruszczynska, 2012), tis footnote is not clear, see the previous one and complete it.

<sup>21</sup> Pilgrim, A., Twitter conversation with Munir Moosa Sadruddin, 17 January 2019.

<sup>22</sup> McGovern, C., WhatsApp conversation with Munir Moosa Sadruddin, 1 December 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Behrends, M., Email communication with Munir Moosa, 2 January 2019.

color of images to fit into the website. However, there are a few weaknesses of Twitter, such as receiving delayed responses. Another drawback is character limits, which has restricted my expressions. Another flaw is a lack of confidentiality. Users' information is publicly available, so anyone can trace us or our followers. Twitter can easily spread the truth as well as misinformation. Thus, one should judge the credibility of information, and rely on information provided by trustworthy people. Like other social media, I found twitter an addiction, which has distracted my professional life. However, it has strengthened my personal networking for this project.

I also networked on Facebook groups such as 'Graphic helpline', 'Pakistan Association for Mental Health', 'Pakistan OCD', 'Depression & Mental Health Awareness Group', and 'Social Anxiety support group', to receive advice on the content and design of a website. My tagged post and hashtags have connected me to few website designers, artists, and a mental health expert. For instance, one of the website designers suggested me to divide website into four sections. Another volunteered her sketch for my website.

One of the thought-provoking tasks was to replace the discussion forum (DF) with chat rooms. Literature suggests that forums allow individuals to support each other through shared experiences.<sup>24</sup> I incorporated the discussion forum on the website, but participants from Pakistan suggested me to incorporate different types of chat rooms. I further displayed chat room guidelines after receiving critical feedback from one of the participants. Overall, I learned to keep my digital identity aside while designing a project for intended participants.

Earlier, web accessibility did not occur to me as important. My first learning was through trial and error. I designed a pilot website using the Open University account and shared it via Open Studio, but participants from the Open University experienced log-in-failure. I realized that others might experience the same. One of the participants suggested testing website with the intended audience.<sup>25</sup> Another highlighted that the patterned background on some webpages might be difficult to read by dyslexic or the visually impaired ones<sup>26</sup>. Peer-review

<sup>24</sup> Louise F. Pendry and Jessica Salvatore, "Individual and social benefits of online discussion forums" *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol.50, 2015, pp. 211-220. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S074756321500268X>, accessed 22 February 2019

<sup>25</sup> Williams, K., Comment on 'My Website in progress', *H818 Open Studio*, 1 December 2018.

<sup>26</sup> V. Hindle, Comment on 'My Website', *H818 Open Studio*, 1 December 2018.

has helped me to incorporate various accessibility options. I have used black font colour in the foreground and the lightest contrast in the background. These are tested using WebAIM contrast checker. It is suitable for retaining the attention of individuals with dyslexia and autism. Font type closest to Sans Serif is used for the legibility among dyslexic. Embedded images are hyperlinked for a larger view and captioned. QR codes are incorporated for mobile accessibility among users with physical or motor disabilities. Hyperlinks are also incorporated for readers. Besides peer-review, overall website performance, security, colour contrast and mobile accessibility were checked via online software.

A few Pakistani female educators suggested an alternative platform to meet diverse learners' need. One of them advised creating a Google Drive folder, while the other introduced me to OERCommons. I used both platforms for resource sharing. Thus, I've chosen appropriate formats and content, informed by peers, experts and learners.

Participants visited my website and shared their critical feedback. In view of Phill Grimes:<sup>27</sup> "I have viewed all of the iterations of this website from the first "rough and ready" one through to this one and have watched it develop. Your project has really embraced networking and developing ethos". Outside the selected participants, Dr Jim Ross-Nazzal<sup>28</sup> from Twitter expressed: "I am particularly drawn to the coping skills ["Skills"] section. I found the list of choices thoughtful, but I did not watch the videos... You might consider help with polishing the English".

The website was piloted with seven Pakistani female university students. Most of them liked the awareness section of the website. Few of them participated in collaborative activities. According to most of the participants, the website has empowered them towards mental health. Most of them rated website content as excellent, while one of them valued content as average. One of the participants suggested adding some links to mind games. Another participant recommended devising a strategy to encourage other females to visit this website. Participants suggested to add more content, and showed a willingness to become co-producers of new resources.

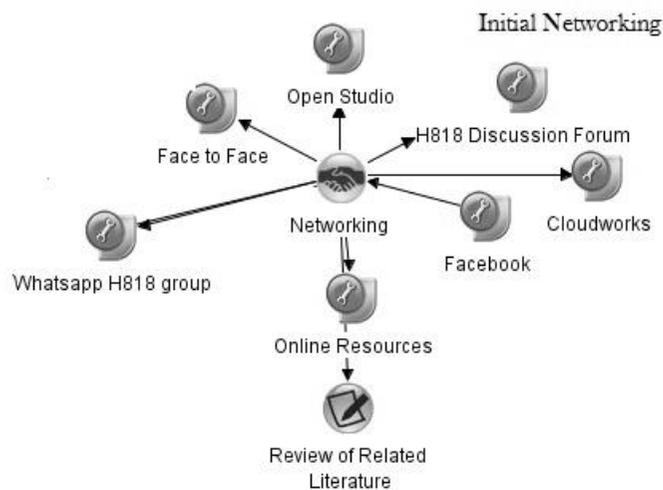
<sup>27</sup> P. Grimmes, Comment on 'My project website', *H818 Open Studio*, 2 Jan 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Jim Ross-Nazzal, Conversation with @MunirMoosa1, 6 January 2019.

## Reflections

Network technologies have strengthened the traditional conceptions of learning. These have built connections between individuals, learning communities and resources to embrace digital scholarship<sup>29</sup>. In my viewpoint, consistent technological change, which is figuratively termed as ‘Network Weather’ by Greenfield<sup>30</sup> has blurred boundary between traditional and open communities of practice. I hold this perspective that learning is socio-culturally situated, which accelerates in a digital environment when individuals take its ownership. I progressively took digital ownership and networked within and beyond for project development.

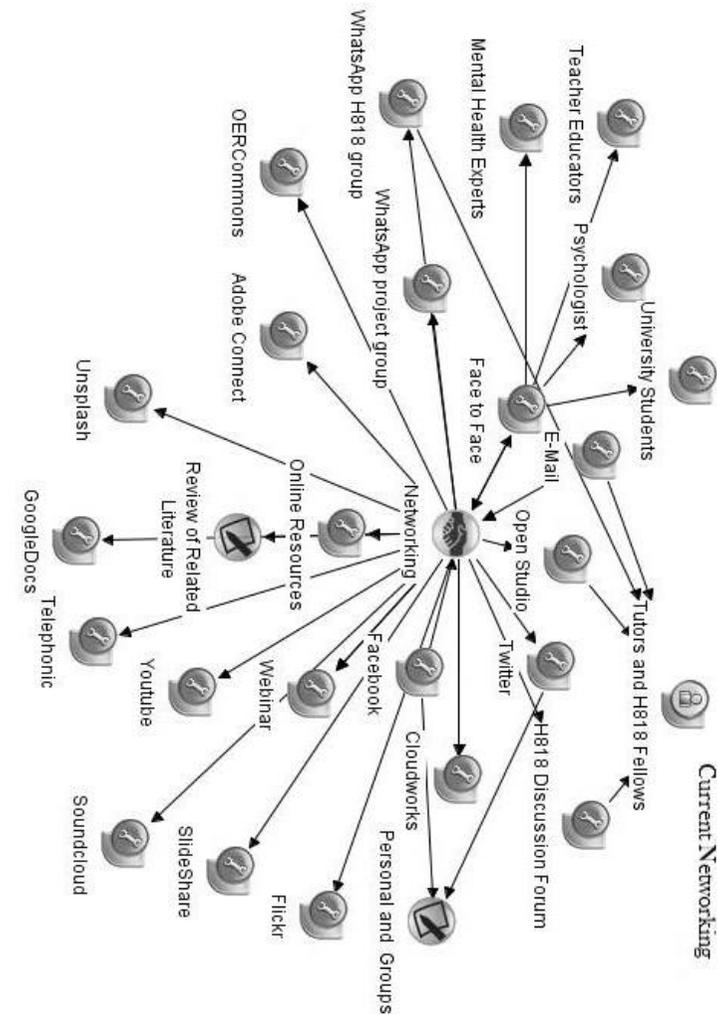
**Figure C: Initial Networking Practices**



<sup>29</sup> Martin Weller “The Digital Scholar Revisited”, *The Digital Scholar: Philosopher's Lab*, 1:2 (2018), 52-71. Available at: <http://oro.open.ac.uk/55721/1/dig%20schol%202018.pdf>, accessed 2 February 2019.

<sup>30</sup> A. Greenfield, “Network Weather” in M. Weller (ed.), *The Digital Scholar-How Technology is Transforming Scholarly Practice* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 114-127. Available at: <https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/the-digital-scholar-how-technology-is-transforming-scholarly-practice/ch10-network-weather>, accessed 26-1-2019.

**Figure D: Current Networking Practices**



### My networking journey

Weller<sup>31</sup> has expressed: “It is when digital, networked and open intersect that transformational practice occurs”. In my point of view, digital literacy, accessibility to resources and conscious networking are crucial for the latter. I started my networking journey with digital identity exploration. I read literature to locate my boundary of digital ‘openness’. I found that it was socio-culturally constructed. Lessig<sup>32</sup> underlines that the online read-only culture has now shifted to a read/write culture. I relate this philosophy to the theory of Connectivism<sup>33</sup> and Engagement Theory,<sup>34</sup> where individuals build connections with resources and people to re-create knowledge. I hold that individuals should embrace digital literacy rather skills alone, to contribute productively in remix culture. I acquired various skills like the application of new tools to design a website. To immerse in discussions, I gained critical thinking and reflective writing skills. Earlier, I used to accept arguments of both the amateurs and established scholars, but now I read, collect pieces of evidence, and participate in discussions to draw out conclusions. For example, my views did not coincide with one of the assumptions of open scholarship,<sup>35</sup> hence I reflected why Pakistani academia resists embracing open scholarship.

One of the limitations of read/write technologies, as pointed out by Dron and Anderson<sup>36</sup> is fear of disclosure. I can relate it to my previous e-

<sup>31</sup> Martin Weller, *The Digital Scholar*. [ebook] (The Open University, 2016). Available at: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/resource/view.php?id=67983>, accessed 24 January 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Remix- Making Art and Commerce Thrive*. [ebook] (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008). Available at: <https://ia802306.us.archive.org/24/items/LawrenceLessigRemix/Remix-o.pdf>, accessed 24 January 2019.

<sup>33</sup> George Siemens, “Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age”, *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2005. Available at: [http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan\\_05/article01.htm](http://www.itdl.org/journal/jan_05/article01.htm), accessed 23 January 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Greg Kearsley and Ben Shneiderman, “Engagement Theory: A Framework for Technology-Based Teaching and Learning”, *Educational Technology*, 38:5 (1998), 20-23. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44428478>, accessed 12 January 2019.

<sup>35</sup> George Veletsianos and Royce Kimmons, “Assumptions and challenges of open scholarship”, *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13:4 (2012), 166. Available at: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1313/2304>, accessed on 14 January 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Jon Dron and Terry Anderson, “Agoraphobia and the modern learner”, *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 1:3 (2014), 3. Available at:

learning context. Earlier, I was not engaged in conscious networking. I followed people on social sites to build ‘hollow connections’, but participation in postgraduate modules titled: ‘[t]he critical researcher: educational technology in practice’ introduced me to its proactive use, like using hashtags to build networking for project development. I also learnt many things from trials and errors, like I joined Facebook groups ‘Depression and Anxiety support’ and ‘graphic designers’ without having clarity, and struggled to receive website feedback. I gradually learned networking with a clear purpose, which connected me to relevant groups and people. Stepping out of the protective system and embracing read/write culture has encouraged me to build networks of learning. I learned that if individuals network with a clear purpose, it can reap productive outcomes. I hold this viewpoint that, unless individuals take ownership of establish sustained networking with people, participation would only be temporarily around ‘social objects’ to fulfill mere formalities. This confirms Engestrom’s view<sup>37</sup> that ‘social objects’ are central in online interaction and success or failure of networking relies on it.

Regarding the typologies of social forms for learning to understand learner’s behaviour in an online learning environment, Dron and Anderson explain that groups are formed for intentional learning, and these are controlled with a set of rules, limits and boundaries. I partially relate it to my participation in closed forums for website designing. There were sets of rules for engagement. We discussed planned activities to attain preset goals. But, we followed a ‘loose’ hierarchy of control, where each individual took ownership of participation.

My entire journey on groups is linked to situated cognition theory.<sup>38</sup> We performed individual activities (set), then explored, examined and gave feedback during project development (group and net), and eventually sensed a community of practice. Overall, the closed

<https://jime.open.ac.uk/articles/10.5334/2014-03/>, accessed 12 January 2019.

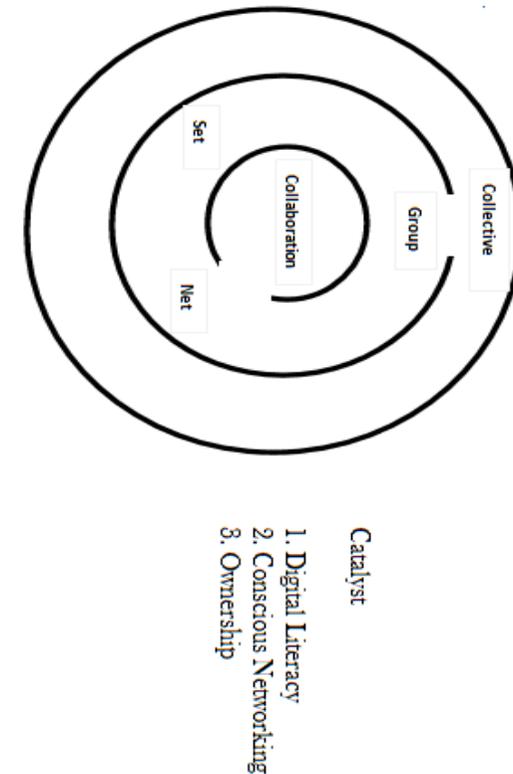
<sup>37</sup> Jyri Engestrom, Why some social network services work and others don’t — Or: the case for object-centered sociality. [Blog] *Zengestrom*. Available at: <http://www.zengestrom.com/blog/2005/04/why-some-social-network-services-work-and-others-dont-or-the-case-for-object-centered-sociality.html>, accessed 12 December 2018.

<sup>38</sup> John Seely Brown, Allan Collins and Paul Duguid, ‘Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning’, *Educational Researcher*, 18:1 (1989), 32. Available at: <http://www.johnseelybrown.com/Situated%20Cognition%20and%20the%20culture%20of%20learning.pdf>, accessed on 14 December 2018.

group turned out as a catalyst for my intellectual stimulation and growth. I participated with objectivity and clear purpose and learned to accept criticism to gain improvement. Moreover, the concept of net as “an emergent entity that is the result of individual connections between people”,<sup>39</sup> resonates with the social network theory, which explains that “the attributes of individuals are less important than their relationships and ties with other actors within the network”.<sup>40</sup> I term digital networking as ‘flexible connection’ as it stimulates wider interactivity and dissemination of knowledge through ‘conscious’ networking.

I consider Twitter and Facebook as the most influential networking platforms for my project development. Initially, I didn’t receive instant replies. I realized that networking is a time-consuming activity, and individuals may not receive responses as expected. I then accelerated my networking, by using certain strategic social objects [set], i.e., tags, hashtags, retweet and search. Consequently, I was connected to individuals during the project development. We shared our collective wisdom on dedicated groups. Many Facebook group members have shared their collective knowledge against my posts. In this way my networking also resembles with the rhizomatic learning model.<sup>41</sup> Overall, I found blurred boundary between ‘set’ and ‘net’. I consider my project site as an example of set and collective-based practices. Individuals may browse resources without registration. They can join chat room without disclosing identity. In addition, individuals can contribute to user-generated content. Throughout my journey, I experienced blurred boundary between ‘sets’, ‘nets’ and ‘groups’, and found them as being interconnected and permeating into one another.

**Figure E: ‘My Permeable Networking Model’ using Dron and Anderson’s Typology**



<sup>39</sup> Dron and Anderson, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> [https://is.theorizeit.org/wiki/Social\\_network\\_theory](https://is.theorizeit.org/wiki/Social_network_theory)

<sup>41</sup> David Cormier, ‘Rhizomatic Education: Community as Curriculum’, *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*, 4:5 (2008). Available at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/innovate/vol4/iss5/2>, accessed on 16 December 2018.

### **My Permeable Networking Model' using Dron and Anderson's typology<sup>42</sup>**

I can also relate my networking journey to the concept of Visitors and Residents,<sup>43</sup> which was situated in context, time, and objectivity. I started my networked practitioner journey as a visitor. I searched OERs, used digital tools for project development, and joined social networking groups for interactivity, but only turned out as a resident of those, which coincide with my digital identity.

### **Conclusion**

The study reflects on my networking journey to design a culturally appropriate mental health awareness website for the well-being of Pakistani young women. My project has improved considerably due to proactive and sustained networking and critical reflections. Initially, I designed a website under innovation theme. But now, I see blurred boundaries between inclusion, innovation and implementation. Being a part of the process, I used open practices, collected OERs and participated in collaborative, critical and reflective practices. My networking with people and groups mostly occurred around shared interests, which formed the bases of my good experiences. I learned that individuals must take digital ownership, and show a willingness to learn from trials and errors. I also learned that digital literacy is the foundation for conscious participation. Further, deeper learning is engraved in conscious networking. Open educational resources and digital networking have potential in Pakistan to bring better, improved, cost-effective and sustainable teaching and learning practices to the forefront. But desired results can only be achieved if the transformative ideas are supported by policies, leadership and all the stakeholders.

### **Recommendations**

The website can be enhanced by widening its scope to everyone across the globe. It is recommended to include open content on other areas of mental health, and test the website with a wider population. The site would have a wider impact if I translate content in local languages. Inclusion of audio and text version for visually impaired and hard to hear

<sup>42</sup> Munir Moosa Sadruddin, Munir Model of Networking. [Blog] *Personal Blogs*, 2019. Available at: <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/oublog/view.php?user=363432>

<sup>43</sup> David S. White and Alison Le Cornu, 'Visitors and Residents: A new typology for online engagement', *First Monday*, 16:9 (2011). Available at: <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3171/3049>

individuals can ensure wider accessibility. Finally, choosing paid web hosting for better security and constant availability of online content can strengthen then website for sure.

Universities should encourage designing open educational resources and courses on mental health through collaboration. Universities should also devise policies to introduce mental health education platforms to save women from violence and depression. In this regard, my website and networking theory can serve as a model or pilot open platform to promote mental health awareness.

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