

Religiopolitical Echo Chambers on Social Media in Shaping  
Pakistan's Violent Extremism Discourse

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## Abstract

### **Religiopolitical Echo Chambers on Social Media in Shaping Pakistan's Violent Extremism Discourse**

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Social media have emerged as a potent instrument for disseminating religiopolitical disinformation, inciting violent radicalism and extremism among youth. Young individuals are spending considerable time online, rendering them increasingly susceptible to radical propaganda aimed at political mobilization. This risk is heightened in societies with fragile political systems, where mainstream media lack credibility, and social media serves as the principal news source. This dissertation investigates the role of religiopolitical narratives on platforms such as Facebook in propagating violent radicalism among Pakistani youth and analyze how critical social media literacy (CSML) can mitigate or counteract online radical narratives.

This dissertation employs a manuscript-based approach with three interrelated sub-studies. The first sub-study systematically reviews how social media drives extremist discourse in Pakistan, setting the study's context. The second sub-study examines CSML as a tool to counter radical propaganda, identifying key skills for prevention. Both systematic reviews use the PRISMA framework with peer-reviewed articles from Web of Science and Scopus databases. Finally, the third sub-study undertakes a critical ethnographic analysis in relation to the Pakistani youth's perceptions and lived experiences about online discourses of radicalism and extremism. In-depth interviews were conducted with university students from diverse regions in Pakistan. Together, these studies use a thematic analysis approach and offer a comprehensive look at social media's role in radicalism and how CSML can help combat it.

The sub-study 1 reveals that scholarship on social media's role in violent extremism in Pakistan generally focuses on individual factors behind violent extremism, overlooking situational or political influences. The sub-study 2 highlights two key insights: Limited scholarship connects CSML to radicalism or extremism, yet CSML emerges as a promising educational countermeasure to prevent toxic narratives on social media. Pedagogies and curriculums should encourage and promote critical thinking abilities as youth equipped with CSML skills are better positioned to safely navigate social media amid political disinformation. Ethnographic findings from sub-study 3 identify political interest groups and the military elite as major players who propagate radical religiopolitical narratives on Facebook, manipulating young users' perceptions, electioneering, and political power. Such misuse of Facebook has fueled political violence, sectarianism, blasphemy cases, and distrust in institutions. Sub-study 3 also contextualizes how CSML could be a counter to prevent violent radicalism among Pakistani youth and mitigate the misuse of platforms like Facebook.

Overall, this dissertation argues that the political use and misuse of social media, particularly the widely popular Facebook, has complicated the already complex dynamics of radicalism and violent extremism in Pakistan. While these issues predate social media (e.g., anti-India and pro-Afghan jihad narratives), platforms like Facebook have amplified their reach

and impact. The study shows how young people, often unwillingly, engage with competing radical narratives online, shaping their political ideologies, and sometimes justifying political violence. To address this, the study advocates for equipping Pakistani youth with CSML skills, enabling them to navigate social media safely and critically amidst the surge of radical religiopolitical narratives competing for attention.

## Acknowledgments

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## **Dedication**

My Father, My Wife

## **Contribution of Authors**

The manuscripts derived from three sub-studies comprising this dissertation are mainly developed by myself, Muhammad Akram. Whereas, Dr. Adeela Arshad-Ayaz and Dr. Muhammad Ayaz Naseem provided substantial support in improving the quality of these manuscripts. Both professors critically reviewed the drafts of three manuscripts derived from sub-studies conducted for this dissertation. Hence, Dr. Adeela Arshad-Ayaz and Dr. Muhammad Ayaz Naseem will be included as co-authors if/when any of these three manuscripts are published in peer-reviewed journal(s). It follows Concordia's policy on the inclusion of co-authored works in a thesis.

### **Declaration about the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

Since English is my secondary language, QuillBot Premium (<https://quillbot.com>) an AI software was used to check the grammar of the content in this dissertation. I confirm that no generative AI software produced any sentence, paragraph, or section in this dissertation. All the arguments made in this dissertation solely belong to myself.

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## Abbreviations

ASWJ	Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat
CSML	Critical Social Media Literacy
CVE	Counter Violent Extremism
ERC	Ethics and Religious Culture
FSC	Federal Sharia Court
IIC	Islamic Ideological Council
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISPR	Inter-Services Public Relations
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JI	Jamat Islami
JUI	Jamiat Ulema Islam
LeT	Lashkar-e-Taiba
MWM	Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen
NACTA	National Counter Terrorism Authority
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PEMRA	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
PMLN	Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
PTA	Pakistan Telecommunication Authority
PTI	Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf
PTM	Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement
RAT	Routine Activity Theory
RNT	Root Narrative Theory
RQ	Research Question
SIC	Sunni Ittehad Council
SML	Social Media Literacy
SLT	Social Learning Theory
TCPS	Tri-Council Policy Statement (of Canada)
TLP	Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (currently Russia)
WoS	Web of Science

## Glossary

The following political leaders, presented in an ascending order, are repeatedly discussed or referenced in this dissertation.

- *Imran Khan* (born 1952) the cricketer turned philanthropist and politician founded Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and served as Prime Minister from 2018 to 2022. He pioneered the use of social media in the country's politics and leads in using social media like Facebook for political messaging.
- *Khadim Hussain Rizvi* (1966-2020) was an Islamic scholar who founded Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), a political party known for its strict stance on blasphemy laws in Pakistan.
- *Manzoor Pashteen* (born 1992) is a human rights activist, a leader of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), and campaigns for the rights of Pashtun ethnicity people in Pakistan.
- *Maulana Fazl-u-Rehamn* (born 1953) is the leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) (JUI-F) which is a conservative Islamist political party that belongs to the Deobandi sect in Islam. He advocates for Islamic legislation and has been part of many alliance governments in the country.
- *Nawaz Sharif* (born 1949) is a three-time Prime Minister of Pakistan and leads the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N). His party holds significant political influence, particularly in the Punjab province of Pakistan.
- *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto* (1928-1979) was a former politician who founded the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), a political party dominant in the Sindh province of Pakistan. In addition to ruling Sindh province for approximately 34 years, PPP ruled the country four times (1971-1977, 1988-1990, 1993-1996, 2008-2013). Bhutto's tenure marked the 1973 constitution declaring the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

This dissertation also discusses the military rulers of Pakistan at various points.

- *General Muhammad Ayub Khan* (1907–1974) took control of Pakistan in 1958 through a military coup, imposed martial law, and declared himself as President. He ruled the country until 1969 and led significant economic reforms in addition to political repression in the country.
- *General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq* (1924–1988) imposed martial law in July 1977 by overthrowing Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government. Later in 1978, he declared himself President and launched various initiatives to Islamize Pakistan's laws and society. He also mobilized Pakistani, particularly Pashtun, youth for Jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, which is cited as one of the key reasons of today's complexities of violent extremism in the country.
- *General Pervez Musharraf* (1943–2023) led a military coup in October 1999 and took over the government by overthrowing the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Musharraf declared himself as president in 2001 and ruled the country until 2008. His tenure saw complex political dynamics surrounded by the US-led War on Terror, which significantly increased violent extremism and terrorism in Pakistan.

At various instances in this dissertation, it was necessary to use certain words as original in the Urdu or Arabic language. Below are the translations and/or definitions for these words.

- *Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat* (People of the Sunnah and the Community): It refers to a group of Sunni Muslims who identify themselves with traditional Sunni beliefs and practices.
- *Ahmadiyya*: Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan is a religious minority that considers itself Muslim but is barred from referring to itself as such and from practicing aspects of its faith under Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws" (Amnesty, 2024, para. last).
- *Allah* (God): Allah is the Arabic word for God and is used by Arabic speakers following Abrahamic faiths, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews.
- *Baluchis*: Baluchis are people living in Baluchistan, the largest but least populous province of Pakistan. The region of Baluchistan spans Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan (and some also include Oman), where people speak the Baluchi language and have nomadic heritage and tribal traditions.
- *Barelvi*: It is a Sunni Islamic movement founded by Ahmed Raza Khan Barelvi (856-1921) in India. Barelvis have strong reverence for Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and devotion for Sufism. Barelvis constitute around 80 percent of Muslims in Pakistan. Historically, Barelvis are considered moderate Muslims, but in recent years, they have engaged in political violence mobilized by religiously-political groups, such as TLP, to "protect" blasphemy laws in Pakistan.
- *Deobandi*: Muslims who follow the Sunni Islamic revivalist movement, which originated in Deoband, India, in 1866, are known as Deobandi. They strictly adhere to Hanafi jurisprudence and oppose Sufism and reverence to saints as Barelvis believe it. Some Deobandi factions are associated with militant groups, such as the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and they were mobilized to Jihad (holy war) against Russians and NATO forces in Afghanistan.
- *Hadith*: The sayings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are referred to as Hadith, which, after the Quran, is the secondary source of laws and guidance in Islam.
- *Haqqani*: Haqqani is a tribe in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Haqqani Network, having members from the Haqqani tribe, was established by Jalaluddin Haqqani in the 1980s to wage Jihad (holy war) against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Post 9/11, the network also allied with the Taliban to Jihad against NATO coalition forces in Afghanistan. The Haqqani Network is designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and various other countries.
- *Jamat-e-Islami* (Islamic party): This Islamic political party was established by Maulana Syed Abul Ala Maududi in 1941 in British India. Jamat-e-Islami currently has a strong presence in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.
- *Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam* (Association of Islamic Clerics): This is a religiously-political party in Pakistan, that mainly represents the Deobandi school of thought. It was established in 1945 in British India to advocate for Sharia law in governance and currently has an influential role in the politics of the Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces of Pakistan.

- *Jihad* (holy war): It is termed a holy war against those who defy God or God's law. This term has been hugely misused in political Islam, where young people are mobilized against certain non-Muslim countries, such as India or the United States.
- *Kashmiris*: The people who are native to the Kashmir region are known as Kashmiris. This region is located in the northern part of the Indian Sub-Continent and is disputed piece of land between India, China, and Pakistan. Each of these countries controls certain parts of Kashmir while claiming the other parts.
- *Khan*: Khan is repeatedly used in this dissertation after the name of Imran Khan, the founder of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI).
- *Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen* (Council of the United Muslims): This party was established in 2009 to advocate for the (political) rights and welfare of Shia Muslims in Pakistan. Majlis actively participates in the electoral process, particularly in the Sindh and Baluchistan provinces.
- *Mujahideen*: It is the plural of 'Mujahid,' someone who fights for Islam. Mujahideen are known as Islamic guerilla fighters.
- *Pashtun*: This is an ethnic group, also known as Pathan, spanning over parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and speaks the Pashtu language. This group was mainly mobilized for Jihad against the Soviets and NATO coalition forces in Afghanistan, and the majority of them are Deobandi Muslims.
- *Prophet Muhammad* (PBUH): He (570 CE – 632 CE) is the founder of Islam, and Muslims believe in him being the last prophet sent by God. He was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Muslims aim to send blessings to Him by saying Peace Be Upon Him (PBUH) with his name.
- *Quran*: Also spelled as Koran, the Quran is the holy book of Islam, which Muslims believe to be the literal words of God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) between 610 CE to 632 CE through an angel known as Gabriel. It has 114 chapters and over 6000 verses.
- *Shia*: Shias are a minority sect within the Muslim community. Hardline Sunni Muslims, such as Deobandis, often do not recognize Shias as Muslims and have been involved in targeted acts of violence against them.
- *Sindhis*: Sindhis are an ethnic group native to the province of Sindh in Pakistan and speak the Sindhi language. Sufism is dominant in Sindh province. India often claims to take Sindh back from Pakistan (Momand, 2023).
- *Sunni Ittehad Council* (Sunni Unity Council): This is a religiopolitical alliance of Sunni Muslim groups in Pakistan and aims to address the sectarian issues among Muslims.
- *Pashtun Tahafuz Movement* (Pashtun Protection Movement): This movement was formed in 2018 by Pashtun youth, currently led by Manzoor Pashteen, to resist military operations in Pashtuns' tribal areas in Pakistan. They claim to protect Pashtuns from extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and displacements in the hands of the Pakistan military.
- *Tehrik-e-Labbaik* (Movement of the Prophet's Support): This is a religiously-political party founded by Khadim Hussain Rizvi in 2015 to advocate for strict Islamic laws and protect blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

- *Urdu*: Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and is derived from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and local Indian languages, especially those during the Mughal Empire in the Sub-Continent.

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Some religiopolitical groups in Pakistan misuse ideological, religious, and ethnolinguistic divides to further their political interests (Hameed & Majeed, 2022). Such political manipulation has become easier through social media like Facebook, which is misused for electioneering (Haider, 2022), violent protests, and radical propaganda (Shafaqat, 2018). These religiopolitical parties manipulate youth's perceptions to radicalize their behaviors by supporting extremist ideologies and engaging in political violence (Asif et al., 2020). Since youth spend a considerable portion of their daily time on social media, online radical narratives influence the youth's behavior to favor extremist political ideologies (Gautam, 2022).

The demographics of social media consumption and the number of young people in Pakistan complement each other. Two-thirds (62 percent) of the population are youth between the ages of 15 and 29 (Ahmad, 2018). The internet penetration in Pakistan was 36.7 percent in 2023, and one-third of the total population were social media users (Kemp, 2023). Among Meta platforms, Kemp reported Facebook to have the second highest number of users in Pakistan (37.30 million), followed by WhatsApp (52.32 million) (Ahmad, 2023). Kemp also reported that Messenger had 11.65 million users and Instagram had 12.95 million users in Pakistan.

Islamism has largely been the driving force in Pakistan's political affairs, managed by the tenures of military rule in the country. Since becoming the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1956 under General Ayub's regime, religious leaders with political interests have been the major hurdle in secularism or pluralism, as Islam has become the supreme political authority in the country (Ahmed, 2023). While Zulifqar Ali Bhutto was perceived to be a leftist, he had to cooperate with religious leaders to declare in the 1973 Constitution that Islam was the state religion (Fair et al., 2004). Thus, politico-military leadership influenced and remained influenced by the religious factions, which made Islamism a core factor in the political dynamics of Pakistan (Akram, 2020). Such a significant presence of youth on social media has complicated the religiopolitical dynamics of violent radicalism amidst an unprecedented rise in the religiopolitical misuse of platforms like Facebook (Ida et al., 2020). Zaheer (2018) notes that "social media tools are used for social interaction and political discourse" in Pakistan (p. 108). Ejaz (2013) adds that social media platforms are massively being misused to build religiopolitical narratives, which keeps Pakistani youth online at risk of political radicalization.

According to Gardezi (2017), 41 out of 64 banned outfits in Pakistan have a significant presence on social media platforms such as Facebook. These outfits have hundreds of Facebook pages, groups, and individual profiles to spread their radical and violent narratives. Banned outfits are the organizations or movements engaged in extremist or terrorist operations in the country (NACTA, 2021). These groups misuse social media like Facebook to manipulate religiopolitical narratives and further their radical propaganda (Dave, 2019). Groups like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) Khorasan, Al-Qaida, and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) benefit from political instability and fragile state institutions in Pakistan and use social media platforms such as Facebook for their operations, including recruitment. For example, ISIS recruited a 20-year-old medical student, Noreen Leghari, via Facebook Messenger (Bukhari, 2017). Hence, extremist outfits benefit from political fragility in the country to integrate their extremist ideologies into the manipulated political content online.

With the increasing use of social media like Facebook, blasphemy accusations<sup>1</sup> are also on the rise. Reports suggest that these accusations frequently serve as a means to resolve personal and political disputes. The lynching-to-death video of Mashal Khan, who wrote a poem for political change in the country, was instantly and massively circulated through Facebook. While many social media users glorified the lynching, others chose to remain silent, fearing accusations of blasphemy. Pakistan's blasphemy laws require life imprisonment for anyone who defiles "a copy of the Holy Quran" (295-B) and a death sentence for anyone who "use of derogatory remarks in respect of the Holy Prophet" (295-C) (Julius, 2016). The misuse of Facebook for blasphemy accusations was realized at the national level when a 30-year-old teacher, Taimoor Raza, was sentenced to death for alleged blasphemy on Facebook in 2017 (Bukhari, 2017). Raza's students accused him of blasphemy, and it was the first-ever death sentence involving any social media. The then government established a 25-member regulatory body to monitor blasphemous content online and track the alleged blasphemers (Anwar, 2017).

The governments of Nawaz Sharif (2013-2017) and Imran Khan (2018-2022) tried to regulate social media. However, these efforts had less to do with regulating social media and more to benefit their political interests (Mir et al., 2022). Pakistan's "Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight, and Safeguards), Rules 2021" is one such example (Ministry of IT & Telecom, 2020). For example, an analysis by Yale Law School described Rule 2021 as a 'disaster' for Pakistani people's freedom of expression, as Rule 2021 allows the government to surveil political dissent online (Karanicolas, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. There have been various incidents of arrests and torture over political expressions posted on social media, such as those associated with the political ideology of PTI during the 2024 election campaign (ACLED, 2024).

Thus, the literature highlights that political narrative building through social media like Facebook is a factor in radicalizing young Pakistanis, which urges them to have and/or support extremist ideologies and engage in violence. Simply, the religiopolitical use of social media has complicated the already complex dynamics of violent extremism in Pakistan, which urges unpacking the underlying issues or problems of social media in violent radicalism in the country.

## **Problem Statement**

Youth in fragile political contexts like Pakistan are increasingly using social media to consume/spread religiopolitical narratives that incite radical behaviors. Though platforms like Facebook tend to identify and remove radical or extremist content from their platforms, the increased access to the internet and the ability to post in any language have eased the spread of radical and extremist content (Benková, 2018). On the other hand, Facebook users lack critical thinking or perceptual analysis about the latent radical intent for political manipulations behind religiopolitical content online (Southwell & Boudewyns, 2017). Such an inability to

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<sup>1</sup> There were numerous incidents in Pakistan when individuals were accused of blasphemy for actions deemed insulting to Islamic belief and practice. It includes disrespectful actions, verbal or non-verbal, against Quran, Prophet Muhammad, and places of worship such as Mosque. The constitution of Pakistan has set severe punishments for such actions which include life imprisonment or death sentence. (Akins, 2019). In several cases the accusations were later found to be motivated by political and/or family/civil disputes. In some cases the allegations of blasphemous acts resulted in public lynching.

<sup>2</sup> On January 23, 2025, "Pakistan's parliament passes [another] bill with sweeping controls on social media" that will imprison the critics of judges, armed forces, and politicians in provincial and national assemblies (Ahmed, 2025).

identify the latent political motives reflects a lack of critical social media literacy (CSML) among Pakistani youth (Ejaz, 2013). Such an engagement with social media content without critical thinking pushes youth into radical ideologies without realizing that the content producers could be organized agents of political disinformation (Chaudhary et al., 2021). Thus, the lack of CSML urges youth to pause, like, or share potentially radical or extremist content, often unintentionally.

Schirch (2020) and Naseem & Arshad-Ayaz (2020) argue that CSML is an essential skill for countering the radical narratives on social media like Facebook. Livingstone (2004) defines media literacy as the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of contexts” (p. 1). CSML is a cognitive competence that helps users evaluate the content before any action or reaction (Yuan et al., 2021). As content evaluation is a critical aspect of literacy, uncritical social media users may not be able to identify the radical content due to the large amount of content they engage with online. Such users post or comment without critical thinking (Supratman & Wahyudin, 2020), which causes the spread of radical propaganda without validity or reliability checks of the posted content (Mason et al., 2018).

The education system in Pakistan has a complex structure for being significantly influenced by political dynamics, which not only impacts the educational policy formulation and curriculum development but the overall quality of education in the country. There are various parallel education systems in Pakistan, which include institutions by federal and provincial governments, religious leaders’ madrassa education boards, private institutions, and army public schools and colleges. Political parties or leaders shape broader educational policies rather than educationists (Sultana, 2018) and the curriculum reflect the state’s political narratives, such as anti-India sentiments (Bukhari et al., 2025). Furthermore, political parties engage in mobilization of student groups within colleges and universities, often patronage for political violence (Khan & Zaman, 2020). I personally experienced such political patronage and campus violence during my college years in Pakistan.

Celliers and Hattingh (2020) argue that inefficient education systems restrict youth from rational processing of information. Critical thinking education could help Pakistani youth engage with social media responsibly and critically, especially concerning radical narratives online (Ida et al., 2020). The motivation of this study was to explore if CSML could be a skill for Pakistani youth to safely interact with social media like Facebook amidst online radical and extremist narratives. Furthermore, there are relatively fewer studies focusing on Pakistan that critically examine the rise of social media abuse in violent radicalism and extremism. Furthermore, there are even fewer studies that analyze contextual nuances such as who created a particular political post, latent factors of radicalism or extremism in that, how different people perceive that differently, and the latent motives of those who posted. This study is intended to fill such gaps in the existing literature.

## **Research Objectives**

The overarching objective of the dissertation is to examine and analyze the role of social media, such as Facebook, in disseminating religiopolitical narratives that can and/or do radicalize Pakistani youth and might even lead to extremist behaviors.

Below are the main objectives of the study, followed by the corresponding research questions (RQs). Since this dissertation took a manuscript-based approach comprising three

individual manuscripts, i.e., sub-studies, each of the objectives and related RQs corresponds to the three individual manuscripts that appear as chapters in this dissertation.

RO1: To analyze the role of social media, particularly Facebook, concerning violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan.

RO2: To identify the ways critical social media literacy (CSML) skills can prevent or counter violent online radical and extremist narratives.

RO3: To understand Pakistani youth's perspectives about the role of religiopolitical content on Facebook in terms of violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan.

## **Research Questions**

To achieve the above-stated objectives, this dissertation sought to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: In what ways does social media, particularly Facebook, contribute to the propagation or mitigation of violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan? (sub-study 1)

RQ2: Which CSML skills and strategies are suggested by the peer-reviewed literature in the field to combat or deter violent radical and extremist narratives on social media? (sub-study 2)

RQ3: What are the Pakistani youth's perspectives about religiopolitical narratives on Facebook concerning violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan? (sub-study 3)

## **Literature Review**

Social media, particularly after the launch of Facebook in 2004 (Barr, 2018), has transformed the world into a global village by becoming a major source of information and communication. While social media has several benefits, including social networking and engagement in online communities, the interactive features of social media have been misused to influence the perceptions and worldviews of targeted audiences, such as youth (Nations, 2019). Since social media is a vehicle driven by users, it has become a key influencer in the lives of the majority of its 4.89 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2023). The unfiltered content on social media allows us to build unverified connections online, and the users rarely verify the information or connection requests they receive on these platforms (Georgescu & Popescul, 2014; Salter, 2018). Such a lack of monitoring or content moderation is being misused by radical and extremist groups to further their religiopolitical agenda (Ojielo & Ridley, 2015).

*Religiopolitics* can be defined as "situations in which relations with God provide shape and meaning to one's political actions and orientations" (Green, 1985, p. 314). In societies like Pakistan where religious and political discourses exist in a "symbiotic fusion," that is, where religion and politics become interdependent and intertwined (Naseem, 2010), social media have changed the traditional political dynamics and have become a key tool for religiopolitical groups to engage citizens at the mass level. These groups use social media to further their political agenda by spreading political narratives, manipulated content, radical propaganda, and hate speech to disinform people against rival religious and/or political groups (Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013). Such use of social media like Facebook is aimed at increasing the number of supporters or voters, religious parties to gain political influence, the government seeking to silence opponents by naming them as dissidents, radicals, or rebels, or power factions trying to boost their narratives while down-out others. Often, political groups in power censor social media to

shut down unfavorable religiopolitical discourses floating on social media to challenge the political control of groups in power.

Misuse of social media to disseminate radical content manipulates users' perceptions, actions, and reactions in religiopolitical contexts. Users, especially young people, remain at risk of radical propaganda being spread through social media as they do not have the educational or perceptual wherewithal to normally engage in critical thinking. Hence, young social media users remain at risk of online radical and extremist propaganda as they spend substantial time on social media (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Costello et al., 2020). As digital natives, teenagers and youth on social media remain at the risk of being exposed to extremist discourses linking violence, death, suicide, and the glorification of serial and mass killers (Rousseau et al., 2020; Hossain, 2018).

Since social media has become a key tool of communication, especially by youth, with immense global outreach, extremists and terrorist organizations misuse it to influence youth's perceptions and worldviews (Rajendran et al., 2022). Groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda use social media to spread violent theories and propaganda to radicalize and then recruit youth (Gaikwad et al., 2022). Such groups aim to polarize society to call for extremist governance of the public and institutions that can support their violent ideologies (Rajendran et al., 2022).

*Radicalization* is a "process through which people become increasingly motivated to use violent means against members of an outgroup or symbolic targets to achieve behavioral change and political goals" (Doosje et al., 2016, p. 2). McCauley and Moskalenko (2008) also touched upon the group factor and define radicalization as "change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the ingroup." (p. 416). Maskaliūnaitė (2015) also defined radicalization with political reasoning as "radicalization is a process by which a person adopts belief systems that justify the use of violence to effect social change and comes to actively support as well as employ violent means for political purposes" (p. 9). Whereas "*extremism* characterizes an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements that understand politics as a struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good" (Bötticher, 2017, p. 74). Torregrosa et al. (2022) define extremism as "an anti-democratic movement (which) stands against all those who do not embrace its dogmatic recipe for a transformation of society" (p. 9872, parentheses added).

Since this study focuses on the social media factor of radicalization and extremism, it defines online radicalization as the emergence of deviant views and behaviors that stem from interactions with extreme ideological content online, often leading to calls for significant, often unjustified, change. In the context of this study, such calls for change are in the religiopolitical or simply political spheres of a society or country. Social media also influences the behaviors and mental health of teens and youth, which are reflected in their offline lives (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Yeh and Swinehart (2022) call for CSML among youth, who are the major users of social media. With the rising misuse of social media for political narratives, CSML for young people has become a crucial skill in today's digital societies so that youth can decode and assess the radical narratives latent in the content online (Festl, 2020). Hence, CSML would help youth to identify, avoid, and report extremist narratives online (Rajendran et al., 2022).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Social media has become a tool of political engagement to influence religiopolitical opinions, voting behaviors, and propaganda against political opponents (Zaheer, 2018). These online political dynamics facilitate the process of radicalization among youth (Windsor, 2020). If youth have higher engagement with social media, there are higher chances for them to be exposed to politically hateful and radical content online (Costello et al., 2020). Such radical content on social media polarizes young people for supporting certain religiopolitical narratives while opposing others (Bouko et al., 2021). They remain ready to confront those having different or opposing political opinions, which in turn might promote extreme hostilities against each other, resulting in aggressive and radical behaviors (Klein, 2019). To counter such radicalization politically fueled through social media, the CSML could provide a crucial skillset for social media users (Ganesh & Bright, 2020).

To understand the dynamics of radicalism and extremism among youth amidst religiopolitical narratives on social media like Facebook, this dissertation employs three complementary critical theories.

**Root Narrative Theory (RNT).** This study applied RNT, developed by Solon Simmons (2020), as an overarching theoretical lens to understand the religiopolitical narratives being promoted through radical and extremist content on social media like Facebook. Simmons articulates that the RNT “is designed to explain the sources of radical disagreement... a disagreement that sinks into deep conceptions of power, injustice, and core values” (p. 2). RNT argues that radical disagreements happen when people hold different opinions, such as political opinions, and tend to determine what is right and wrong amidst interpretation gaps that restrict productive communication among parties or individuals with conflicting views. Simmons argues that radical disagreements emerge from rival interpretations of social power, one side being a source of power such as armies and governments and believing to be good, whereas the other side is a root of evil (Simmons, 2021). In the context of this dissertation, Pakistan army is projected to be a good force, and those opposing the army’s narratives are evils such as Imran Khan after 2022. Overall, RNT explains the sources of radical disagreement on power and injustice.

RNT identifies four types of narratives, i.e., security, liberty, equality, and dignity, and four types of power abuses, i.e., political, military, status, and economic. Simmons (2021) views power as a defining factor for narratives serving the interests of powerful groups such as the government and military elite. In the context of this study, in Pakistan, the competitive authoritarian regime employs securitization as a tool to surveil citizens through the abuse of their military and political powers (Khan & Kaunert, 2024). Whereas narratives competing with of regime’s rely on narratives of liberty, such as from the military elite and feudal politicians forming the fabrics of competitive authoritarian regime in the country. The case of PTI / Imran Khan is such an example whose narrative compete with those of the regime and resulted in political violence and oppression in the country (Akram et al., 2024a).

Especially for sub-study 3, *this study has grounded its analysis and findings on the abuses of power by politicians and the military elite through narratives of security, liberty, and dignity.* Uddin (2023) found that Pakistan’s social media spaces are being misused to spread radical and extremist narratives framed around narratives of insecurity, such as by the military

elite, and liberty and dignity, such as by the politicians. The application of RNT guided this study to understand the types of religiopolitical narratives being spread through social media that are resulting in radical and extremist behaviors among youth.

**Routine Activity Theory (RAT).** The Routine Activity Theory (RAT) was first introduced by Cohen and Felson (1979) to explain crime rate changes between 1947 and 1974 in the United States. RAT was revolutionary to calculate a (crime) activity and is an extension of the lifestyle exposure theory (LET), arguing that some people are more prone to becoming victims of crime than others because of their lifestyle (Ahmad & Ramayah, 2022). Obermaier and Schmuck (2022) argue that victimization happens when a suitable target, an absence of capable guardianships, and motivated offenders come together at any place and time, either online or offline. RAT is unique for emphasizing the ecological nature of (crime) activities and its implications thereafter (Miro, 2014). It argues for examining how social activities incline deviant behaviors, resulting in radical or criminal actions. Hence, such behaviors can be understood in relation to social conditions affecting the convergence of offenders and targets in the absence of guardians (Schaefer, 2021). Cullen and Wilcox (2010) acknowledge Cohen and Felson's proposal to curb criminal behaviors by limiting the availability of motivated offenders.

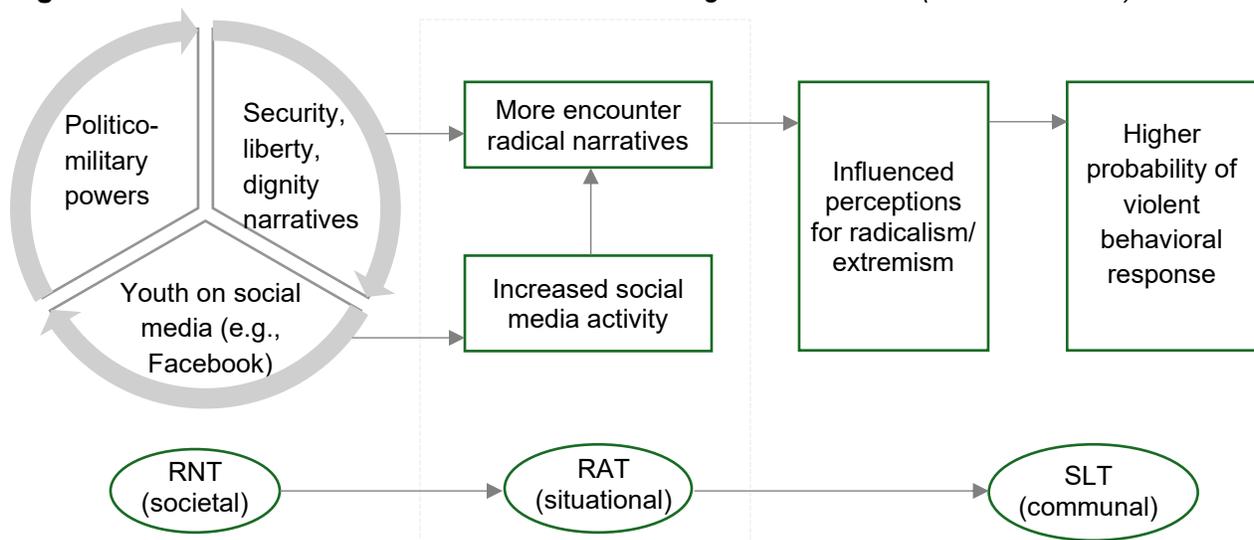
Later-day applications of RAT include examination of online (and offline) radicalization and extremism. According to Hawdon et al. (2019), RAT has been widely used to explain exposure to extremist material online, which increases the likelihood of elevating extremist behaviors among individuals. According to the RAT, higher usage of social media increases the probability of encountering online extremism; that means, contrary to passive users, active users of social media have almost double the chance of encountering extremist content online. Similarly, individuals who are inclined to share their views online, such as on social media, particularly around sensitive topics, are more likely to generate feelings of hatred or prejudice against others.

Leukfeldt and Yar (2016) argue that online activities such as communication through social media increase the chances of victimization as it risks individuals' identity and personality towards the offenders. RAT says that people with personality traits that make them easy target for (online) victimization, like people who are looking for their identity, attract offenders who will commit crimes against them (Ahmad & Ramayah, 2022). Such activities include influencing their perceptions and behaviors to support offenders' agenda, which could be criminal or political. This study views Pakistani youth as a suitable target for lacking critical thinking during their social media activity, an online space that exposes them to the radical and extremist narratives of motivated offenders, such as politico-military powers in the country. This study points that the political fragility in Pakistan poses a significant threat to the online safety of young people living under incapable guardianship of the state. Applying RAT to the social media space, youth encounters with violent radical and extremist narratives online are not an accident but a calculated or planned occurrence by the offenders to reach young people (Choi et al., 2020).

**Social Learning Theory (SLT).** Since RAT is concerned more with societal-level actors and processes and thus lacks focus on individual traits such as personality and behaviors, insights from Social Learning Theory (SLT) were applied to understand perceptions and behaviors of youth concerning their exposure to radical religiopolitical content on social media

like Facebook (Atif et al., 2019). Albert Bandura developed the SLT in 1977 (McLeod, 2024). SLT claims that people can engage in violent radicalism or extremism while watching extremist content, even if they are not directly involved. SLT is linked to the social-behavioral approach that draws attention to the environmental determinants of individuals' behaviors. It argues that individuals have unique attitudes and values that derive their judgment of the environment or situations around them, for example, the social media world, to influence their actions. Young people learn radical and extremist behaviors from their social environment, which later reflect in not only their social media activity but also real-life scenarios. SLT describes the "learning process that occurs through the interaction with deviant others in which individuals learn to define their attitudes and behaviors as deviant" (Miller & Morris, 2016, p. 1,546). Since learnings have a social context (Brooks, 2009), this study applied SLT to the social media contexts of Pakistan to understand how youth learn deviant and radical behaviors amidst religiopolitical narratives online.

**Figure 11** *Theoretical Framework of Radicalism through Social Media (Source: Author)*



The theoretical framework of this study (Figure 2) argues that politico-military powers in Pakistan fuel social media platforms like Facebook with religiopolitical disinformation latent in narratives around the country's security and its citizens' dignity or liberty. It creates an environment of narrative competition online, causing distrust in institutions, political anxiety, and uncertainty among young people. Such distrust in institutions such as mainstream media pushes youth's increased social media activity, where they (unwillingly) encounter radical religiopolitical narratives spread by the politico-military powers. Such encounters with radical religiopolitical narratives on social media influence political perceptions of many young users, which often result in extremist views about political change in the country and even political violence. Thus, the religiopolitical narratives that the politico-military powers spread for their political agenda result in radicalizing behaviors of young people who often respond to calls for (violent) protests and radical changes in the country.

**Theoretical Synthesis.** RNT, RAT, and SLT offer distinct yet complementary lenses to understand the radical and extremist behaviors of young social media users.

- Where RNT helps to understand the broader religiopolitical narratives on social media propagating violent radicalism and extremism, it lacked focus on the situational factors focused on by the RAT. The RNT also has a limited focus on the influence of interpersonal factors, which are discussed through the lens of SLT.
- RAT argues that social media provides a space where propaganda-focused religiopolitical actors (offenders) and their targets (youth) converge due to the lack of capable guardianship such as content moderation, counter-narratives, and limited critical social media literacy (CSML), RAT sees violent radicalism through social media as an environmental and opportunist factor rather than a behavior learned because of a broader narrative built through religiopolitical propaganda.
- The SLT views that violent radicalism and extremism could be a behavior learned through religiopolitical propaganda content on social media, but it does not focus on the broader societal factors (RNT) and situational factors (RAT). It argues that the social media environment fed with religiopolitical propaganda influences youth to adopt radical and extremist behaviors. In its conclusion section, this study presents a CSML framework for Pakistani youth to educate them for critically assessing the situational, communal, and societal factors latent in social media content and activity.

It is to note that sub-study 3 (Chapter 4) briefly provides theoretical framework to discuss the primary findings of data collected from the field.

## **Methodology**

Two different methodologies were used to conduct research on the three sub-studies comprising this dissertation. First, a systematic review was used for sub-study 1 and sub-study 2, whereas critical ethnography was used for sub-study 3. A PRISMA-guided systematic review of the Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases was conducted to understand the role of social media in radical and extremist narratives in Pakistan (sub-study 1) and how CSML could be a skill for young people to safely interact with social media (sub-study 2). Whereas critical ethnography was conducted for sub-study 3 to assess the perspectives of youth about religiopolitical content on social media concerning violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan. This dissertation presents the detailed methods used for each sub-study in their respective chapters – 2, 3, and 4.

## ***Interpretivist Research Paradigm***

This study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which argues that “truth and knowledge are subjective... culturally and historically situated (and) based on people’s experiences and their (own) understanding of them (experiences)” (Ryan, 2018, p. 8; parentheses added). The interpretive paradigm of qualitative research helps to generate rich and culturally sensitive data, offers flexibility in design, and acknowledges respondents' experiences and interpretations as subjective (Ponelis, 2015). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), the interpretivist approach helps researchers to study things in their natural settings and make sense of or interpret meanings by the people. Interpretivism looks for meaning behind the understanding of human behavior, interactions, and society, which requires an in-depth

subjective understanding of the people and their living contexts. Interpretivism is well suited as a framework for qualitative research that aims to understand individuals and their interpretations of experiences around certain subjects and their specific contexts (Pulla & Carter, 2018).

From an interpretivist perspective, Rowland (1995) argues that qualitative research usually reflects three philosophical layers: ontological beliefs about reality or what it is, epistemological assumptions regarding how we make sense of reality, and methodological choices as ways to achieve desired outcomes. Specific ontological beliefs lead to specific epistemological assumptions, and particular epistemological assumptions guide us to select certain methodologies over others.

Interpretivist research provides a philosophical and methodological framework of understanding social reality, and the notion of *Verstehen*, or understanding, is central to it. According to this paradigm, there are no facts, only interpretations, and it is up to the researcher to decide what they want to understand (Given, 2008). Interpretivists draw meanings from people's behaviors and interactions by looking deeply into the related contexts (Chowdhury, 2014). Gichuru (2017) notes that interpretive methods in qualitative research help understanding the context and processes of information systems when information systems are also influenced by the context.

There are various methods to carry out interpretivist research, such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, case studies, grounded theory, phenomenology, and critical ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Since it is critical to understand the context, societal structures, and people's experiences through the lens of respondents, this study employs critical ethnography.

### ***Critical Ethnography***

As mentioned earlier, sub-study 3 sought to elicit thick descriptions of the perception of Pakistani youth in the context of social media's (especially Facebook's) impact on/role in violent radicalism and extremism in the country. To this end, a critical ethnography was conducted among 17 students from four universities in Pakistan. "Critical ethnography is a qualitative approach to research that explicitly sets out to critique hegemony, oppression, and asymmetrical power relations to foster social change" (Palmer & Caldas, 2015, p. 1). The term critical ethnography was coined by Jim Thomas, who defined it as "conventional ethnography with a political purpose" (Thomas, 1993). Critical ethnography moves from simply politics to the politics of positionality. Critical ethnography takes the researcher beneath the surface and disrupts the status quo by obscuring operations of power and control. It resists the domestication and urge for 'what could be' instead of 'what is' (Madison, 2020).

Religious and political groups compete to control or influence social media like Facebook considering the wider outreach of these platforms. Critical ethnography allows contradictions of competing ideologies that transcend the audience or target populations and help "analyze (informants') words concerning larger historical processes and social contradictions, searching for the hidden forces that structure life" (Amber, 2011, p. 21, parentheses added). In-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents of sub-study 3 to elicit their perceptions and worldviews about religio-political content on Facebook concerning violent radicalism among Pakistani youth.

Traditional or conventional ethnography has had a bad rap and has been critiqued on several grounds (Brewer, 1994; Rashid et al., 2015). Critical ethnography differs from conventional ethnography in its focus on studying individuals within a marginalized community engaged in a cycle of action and reflection (Palmer & Caldas, 2015). It helps researchers to access the study respondents' perspectives, leading to thick descriptions of their knowledge and experiences, in addition to providing direct access to the local culture, experiences, and practices (Arshad-Ayaz et al., 2022). It also helps critique the interactions among people and/or with those building narratives for common people to believe and act upon (Mourad, 2023). Critical ethnography adopts 'soft approaches', such as critical thinking, to have difficult conversations on controversial and sensitive topics (Schulz et al., 2021). Since critical ethnography aims to bring change in the patterns of narrative oppression in the research settings (Acevedo-Gil, 2019), it helped this study to explore respondents' perceptions about their interactions with religiopolitical content on social media like Facebook.

Critical ethnography helped this study to uncover power dynamics in Pakistan, which are evident on social media, such as the role of the military elite in political manufacturing and narrative manipulations. It also helped to understand how different political parties use social media, like Facebook, to establish and promote their political discourse in the lives of young people whose support turns into the parties' political power. Critical ethnography also helped to contextualize this study's theoretical framework and the concepts around critical social media literacy, which helped in a thorough but relevant discussion of the findings. During the phase of data collection, critical ethnography allowed me to reflect on my observations and experiences in the field and on social media to better reflect on the findings of this study. Furthermore, the critical ethnographic approach enabled me to critique the influence of the military elite in political narratives in Pakistan, which has now turned into narrative competition due to the use of social media like Facebook. Hence, the goals of this study may not be achieved without taking a critical ethnographic approach.

As detailed by Carspecken (1996), this study complies with five key elements of critical ethnography for data generation: 1) Compiling primary records – of research settings and participants with an outsider lens, 2) Preliminary reconstructive analysis – to create codes for making sense of the findings, 3) Dialogical data generation – to check in with respondents and probe for in-depth details, 4) Describe system relations – by refining and interconnectedness of emerged themes, 5) System relations – to reflect on findings concerning community and existing theory.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

This study employed the thematic analysis approach to interpret the collected data. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400). It helps familiarize oneself with data, generate initial codes, identify themes, construct thematic networks, and integrate or interpret the findings (Alsaawi, 2014). Thematic analysis helps to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) in the interviews' data (Bennett et al., 2019), in addition to helping generate sub-themes if needed (Burdine et al., 2021).

Thematic analysis is often confused with content analysis, which involves recording the numerical frequency of codes and themes in the data (Bennett et al., 2019). Content analysis is

also a widely used method in qualitative research (Zikmund et al., 2013; Drisko & Maschi, 2016), which is a systematic way to analyze the content of interviews, audio, or visual data (Harper, 2011). Content analysis is conducted to identify trends and patterns of keywords used in textual data, their frequency, and their relationship structures. However, the content analysis does not consider the context and relies on the frequency of codes to find significant meanings in the text. On the other hand, thematic analysis offers systematic elements of doing content analysis, and it also lets researchers combine or synthesize the meanings of different contexts when they come to their analysis and conclusion (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Hence, this study employed a thematic analysis approach to systematically and contextually inform its findings and conclusions.

### ***Triangulations***

This study applied data triangulation, which Denzin defined as “collecting data from multiple sources (such as people or stakeholders), across time, space, and person” (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 126). Triangulation helps incorporate additional findings, such as “what someone tells you in an interview can be checked against what you observe on site or what you read about in documents” (Natow, 2020, p. 161). Patton (1999) defines triangulation as using more than one method or data source for developing a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon. Carter et al. (2014) draw from Denzin and Patton’s work and report four types of triangulation: method, investigator, theory, and data source triangulation. Except for investigator triangulation, all three types of triangulation were applied to consolidate the findings of this study.

In terms of method triangulation, this study collected data through systematic reviews of literature for sub-studies 1 and 2 and in-depth interviews with selected respondents for sub-study 3. The data collected for sub-study 1 and 2 contributed to the design of sub-study 3, while sub-study 3 validated or value-added in the findings of sub-study 1 and 2 (Hammersley, 2008). In addition to the systematic reviews of literature, traditional reviews of the literature were conducted extensively to identify relevant information, such as scrolling through Facebook posts for sub-study 3.

The data sources triangulated for this study include respondents of sub-study 3, the Web of Science and Scopus databases for sub-study 1 and 2, Google Scholar for traditional reviews of literature, and religiopolitical posts on Facebook, such as pages of political parties. The data from these sources, which were specific to radical religiopolitical content or mis/disinformation on social media, particularly Facebook, were synthesized to jointly inform the findings of this study.

Theory triangulation was conducted by applying three distinct theories: the root narrative theory, the routine activity theory, and the social learning theory. Guided by the study’s theoretical framework, the findings of this study are discussed in the lenses of these theories to ensure the study’s theoretical contributions.

Triangulation in qualitative research differs from in quantitative research, where it is used to confirm results through multiple approaches emphasizing statistical verifications. In qualitative research, as in this study, triangulation enhanced its credibility by cross-checking the findings through various lenses that gave an in-depth understanding of religiopolitical content on social media regarding violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan. It allowed the synthesis of

diverse perspectives from respondents representing various regions of Pakistan and the findings of previously published peer-reviewed literature.

### ***Reflexivity***

There are three approaches to conduct thematic analysis: coding reliability, reflexivity, and codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This study took a reflexive approach to thematic analysis. The contextual knowledge and recent political events related to this study were acknowledged and studied during the thematic analysis of systematic reviews for sub-study 1 and sub-study 2. In sub-study 3, the analysis process integrated the interaction with respondents into the findings (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The context of interview conversations and individual contexts and worldviews of respondents were the key factors in the coding process of interview transcripts in sub-study 3. When you use a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, you build themes from codes and think about how people can make sense of things together around a central organizing idea (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Considering reflexivity, the unstructured and organic (inductive) coding process let codes evolve and capture a deeper understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). During the coding process, the principal researcher continuously reflected on his experiences in the field during the data collection, which helped shape the evolution of the coding structure.

The reflexive thematic analysis is often termed as ‘fully qualitative research’ because it allows for improvement to happen while the analysis is being done and because the researcher’s experiences or observations are at the center of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The reflexive approach of thematic analysis in this study involved the following steps: 1) Familiarization with data; 2) coding the interview transcripts; 3) generating initial themes based on the codes; 4) reviewing and developing themes further; 5) refining, defining, and naming themes; and 6) writing up or interpreting findings. (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

### ***Positionality***

Positionality refers to the “position a researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study... for consciously examining their own identity to allow the reader to assess the effect of their characteristics and perspectives concerning the study population, the topic under study, and the research process” (Wilson et al., 2022, p. 44). It acknowledges how the researcher’s values and beliefs, such as religiopolitical and ethnic attributes, can influence the design and outcome of research. Researchers identify positionality by connecting the research to the study subject, its participants or respondents, and the research context or processes (Holmes, 2020). It establishes credibility in research findings, particularly when the researcher has an insider status such as belonging to the study context or subjects (Massoud, 2022).

My position on this study is multifaceted. In terms of study subject, I have worked for more than a decade on international development programs focusing on conflicts, extremism, and violence in fragile states, including Pakistan. During my field experiences, I observed various factors radicalizing youth’s behaviors for violent extremism. Then social media emerged in the lives of Pakistani youth, which further complicated the drivers of radicalism and extremism. I closely monitored the general elections of 2013, 2018, and 2024 in Pakistan, during which political parties heavily relied on social media to build their propaganda and called for youth’s radical and violent engagement in the political campaigns. The 2024 general

elections happened during the period of this study, which was significantly reflected by the respondents of sub-study 3.

Subsequently, my MA in Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia, United States, gave me systematic insights into how social media is being misused for establishing and promoting radical and extremist narratives. Before starting to work on this dissertation, I worked on some research studies focused on social media factors in disinformation, radicalization, and violent extremism, which helped me gauge the scholarly trends on social media concerning violent extremism among youth (Akram & Nasar, 2023; Akram et al., 2023). I embarked on this study with a considerable degree of awareness, personal views, and even biases on radicalism and extremism being spread through religiopolitical content on social media like Facebook. The findings of this study reflect my positionality interpretations of the data collected through systematic reviews and interviews with respondents. By minimizing the researcher's own biases and perceptions, the detailed documentation of the data collection procedures made it easier to track the information sources and how the findings were connected.

Overall, my stance in this study was reflexive, involving continuous reflection on my values, worldview, personal biases, and contextual knowledge throughout the research process. It involved continual questioning of my position in the research process and the physical location of where I come from (Canada) and where I conducted the interviews (Pakistan) (Hansen, 2021). My physical location and ability to fluently speak in English influenced in organizing and conducting interviews for sub-study 3, and I was mindful of that. Though my origins in Pakistan gave me an insider edge, my studies at Concordia University in Canada and living in North America for the last decade portrayed me as an outsider. Reflexive positionality examines how "a researcher's sociodemographic identifiers... affect research encounters, processes, and the outcomes" (Johnsen & Fitzpatrick, 2022, p. 1). I critically examined the potential influences my position may have on the research process and tried to be transparent about such instances while reporting the findings. Reflexive researchers acknowledge the limitations of their research and repeatedly recall their role throughout the process (Paterson & Glass, 2020). Because reflexivity requires the researcher to be sensitive (Holmes, 2020), all written and spoken communication in this study took into account the respondents' identities or groups they belonged to as well as the study's settings.

### ***Ethical Consideration***

This dissertation follows ethical guidelines entailed in Concordia University's ethical protocols (Concordia, 2023) (see Appendix 1) and Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2, 2022).

For sub-study 3, informed consent was obtained from the potential respondents during their recruitment process. Informed consent helps in keeping a "reasonable balance between over-informing and under-informing" the potential respondents (Orb et al., 2000, p. 95). The consent form informed the potential respondents about their invitation to participate in the study through in-depth interviews. The research aimed to inform the respondents about the knowledge they will be contribute during their interviews. The respondents were also informed about the potential risks associated with their participation in the study, enabling them to make informed decisions. The respondents were made clear that participation was not mandatory, but

rather a choice. They were also informed that the collected data through interviews will not have any commercial use but will be used only for academic purposes. The consent form also informed them about the type of information being collected and how the study findings will be disbursed (TCPS2, 2022) (see Appendix 2).

As per Article 3.1 of TCPS2, the potential respondents were informed that their participation was completely voluntary, and they were not provided with any financial returns. The researcher respected their choice or decision either to move forward with interviewing for sub-study 3 or decline and/or opt-out at any stage without any obligation. The researcher did not influence their decision to participate in this sub-study nor disclose any information at any stage of those who declined the invitation to participate. They were also informed that they had the freedom to end the interview at any time and for any reason (Article 3.1 of TCPS2).

This study does not entail any conflict of interest on the part of the researcher, such as financial or political interest (Article 7.4 of TCPS2). The sub-study 3 respondents were informed that the study's findings would only be used for academic purposes and not for commercial purposes. Ethnic minorities were included in the interviews (Article 4.1 of TCPS2), and women also participated as study respondents (Article 4.2 of TCPS2).

For those who chose to participate, the privacy of their information was strictly ensured. The respondents were given an environment and confidence of privacy to ensure their unbiased and thorough participation. They were also encouraged to share any additional insights they might have with their referral contact in case they recalled something relevant after the interview. None of them shared any additional insights. Their identity was blinded on their interview transcripts before processing them for analysis and later reporting on the findings of sub-study 3. Masking the personal information of respondents helps ensure their privacy (Cresswell, 2013). Complete confidentiality was ensured in the responses associated with individual respondents. The recording and transcripts of the interviews conducted for sub-study 3 were not shared with any person or party, and the researcher stored them in a password-protected cloud-based database, Concordia's OneDrive, for the sole purpose of analysis. Though the findings of the thematic analysis were shared with a larger audience, such as the supervising faculty members at Concordia University and potential publications of the manuscripts derived from sub-study 3, there is no identifying information of any of the study respondents.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is limited research that exclusively focuses on violent radicalism in Pakistan that results from the religiopolitical narratives on social media like Facebook. Even in these studies, the social media aspect of radicalization and extremism is not the main focus and is often discussed briefly. This study calls for further research into religiopolitical narratives on social media to better understand their role in the complex issues of violent radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth.

The findings of this study have significance for policymaking in areas such as youth affairs, education, and social media regulation. The government of Pakistan may utilize this study to launch programs on critical thinking among youth routinely engaging with social media. It may also urge the government to impartially react to or deal with the radical and extremist

content on social media, regardless of whichever political narrative the government is supporting.

Educationists can utilize this study to inculcate CSML skills in curricula and pedagogies at the school and college levels to promote critical thinking among students when they engage with social media. The educational institutions may enhance their focus on CSML, especially for the programs in social sciences and communication studies. Civil society organizations and think tanks working on extremism issues related to social media can also reference this study in the design and implementation of their programs. Since social media have become a key tool of radical and extremist narratives in Pakistan, this study will benefit organizations and institutions, such as UNICEF Pakistan, working to prevent or counter violent extremism and educating social media users for critical thinking and nuance analysis. In addition, social media platforms like Facebook can also reference this study to improve their community guidelines and trust and safety protocols for users' safety education, such as flagging or nudging mechanisms to prevent and counter radical narratives online.

Furthermore, on a societal level, the findings can help initiate a debate on the importance of CSML as a fundamental skill for Pakistani youth, enabling them to prevent and counter radical narratives when interacting on social media. The theoretical contributions of the study will benefit the broader academic audience researching social media factors of religiously or politically fueled radical and extremist behaviors among youth.

### **Limitations**

This study has had certain limitations. The readers, reviewers, or those who intend to reference or utilize this study in their work should be mindful of these limitations. Since two components of this study were systematic reviews of literature (sub-study 1 and 2) and one was a qualitative ethnographic study (sub-study 3), there were different types of limitations for each of these component types.

One of the limitations is the theoretical framework of this dissertation/study, which might seem repetitive. Though the theoretical framework is detailed as a sub-section of the Introduction Chapter (Chapter 1), it was also briefly discussed in Chapter 4 (sub-study 3) as the manuscript of this sub-study was individually submitted for peer review at different academic journals. The theoretical framework was discussed in a non-repetitive manner to support the findings of sub-study 3.

### ***Sub-Study 1 and 2***

Since two databases, Web of Science and Scopus, were systematically reviewed for 1 and 2, other databases may contain more articles relevant to the scope of these sub-studies. However, these two databases were chosen based on their credibility in social sciences research. Although both of these sub-studies followed specific PRISMA frameworks, future backend software-level updates may result in different results for the same search criteria. Another notable limitation is that sub-study 2 found a few articles focused on the Pakistani context, and it was challenging to generalize the CSML skills in Pakistan to varied contexts focused on preventing or countering violent radicalism.

### **Sub-Study 3**

Due to its qualitative nature involving in-depth interviews, sub-study 3 may not be generalizable and may not represent the broader perspectives or experiences of all or most Pakistanis. In addition, the respondents of this sub-study were young people currently enrolled in four public universities, which may not reflect the experiences and observations of youth not attending those universities. One province of Pakistan, Sindh, remained non-representative in this sub-study, as there was no student from Sindh referred by the faculty to be interviewed for this sub-study. Sindhi youth's exclusion was not intentional or planned.

This sub-study's focus was on religiopolitical narratives, not political only or religious only narratives, of violent radicalism or extremism among youth. It was challenging to retain the focus of sub-study 3 respondents on religiopolitical narratives and distinguish the findings from any religious-only or political-only narratives referenced by the interviewees. The focus of sub-study 3, the key component of this study, was solely on religiopolitical content on Facebook. It does not cover other social media platforms like X or Youtube, not even Facebook's associated services such as Messenger, WhatsApp, or Instagram.

Since sub-study 3 was focused on the Pakistani context, its findings may not be generalizable to other politically fragile contexts or countries as there are unique religiopolitical circumstances in each country.

### **Risks and Challenges**

Considering its context and subject, this study entailed various risks and challenges in the process of its design and data collection. Due to the state's crackdown on expression of political opinions on social media, especially by Imran Khan's government and by the state<sup>3</sup> after Khan's ouster<sup>4</sup> from the Prime Minister's office on April 10, 2022 (Freedom House, 2024), this study required strategic design for safer implementation of processes such as data collection in the field.

For sub-study 1 and sub-study 2, it was risky to browse the internet for the literature review. Highest in the country's history, the Pakistani state referenced internet freedom and social media as key reasons for insecurity, extremism, and terrorism in 2024. To counter that, the government installed a firewall on the country's internet, which slowed down internet speed, blocked access to certain websites, and filtered out specific content to browse (Zaman, 2024a). It affected browsing for this study when I was in Pakistan, as various websites did not open there, for example, non-Pakistani news websites and data portals of Canadian and American universities. In addition to blasphemy accusations, 2024 witnessed various incidents of arrest and torture for sharing political opinions on social media, particularly Facebook (Hussain, 2024b). To avoid any security risk, I had to browse online data sources such as Google Scholar and Facebook in incognito mode so that cookies or my IP (internet protocol) address could not be tracked by anyone, particularly by Pakistan's state authorities.

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<sup>3</sup> This study defines "state" as an organized political entity of Pakistan which functions under influence of the country's military elite, maintaining substantial control over policies and political processes without overtly assuming ruling positions. This study views "indirect praetorianism" in Pakistan.

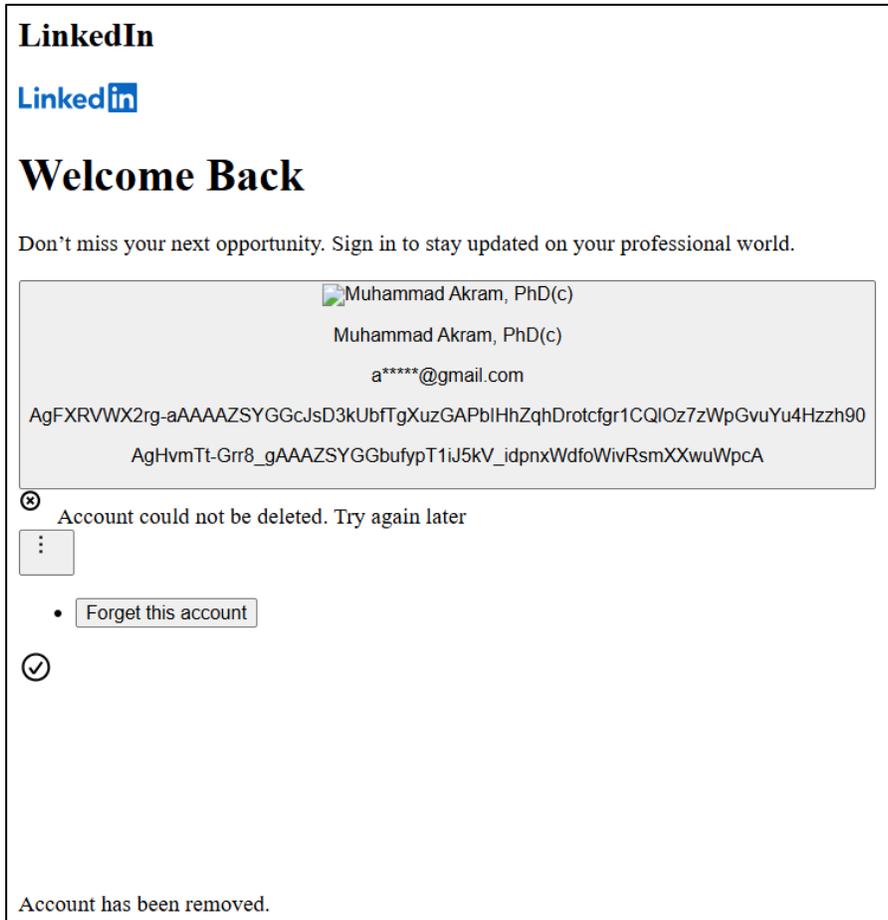
<sup>4</sup> Since no-confidence vote ousted Imran Khan from office of prime minister, "Khan has campaigned against the military and coalition government, accusing both of colluding with the United States government to engineer his ouster," the government and military has rejected this accusation through (Mir, 2023).

Whereas more risks and challenges were associated with sub-study 3. Below are the key risks faced during the data collection phase of sub-study 3.

- I travelled to Pakistan for data collection during February 2024, the month when general elections took place, with the alleged influence and control of the military establishment to marginalize PTI from media coverage and political spheres (Afzal, 2024). There were various incidents of forced disappearances and torture of social media activists criticizing the state for political interference. Since public sentiment was high due to the election, I chose to be in the field for timely and in-depth insights from potential respondents. I was aware of the risks if my data collection plans were revealed publicly, and thus exercised caution.
- Furthermore, it was challenging to recruit respondents for the in-depth interviews due to the sensitivities and insecurities associated with the subject of the sub-study. The faculty members in targeted universities were reluctant to refer students due to their personal safety and concern for students' security. They were concerned about the study being conducted at a foreign university. They were also apprehensive because of the focus of the study on 'political disinformation for violent extremism', which may put them at risk in the hands of Pakistani security agencies. I needed to ensure their privacy to secure their cooperation and guarantee confidentiality for their students' participation.
- After the potential respondents learned about this study through the consent form and introductory explanation, nine of them declined to be interviewed. They shared their discomfort to be a part of this study due to its sensitive subject which may trigger discussion on the state's political interferences and social media surveillance. I did not try to convince them to participate in this study. At the same time, I was concerned that they might spread the word about my data collection which could create security risks for me.
- During the interviews, I could observe the apprehension and discomfort in some respondents especially when they were to name the military elite as a key driver of violent extremism in Pakistan. In such instances, they used different slang to reference the military elite, such as, "you know who I mean", "khalai makhlooq (angels)", "real powerhouse in the country", and more. A respondent from Baluchistan really whispered for almost all his responses to the questions asked for the interview. Since the interviews took place in the premises of universities, it was challenging to sustain the privacy in interview rooms which could risk the students from their fellow students having opposite opinions politically or religiously.
- There were instances when respondents whispered about the study with fellow students, but after the interview was completed. For example, a respondent came back to the room, after the interview, with fellow students and questioned me, "Why did you come all the way from Canada and do 'such' interviews in Pakistan"? "Why did you choose our university and not others"? "Is this study a part of a foreign mission or be given to a foreign agency"? The respondent, along with fellow students, was trying to frame the interviews as some Western agenda that I am helping with against the Pakistani nation and country. I had to explain to her in detail and justify my position by explaining why my study focuses on Pakistan. At that

moment, I felt insecure about being dragged into some investigation by the university or law enforcement authorities.

**Figure 22** *My LinkedIn Account Disrupted.*



Due to extra security screenings at airports, I created digital copies of all the interview recordings and their transcripts and uploaded them to a designated folder in password protected One-Drive by Concordia University, Montreal. When traveling back to Canada, it was crucial for personal security not to hold the physical or soft copies of data collected for this study. In addition, I signed out from my cell phone and laptop One-Drive, my personal drive at Google, and my social media accounts on Facebook and LinkedIn. I also deleted these apps from my devices when travelling back to Canada.

My entire online presence during the fieldwork in Pakistan was in incognito mode. During my early days for this trip in Pakistan, I also reached out to some non-academic people seeking referrals of potential respondents for this study. I faced skepticism and critical questions such as, "Are you a foreign agent now", "Is this research a part of some mission", "Why would you stay that long here"? And more. Then, I did not publicize my presence in Pakistan except for a few family members and faculty members who helped to organize the interviews. I took precautions to avoid any risk to my personal security during travel to/from Pakistan. I kept my

stay in a small town and did not travel inside the country except for collecting data from four different locations. Also, I did not post any political content or comment on any social media platform during my time in Pakistan which could be flagged to the ongoing operations against political activists on social media. Considering LinkedIn as a professional platform that may not be surveilled, I cautiously posted on LinkedIn a month prior to returning to Canada about my non-dissertation research paper's presentation at an academic conference<sup>5</sup>. I was unable to access my LinkedIn account following that post (Figure 1).

Furthermore, the occasional shutdown of the internet and crackdown on social media (Freedom House, 2024) was another major challenge I faced during data collection phase of this study. The government suspended internet and social media services on mobile phones whenever there was a call for protest such as by the PTI (Pant, 2024). The service remained available for broadband internet connections at homes though. It was challenging to continue research online, communicating with respondents' referring faculty members, and my dissertation supervisor at Concordia University, Montreal.

### ***Increased Social Media Surveillance in Pakistan***

During 2024, when data was collected for this study, the state of Pakistan took various measures to surveil and restrict social media activity by accusing it a source of anti-state propaganda. The Appendix 3 presents a snapshot of such measures.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This study followed a manuscript-based structure comprising three manuscripts and chapters logically connecting these manuscripts. Each manuscript was the output of a sub-study. This dissertation starts with a comprehensive introduction of this study in addition to the limitations, data collection risks, and significance of this study, followed by a review of relevant literature, theoretical framework, and methodology. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 detail the methods used to conduct each of the sub-studies. Furthermore, this dissertation provides a conclusion based on the findings drawn from the three sub-studies and then makes recommendations accordingly.

Below is an overview of three sub-studies conducted as part of this dissertation.

### ***Sub-Study 1 (Chapter 2): The Role of Social Media in Shaping Violent Extremism Discourse in Pakistan***

Sub-study 1 aimed to synthesize the peer-reviewed literature on the use of social media, such as Facebook, concerning radical and extremist narratives in Pakistan. It explores how young people in Pakistan interact with violent radical propaganda during their social media engagement and what remedial actions have been suggested in the published literature. This sub-study also intends to highlight the scholarly trends on social media factors in radicalism and extremism in Pakistan to identify research gaps that could guide sub-study 3. The manuscript

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<sup>5</sup> "Military interference in political affairs: Perspectives from illiterate Pakistani Baby Boomers and Gen X." *Peace and Conflict Studies Journal Conference*, 2025, Nova Southeastern University, Florida, United States. [https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs\\_conference/2025/day1/10/](https://nsuworks.nova.edu/pcs_conference/2025/day1/10/)

derived from sub-study 1 transitions this dissertation to sub-study 2, in addition to providing the literary background of this dissertation.

The WoS core collection database was systematically reviewed, adhering to the inclusion criteria. The WoS database generated a few articles focused on radicalism or extremism in Pakistan through social media. Then, the articles' search expanded to Elsevier's Scopus database, which was reviewed systematically following the similar inclusion criteria guided through the PRISMA flow chart. This sub-study synthesized the current level of peer-reviewed research on social media factors in the violent radicalism dynamics of Pakistan. It also identified the gaps in research trends, made recommendations, and discussed if/how CSML could be a skill for Pakistani youth. (See full manuscript as Chapter 2)

### ***Sub-Study 2 (Chapter 3): Leveraging Critical Social Media Literacy (CSML) to Safeguard Youth Against Violent Radicalization and Extremism***

This sub-study aimed to synthesize the peer-reviewed published literature on CSML skills to prevent or counter violent radicalism and extremism among youth amidst radical and extremist narratives on social media. The WoS core collection database was reviewed to systematically identify the articles based on a predefined inclusion criteria. The identified articles meeting the inclusion criteria were analyzed thematically to discover CSML skills discussed for preventing or countering violent radicalism or extremism.

The manuscript, which originates from sub-study 2, enumerates various CSML skills designed to counter or prevent violent radical and extremist propaganda on social media. It identifies the understudied aspects of critical thinking that are crucial for safer interaction with social media. It argues for an enhanced scholarly focus on critical thinking abilities among youth during their engagement with social media amidst radical and extremist narratives online. (See full manuscript as Chapter 3)

### ***Sub-Study 3 (Chapter 4): Facebook and Violent Extremism: Insights into Pakistani Youth's Take on Religiopolitical Content***

This sub-study directly engaged with Pakistani youth currently enrolled in graduate programs in social sciences. This sub-study aimed to understand: 1) What impact does religiopolitical disinformation on social media have on youth's perceptions and attitudes towards violent radicalism and extremism? and 2) To what degree do youth critically evaluate the underlying motives and intent of religiopolitical content on social media that advocates violent radicalism or extremism?

The results of this sub-study were informed by the thematic analysis of 17 in-depth interviews with university students from diverse regions of Pakistan. The findings of sub-study 3 revealed that Facebook is used for religiopolitical disinformation in Pakistan, which radicalizes the behaviours of young people who often engage in political extremism and violence. This sub-study points out that political extremism is more evident on social media like Facebook than religious extremism. It recommends CSML as a core skill for youth to safely navigate platforms like Facebook for their social interactions. (See full manuscript as Chapter 4)

### ***Connecting Three Sub-Studies***

This dissertation connects the manuscripts derived from all three sub-studies to ensure coherence in the dissertation. Sub-study 1 provides literature-based background for sub-study 3, which is the key output of this dissertation. The chapter connecting sub-study 1 to sub-study 2 uncovers the dearth of literature on social media factors in the violent extremism discourse of Pakistan. It identifies various patterns of religiopolitical disinformation on social media that radicalize the behaviors of young people, resulting in violent extremism. It found that youth in Pakistan lack critical thinking to safely interact with political content on social media, which highlights the need for CSML skills among youth. This connecting chapter also references some aspects of this study's theoretical framework on how radical behaviors are learned through social media activity and why CSML could be learned to prevent radicalism online. The theoretical articulation provides a segue to the next chapter that examines how CSML can be a countermeasure to prevent radical and extremist narratives on social media.

The chapter connecting the manuscript of sub-study 2 to the sub-study 3 discusses how the lack of critical thinking among youth places them at risk of radical and extremist narratives on social media. It contextualizes the CSML abilities among Pakistani youth whose online activity remains at risk of radical religiopolitical narratives on Facebook, the most used platform in Pakistan. Findings of sub-study 2 provide a base for exploration of religiopolitical disinformation on Facebook concerning radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth discussed in sub-study 3.

## CHAPTER 2 (Sub-Study 1): The Role of Social Media in Shaping Violent Extremism Discourse in Pakistan<sup>6</sup>

### Introduction

Many agree that social media has accelerated the radicalization process, even though the factors causing a person's radicalization are still being debated (Akram & Nasar, 2023). It has, at the same time, added complexity to the research on factors pushing individuals toward radical and extreme narratives (Shapiro & Crooks, 2022). Social media has reshaped the study of radical and extremist ideologies as it conveniently connects radical people with like-minded spheres (Ali et al., 2022). Factors like poverty and unemployment were considered the major causes of extremism, such as in the northern areas of Pakistan (Naz et al., 2022). However, as in the case of the 9/11 attackers, poverty is now considered one of the factors and not the sole causal factor. Now, radical narratives on social media have also become a driving force in youth's radicalization (Hassan et al., 2021). Online exposure to extremist ideologies has become one of the key factors in the rise of extremist behaviors among youth (Shah, 2018). Though social media was intended to offer social interactions online, it has also become a breeding ground for spreading radical narratives by certain actors and their ideologies (Asif et al., 2020). Some people and groups use social media to propagate and expand their extremist ideologies (Gaikwad et al., 2021). They share hateful and manipulated content on social media, such as revolutionary language against the government, to incite radical behaviors among youth (Sharif et al., 2019).

Extremist groups use the data mining features of social media platforms, such as Facebook and X, to profile their youth as potential targets. Subsequently, affordances such as narrowcasting<sup>7</sup> or geofencing<sup>8</sup> help them reach the profiled youth (Droogan et al., 2018). Since the launch of Facebook in 2004 and X (formerly Twitter) in 2006, the dynamics of radicalism and extremism have become complex with the increased use of these platforms by violent extremist groups (Droogan et al., 2018). Facebook has more than 2.27 billion monthly active users, whereas X has an average of 335 million monthly active users (Sharif et al., 2019). Since these platforms are decentralized and allow anonymity as well as a wider reach, they are used by radical and extremist groups to spread their violent propaganda and help in recruitment, fundraising, and the expansion of their networks (Droogan et al., 2018). In 2015, a study by Sharif et al. (2019) reported more than 125,000 X accounts being associated with terrorist activities or outfits. With billions of young users, social media allows extremist groups to propagate their radical ideologies at the mass level (Gaikwad et al., 2021). Social media has an enormous capacity for organized misinformation and disinformation, which provides space for radical and extremist narratives (Gautam, 2022). Amidst these radical narratives freely floating online, youth remain at higher risk of being dragged into radical propaganda (UI Rehman et al., 2020).

Social media has shifted the radicalization processes to expose the youth to extremist content online and then migrate potential victims into closed groups for intensive radicalization

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<sup>6</sup> This manuscript has been accepted for peer review by the *Online Information Review* (Emerald Publishers).

<sup>7</sup> Narrowcasting is used to disseminate information to a specialized audience, rather than to general public as in broadcasting (Goncalves et al., 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Geofencing "refers to using location-based technology to create virtual boundaries around specific geographic areas" (Coursera, 2024, para. 1).

(UI Rehman et al., 2020). Radical and extremist groups are reported to use automated bots to generate radical content and spread it strategically, targeting their youth audience, who are also the key users of social media (Droogan et al., 2018). The internet-based communication tools offer violent extremists the same opportunity to “communicate, collaborate, and convince” as everyone else (Perešin, 2014, p. 86). The increasing amount of radical content online has increased its accessibility, hence the youth’s vulnerability to encountering it (Pauwels & Schils, 2016).

Radical narratives have been embedded in Pakistan's religiopolitical dynamics, especially since the Bhutto era, even when he was foreign minister to General Muhammad Ayub Khan’s government. At that time, Bhutto favored the country’s radical Islamization, supported Mawdudi’s post-1965 war preaching for Jihad, and undermined the socioeconomic development of the country (Nasr, 1994). Later, when Bhutto became prime minister (1973 to 1977), he got tough on minorities, particularly the Ahmadiyya community, when he was losing ground in political spheres (Sulehria, 2022). Then General Zia-ul-Haq led Pakistan’s jihadi engagement during the Afghan-Soviet war in the 1980s<sup>9</sup>, which bred such complex factors of religio-politically fueled violent extremism in the country’s social fabric; it has been getting more complex since then. Another military dictator’s (General Pervez Musharaf, 2001-2008), engagement with the post-9/11 NATO-Taliban war further promoted violent extremism and terrorism in Pakistan (Akram, 2020). During this period, social media was rapidly gaining popularity in Pakistan; and Imran Khan’s strategic use of these platforms significantly dominated the narrative space by the late 2010s. Khan’s political narrative on social media remained radical until his ouster from the prime minister’s office in 2022; after that, it became violent, extremist, and a source of radical polarization (Akram et al., 2024a).

According to the Data Portal (Kemp, 2023), there were 87.35 million internet users in Pakistan in 2023, making the internet penetration 36.7 percent, whereas 71.70 million were social media users, equating to 30.1 percent of the total population. Overall, 82.1 percent of internet users in Pakistan used at least one social media platform in 2023, and 28 percent of those identified as female. In terms of the specific social media platforms in 2023, Facebook was reported to have the highest number of users (37.30 million) among other platforms in Pakistan, in addition to the users of its other services, Messenger (11.65 million), Instagram (12.95 million), and WhatsApp (52.32 million) (Ahmad, 2023). The Data Portal reported 4.65 million X users in Pakistan, compared to 71.70 million on YouTube and 16.51 million on TikTok in 2023. Since Pakistani teens and youth spend almost five hours a day on the internet and two hours on social media, they remain at higher risk of encountering radical content online (Thakur et al., 2020; Mazhar et al., 2020).

In the case of Pakistan, the social media spheres are dominated by those whose narratives influence offline scenarios and who tend to control and foster radical mindsets among youth to fulfill their religiopolitical propaganda (Ali et al., 2022). Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) are recent examples of ruling both the online and offline political narratives in Pakistan (Akram et al., 2024a). Though the customized Islamization, that

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<sup>9</sup> “Without Pakistan, there could have been no effective Afghan resistance movement and little prospect for its success against the Soviets. The sanctuary of Pakistan allowed the *mujahidin* (holy warriors) to organize military operations, and the Islamabad government became a conduit for multinational arms deliveries to those fighting in Afghanistan” (Weinbaum, 1991, p. 71).

is, adapting a politically tailored version of Islam, of Pakistan in the 1980s by General Zia-ul-Haq was aimed at setting an ideological direction for the country, it resulted in a spiral of radicalism and extremism (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014). The ever-changing religiopolitical narratives in the country, mainly influenced by the military elite, have been urging youth to favor violence and align with extremist ideologies (Asif et al., 2020). Amidst increasing religiopolitical polarization and people's ability to radically and hatefully express their opinions on social media, especially those favoring the political manifesto of PTI or TLP, the Pakistani youth online remain at risk of being influenced by radical content online (Gautam, 2022). Hence, there is a need to thoroughly understand the role of social media in shaping radicalism and extremism discourses in Pakistan.

The dominant trend to study the role of social media in violent radicalism is through research applying quantitative methods and detecting extremist keywords through AI or machine learning techniques. There are fewer studies focused on thoroughly understanding the extremist behaviors of extremists abusing social media platforms (Almazroi & Mohammed, 2024). The purpose of this study is to review the peer-reviewed published literature, either qualitative or quantitative, on the abuse of social media such as Facebook and X in radical and extremist narratives in Pakistan. It aims to synthesize and understand how youth live on the margins of violent radical propaganda during their social media activity and what remedial actions have been suggested in the published literature. Furthermore, this paper aims to highlight the trends in scholarly work on radicalism and extremism through social media in the Pakistani context, thereby providing recommendations for future studies.

The paper first provides an introduction to the use of social media (Facebook and X) in religiopolitical propaganda for violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan. The paper then details the methods used for systematically reviewing peer-reviewed published literature and presents findings from a thematic analysis of the reviewed literature. Finally, it discusses various aspects of social media as a tool in Pakistan's violent radical and extremist narratives, draws conclusions, and makes recommendations.

## **Methods**

The systematic literature review approach supports developing themes and trends and identifying gaps and further research areas (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008; Wright et al., 2007). In this study, the systematic literature review was conducted using the "Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses" (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009). It supports finding, selecting, and evaluating relevant researched topics, as well as developing the problem's solution using the PRISMA technique, as mentioned in Figure 3.

Scholarly journals were identified in the first step using the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection and Scopus databases. The rationale for selecting these databases lies in their extensive international coverage of bibliographic resources. These databases became the most prominent bibliographic data sources for journal selection, research appraisal, bibliometric analysis, and other research activities, especially in the social sciences (Li et al., 2018; Prancutè, 2021). For more than 40 years, WoS was the first source of bibliographic records until Elsevier introduced Scopus in 2004 (Baas et al., 2020). An advanced search tool was used to identify the research studies using the search terms "social media with inclusion of Facebook and X (former Twitter)" and "radicalization, radicalism, and extremism." The keyword Twitter was used in the search to include articles published before Twitter's name change to X on July

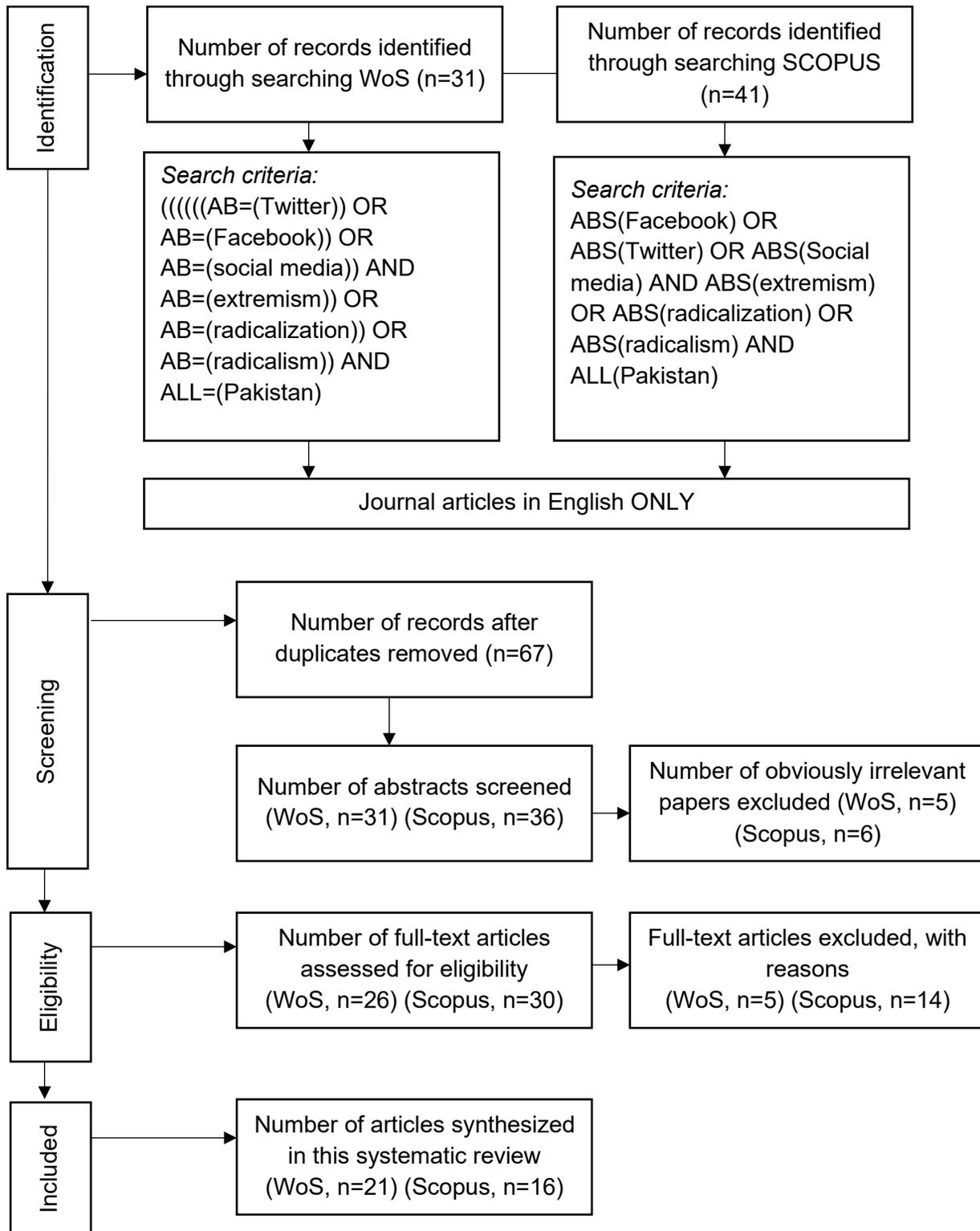
24, 2023. The inclusion search terms filter was set to abstract, and articles published in English only were included. The publication date range and index filters were not applied because the search criteria yielded few published articles. The research's relevance to Pakistan was the key point in the inclusion criteria.

The second step involved identifying 72 research studies from the WoS and Scopus databases. All the studies were reviewed thoroughly to evaluate whether they met the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1). Since two databases were reviewed, five records were removed for being duplicates. After reviewing the abstracts of all the papers (n=67), 11 articles were removed for being irrelevant to the focus of this study. After conducting a critical review of all 56 papers, 19 more were excluded at this stage due to their lack of relevance to the social media (Facebook or X) aspects of radicalism and extremism, particularly in Pakistan. Therefore, the thematic analysis was conducted of 37 selected papers using the qualitative analysis and data management software NVivo version 12 (QSR International).

**Table 11** *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

No.	Included	Excluded
1	Articles published in peer-reviewed journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science databases.	Non-peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, magazines, news reports, dissertations.
2	Articles with a focus on radicalization and extremism through social media (Facebook or X) in Pakistan.	Articles focus on radicalization and extremism but do not focus on social media or Pakistan.
3	Articles discuss radicalization through popular social media platforms, namely, that is, Facebook and X.	Articles with a focus on radicalization or extremism and print or other forms of media.
4	Articles in English.	Articles in other languages such as Chinese, Spanish, etc.
5	Articles in the field of "Arts and Humanities, Social Science and Technology".	Articles belong to other fields such as "Music, Medical, Language, and History".

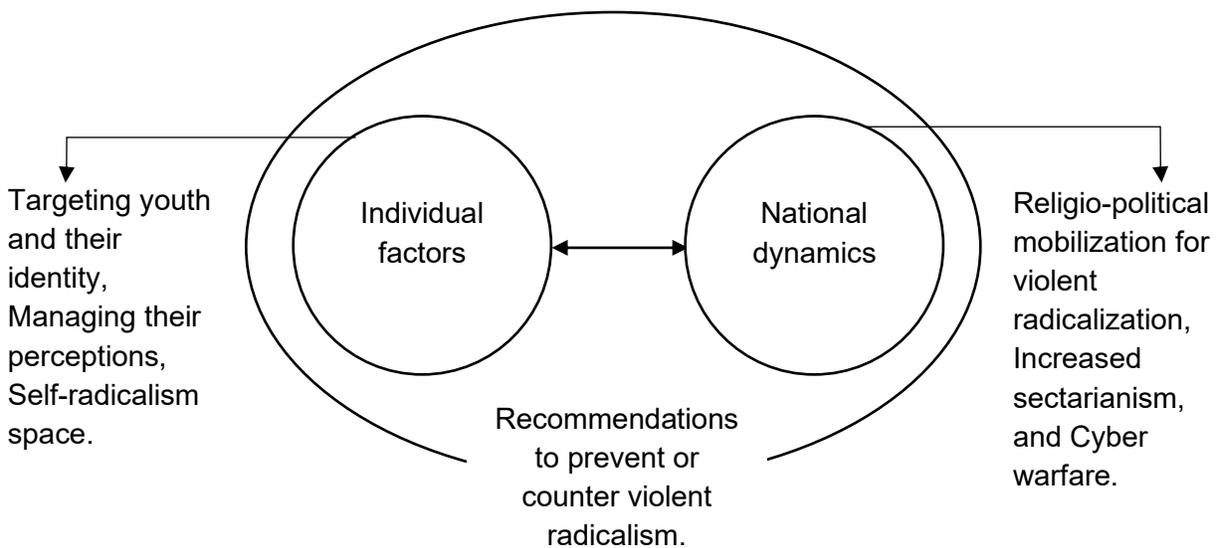
**Figure 33 PRISMA Framework for the Systematic Review (Source: Author)**



## Thematic Analysis

This systematic review of the WoS and Scopus databases showed that there is not much research on the role of social media in violent radicalization and extremism in Pakistan. Only seven research papers were found that were solely focused on this topic. The rest of the papers included in this paper discussed social media and violent radicalism, or extremism, under some other major topic of the study. After building definitional or conceptual understandings, the thematic analysis of the identified literature on how social media affects violent radicalism among Pakistani youth revealed a scholarly debate on two levels: the individual and the national. Furthermore, the literature reviewed made recommendations on how social media can be a safer online space for its users in Pakistan.

**Figure 44** Findings of Thematic Analysis (Source: Author)



## Conceptual Understanding

The reviewed literature covered conceptual or definitional aspects of violent radicalism and extremism. Shapiro and Crooks (2022) note that radicalization is a multi-faceted issue that involves various trajectories from the inception of an extremist idea to the execution of a violent act. Gaikwad et al. (2021) define radicalization as “changes in belief, feelings, and behavior towards extremity, calling for violence and sacrifice” (p. 48,366). Nawaz (2024) associates such calls for violence with religious and political mobilization and endorsements. Iqbal and Salman (2023) termed radicalization a “process of moving away from equilibrium thinking” (p. 2).

The thematic review also provided definitions of extremism and terrorism, given that radicalism can lead to violent extremism, often referred to as terrorism. Perešin (2014) notes that radicalization is a “process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism” (p. 87). Extremism usually refers to an ideology, which may be religious or political, that is unacceptable to the perception of society (Gaikwad et al., 2021). According to Asif et al. (2020), violent extremism refers to the beliefs and actions of individuals who advocate for or employ ideologically motivated violence to achieve more radical ideological, religious, or political goals. “An extremist holds views that defy logic, that swing so far from the

middle ground that any actions based on that premise are socially and often legally unacceptable” (Ali et al., 2020, p. 1). Iqbal and Salman (2023) defined extremism as “a process characterized by an increased commitment to and use of violent means and strategies in political conflicts” (p. 2). So, violent extremism is characterized as any behavior that allows and legitimizes the use of violence of any sort in assistance of a specific goal (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). Iqbal and Salman (2023) call terrorism a “byproduct of extremism that results from radicalization” and commit violence to pursue political interests. Hence, “extremism transforms into terrorism (violent extremism) through the process of radicalization” (Iqbal & Salman, 2023, p. 2).

On the other hand, online radicalization is “a process whereby individuals, through their online interactions and exposures to various types of internet context, come to view violence as a legitimate method of solving social and political conflicts” (Perešin, 2014, p. 87). Perešin’s definition of “online radicalization” does not say much about the specifics of the internet. It could be used for religious or political reasons to call for radical change and justify violence in order to get it. The second part of Perešin’s definition of online radicalization focuses on violence, which does not fit well into the radicalization concept but of violent radicalization or extremism. This research says that online radicalization is when people develop deviant beliefs and behaviors that stem from interactions with extreme ideological content online, often leading to calls for significant, often unjustified, change. In the context of this study, such calls for change are in the religiopolitical or simply political spheres of a society or country.

These definitions of radicalization and violent extremism discussed in the reviewed literature factor in the individual and group-level drivers, which are discussed in the following two sub-sections of this paper.

### ***Individual Factors of Social Media Radicalizing Youth***

Individual factors are of higher importance when it comes to violent radicalism through social media, as each user possesses a specific tendency to fall prey to the radical narratives online (Almazroi & Mohammed, 2024). Thematic analysis of the systematically reviewed literature revealed various individual-level aspects of religiopolitical content on social media that trigger violent radicalism among users.

**Generations Compete for Attention on Social Media.** The reviewed literature highlights that social media platforms are being used by people from different age groups, representing four generations, that is, Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012), Gen Y or Millennials (1981-1996), Gen X (1965-1980), and Baby Boomers (1946-1964). Users representing different generations consume social media content in different ways. Missier (2023) notes that “for the first time in history, five generations are competing for attention and pushing to be heard and understood” (p. 259), and this has happened because of social media, where each generation tends to blame the other for today’s critical socioeconomic issues. Gen Y and Gen Z are more influenced by the content they consume on social media than their geographic location, as these are the first generations in history to embody “technological consciousness” and are living with the dynamics of online hate and violent extremism (Missier, 2023).

In addition to consuming fewer social media, Gen X and Baby Boomers' interaction with social media is brief, as they rely more on traditional media as a source of news or information. Those who use social media more often tend to make a case that Gen Y and Gen Z should follow sociopolitical patterns established by Gen X or Baby Boomers, bringing generations' conflicting content to social media. There are similar scenarios in Pakistan's social media sphere where Gen Y and Gen Z have taken a stance critically conflicting religiopolitical or political policies practiced by Gen X or Baby Boomers. This paper argues that social media has challenged the feudal and political authority of Gen X and Baby Boomers in Pakistan.

**Extremist Groups Targeting Youth.** This systematic review of the literature found that when Pakistani teens and young adults, even educated ones, talk to strangers online through unrestricted social media use, they are more likely to come across radical and extremist content or people looking to recruit for violent narratives (Ali et al., 2020; Iqbal & Salman, 2023). Since extremist groups are abusing social media to infiltrate youth spheres, groups like ISIS Khorasan (Pakistan) have an active social media presence and activity to persuade youth to support their violent and extremist ideologies (Ul Rehman et al., 2020). There are hundreds of Facebook pages and groups, X handles, and YouTube channels through which such extremist and terrorist groups in Pakistan routinely distribute their radical propaganda. Khan et al. (2020) found social media one of the key sources where Pakistan-based terrorist groups like Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) broadcast their propaganda. Such groups take youth to their isolated, closed, or homogeneous groups, such as on Facebook, to further radicalize youth's behaviors and secure allegiance with their radical and extremist ideologies (Sharif et al., 2019).

Those already radicalized or whose worldviews lean towards radical ideologies tend to join these groups online, where they do not see counterarguments or different worldviews than theirs. There are numerous videos and images of extremist individuals and outfits on social media, and such pro-extremist content builds one-dimensional rhetoric promoting violent extremism among youth (Pauwels & Schils, 2016). Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan's (TLP) stance on blasphemy is such a recent example, exhibiting on social media their protest monopoly to rule the blasphemy laws in the country (Akram et al., 2024). Therefore, this sub-study argues that Pakistan's social media serve as convenient platforms for extremist and terrorist groups, enabling them to not only spread their radical agenda among the youth but also inspire them to engage in violent extremist actions. Radical propaganda on social media continues to target youth who are pursuing their identities.

**Identity Pursuit Amidst Uncertainty.** The literature notes that feelings of insignificance cause loneliness among individuals and urge them to look for their social identity and belongingness. Such identity pursuits make them fearful to interact with people from out-groups, which urges them to form ties with closed groups of people with similar identity pursuits. Similar identity closed groups remain vulnerable to manipulated propaganda, which rejects narratives different from their own and promote hateful and radical ideologies within the group. When political parties in Pakistan abuse the identities of Pashtuns or Balochis on social media, for example, it puts people's identities out there to be used for political gain, and could be a major factor in the rise of violent extremism (Almazroi & Mohammed, 2024). Such scenarios often limit

worldviews and foster radical beliefs among people based on their targeted identities. Ozer et al. (2023) argue that people from marginalized communities, such as ethnic minorities, exhibiting their identities on social media remain at risk of being targeted by the radicalized majority, which may result in counter-radical behaviors among the minority as well. The identity crisis or situational uncertainty urges youth to interact with closed groups, which poses the risk of falling into violent radical and extremist ideologies (Belanger et al., 2020).

Most people joining extremist groups were friends with or connected with someone who is already a member or sympathizer of an extremist group or ideology (Belanger et al., 2020). Belanger et al. showed study participants the Facebook profiles of extremists and asked if they would like to be Facebook friends with them. Most of the participants expressed their intention to connect with people who resembled their personal identities. Hence, this study argues that where social media has provided a platform for exhibiting one's identity, it places offline-marginalized identities at risk of being targeted by radicals online. Individuals or groups seeking to radicalize youth drive their propaganda to manage the youth's perception of radicalism.

**Perception Management for Radicalism.** Perception management is another theme that emerged from the literature reviewed for the thematic analysis. Menteşe and İli (2016) argue that social media platforms are structured to be open for interactions where perception management phenomena have a significant share in manipulating the information for certain interests, including the spread of radical and extremist propaganda. The manipulation of information to disseminate propaganda on social media psychologically influences youth and manages their perceptions of certain religiopolitical narratives. "The war of perception has thus transformed from earlier orthodox concepts of 'traditional propaganda' and 'psychological warfare' to all-encompassing and all-inclusive domains of 'information warfare,' 'information operations,' and 'psychological operations' (Abbasi, 2020, p. 14). Perception management aims to garner public support for specific narratives that align with the interests of certain entities or individuals, either within or outside the country, to shape the broader religious and political discourse.

"Propaganda can be an influential means of perception management as it productively coalesces entertainment and education while coaxing the intended targets" (Abbasi, 2020, p. 21). In Pakistan, the state's anti-India propaganda can be an example of perception management. This paper argues that social media has become a key tool in managing the perceptions of Pakistanis about various factors of religiopolitical interest, which involve the massive spread of manipulated information online. Such religiopolitical disinformation leads to radical and extremist behaviors among youth online. Radically managed perception could lead to the self-radicalization of youth, encouraging them to seek out and participate in radical propaganda.

**Self-Radicalization to Violent Actions.** The literature reviewed for this paper also identified self-radicalization as a theme. The internet allows people to self-radicalize, that is, when an individual adopts extremist ideologies without any group association through interacting with extremist web portals, which has become way easier now due to social media convenience. "Self-radicalization is considered the first preliminary step of recruitment by a terrorist organization or self-recruitment for lone-wolf actions" (Perešin, 2014, p. 91). The nature

of social media allows self-radicalization due to the massive amount of radical and extremist content online that is openly accessible to the masses (Shah, 2018). Such self-radicalization through encountering extremist narratives on social media often turns into offline violence (Velásquez et al., 2021).

In the case of Pakistan, mob violence against alleged blasphemers based on social media posts could be an example of self-radicalization when the people in the mob engage in violence without the support of an organized group. This rise in violence in offline spaces has made young people more likely to take violent actions in support of radical and extremist ideologies that are shared on social media, such as the blasphemy laws protection rhetoric by Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) (Akram et al., 2024a). Radical and extremist groups tend to target young people with psychological vulnerabilities, isolation, and dissatisfaction, as they cannot make informed decisions and get easily incited to engage in violence (Ali et al., 2020). The Pakistani youth is highly dissatisfied with the ruling elite due to people's overwhelming socioeconomic vulnerabilities, insecurities, and incidences of injustice. It has caused a sense of hopelessness, deprivation, and future anxiety among youth, which makes them vulnerable to the radical propaganda of religiopolitical groups (Nizami et al., 2018). Various age groups experience distinct catalysts for radicalization.

### ***National Level Dynamics of Religiopolitical Extremism and Cyber Warfare***

The other key focus of the literature reviewed for this paper discusses national or state-level factors of (ab)using social media for religiopolitical reasons but causing radical and extremist behaviors among the country's youth.

**Religious Fundamentalism and Violent Extremism.** The reviewed body of literature discusses religious fundamentalism as one of the core reasons for violent extremism in the country. "Pakistan is like Israel, an ideological state. Take out Judaism from Israel, and it will collapse like a house of cards. Take Islam out of Pakistan and make it a secular state; it would collapse" (Sulehria, 2022, p. 68). Fundamentalism can be defined as a religious or political movement strictly adhering to fundamental beliefs, often against modernity, inclusivity, or secularism. In Pakistan, "military dictators have not been alone in prostituting Islam" (p. 69), but elected popular leaders did the same; for example, Zulifkar Ali Bhutto declared the Ahmadiyya sect a non-Muslim minority when he faced opposition for dissolving Baluchistan's provincial government in 1973 (Sulehria, 2022). Religious fundamentalism has official patronage in Pakistan to favor religiopolitical narratives of the ruling elite, including the military establishment, which abused youth from time to time but resulted in the inculcation of violent extremist ideologies among them (Bahadur, 2006).

Radicalism is dyed with Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan, where religion is a part of the societal fabric and is evident in public, institutional, and educational spheres and discourses. Such religious fundamentalism has pushed Pakistani youth into the margins of violent extremism, reflected in their behaviors, such as through incidents like Mashal Khan, a journalism student at Abdul Wali Khan University, in Mardan city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, being lynched to death by a fellow students' mob on accusation of blasphemy (Ali et al., 2020). This lynching incident was widely shared on Facebook and other social media platforms even before traditional media outlets. With the notion of blasphemy laws, Sufi-Barelvis

have become increasingly active on social media, organizing mass protests, issuing public decrees, and questioning others' beliefs. Radical and violent incidents, such as the violent mass protests by Tehrik-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), have marked the country's recent history. Sufi-Barelvi ideology, such as that of the TLP about the finality of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), combined with social media, brought the factor of violent mass protests for protecting the honor of the Prophet PBUH. Hence, there is a positive correlation between social media emergence and violent radicalism in Pakistan, that is, increased violent radicalism with increased penetration of social media (Gautam, 2022). The political factor has been key to the religious fundamentalism leading to violent radicalism among Pakistani youth.

**Spread of Religiopolitical Radicalism.** Mass-level politically incited religious extremism was another theme discussed in the literature. Religion has been a key factor in the political dynamics of Pakistan, where religiopolitical radicalism involves both domestic and foreign narratives to shape the country's political discourse. Amidst the blasphemy law-driven political rise of Sufi-Barelvis, the violence risks have increased with the emergence of social media, where free speech can result in manipulated accusations of blasphemy (Gautam, 2022). Such an incident will unconditionally cause violence against the accused.

To understand the notion of Pakistaniness, Ali et al. (2022) did a multimodal discourse analysis of 210 posts in three Facebook communities through the lenses of Islamism, pluralism, and nationalism. More polarization was found in the conservative strata of the Facebook community, for whom the Muslim identity was a key mark of being Pakistani, followed by the anti-India rhetoric. Ali et al. found that Pakistani Facebook users with Islamist and nation-statist discourse are at greater polarization as they lean towards "extremist discourse, an anti-minorities stance, self-proclaimed Islamic identity, contempt for "others," pan-Islamism, and ethno-nationalist ideas" (p. 2150). Extremism is not only against the minorities living in Pakistan but also complex among different sects of Muslims, particularly Sunnis, against Shia.

**Increased Sectarianism among Muslims.** The body of literature reviewed for this systematic review shows that there is sectarian abuse of social media among the Muslim majority in Pakistan. Since no gatekeeping is involved in posting on social media like Facebook and X, people post whatever they want, regardless of whether that will incite hate or prejudice against others. Such hate speech in Pakistan's sectarian scenarios has increased with the evolution of social media, particularly Facebook. Under the notion of freedom of expression, social media is being misused for hate speech against religious minorities and political adversaries, which fuels sectarianism among youth (Abid et al., 2021). For example, the annual religious event of Muharram witnesses extreme hate speech between Sunni and Shia Muslims on social media platforms, where radically influenced followers of both sects post sectarian and hateful content targeting each other. People often defend such hate speech as free speech and categorize it under 'profound offenses' that offend others (Billingham & Bonotti, 2019). Abid et al. (2021) found that the stronger the religiosity, the more hateful content they will post on Facebook against other sects, and there were negative relations in terms of education - less education leading to more hateful content against the other sects. Apart from the abuse of social media by religiopolitical elements in Pakistan, the literature reviewed also examined the role of

social media in cyber warfare, such as with military elite blaming any content criticizing it as cyber warfare against Pakistan's security.

**The Notion of Cyber Warfare.** The literature reviewed for this research discussed that sophisticated and easily accessible information technology like social media has become the lifeline for hybrid warfare in Pakistan, where the state runs on a security narrative (Akram et al., 2024b). Contrary to traditional media, where content is determined and distributed from the top (those in power) to the bottom (the public), social media broke the traditional cycle of information flow and placed the public as the content creators, parallel to those holding political, religious, or military power in a country. Though it loosened the control of the state and its elite over what content or news general people would receive, it also placed people at the margins of violent narratives of radicalism and extremism due to free-floating hateful content on social media (Pauwels & Schils, 2016). Ali et al. (2022) argue that social media is not the only public social sphere, but authoritarian and hybrid political regimes like those in Pakistan control these platforms to surveil the masses, particularly those opposing their narratives. Since the quicker reachability of social media helps spread narratives at the mass level, youth remain vulnerable to cyber warfare. Young people, or youth, remain the ultimate victims of both state and non-state actors manipulating the information on social media to manage perceptions for politically driven narratives (Abbasi, 2020).

### ***Harnessing Social Media for Safer Online Environments***

The systematic review also suggests various factors that can help prevent or counter violent radicalism and extremism among youth through social media platforms such as Facebook and X.

**Expanding the Counter-Radicalization Focus to Social Media.** The literature reviewed for the research suggests social media itself could be used to counter radical narratives online. Since violent extremism is generally motivated at three levels, that is, individual, organization, and environment, the counter-terrorism efforts should also be applied at the same three levels. Social media connects at all three levels by providing individual users with a social platform where organized propaganda happens and is consumed in digital environments (Iqbal & Salman, 2023). It makes social media a critical venue for intervening to prevent and counter the violent radicalization of youth in Pakistan. Though there are various deradicalization programs in Pakistan, there are few that are specific to the individual-level online factors of violent radicalization among youth (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). Suhaib and Adnan suggest the following potential deradicalization initiatives that can help prevent and counter violent radicalization through Pakistan's social media space: 1) curbing the creators of radical content; 2) enabling social media users to self-educate on identifying and reporting radical narratives online; 3) challenging the youth's interest in extremist information; 4) tracking down the hateful comments and conversations on social media; and 5) advocating for offline initiatives to educate youth on discouraging and encountering radical content online. In addition to the above recommendations, this paper argues that social media service providers should use advanced tools and techniques to identify radical and extremist content online, in addition to using social media to build counter-narratives.

**Tech Tools to Track and Counter Harmful Content Online.** The literature suggests various tools to track or counter harmful content online. Al-Ghamdi et al. (2024) argued for the application of automatic computational tools such as classification algorithms to measure the credibility of information online. FakeNewsTracker is an example of automatically collecting and detecting fake news using a deep learning approach, such as gathering data from different fact-checking sources online. In Pakistan, there is a critical gap in such initiatives to detect harmful content on social media platforms. For example, Pakistan's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has established an online portal to facilitate checking fake news, but as of November 5, 2024, the portal does not have any activity except stating, "This is an official web page of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting for exposing fake news" (<https://moib.gov.pk/Pages/147/FactChecker>). It highlights the need for government and non-government efforts to establish initiatives to monitor, report, prevent, and counter harmful content online, particularly on social media platforms. The government should also actively collaborate with social media service providers to ensure their platforms are safer for the people of Pakistan.

**Role of Social Media Service Providers.** The reviewed literature also highlights the role of companies like Facebook and X in preventing and countering radical and extremist narratives on social media. Though social media platforms are employing various strategies to contain the expansion of online extremist movements (Velásquez et al., 2021), most of the religiously hateful content and the discourses provoking radicalism in Pakistan are not easily detectable since they are in local and vernacular languages (Ul Rehman et al., 2020). Machine learning tools, such as corpus analysis, should be robust beyond the English-only content and considerate of radical and extremist dynamics in security states like Pakistan. Despite Facebook and X having rules and regulations in place to counter extremist content on their platforms, such as flagging extremist content, these platforms mostly take action when users report or flag such content. A wide range of such content remains unflagged, as most users are unaware of how to identify hateful and extremist content and how to report it. Hence, the government claims to have the responsibility to monitor and counter such content on social media platforms, but this risks the youth's free speech and increases the chances of their victimization by oppressive and authoritarian regimes (Gaikwad et al., 2021). Content moderation could be a way to monitor and regulate the content on social media.

**Content Moderation.** The reviewed body of literature also suggests applying advanced tools to moderate content online to filter out harmful information or narratives. Since most of the content moderation tools and algorithms are in English, they cannot be applied to non-English propaganda content on social media favoring radical and extremist ideologies. For example, the TLP successfully convened mass violent protests in Pakistan amidst the censorship of mainstream or traditional media houses (Gautam, 2022). Lack of content moderation and the ability to rapidly circulate are the traits of social media that attract extremists to disseminate their narratives online effectively. Extremists abuse social media to target their audience, particularly youth, who are more likely to fall prey to the extremist ideologies propagated (Almazroi & Mohammed, 2024). Though regulating radical content online risks netizens' privacy and restricts

freedom of speech, it has become important to monitor hateful and extremist content on social media (Gaikwad et al., 2021). Content moderation would require reducing the supply, robust monitoring, and educating youth on the responsible use of radical and extremist content, which is recommended to prevent violent propaganda on social media. The success of content moderation would require enabling youth to recognize and report radical content they interact with during their social media activity (Perešin, 2014). Apart from these institutional efforts to ensure social media is a safer platform, it is crucial to enable users, particularly youth, to think critically before engaging with any potentially harmful and radical content online.

**Critical Social Media Literacy (CSML).** The literature suggests that critical thinking and critical social media literacy are key to educating a larger number of users for responsible and safer use of social media. People often underestimate online safety because they only associate it with content blocking and age restrictions, but it encompasses much more. Youth should be educated to identify hateful and extremist content during their interaction with social media platforms so that they can better decide to avoid, block, or report such content (Ali et al., 2020; Véganzonès-Varoudakis & Rizvi, 2019). Young social media users should be made aware, for example, through nudging and pop-ups, of the situations or scenarios during their online activities that they may encounter politically manipulated content and how they can appropriately respond to it.

Youth should be able to identify the content intending to influence their perceptions against other religious, political, linguistic, or regional groups or even against groups of their identities, such as being Pakistani, Punjabi, Pashtun, Balochi, or Sindhi (Abbasi, 2020). To pursue this, state institutions should help promote social media literacies and a sense of internet safety among youth by embedding these in school education, community awareness material, and educational campaigns through mass media (Perešin, 2014). Since online radical groups are densely interconnected, state institutions should prioritize their focus on loosening them by sensitizing and deradicalizing their (select) members (Belanger et al., 2020). The positive stories of deradicalization could be shared and discussed widely to invite more radical members associated with extremist ideologies to educate youth about social inclusivity (Yousaf & Huaibin, 2014).

## **Discussion**

The in-depth review of the themes identified through this systematic review shows that violent radicalism and extremism on social media at the individual-level feed into one or more factors at the national-level, and the other way around. In any case, Pakistani youth remain at the center of individual or national-level factors of violent radicalism and extremism through social media. For instance, the youth's feelings of insignificance stemming from their religious or linguistic identity not only fuel their pursuit of identity protection but also drive them to respond to opposing viewpoints more radically. Individuals struggling to seek personal significance are more likely to fall prey to radical networks that offer self-certainty in place of embracing radical and violent ideological narratives (Bélanger et al., 2020). The "quest for personal significance constitutes a major motivational force that may push individuals toward violent extremism" (Hermansen, 2019, p. 67). For instance, it draws them nearer to extremists in closed Facebook groups, where they connect with peers who share similar backgrounds and experiences. The

peers in these networks make them feel important and give them a sense of purpose in their lives. Social networks or groups, whether online, have an undeniable role in fostering radicalization to violent extremism, as such networks “serve as conduits through which individuals get acquainted with and embrace the ideological narrative that the network espouses” (Bélanger et al., 2020, p. 1188). Such a phenomenon adds layers of hate, prejudice, and anti-othering sentiments among youth, further deepening inter-group sectarianism in the country.

Since radicalism urges us to control the power to respond, Pakistani youth tend to deal with prejudice and hatred by themselves, which pushes them to be targeted by violent and extremist ideologies. Extremist groups in Pakistan heavily use social media to spread violent ideologies, communicate with potentially like-minded youth, and radicalize them for violent acts (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). At this level, they take self-directed actions to engage in radicalism and extremism, for example, calling for or portraying violence through social media posts and comments, and such public demonstrations further spread radical propaganda among other uses of social media. This is the stage where extremism is embedded into religious fundamentalism, shaping political discourse, and it gets challenging to prevent or counter religiously fueled extremism as such efforts risk being targeted with violence. Discussing scenarios such as Pakistan’s friendship with India, the status of non-Muslims as equal Pakistanis, and the misuse of blasphemy laws presents significant challenges.

Amidst prolonged political chaos and religious framings, the extremist factions manage the youth’s perceptions and worldviews about political events inside and outside Pakistan (Hermansen, 2019). Since Pakistani youth are politically active on Facebook (Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013), it has shifted the perception management dynamics of youth about the country’s religious and political narratives, which keeps them at higher risk of encountering radical and extremist content. The country’s religious and political elite benefit from the youth’s social media time and fuel their profile feeds with manipulated information tailored to further divide public opinion and promote sectarianism (Salim et al., 2019). The case of PTI’s social media content, especially after the ouster of Imran Khan from the Prime Minister’s Office, is a recent example of extreme polarization narratives in Pakistan (Akram et al., 2024a).

Scholars are increasingly concerned about social media’s role in fostering radicalization and violent extremism, yet it also serves as a tool for evaluating narratives surrounding violent and radical ideologies in both online and offline domains. Social media facilitates people’s engagement, especially youth, in the country’s political dynamics, which helps (non)government institutions to assess public sentiments. For example, a furious debate on Facebook and X to defend or oppose the killing of Punjab’s former governor Salman Taseer on January 4, 2011, for his support of blasphemy-accused Christian woman Asia Bibi, who was accused of blasphemy and spent eight years on death row but verdict as not guilty, and someone in Abbottabad tweeting about the American operation against Osama Bin Ladin hideouts in the same city when the operation was being carried out reflects people’s engagement in national-level affairs through social media (Hassan, 2018). Social media also helped the residents of former FATA (federally administered tribal areas) advocate for their rights against political marginalization and systematically rooted extremism in the region. The prominent hashtags on social media were #mainstreamFATA, #AbolishFCR, and #AbolishArt247 which helped to get policymakers’ attention (Zeb & Ahmed, 2019).

This study posits that the understudied radicalism and extremism factor of social media, given its widespread abuse of religiopolitical propaganda in Pakistan, warrants further investigation. Social media has become a handy tool for lone wolves, that is, radicals not associated with a group, religiopolitical groups, or the state itself, to build radical and extremist narratives favoring their political ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that social media has been instrumental in fostering, rather than countering, radicalization to violent extremism in Pakistan. This phenomenon of religiopolitical abuse of social media to promote violent extremism is multifaceted, involving diverse religious and political factors. Amidst fragile political governance and political religiosity in the country, the identity pursuit reflected through social media risks the already marginalized populations being engaged in radical narratives. Since the religiopolitical entities in the country are (intentionally) unable to mediate such oppositions and confrontations, they rather cash out the public polarizations by fostering extreme ideologies in support of their religiopolitical agenda.

The literature review suggests unbiased, uninfluenced, ethical moderation of social media content to counter radicalization to violent extremism, a strategy the Pakistani government should implement in collaboration with social media service providers like Facebook. Furthermore, it is critical to educate Pakistani youth to think critically while engaging with social media content. This literature synthesis reveals a limited scholarly focus on the social media factor in violent radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth. Most of the identified and reviewed papers only briefly discuss the role of social media in violent radicalism and extremism among youth, instead of conducting a thorough and specific study. As a result, this paper draws scholarly attention to expanded research on social media, violent radicalism, and extremism among youth in Pakistan.

### **Preface to Chapter 3**

#### **The Need for Critical Social Media Literacy (CSML) to Counter Extremist Discourse on Social Media**

The literature reviewed for sub-study 1 highlights the role social media has been playing in the articulation and propagation of violent extremism discourses. It also explores existing research about measures to prevent or counter extremism online and how CSML skills can help youth to safely engage with social media. But in reality, most Pakistani youth with internet access and using social media remain at risk of engaging with politically radical content due to limited CSML skills. The literature reviewed for sub-study 1 points out that religiopolitical disinformation is spread through social media to build politically motivated radical narratives. These narratives mobilize young individuals, particularly those lacking the critically thinking skills to scrutinize them, leading to the propagation of manipulated political propaganda and violent extremism. The logical next step was to study and understand the CSML skills that Pakistani youth can utilize to disrupt political propaganda during their social media activity (sub-study 2).

Sub-study 1 opened a discussion on whether educational systems can inculcate critical thinking among children and youth. Can it effectively take place in educational institutions that are fragile, have outdated governing mechanisms, are not capable of teaching critical thinking amidst the ever-changing dynamics of political disinformation, and discourage students from thinking critically and asking questions? Such deficiencies in education systems prepare children and youth to mostly believe in what they see or listen to without engaging in critical thinking. It benefits those spreading political and extremist narratives as they face lesser resistance to their propaganda and more (blind) following. In such fragile education systems, teaching CSML skills to youth and children who routinely engage with social media might remain a pipe dream. Such scenarios are normal in most of the countries in the global south, where political fragility breeds incompetence and inefficiency of state institutions. Pakistan is such a country where political destabilization has shattered the operationalization and development of state institutions, including education. It results in limited CSML skills among youth, the majority of whom daily engage with social media full of politically manipulated radical content - hence they remain at risk of interacting and engaging in violent radicalism (Ali et al., 2022).

The findings of sub-study 1 confirm the Social Learning Theory (SLT) advanced by Albert Bandura (1977) (McLeod, 2024), that is, radical behaviors could be learned through the social media ecosystem. For example, one can develop radical behaviors through different activities on social media, such as while seeking attention, figuring out personal identities, or building sociopolitical perceptions. To counter radicalism among youth on social media, they need the ability to recognize and prevent radical narratives during their social online interactions, which creates an opportunity to explore if/how CSML could help young people. Since CSML enables young people to think critically about analyzing content on social media, it could help them safely navigate digital spheres amidst radical religiopolitical content. Algorithmic awareness instilled through CSML among young social media users could build their resilience to misinformation and radical religiopolitical propaganda. Such critical thinking would urge users to report radical posts, which then social media algorithms could identify as radical and extremist content and prevent in the future (Rajendran et al., 2022). This is another debate

about how efficiently social media like Facebook's algorithms can do so for non-English content. Thus, this study needed to dig deeper into the literature on CSML skills, which could help young people to prevent and counter radical religiopolitical messaging while they engage with social media (sub-study 2).

Furthermore, sub-study 1 confirms the Routine Activity Theory (RAT) by Cohen and Felson (Miro, 2014) by highlighting various individual and group-level factors and processes of violent extremism facilitated through social media activity in Pakistan. Applying RAT to this study argues that active social media users have a higher probability of encountering radical content online and remain at risk of falling into politically manipulated propaganda. Since Pakistani youth spend 2-3 hours a day on social media (Thakur et al., 2020), thorough research is needed on how young people can safely engage with social media like Facebook, where religiopolitical narratives propagate. Sub-study 1 also invited participants to identify how individual skills such as CSML could be a counter to prevent young people from developing radical behaviors. Hence, sub-study 1 led to sub-study 2 to explore the existing scholarly literature on how CSML could be a skill for young people to navigate their social media experiences by not only preventing radical religiopolitical narratives but also countering them when it comes to their feed.

Another key finding from sub-study 1 was that the literature has generally discussed the connection between social media and radical religiopolitical narratives in Pakistan, and so is the CSML as a potential skill for young Pakistanis engaging with social media every day. It made me to read more academic literature on CSML to find out what skills can be used to teach young people how to think critically and analyze social media in order to keep them safe online (sub-study 2). Hence, sub-study 2 was conducted to explore CSML skills discussed in the scholarly literature to identify which ones can be utilized to prevent and counter factors of radicalism and extremism through social media platforms like Facebook.

## CHAPTER 3 (Sub-Study 2): Leveraging Critical Social Media Literacy (CSML) to Safeguard Youth against Radicalization and Violent Extremism<sup>10</sup>

### Introduction

Globally, around one-third of youth aged 15 to 24 years use the Internet (Turner et al., 2022), with an estimated 3.78 billion users of various social media platforms (Rajendran et al., 2022). While social media offers several benefits for learning and connectivity, extremists have increasingly used it to disseminate hateful and extremist content to the public, particularly youngsters (Costello et al., 2017). Exposure to religiously or politically radical content is the initial stage in developing extremist beliefs in online spheres, which exposes children and youth to the risk of being influenced by extremist propaganda. With the growing ubiquity of the internet, extremist organizations' online activities have expanded alarmingly, spreading extreme ideologies by instilling a like-minded extremist attitude in young people. Hawdon et al. (2019) investigated the elements that bring people in touch with radical content online. They found a direct relation between exposure to violence-promoting content online and pre-existing discontent with social or state institutions. Because Internet platforms like social media allow for the unfiltered spread of information, individuals are nonetheless in danger of encountering distorted content online. Extremists misuse online forums not just to propagate radical agendas but also to attract like-minded individuals. Millions of people have unrestricted access to extremist information, which has led to extreme behavior among a considerable proportion of the population (Akram et al., 2023).

*Radicalization* arises from socioeconomic and political conflicts that “involves a shift from a moderate point of view to an extreme and rigid or uncompromising view... [demanding] drastic societal change for the benefit of specific groups, although not necessarily through violence” (Rousseau et al., 2020, p. 407). *Violent extremism* can be described as the “beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals... seek[ing] change through fear and intimidation rather than constructive democratic processes” (Striegher, 2015, p. 78). Whereas an *extremist* has “...a belief in, and support for, ideas that are very far from what most people consider correct or reasonable... hold extreme or fanatical political or religious views, especially one who resorts to, or advocates, extreme action and/or violence” (Brennan et al., 2022, p. 212).

*Online extremism*, especially the kind advocating for violence, is a growing concern among academia and public policymakers. It can be defined as “a form of cyberviolence characterized by the use of digital platforms to express hatred towards a collective based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, or some other group characteristic” (Hawdon et al., 2019, p. 330; Turner et al., 2022).

Three types of online risks are defined by Savoia et al. (2021): *content risk*, involving exposure to potentially harmful content; *contact risk*, involving encounters with an unknown or extreme individual; and *commercial risk*, involving corporate businesses exploiting users and their data. People are at risk of radicalization and involvement in extremist actions, both online and offline, due to the content and contact risks. Among these three risk types, Savoia et al.

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(2021) name content risk as the most dangerous aspect of online activity for teenagers and children on social media, where they spend a considerable portion of their time. Exposure to hateful content online, such as on social media, increases the chances of radicalizing the behaviors of young people (Costello et al., 2016). Social media has flipped the conventional media landscape by allowing individual users, who were once consumers of traditional media, to freely and conveniently create and share online content based on their views and reviews about sociopolitical scenarios (Cho et al., 2022). The lack of or ineffective protocols, rules, or laws and minimal fact-checking have made social media platforms a favorable place for misinformation and hate speech (Cho et al., 2022). Hence, social media has become a place for “information laundering,” where hateful and extremist narratives get legitimacy and easily enter the mainstream religiopolitical discourse (Rajendran et al., 2022).

Social media like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) have been misused to spread extremist content, which has caused extreme behaviors among youth online (Hawdon et al., 2019). “Social media sites act as a sort of feedback loop, whereby publicly sharing photos, videos, or personal information invites other users to interact with the posts” (Turner et al., 2022, p. 5). Radical-agenda groups misuse such features and post on social media to gauge public trends or perceptions of their extremist narratives. Thus, children and youth’s willingness to speak with strangers puts them at higher risk of being contacted, directly or indirectly, by extremist individuals or entities (Turner et al., 2022).

Since social media users can be as young as nine years old (UNICEF, 2019), whether with fake profiles or using their parents’ accounts, it is concerning when social media is flooded with radical and extremist content every single moment. Being early adopters and major users of social media, children and youth remain at the highest risk of being victimized by the perils of social media (Turner et al., 2022). When they encounter, mostly unintentionally, extremist content on social media, it may leave many of them with radical ideologies. Hence, social media experience without critical thinking can connect young people with extremist content online (Rousseau et al., 2020).

Post-9/11, young Muslims faced hate speech and the stigmatization of being perceived as terrorists. They turned to their parents and peers with identity complexes who were also unable to deal with such hate speech and were struggling to find the answer to why Muslims are being stigmatized as terrorists. Then, young Muslims turned to social media to seek answers to their identity complexes and associated prejudice and hatred (Kaskeleviciute et al., 2024). In such a scenario, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al-Qaeda, and other such groups used social media to propagate Muslim identity-related conspiracies to radicalize youth for extremist ideologies and recruit for terrorist operations (Gaikwad et al., 2022). Extremists misuse social media to target the emotions of young people to create chaos in society. They conspire false claims and misinformation, urging people to fight back either with the other competing religious or political groups or the state institutions. The extremists’ content tone or language does not allow dialogue or “other” perspectives but claims to be the only ones on the correct religious and/or political path and have the right to fight with the “others” government. (Rajendran et al., 2022)

It is complicated to analyze conflicting groups or parties’ narratives amidst deep religiopolitical divides (Rhodes & Akram, 2022), such as in Pakistan, where the state manipulated political Islam concepts in the 1980s, resulting in extreme radicalization (Akram,

2020). In such fragile contexts, religiopolitical groups increasingly spread radical propaganda through social media to manage public perceptions, influence behaviors, and manipulate narratives to pursue and propagate radical ideologies (Akram & Nasar, 2023). In their “God Talk in a Digital Age,” Bramlett and Burge (2020) note that politicians generally use religious language to transmit messages to their constituents or voters, aiming to frame the political content with manipulated religious quotes or sayings. Social media has not only facilitated and eased such an interaction between politicians and their constituents but has also significantly reduced the role of community-level influentials in transmitting the message of political campaigns to their communities. Hence, the reduced role of in-person political mobilization has eased the space for propaganda, misinformation, and hate speech in political activity.

According to “Truth by Repetition Fact,” people start believing in the information they repeatedly encounter during their online activities (Akram et al., 2023). Thus, the increasingly higher use of social media bots, unethical designs of algorithms, and paid promotions of manipulated content has further deepened religiopolitical polarization (Olaniran & Williams, 2020). Such effects of message replication multiply in fragile democracies where users already lack critical thinking and critical social media literacy (CSML). While manipulated content online disrupts young people’s worldviews and perceptions about targeted religiopolitical factors, the majority of them lack CSML skills (Syam & Nurrahmi, 2020; Drake et al., 2023; Bell et al., 2023).

Since content on social media influences the perceptions and worldviews of teens and adolescents, their negatively influenced behaviors also reflect in their offline lives (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). Such a transitional impact creates the need to build CSML skills among social media users (Yeh & Swinehart, 2022). The need for CSML skills has become increasingly important in this disinformation-blended age of social media to decode radical content while having social interactions online (Festl, 2021). Hence, it is crucial to enable children and adolescents to detect and denounce propaganda online, for which CSML can help them identify, avoid, and report extremist content online (Rajendran et al., 2022).

### ***Objectives of this Study***

Most of the research on social media factors in violent radicalism and extremism typically focuses on generalizing media literacy skills within the context of social media and lacks emphasis on the importance of fostering situational awareness and critical thinking (Manca et al., 2021). The existing research also lacks the multidisciplinary aspects of radical and extremist content on social media (Zhang et al., 2022), which requires a situational or event-specific understanding of hateful and radical content (Bernatzky et al., 2022). To fill such research gaps, this study aimed to emphasize the importance of CSML for preventing and countering radical and extremist narratives on social media such as Facebook. Because this study focused on CSML, it looked at previous research that had already been done to see how CSML has been looked at in relation to the radical and extremist narratives on social media.

After building the readers’ understanding of how social media is being used to spread radical and extremist propaganda and further deepening religiopolitical divides, this paper is organized as follows: *First*, it discusses methods used to synthesize the findings from peer-reviewed literature; *second*, it builds conceptual understanding around CSML; *third*, it describes various ways CSML can help promote critical thinking and analytical abilities among youth

during their social media interactions. *Finally*, it concludes the findings with an emphasis on the implications of this study.

## Methods

The goal of this study was to synthesize the scholarly literature on CSML skills to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE) among youth. To pursue this goal, a systematic review of the literature was conducted to identify, review, and synthesize the relevant literature. A systematic review of the literature supports developing themes and trends by identifying research gaps and recommending future research (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008; Wright et al., 2007). The “Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses” (PRISMA) guided this literature review. PRISMA flow chart supports identifying findings in literature by selecting and evaluating the research relevant to the study topic, which leads to systematically identifying research trends (Moher et al., 2009). (see Figure 5)

Guided by the PRISMA flow chart, the Web of Science (WoS) Core Collection database was checked from 2014 to 2024 using four indexes, that is, the Science Citation Index Expanded, the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, the Emerging Sources Citation Index, and the Social Sciences Citation Index. We reviewed articles from 2014 since when social media started to be increasingly used for radical messaging, such as during the presidential campaign in the United States and political mobilization by Pakistan’s Imran Khan (Akram & Nasar, 2023). The WoS database was chosen because it has broader multidisciplinary coverage. It has become the most popular source to find bibliographic data for journal selection, research evaluation, bibliometric analysis, and other steps involved in systematic review research (Li et al., 2018; Prancutè, 2021). For more than 40 years, WoS has been the primary source of bibliographic records until Elsevier introduced Scopus in 2004 (Baas et al., 2020).

Initially, a search for “critical social media literacy” in WoS yielded only five articles. Then the search criteria were expanded as (((ALL= (social media literacy)) AND ALL=(radicalization)) OR ALL=(extremism)) AND ALL=(youth), which generated 381 results from the WoS database. Among 381, 281 results were peer-reviewed articles, and 235 of them were published in English. These search criteria were applied to “ALL” aspects, including articles’ titles and abstracts, to provide a wider range of options for identifying articles that could aid in understanding CSML for P/CVE among young people.

Since varied CSML approaches to counter violent radicalism and extremism have been reported in diverse contexts, we selected publications’ affiliations from Canada, Pakistan, and the United States, which identified 63 articles for the initial review. Since this study is part of my doctoral dissertation focused on Pakistan, there was not enough literature published specific to Pakistan. Hence, we included Canada and the United States. We selected these three affiliation countries to remain contextually focused and better inform future studies based on the findings drawn from this literature synthesis. After screening the abstracts, we excluded nine more articles for being irrelevant to CSML and selected 54 of them for a thorough review. Based on the in-depth review of 54 selected articles, we found that 33 articles were unrelated to the radicalism or extremism aspect of CSML, which were excluded considering the inclusion criteria listed in Table 1. Hence, we did a qualitative thematic analysis of 21 articles to identify CSML skills for countering radicalism and extremism among young social media users.

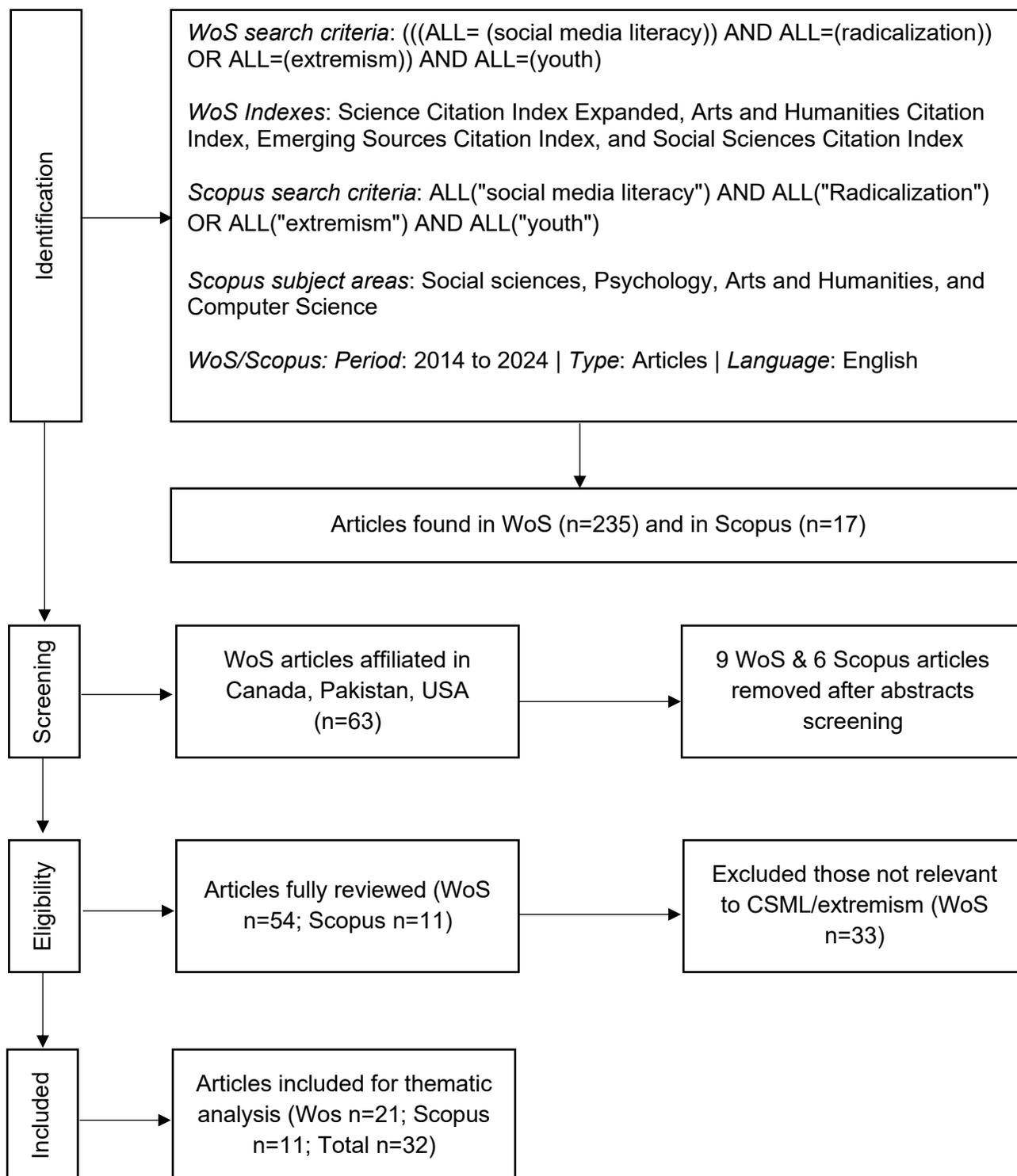
To strengthen this study's CSML aspect, we identified 17 more peer-reviewed research articles from the Scopus database using similar search criteria as were applied to the WoS. We selected 11 articles from Scopus because six of them were not relevant to extremism or radicalism on social media. We embedded these 11 articles in the overall thematic analysis of 32 articles from both databases.

Using a color-coding scheme, we manually conducted a thematic analysis of 32 articles selected from WoS and Scopus. *First*, inductive coding of content in selected articles was conducted; *Second*, multiple reviews of the color-coded content were done to categorically synthesize the findings; *Third*, key findings were synthesized to draw conclusions.

**Table 22** *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

Sr. #	Included	Excluded
1	Articles published in peer-reviewed journals indexed in WoS and Scopus databases.	Non-peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, magazines, news reports, dissertations or theses.
2	Articles with a focus on radicalism and extremism through social media.	Articles with a focus on radicalism and extremism but not related to social media, and vice versa.
3	Articles with a focus on CSML concerning radicalism, hate speech, and extreme narratives online.	Articles with a focus on social media literacy (SML) but not concerned about critical aspects of it in terms of extremism and radicalism online.
4	Articles in English only.	Articles in other languages such as Chinese, Spanish, French, etc.
5	Articles published from 2014 to 2024.	Articles published before 2014.
6	The publication affiliation either belongs to Canada, Pakistan, or the United States.	The publication affiliation other than Canada, Pakistan, or the United States.

**Figure 55** PRISMA flow chart for systematic review (Source: Authors)



## Thematic Analysis

We conducted a thorough thematic analysis of the selected 32 articles to identify CSML skills that can help prevent or counter the spread of radicalism and extremism through social media. Since the selected articles generated a large volume of data, the coding process was undertaken to condense the data. “Coding is the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way” (Elliott, 2018, p. 2850). Coding helps make the qualitative data identifiable and sortable so it can be organized in a manageable form (Burdine et al., 2021). Thematic analysis of selected articles was conducted manually through approaches of color coding and annotations. The articles were read thoroughly to identify the text relevant to the objectives of this study. For a smoother analysis process, relevant pieces of the text from articles were copied into a single Microsoft Word document to keep all the potentially relevant content and their citation details in one source. Then, text copied in the source document was reviewed again for color coding of the text depending on the focus or type of information in each piece of the text copied from articles reviewed.

The color coding did not follow any pre-defined structure or mechanism but took an inductive coding approach, allowing the organic emergence of findings. “Inductive analysis is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 8). In inductive coding, “codes arise from the data in an open coding process” (Bennett et al., 2019, p. 10). This study’s coding process remained flexible and adaptable as the framing of information varied between different sections of the text copied from different articles. The code colors were assigned based on initially emerged themes of the text, and annotations were marked considering the importance of specific pieces of text, such as a particular example of utilizing CSML.

Following the color coding, pieces of text having similar colors assigned were grouped or categorized to make them ready for the synthesis process. Categories “are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 186). Each colored text was reviewed more than once to condense the information for inductively emergent categories, ensuring the relevance of text with the assigned category, and moving the text pieces to their relevant category. Then, the categories were grouped into themes outlining the larger level structure of findings from thematic analysis. “Theme can be an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, but it is not something that is, in itself, coded” (Elliott, 2018, p. 2852).

**Table 33** *Sample of selected articles (listed alphabetically by authors’ name)*

No.	Authors	Year	Title	Key Findings
1	Apuke, O.D., & Gever, C.V.	2023	A quasi experiment on how the field of librarianship can help in combating fake news	CSML skills’ trainings equip youth to identify fake news, verify content, and not incline toward to share content without verification.
2	Burnham, S.L.F., Arbeit, M.R., & Hilliard, L.J.	2022	The subtle spread of hateful memes: examining engagement	There is an urgent need to not only promote SML, but also critical analysis of far-right ideologies being circulated online.

No.	Authors	Year	Title	Key Findings
			intentions among parents of adolescents	
3	Cho, H., Cannon, J., Lopez, R., & Li W.	2022	Social media literacy: A conceptual framework	CSML enables young people to examine and evaluate content in terms of their sociocultural contexts.
4	Hadewijch, V., & Pieter, V.	2013	Integrating social media in education	SML education must train youth to acquire cognitive, practical, and effective competencies needed for safer interaction and utilization of social media.
5	Hoffman, E.	2021	Social media in an era of great power competition: The resurrection or downfall of democracy	Critical thinking skills should be embedded in school curriculums enabling students to learn how social media platforms work and the dynamics of content on it.
6	Manca, S., Bocconi, S., & Gleason, B.	2021	“Think globally, act locally”: A glocal approach to the development of social media literacy	CSML is more than just know-how of evaluating rhetorics online, it is ability to analyze latent messaging affecting human behaviors and understanding sociocultural nuances.
7	Schreurs, L., & Vandenbosch, L.	2021	Introducing the Social Media Literacy (SMILE) model with the case of the positivity bias on social media	CSML trainings provide critical thinking abilities to adolescents who are most intense consumers of social media. It guides them to limit connections to strangers and protect themselves from potentially manipulative content.
8	Ventsel, A., Hansson, S., Rickberg, M., & Madisson, M.	2023	Building resilience against hostile information influence activities	Specific educational programs should be developed to improve CSML for building resilience against information influence activities. Social media platforms can play a facilitating role in such education.
9	Yeh, E., & Swinehart, N.	2022	Social media literacy in L2 environments: Navigating anonymous user-generated content	SML face challenges of sociocultural pragmatics as well as technical and cognitive competencies. These barriers can be overcome with awareness and training.
10	Yuan, D., Rahman, M.K., Gazi, M.A.I,	2021	Analyzing of user attitudes toward intention to use social media for learning	CSML influence users’ attitudes to perceive risks latent in content and guide their behavioral control to not

No.	Authors	Year	Title	Key Findings
	Rahaman, M.A., Hossain, M.M., & Akter, S.			get influenced by potentially manipulative content.

The thematic analysis revealed that the selected literature focused on building a conceptual understanding of CSML and how it can counter violent radicalism and extremism among youth.

**Conceptual Underpinning**

The literature reviewed for this study helps define CSML in addition to building knowledge on related concepts, such as youth being at the core of CSML education as well as radical and extremist narratives on social media.

***Defining Critical Social Media Literacy (CSML)***

Scholars have struggled to agree on a universal definition of CSML, as evidenced in the reviewed literature. The traditional conception views literacy as an individual accomplishment demonstrating a person’s competency in reading, writing, and sensemaking (Manca et al., 2021). Then, media literacy has largely been defined as the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create information” (Ventsel et al., 2023; Hadewijch & Pieter, 2013; Cho et al., 2022). While Yuan et al. (2021) go further and say that media literacy is “a set of competencies that empowers people to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate, use, create, and share information in personal, professional, and societal activities” (p. 2).

SML is a subset of media literacy that focuses on specific skills needed to navigate social media platforms like Facebook. The social media literate individuals can understand social media characteristics such as user-generated content and the dynamics of socializing online. The key distinction between media literacy and SML is that the former involves understanding the dynamics of content created by institutions such as news channels on television and radio, whereas the latter involves understanding individual user-created content in online communities like Facebook. According to (Hadewijch & Pieter, 2013), SML is the “practical, cognitive, and affective competencies needed to access, analyze, evaluate, and create social media content across a variety of contexts” (p. 4). Though SML enables individuals to create and share content on social media in addition to engaging with online communities, it does not enable users to safely navigate manipulated content, such as political propaganda. In social media environments filled with propaganda content and disinformation, users need skills to think critically and analyze the nuances latent in the content they interact with during social media engagement.

CSML equips users with cognitive skills to mitigate the risks of engaging with harmful social media content and optimize its ethical application (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021). It enables individuals to identify the latent message and potential manipulation in social media posts before engaging with them, particularly political ones (Syam & Nurrahmi, 2020). CSML “develops critical thinking skills, supports the development of writing and literacy skills, and can

lead to improved cognitive and metacognitive processes” (p. 3), along with building an understanding of sociopolitical issues (Manca et al., 2021). It enables social media users to engage in effective social interactions online and helps them to critically and ethically access, create, navigate, organize, and share content (Yeh & Swinehart, 2022). CSML is the “analysis of [social] media messages through a critical evaluation of the producer, the purpose... the audience, and representations of the message” (Hadewijch & Pieter, 2013, p. 4). Broadly, CSML can be imagined through four learning metaphors: “as a tool, as a process, as collaboration, as participation” (Manca et al., 2021, p. 1). Simply put, CSML is a cognitive competence that helps users evaluate the content before any action or reaction (Yuan et al., 2021).

### ***Framing CSML for P/CVE***

This study reviewed various frameworks to inculcate critical thinking and CSML. Schreurs and Vandebosch (2021) introduced a SMILE model to explain the conceptualization of CSML and how it can improve people’s interaction with or utilization of social media. The SMILE model empowers social media users to prioritize their well-being, understand the behaviors of other social media users, develop CSML in them to identify influence factors in the social media environment and build competencies to navigate propaganda content. This model advocates for the responsible and ethical engagement of youth with social media to P/CVE. According to the SMILE model, users who are social media literate are less likely to be exposed to radical content than non-literate ones. The social media literate users critically evaluate the content and cautiously connect with strangers as they think critically before engaging with a piece of content or a connection.

Another notable framework in the literature was SoMeLit by Cho et al. (2022), which argues that youth should keep their ‘self’ at the center of social media networks. By acknowledging the dynamics and complexities of interaction between one’s ‘self,’ (social) media, and the notion of reality on social media, SoMeLit views critical aspects of SML as a core competency. With the ability to understand positionalities and dynamics of political propaganda on social media, SoMeLit advocates for youth to take the lead in endorsing or opposing specific political ideologies promoted through social media.

### ***Youth at the Core of CSML***

The CSML literature reviewed for this study identifies young people at the core of radical and extremist narratives on social media. However, the limited critical thinking abilities of a majority of young social media users make them vulnerable to the pull factors of religious and right-wing extremist propaganda online (Ghosh, 2018). Such risks increase when youth interact with unfamiliar connections and radical religious or political content on social media (Yuan et al., 2021). To mitigate these risks of radicalization, children and adolescents must comprehend the process of content creation and make informed decisions about which content to engage with during their social media activities (Yuan et al., 2021). Hence, context-specific CSML skills can help young people understand the responsible and ethical use of social media (Zhang et al., 2022).

### **Differential Effects of Online Hate**

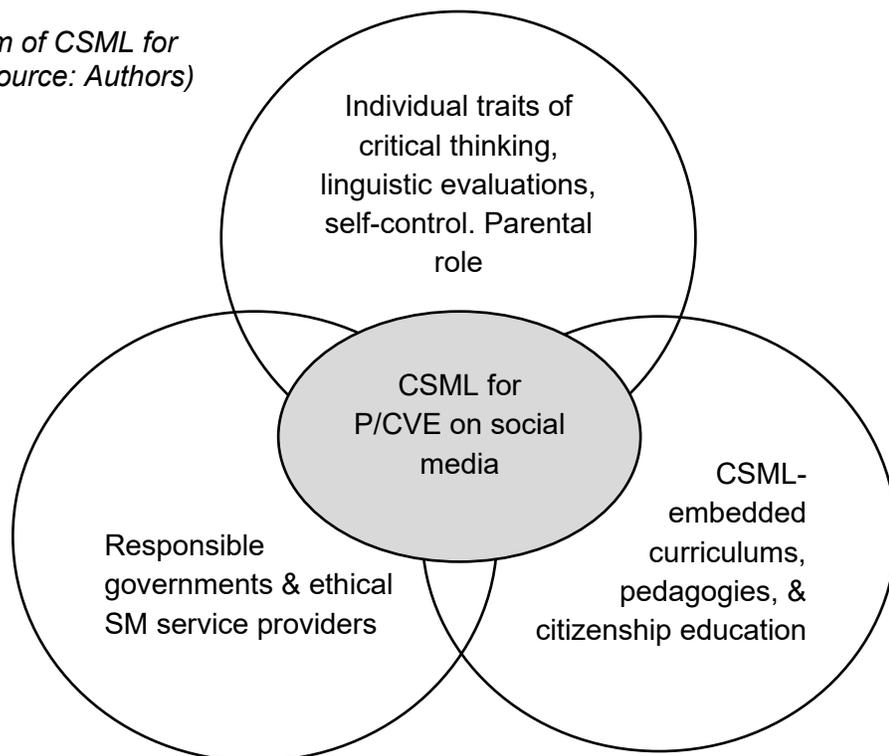
Many scholars in the literature reviewed, such as Yuan et al. (2021), Hawdon et al. (2019), and Turner et al. (2022), were mindful that hate material online does not affect everyone in the same radical manner; that is, not everyone interacting with such content turns into a violent extremist. On the other hand, they did not ignore the chances that interaction with radical content will have short- or long-term perceptual or emotional impacts such as mood swings, anger, loneliness, and fear, leading to favoring extremist ideologies. While some social media users actively seek radical content and take influence from it, many others do not seek such content but still find themselves ensnared in extremist ideologies online. More time spent online by those not seeking radical content increases their chances of encountering such content, often unintentionally; hence, having a higher chance of being radicalized if they do not critically engage with it. Thus, engaging with social media without knowing the latent messages increases the likelihood of radicalization (Burnham et al., 2022). Due to such complexities, there is a growing emphasis on CSML as a potential remedy.

In previously published literature, media literacy focused on traditional or mass media only, but social media has critically different dynamics (Cho et al., 2022). Though the literature on media literacy can be utilized to study SML, the unique features of social media, such as unrestricted creation and circulation of content, require a critical approach to SML (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2021).

### **How CSML Can Help in P/CVE**

The selected articles reviewed for this study revealed three types of CSML factors that can enable young people to identify, prevent, and report on radical propaganda content during their engagement with social media (see Figure 6).

**Figure 66** Venn diagram of CSML for P/CVE among youth (Source: Authors)



### ***Individual Competencies in CSML***

The literature discussed the ways critical thinking among youth can help them evaluate linguistic framings of propaganda content on social media. It also argued for the influential role of parents in building self-control among their children, which will ultimately help them not to fall for radical propaganda online.

**Fostering Critical Thinking in Youth.** The reviewed literature suggests that CSML encourages young people to engage with social media critically and produce content responsibly. Such behavioral trends minimize the risks of falling into manipulated radical propaganda online (Cho et al., 2022). Since CSML emphasizes looking into facts or intent behind a social media post, it promotes critical thinking among youth to safely navigate their interactions online (Cho et al., 2022). To counter radical narratives on social media, users need to understand their audience, religiopolitical dynamics, and how social media algorithms function. These skills help young social media users to evaluate content creators, attractions in it, and latent messages and discourses (Hadewijch & Pieter, 2013).

Critical thinking helps youth to review a social media post rationally, rather than emotionally, which helps them avoid personal or situational biases. Such ability in critical reviews enables young people to identify extremist content on social media by keeping aside their religious or political biases (Gaikwad et al., 2022). They realize the cruciality of keeping their sentiments and emotions aside for evaluating content on social media before reacting to it (Rajendran et al., 2022). If we put it simply, CSML not only gives critical thinking for the supply side of extremist content, such as the creation or dissemination of it, but also urges us to understand the demand side as well, such as the potential audience (Bernatzky et al., 2022). Hence, CSML is crucial for young social media users to prevent and counter the spread of radical propaganda online (DeCook, 2018).

**Decoding Linguistic Framings.** Linguistic framing, the way social media posts are written, is critical to identifying and understanding the tone of radical and extremist content on social media. CSML-skilled social media users are better able to assess radicalization risks latent in the structure of such content (Yeh & Swinehart, 2022). Youth with CSML skills can assess and better decide whether or how to engage with potentially manipulated and radical content on social media. Critical consciousness and content verification techniques help young social media users identify content that could be harmful to them or society (Zhang et al., 2022; Ventsel et al., 2023; Apuke & Gever, 2023). Thus, CSML helps understand language tone and contextual framings, enabling youth to evaluate if a piece of social media content was manipulated or fabricated to promote religiopolitical propaganda or urge for radical violence (Cho et al., 2022).

**Parental Influence on Developing Self-Control in Youth.** The literature reviewed for this study suggests exercising self-control to counteract the influence of radical and extremist ideologies on social media. The critical thinking in CSML enables youth to establish control of their personal feelings or emotions whenever they encounter a manipulative post on social media. Since self-control “involves the ability of individuals to regulate their behaviors” (Turner et al., 2022, p. 3), such ability develops and emerges through socialization at home and

education at schools. Hence, parental role is critical in developing self-control among children and adolescents as they can monitor deviant behaviors among their children and hold decisive positions to mitigate and positively divert such behaviors. Positive parenting, in conjunction with peer support and self-esteem can effectively counteract manipulative and radical messaging on social media (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022).

On the other hand, parents who do not monitor their children's engagements on social media are more likely to develop a lower level of self-control. Parents, along with peers and teachers, are the first to know if their child(ren) is chatting with strangers or interacting with radical content while on social media (Savoia et al., 2021). Thus, radical propaganda on social media is less likely to manipulate youths who have control over their emotions. Parents with CSML skills can inculcate critical thinking in their children, which protects them from the victimization by radical and extremist propaganda on social media (Burnham et al., 2022). Hence, critical thinking abilities among adults and their children are crucial for safer engagement with social media (Harriman et al., 2020).

### ***Educational Systems for Cultivating CSML Skills***

The other major theme discussed in the literature was how educational systems are crucial to inculcating critical thinking and CSML abilities among children and adolescents.

**Educating for Responsible Digital Citizenship.** The literature reviewed for this study urges youth to interact with internet platforms like social media for educational purposes, instead of engaging with and falling for radical propaganda, extremist messaging, and recruitment calls (Harriman et al., 2020). Since CSML inculcates accountable and ethical use of social media, it promotes digital citizenship responsible for identifying and reporting radical content urging violence (Ghosh, 2018). "Digital citizenship is the ability to safely and responsibly access digital technologies, as well as being an active and respectful member of society, both online and offline" (Marcial et al., 2022, p. 6853). Hence, digital citizenship educates youth to responsibly post on social media and become self-accountable content creators (Apuke & Gever, 2023). Digitally educated youth can navigate manipulated information on social media to identify extremist content and violent ideologies (Ventsel et al., 2023). They can also identify manipulated content, verify its authenticity, and decide their reaction to it (Apuke & Gever, 2023). Hence, responsible digital citizenship can effectively combat the spread of radical and extremist propaganda on social media.

**How Teaching and Schooling Can Help.** Schools and colleges have a critical role in P/CVE among young people by educating them on skills to identify and report extremist factions operating online and their radical content (Rousseau et al., 2020). It could be possible through CSML and critical thinking education for children and adolescents at schools and colleges (Manca et al., 2021). Teachers have a pivotal role in building CSML competencies among their students to safely navigate the risks students face during their social media activity (Hinduja & Patchin, 2022). Therefore, emphasis on critical thinking and CSML in teaching pedagogies can shield children and youth from radical and extremist propaganda on social media.

**CSML-Embedded Curriculums.** The literature reviewed also suggests school curriculum's emphasis on building CSML skills among children and adolescents (Manca et al., 2021). Syam and Nurrahmi (2020) argue for CSML and critical thinking to be compulsory subjects at schools and colleges, which will help children and young people denounce extremist and militant ideologies online (Atif et al., 2019). Specific educational programs should be developed to shield children and youth from encountering hateful material during their social media activity by building their abilities to effectively respond if they do encounter such material (Harriman et al., 2020). Such programs should focus on self-awareness and self-realization, in addition to contextual knowledge, to increase the online safety of children and youth (Atif et al., 2019). The Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) program in schools in Quebec (Canada) is an example where resilience to counter violent radical narratives is developed among students (Ghosh, 2018).

### ***Ethical Governance for CSML Skills***

The literature also stresses the critical role social media platforms themselves can play in educating CSML to their users amidst the heavy and continuous influx of manipulative content being posted on them every single moment.

**Social Media to Counter Radical Narratives.** Despite the misuse of social media to propagate radicalism and extremism, Mahmood et al. (2022) suggest that Facebook and similar platforms can also serve as effective tools to counter extremist narratives online. Makki and Akash (2022) referenced a counter-violent extremism (CVE) campaign, 'Voice Against Extremism' in northern Pakistan, which uses social media to mobilize local youth to counter extremist sentiments against minorities and other marginalized communities. Makki and Akash argue that CVE campaigns through social media can build community resilience against extremist narratives and play a pivotal role in countering extremism among young social media users. Moffett and Sgro (2016) used the #IChallengeExtremism campaign online to raise awareness among youth by asking them to write a personalized social media post on countering extremism. Another campaign, #RaiseAFlag, asked young people to flag extremist and radical content whenever they encountered it on social media. These campaigns educated youth to engage with social media to prevent and counter radical and extremist narratives online. Hence, communities in conflict-ridden and fragile contexts can benefit from social media to prevent or counter the narratives of insurgence and extremism.

**Contextually Informed Algorithms.** Since social media algorithms use people's personal information to personalize their social networking experiences online, their profile feeds reflect the attitudes, beliefs, and lifestyles they lean toward (Costello et al., 2016). For example, social media algorithms record users' engagement with anti-government content, and then users are provided with similar content alongside recommendations to join like-minded online groups. Such features of social media give extremist groups access to socially or psychologically vulnerable youth to target radical propaganda and establish support networks. Since algorithms are supposed to auto-detect radical and extremist content on social media, such auto-detection should be contextually informed in terms of specific posts, user profiles, and their sociocultural background (Rajendran et al., 2022). Social scientists who identify algorithms'

behavioral impacts advocate for CSML capabilities among algorithmic engineers as well in terms of misinformation and propaganda (Manca et al., 2021). Therefore, the social and ethical aspects of algorithms hold greater significance than their technical aspects in addressing social media activities that involve sociocultural sensitivities (Manca et al., 2021).

Furthermore, most social media algorithms are not tasked to accounting for the 'intent' of users when suggesting posts on their profile feeds. It makes social media users unintentionally engage with unwanted content such as radical propaganda and posts or messages from unknown people. To prevent or counter disinformation and discriminatory content online, CSML is essential (Manca et al., 2021). Social media platforms must equally apply their learning mechanisms to prevent each user from engaging with radical content (Akram & Perveen, 2020; Burnham et al., 2022). CSML-skilled youth can navigate algorithmic biases, find ways to safely socialize online, and ensure information privacy factors (Yuan et al., 2021). It entails awareness and understanding of harmful content, building competencies to identify radical propaganda online, and enabling youth to responsibly respond to such content – all these can be achieved through CSML education (Cho et al., 2022). Because of this, social media sites should work like a responsible and critical sociotechnical system that takes into account both technological and personal factors.

**Critical Role of Governments.** Governments have a critical role in preventing and countering the spread of radical and extremist propaganda content on social media (Hoffman, 2021). Where authoritarian regimes use social media for citizens' surveillance, social media can also be utilized to improve governance systems and hold governments accountable for the spread of radical narratives online. Like citizens directly engaging with government policymakers through social media, policymakers can also utilize social media to gauge the factors fueling violent radicalism and extremism among youth (Hoffman, 2021). Since leading social media platforms such as Facebook and X are based in the United States (U.S.), the U.S. government has the leading role in government-led responses to P/CVE online. Holding social media companies accountable for the spread of disinformation and religiopolitical radicalism online may urge them to educate users on identifying and reporting radical content (Hoffman, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that CSML is a crucial countermeasure to prevent radical and extremist narratives from being fueled through social media. This countermeasure will work through the trio-nexus of educational systems equipping CSML skills among youth, while social media platforms ensure user safety from radical content being posted every moment. In this trio-nexus, young people who use social media are still very important for learning CSML skills and using them to prevent and counter unwanted propaganda online. To enable CSML and critical thinking abilities among youth, socialization processes embedded with the ability to manage emotions and behaviors are critical. Their CSML-embedded schooling and curriculums, such as critical thinking exercises in classrooms, contextually relevant pedagogies, and citizenship education practices, are also crucial to navigating potentially radical content on social media.

Furthermore, this study revealed that current research lacks CSML specific to violent radicalism and extremism through social media. A lot of the literature that was looked at for this

study either talked briefly about CSML while talking about ways to stop violent radicalism online or talked about stopping extremist narratives as one way that CSML is an important skill for young people. Hence, existing literature lacks thorough research on CSML being a core skill for children and adolescents socializing online amidst radical and extremist content massively being spread through social media. This study invites a scholarly focus on expanding the empirical and in-depth research on CSML and how it can be a crucial skill for young people in diverse contexts. Since different social media platforms have varied operating mechanisms and content features, CSML research could identify and recommend platform-specific strategies of critical thinking and content nuances analysis.

This study has a variety of academic and policy implications. As currently lacking, this study has synthesized literature on how CSML can be a counter to prevent violent radicalization and extremism through social media. It will be a source for scholars to further research the topics discussed in this paper and explore the areas that have been underexplored by the current research. It also urges educators to embed CSML in teaching pedagogies for children and adolescents to safely interact with social media while countering violent radicalism online. Furthermore, policymakers can use this paper to influence the ethical design and safer governance of social media platforms, in addition to supporting CSML for P/CVE measures.

## **Preface to Chapter 4**

### **Critical Social Media Literacy (CSML) and Radical Religiopolitical Disinformation on Facebook in Pakistan**

Sub-study 2 reflects Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) presented in 1977 (McLeod, 2024). As narrated by Miller and Morris (2016), SLT argues that individuals learn to define attitudes and behaviors from their environment, such as the online environment of social media. In the context of this study, SLT would note that young social media users, while pursuing their identities or looking for attention, may engage in violent radicalism while observing extremist activity or content online, even if they do not have any direct association with it. Amidst every hour influx of religiopolitical disinformation on social media, online environments have become propaganda platforms to manage political perceptions and worldviews of young people (sub-study 1). Since young social media users have unique attitudes and values defining their perception of religiopolitical content, it influences their behaviors, for example, participating in violent protests. Specific to the context of this study, Pakistan, political parties like PTI and TLP are prominent examples of managing public perceptions through propaganda content on social media and have repeatedly organized (violent) protests solely organized through social media (Akram et al., 2024). Such mass-level protests reflect a lack of critical thinking and social media analysis among the majority of Pakistani youth who proactively respond to calls for protest without even questioning the political agenda behind them. Sub-study 1 also highlighted the group-level factors in inculcating religiopolitical radicalization among Pakistani youth. It invited sub-study 3 to thoroughly explore the role of religiopolitical messaging on social media in radicalizing political perceptions of young Pakistanis and identify which CSML skills as found in sub-study 2 could be useful for them.

The literature reviewed for sub-study 1 touched upon the group or larger national-level factors in violent extremism discourse but did not detail the specifics of groups or entities engaged in it. But the dynamics of extremism have changed with social media use in politics, particularly after the 2013 general elections, and got complicated after Imran Khan's ouster from prime minister's office in 2022. Considering severe criticism through social media of the military elite's role in Khan's ouster, the military spokespersons repeatedly referenced social media as a reason for political propaganda against the state of Pakistan and its institutions. It created the need to have a focused and thorough research study (sub-study 3) on the dynamics of religiopolitical narrative competition on a leading platform, Facebook, in which people of Pakistan were currently experiencing such a political phenomenon in the country.

Except for a few, most of the papers reviewed in sub-study 2 were produced by researchers based in Western countries and focused on their Western contexts. The analysis of the existing literature reveals that the critical aspect of CSML is understudied in the context of the Global South, where the majority of the social media users live, where social media is massively misused for political disinformation, and online propaganda often leads to unrest and violent protests. Sub-study 3 intended to see how/if the CSML skills identified through sub-study 2 could be utilized in Pakistan, where political scenarios are quite different than those in Western contexts. Pakistan is such a case where social media has become a tool for political propaganda by the state and various political and religiously political actors or parties (Rahman

& Shurong, 2021). In the absence of CSML in the educational context of a politically fragile society like Pakistan, it was critical to study how CSML could be a skill for Pakistani youth. Hence, sub-study 3 was designed and conducted to elicit the levels of CSML among Pakistani youth (especially students) and their perception of the role and influence of social media in radicalization and in shaping violent extremism discourse in Pakistan. It also aimed to understand whether the inculcation of CSML skills can be beneficial for social media users in navigating (and eventually countering) radical online narratives.

The existing literature, as reviewed for sub-study 1, takes a generic approach to studying the role of social media in violent extremism among Pakistani youth and does not focus on a particular platform, such as Facebook. However different social media platforms have varied roles in religiopolitical radicalization in Pakistan. Since February 2024, X has been banned over national security concerns (Aziz, 2024), Youtube has had an influx of monetization-seeking journalists spreading political sensation, and Facebook is a go-to platform where people get current news along with the ability to socialize online. It highlights the need for sub-study 3 to research the dynamics of religiopolitical content on a specific platform, Facebook, to understand their role in violent radicalism among Pakistani youth. Among others, Facebook was chosen to study the role of religiopolitical content in violent extremism (sub-study 3) due to the extensive reach of the platform and the every-minute influx of political content being posted on it.

Choi et al. (2020) argue that violent radical narratives online are not an accident but a planned occurrence of offenders, such as political interest groups, to reach their suitable target, youth. The previous studies, as reviewed for sub-study 1, do not detail the motives behind such occurrences of political interest groups spreading radical religiopolitical narratives in social media space in Pakistan. Similarly, sub-study 2 brought up the need to assess if/how young people engage critically with social media in politically fragile contexts like Pakistan. With sub-study 3, it was intended to dive deeper to understand the interconnectedness between religiopolitical content on social media and violent extremism. It also aimed to gauge if radical religiopolitical content on social media like Facebook is a random scenario or if it involves some sort of political intention or interest.

Furthermore, the existing literature, as reviewed for sub-study 1, does not delve deeper into exploring the types of religiopolitical narratives on social media, the dynamics of actors involved in it, the real-life impacts of such narratives, and how CSML skills can specifically address violent radicalism in the Pakistani context. In most of the articles reviewed for sub-study 1, the role of social media in violent extremism was touched on briefly in some sections of the articles but did not wholly study the role of social media in violent extremism in Pakistan. As a result, the research articles that were looked at for sub-study 1 did not go into detail about how Pakistani political and religiously political parties spread false information on social media.

Routine Activity Theory (RAT) argues that victimization happens when there is a suitable target, an absence of capable guardianships, and motivated offenders come together at any place and time, both on- and offline (Obermaier & Schmuck, 2022). Therefore, it is safe to argue that there is scant research that juxtaposes factors behind the radicalization of youth, the motivations of a politico-military elite, and the role (and responsibilities) of other critical stakeholders such as fragile governments, ill-equipped educational structures and institutions, and the social media ecosystems. Sub-study 1 was conducted to explore the role of these factors in violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan. However, there were gaps in the

existing literature that motivated sub-study 3, i.e., for an in-depth understanding of religiopolitical narratives on social media, particularly Facebook, concerning violent radicalism among Pakistani youth. Sub-study 2 found a critical role of educational institutions in inculcating CSML among youth, which guided sub-study 3 to collect perspectives of youth currently enrolled in (under)graduate programs at public universities in Pakistan. Sub-study 2 reiterated that CSML is an individual skill that can be learned to prevent or counter radical messaging on social media. Hence, sub-study 3 aimed to conduct in-depth interviews with youth to assess their current CSML and critical thinking abilities so that future recommendations can be made. In addition, both sub-studies 1 and 2 called for an in-depth research on religiopolitical content on social media, especially in fragile politics like Pakistan, in terms of violent radicalism among youth; and how/if CSML could be a skill needed in this age of social media.

As discussed in sub-study 2, preventing or countering violent radicalism on social media through CSML requires a comprehensive approach and multifaceted efforts by different actors and stakeholders so that CSML can educate social media users to not only identify radical content but also not to fall into extremist manipulative propaganda during their online activity (Manca et al., 2021). However, none of the studies analyzed specifically focus on CSML skills in the Pakistani context, where religiopolitical propagations on social media like Facebook have become a political tool. Combined with the lack of critical thinking abilities among the majority of the Pakistani youth, it becomes an area in need of further research. Hence, the perspectives of Pakistani youth were elicited about political and religiously political content online to dig deeper into the nexus of religiopolitical content on social media like Facebook and violent radicalism. Sub-study 3 focused on one social media platform, namely Facebook, considering its wider usage among Pakistani youth and larger consumption of disinformation for political mobilization. Sub-study 3 is one of the pioneering studies that primarily explores the impact of religiopolitical content on Facebook on Pakistani youth about radicalization and violent extremism.

## CHAPTER 4 (Sub-Study 3): Facebook and Violent Extremism: Insights into Pakistani Youth's Perspectives on Religiopolitical Content<sup>11</sup>

### Introduction

One-third of Pakistanis, around 80 million, use social media, and most of them have daily activity on Facebook (Kemp, 2022). This makes Facebook a favorable space for propagating religiopolitical narratives, whether through radical or extremist lenses (Ida et al., 2020). Youth remains the key target of such radically manufactured religiopolitical discourses online (Zaheer, 2018; Ejaz, 2013). Political and religiopolitical groups exploit ethnolinguistic and religious divides among people to further their political agenda (Hameed & Majeed, 2022). The major drivers of religiopolitical misuse of Facebook in Pakistan include electioneering (Haider, 2022), violent protest and propaganda (Shafaqat, 2018), and suppression of free expression (Khan, 2021). The political dominance on social media like Facebook also reflects offline, as youth tend to follow calls for radical changes or violent protests in real-life scenarios (Ali et al., 2022).

Religiopolitics can be defined as “situations in which relations with God provide shape and meaning to one’s political actions and orientations” (Green, 1985, p. 314)<sup>12</sup>. In societies, such as Pakistan, where religious and political discourses exist in a symbiotic relationship (Naseem, 2010), social media like Facebook have changed the traditional political dynamics and have become a key tool for religiopolitical groups to engage citizens at the mass level. These groups use Facebook for their political agenda of spreading politically radical narratives, manipulating political facts, and building propaganda to disinform people against rival religious and/or political groups (Ahmad & Sheikh, 2013). Such misuse of Facebook is aimed at increasing the number of supporters or voters, religious parties to gain political influence, ruling parties to silence opponents, and military elite to name critics as dissidents or rebels (Akram et al., 2024a).

The use of social media in Pakistani politics was started in Facebook’s early years (2007) for a pro-democracy lawyers’ movement against the then military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, who had complete control over traditional media (Hassan, 2018). Then Facebook remained untapped for a major political cause until Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) strategically used it in their campaign for the 2013 general elections. It is believed that PTI’s use of social media like Facebook not only gave them electoral success in one province but also helped them emerge as the second biggest political party in Pakistan. In pursuit of electoral victory nationally, PTI’s social media approach became politically radical during the 2018 elections, which resulted in their national victory. PTI benefited from its narrative of “negative others” during the 2018 elections (Akram et al., 2024). But after the ouster of Imran Khan in April 2022, the political narratives of PTI turned extremist and violent, particularly around the 2024 elections (Mir et al., 2022). After his ouster from office, Khan took an anti-military stance that gained overnight popularity among social media netizens and shattered the longstanding narrative controls of the Pakistani military elite.

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<sup>11</sup> This manuscript is accepted for peer review by the American Psychological Association's journal *Psychology of Popular Media*.

<sup>12</sup> This definition of Religiopolitics is repeated here as this sub-study / chapter was individually submitted for publication in a peer reviewed journal.

Tehrik Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) is the other key political party that inculcated radical extremism among Bareilvi Sunni Muslims, a sect, and organized violent protests through social media like Facebook. TLP massively spread their radical religiopolitical propaganda online under the notion of blasphemy laws protection in Pakistan (Gautam, 2022). With social media like Facebook, certain political and religiously political parties have become key spreaders of radical ideologies that have influenced political perceptions of youth (Atif et al., 2019). There is limited evidence that the majority of Pakistani youth engage in critical thinking or perceptual analysis before they believe in manipulated radical content or act upon the calls for violent protests. Scholars such as Schirch (2020) and Naseem & Arshad-Ayaz (2020) argue that critical social media literacy (CSML) is essential to countering radical narratives on social media, which requires educating youth on the responsible and critical use of social media to prevent and counter extremist narratives (Ida et al., 2020). Whereas Pakistani youth often do not realize the political intent behind such content or calls for radical change that are made through social media like Facebook (Chaudhary et al., 2021).

### ***Theoretical Underpinning***

This study applied root narrative theory (RNT) as an overarching theoretical lens (Simmons, 2020). RNT argues that radical disagreements happen when people hold different opinions and tend to determine what is right and wrong amidst interpretation gaps restricting productive communication among parties or individuals with conflicting views. It was Cohen and Felson who first came up with the routine activity theory (RAT) to explain changes in the U.S. crime rate from 1947 to 1974 (Miro, 2014). This theory was then used to figure out what causes violent radicalism and extremism on Facebook. According to RAT (Hawdon et al., 2019), higher usage of social media increases the probability of encountering online extremism. Since RAT lacks focus on individual traits, social learning theory (SLT) was then applied to understand behaviors and perceptions of study respondents concerning their exposure to radical religiopolitical content on Facebook (Atif et al., 2019). Albert Bandura developed the social learning theory in 1977 (McLeod, 2024). RNT, RAT, and SLT offer distinct lenses to understand extremist behaviors.

Where RNT helps understand the broader religiopolitical narratives online propagating violent extremism, it lacks focus on the situational factors focused on by the RAT. The RNT also has a limited focus on the influence of interpersonal factors, which could be covered through the application of SLT. This study used these theories to understand if or how youth engage in critical thinking to assess the situational, communal, and societal factors latent in Facebook content and activity.

### ***Research Questions***

This study aimed to understand Pakistani youth's perspectives on religiopolitical content on Facebook concerning violent radicalism and extremism in the country. Two key questions guided our research: 1) What impact does religiopolitical content on social media like Facebook have on Pakistani youth's perceptions and attitudes towards violent radicalism and extremism, and 2) To what degree do Pakistani youth critically evaluate the underlying motives and origins of religiopolitical content on Facebook that calls for violent radicalism or extremist actions?

This paper is organized as follows: First, research methodology is detailed. Second, the findings that emerged from the analysis of this study's data have been discussed. Third, the findings are presented considering three theories: root narrative theory (Simmons, 2020), routine activity theory (Hawdon et al., 2019), and social learning theory (Miller & Morris, 2016). Finally, we draw conclusions from this study.

## **Methodology**

This study followed a critical ethnographic approach. "Critical ethnography is a qualitative approach to research that explicitly sets out to critique hegemony, oppression, and asymmetrical power relations to foster social change" (Palmer & Caldas, 2015, p. 1). Since religious and political groups compete to influence Facebook space in Pakistan, critical ethnography allows to study contradictions of competing ideologies that transcend the target audience. It also helps to "analyze (respondents') words concerning larger historical processes and social contradictions, searching for the hidden forces that structure life" (Amber, 2011, p. 21). Critical ethnography guides access to respondents' perspectives to generate thick descriptions of their knowledge and experiences and provide direct access to the local culture, experiences, and practices (Arshad-Ayaz et al., 2022).

For this study, an in-depth interview guide was developed (Appendix 4), which consisted of three key sections: 1) participant screening to ensure all participants meet inclusion criteria; 2) an ethics statement and consent form to seek voluntary participation in this study; and 3) a guide containing open-ended questions probing for examples and more details on the responses. "Interview guide includes a list of main questions directly related to the research question, potential follow-up questions and probes, or simply an outline of topics or themes that will be addressed within the interview" (Roberts, 2020, p. 3,191). In addition to incorporating the contextual and subject sensitivities, sub-studies 1 and 2 also informed the design of the interview guide for sub-study 3. The guide was not pilot-tested as this was an interpretivist ethnographic study where respondents could think through the questions to explain their responses by interpreting their related observations and experiences.

Palinkas et al. (2015) define purposive sampling as "involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest" (p. 2). The inclusion criteria for participation required respondents to be: 1) Currently enrolled in an (under)graduate-level degree in social sciences; 2) A Pakistani national aged 18-29 years, with an exception till 35 years, as UNDP Pakistan attributes youth those between the age of 15 and 29 (Ahmad, 2018 ) and those from 18 years were considered as that is the median age for university entry in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2024); 3) An active (daily) user of Facebook; 4) Exposed to religiopolitical content on Facebook, as that would provide rationale to their participation; and 5) Not affiliated with any religious or political party, as any such affiliation could urge respondents to share biased responses influencing the findings of this sub-study. It was aimed to ensure female participation in this sub-study. Respondents were recruited via referrals from faculty members at public universities (refer to Appendix 5), who subsequently received a letter expressing gratitude for their students who participated in the interviews (see Appendix 6).

In this study, the interviewees were encouraged to share examples and observations from their real-life experiences which helped them to rethink and refine their responses. The

average interview time ranged from 90 to 120 minutes, and the respondents were provided with freedom to be interviewed in English or Urdu to ensure their thorough participation, as English was not the first language of respondents, affecting their response thoroughness. Where necessary, the questions were explained to the respondents to ensure clarity and response relevance. Compliance with research ethics was ensured throughout data collection, as interviews probe individuals' personal experiences and private lives (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The Office of Research, Research Ethics Unit, at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, approved this study (Certification Number: 30019935).

NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to code, categorize, and then theme the interview transcripts (Elliott, 2018). Since some respondents were comfortable being interviewed in Urdu while others were interviewed in English, the interview transcripts were imported into NVivo in the language organic to the actual interview. The thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400). Interview transcripts generate a large volume of data, prompting the coding process to condense and make sense of it. Coding helps make sense of the interview transcripts by aggregating the text into a few themes (Cresswell, 2013). The inductive coding approach was applied to the data, allowing the organic emergence of findings. In inductive coding, "codes arise from the data in an open coding process" (Bennett et al., 2019, p. 10).

"A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (Elliott, 2018, p. 2,855). The codes were generated at three levels during the coding process: 1) low-inference codes to summarize the data, 2) merged similar-sense codes for synthesis, and 3) improved the codes to be pattern-based to consolidate the data into a limited number of more meaningful units, i.e., categories (Elliott, 2018). Categories "are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (Cresswell, 2013, p. 186). The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts led to the grouping of the categories into themes, which outline the larger level structure of findings. "Theme can be an outcome of coding, categorization, or analytic reflection, but it is not something that is, in itself, coded" (Elliott, 2018, p. 2,852).

Among three types of thematic analysis approaches - coding reliability, reflexivity, and codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2021) - this study's analysis process took a reflexive approach, i.e., the experiences of interaction with interviewees will be incorporated into the findings of this study (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Reflexive approaches to thematic analysis develop themes based on codes, conceptualizing shared meaning-making around a central organizing concept (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Taking into account reflexivity, the unstructured and organic (inductive) coding process lets the codes change over time and helps get a better grasp of data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). During the coding process, field experiences during the data collection were reflected on to shape the coding structure's evolution. In addition, the author's positionality as someone with roots in Pakistan was reflexive, which meant that he had to keep thinking about his own biases and contextual knowledge as he did the research (Hansen, 2021). Reflexive positionality examines how "a researcher's sociodemographic identifiers... affect research encounters, processes, and outcomes" (Johnsen & Fitzpatrick, 2022, p. 1). To evidence the findings of

thematic analysis, social media posts were also reviewed and provided the images of relevant posts and comments.

### Thematic Analysis

The analysis stage started with assigning codes to the interviews' recordings, that is, R1, R4, and so on, followed by their transcription into text files. Thematic analysis was conducted in five steps: first, familiarizing oneself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts; second, coding the transcript content and assigning themes; third, grouping themes into broader categories; fourth, establishing connections between different themes and categories; and fifth, theorizing for critical ethnographic discussion. Themes and categories are described using verbatim quotes from respondents, designating codes such as R1, R2, and R3 for respondents 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the study respondents.

**Table 44** *Characteristics of Study Respondents*

Respondent ID	District of origin	Gender	Age (year)	Education level	Daily time on Facebook (hours)
R1	Gilgit Baltistan	Male	30-35	Graduate	2-4
R2	Loralai (Baluchistan province hereafter)	Male	18-20	Undergrad	3-5
R3	Loralai	Male	20-25	Undergrad	2-3
R4	Noshki	Male	20-25	Undergrad	3-5
R5	Ziarat	Male	20-25	Graduate	1-2
R6	Zob	Male	20-25	Undergrad	3-4
R7	Bajaur (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa hereafter)	Male	25-30	Graduate	3-4
R8	Bajaur	Male	20-25	Undergrad	2-3
R9	Chakwal (Punjab province hereafter)	Female	20-25	Undergrad	2-3
R10	Chakwal	Female	20-25	Undergrad	Up-to 1
R11	Chakwal	Female	20-25	Undergrad	1-2
R12	Chakwal	Female	20-25	Undergrad	1-2
R13	Islamabad	Female	25-30	Undergrad	2-3
R14	Lahore	Female	20-25	Undergrad	4-5
R15	Lahore	Female	20-25	Undergrad	1-2
R16	Lahore	Male	30-35	Graduate	2-3
R17	Mianwali	Male	25-30	Undergrad	1-2

There is no consensus on the exact sample size needed for a qualitative study, as it depends on the researcher's belief in reaching the saturation level for identified themes and categories (Marshall et al., 2013). Data from 9 to 17 interviews often reach the saturation level of qualitative interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). In qualitative studies, a sample size of 30 or more in-depth interviews is considered larger because data saturation begins at six to 12 in-

depth interviews (Boddy, 2016). Cresswell (1998, p. 64) suggests a sample size between five and 25 for the phenomenological studies.

Interviews were conducted with 17 respondents from four universities in the Punjab province of Pakistan (see Table 1). The respondents were from 10 districts representing the provinces of Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Punjab, as well as Gilgit Baltistan and Islamabad, which are federal regions. The names of participating universities are not disclosed in this paper to ensure the personal safety and security of study respondents and those faculty members who facilitated the data collection. The rationale for selecting universities in Punjab and Islamabad is that 53% of the country’s population lives in this province (USAID, n.d.) and has most of the country’s youth as well as educational institutions.

## Findings

The data analysis revealed four major categories of findings and various themes were discovered under each of these categories, as detailed below.

**Table 55** Summary of Qualitative Findings

Categories	Themes
Religiopolitical dynamics behind violent extremism on Facebook	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Partisan Conflicts Has Radicalized Facebook Ecosystem</li> <li>2. Radical Propaganda: Deliberate Spread, not a Coincidence</li> <li>3. Radical Messaging for Electioneering</li> <li>4. The State’s Propaganda Misuse of Facebook</li> </ol>
The real-world impact of extremist narratives on Facebook	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sectarianism Politics Become Easier than Ever</li> <li>2. Rise in Blasphemy Politics</li> <li>3. Escalations of Online Debates to Offline Violence</li> <li>4. Easier Organization of Mass (Violent) Protests</li> <li>5. Politics Triggering Emotions and Feelings</li> </ol>
Challenges to counter extremist religiopolitical narratives on Facebook	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Facebook Has a Secondary Role in Violent Extremism</li> <li>2. Fact checking is not the Norm</li> <li>3. Educating Others Online? Prepare for the Backlash</li> <li>4. Risks of being Trolled or Lynched</li> <li>5. Regulating Social Media Could Oppress Already Oppressed</li> <li>6. Facebook Users Struggle with Critical Thinking</li> </ol>
Preventing religiopolitical radicalism on social media / Facebook: A path forward	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Avoidance Strategy of Individual Users</li> <li>2. Facebook’s Role in Enhancing Users’ Safety</li> <li>3. How Government Can Ensure Citizens’ Online Safety</li> <li>4. Staying Safe Online: How Education can Help</li> </ol>

### ***Religiopolitical Dynamics behind Violent Extremism on Facebook***

The respondents of this study shared several dynamics of how Facebook is being misused in religiopolitical radical propaganda in Pakistan, including the stakeholders involved in it.

**Partisan Conflicts has Radicalized Facebook Ecosystem.** Several respondents compared the share of different political and religiously political parties in promoting extremist propaganda through Facebook. For example, a respondent noted:

“TLP has the most radical content on Facebook, followed by JUI (Jamiat Ulema Islam), and then, to some extent, the Jamaat Islami. In terms of mainstream political parties, PTI has the most radical content on Facebook, followed by the PMLN (Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz) to some extent. Their competing narratives on Facebook completely rejecting others’ political agenda, which creates extremist behaviors among youth.” [R3]

Another respondent pointed to the religiopolitical character of groups claiming to be movements but not a religious or political party. He highlighted:

“Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) has more of a religious factor than a traditional one. The physical outlook of Manzoor Pashteen, the way he has dressed, and videos of him leading prayer circulating on Facebook with descriptions that ‘look at our leader, who is Islamic’. So, I would say that religion is being used in almost every political scenario in Pakistan.” [R6]

**Radical Propaganda: Deliberate Spread, Not a Coincidence.** Several respondents to this study believed that political and religiopolitical parties in Pakistan intentionally disseminate radical and extremist propaganda through social media platforms such as Facebook. A respondent argued:

“The political parties rarely post facts but mostly propaganda to get followers and voters to support their religiopolitical narratives. They do this intentionally.” [R1]

Another respondent delved deeper into the topic, highlighting how these parties enlist their supporters to spread radical propaganda. She noted:

“Religious and political parties encourage their supporters to adopt a radical approach against their opponent party, which inculcates extremism. The supporters get tasked with defending their party leadership in any way possible. This is how the radical posts on Facebook become part of organized propaganda.” [R15]

**Radical Messaging for Electioneering.** Respondents of the study highlighted the misuse of Islam by various political and religious parties during their election campaigns on Facebook. They recounted various instances of coming across Facebook posts featuring radical appeals to votes for specific political parties or their candidates. While referring to TLP, a respondent from Chakwal (Punjab) said:

“I see (Facebook) posts asking for votes with claims that if you vote for our party, we will make our country a true Islamic state. They claim to be the only ones on right political path and promise to send all of us straight into heaven if they win.” [R11]

Another respondent from Chakwal (Punjab) brought up Facebook posts by PTI's misuse of religion in politics. She mentioned:

"You can see Facebook posts of PTI leadership whose political speeches start from religious verses or quotes. Imran Khan is seen holding beads in his hand during a political rally. It makes people think that PTI leadership is true Muslim; let us vote for them." [R10]

A respondent from Zob (Baluchistan) talked about Jamat Islami as:

"Jamat Islami has a book as their political symbol, and they build narrative that this book is the Quran, and why you must vote for the Quran. In my area, Jamat Islami would say, 'why are you rejecting the Quran for not voting for it'? You can find all these political claims on social media." [R6]

Another respondent from Loralai (Baluchistan) highlighted the election narrative of JUI as:

"My area is influenced by JUI, whose political approach is extremist. During general elections of 2024, I often saw Facebook posts by JUI in which they were guaranteeing to take their voters to heaven." [R3]

**The State's Propaganda Misuse of Facebook.** Some respondents believed that Pakistan's military also misuses social media, including Facebook, to create narratives favoring their control over the state's political affairs. A respondent shared:

"During the 2018 elections, the military establishment supported the PTI by all means, including through social media narratives." [R6]

Another respondent shared his perspective when the PTI government had differences with the military elite on certain political affairs. He said:

"In the PTI government, the facilitators (military elite, he meant) of TLP asked them to rally towards Islamabad from Lahore in protest over a blasphemy issue. TLP was heavily posting their photos and videos from rallies and protests on social media, including Facebook, to radically spread their political Islamic narratives. This is how their facilitators were building pressure on the PTI government, extending all the way to Islamabad." [R17]

A respondent from Islamabad framed the overall scenario of political interferences by military elite and shared:

"My early years on Facebook were spent socializing online, making friends, and sharing stuff to appear cool. But recently, I came to know if you do not give that institution (Pakistan Army, she meant) the political benefits they need, they will build a narrative online that nothing is going well in this country." [R13]

She further shared the consequences of disagreeing with the military elite's narratives and said:

"I have seen posts on Facebook people calling others Gaddaar (rebellion), Infidel, non-Muslim, and even terrorists. If you do not agree with the narrative of a certain institution (Pakistan Army, she meant), then you will be called a terrorist. This is such a harsh word, but people call others very casually if you do not agree with them." [R13]

### ***The Real-World Impact of Extremist Narratives on Facebook***

The study's respondents outlined various ways that online radical religiopolitical propaganda impacts real life situations. They shared various examples from their life when radical post(s) on Facebook resulted in the incidence of unrest and violence on the ground.

**Sectarian Politics Become Easier.** The respondents recounted instances when they witnessed the politicization of religious sectarianism, especially the Shia-Sunni conflict. For example, a respondent said:

"After the majority of the PTI-backed candidates won the 2024 General Elections, the PTI was going to alliance with Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM, a Shia political party) due to the ban on PTI itself. People all over social media, including Facebook, trolled Imran Khan and his PTI for getting together with Shia, which resulted in PTI reversing their decision and joined a Sunni political party (Sunni Ittehad Council – SIC). This reflects how much religious extremism is embedded in our political system." [R15]

**Rise in Blasphemy Politics.** Since blasphemy laws of Pakistan have a history of being misused in personal disputes. This study's respondents were concerned about the increased incidence of blasphemy accusations considering free speech on Facebook. A respondent mentioned:

"My first political post on Facebook in 2013 was the poem of Mishal Khan, who was killed for an alleged blasphemous post on Facebook. But his post was a poem that he wrote for political change in the country." [R13]

Another respondent highlighted the cases of blasphemy in larger political spheres of the country and said:

"There were a lot of posts on Facebook against PMLN when they released Asia Bibi (a Christian woman accused of blasphemy). Another example is the hanging of Mumtaz Qadri (who killed former governor Salman Taseer for favoring Asia Bibi), which reaped a lot of political hate on social media against PMLN. Whereas Imran Khan was backlashed on Facebook when he allowed a teen Christian girl accused of blasphemy to fly abroad." [R17]

**Easier Organization of Mass (Violent) Protests.** The study respondents shared various examples of when social media like Facebook was heavily used in organizing mass protests.

"The TLP's sit-in Faizabad (Islamabad) was shared all around social media, including Facebook, which made that viral. Also, look how political gatherings of Sami-ul-Haq, who

is known as Father of Taliban<sup>13</sup> and whose followers formed the Haqqani Network<sup>14</sup>, were covered and promoted through Facebook livestreaming.” [R6]

Another respondent brought up the factor of organizing religiopolitical protests exclusively via Facebook. He said:

“In my area in Baluchistan, there is no physical presence of TLP, but people responded to their protest calls on Facebook and shutdown the traffic and businesses. It reflects the power of Facebook in organizing mass protests.” [R3]

The misuse of Facebook in organizing violent protests is now grounded so much in Pakistan’s political spheres that even grassroot groups benefit from it. A respondent shared her experience as:

“Once a student’s attendance was short, and the university was not allowing him to sit in an exam. He contacted Jamiat (the student wing of Jamat Islami, a religious political party) which immediately called for protest through texting in WhatsApp groups and posting on their Facebook page; and demanded immediate suspension of exams. They smashed windows and doors at campus which resulted in suspension of all the educational activities.” [R15]

**Escalations of Online Debates to Offline Violence.** The study’s respondents recounted instances in which they witnessed radical posts on Facebook leading to actual violence. A respondent shared her observation as:

“These online religious or political clashes do not remain confined to the internet. People reach out through Facebook Messenger and start arguing their opinions, which risks resulting in in-person clashes. Such incidents frequently occur on Facebook.” [R9]

A respondent shared his experience when Facebook posts turned into physical violence. He said:

“Our area’s Imam, who supports Jamat Islami and is critic of PTI, once posted on Facebook that Imran Khan is a Jew and Muslims should not attend funerals of his supporters. He further said that he will not lead funeral prayer of anyone voting for PTI. When his post went viral, PTI supporters criticized him a lot both online and offline and even beat him in public. Since then, he keeps two security guards with him all the time.” [R7]

**Politics Triggering Emotions and Feelings.** Several respondents viewed that religio-politically radical content on Facebook has impacted public emotions and feelings. For example, a respondent shared:

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<sup>13</sup> Maulana Sami-ul-Haq “is known as “the father of the Taliban” due to the high number of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban leaders who studied at his seminary” known as Darul Uloom Haqqania in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. “In a 2005 interview, Haq claimed that his school would regularly provide the Taliban with fighters as needed.” (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.)

<sup>14</sup> “The interim Taliban government has heavy representation of the Haqqani network, whose connections to transnational jihad are well-documented.” (Kaura, 2021)

“I was using Facebook a lot. Seeing political content on it, such as radical memes, gives me many mood swings every day. When I realized the reason, I reduced my excessive use of Facebook.” [R6]

Religiopolitical misuse of Facebook has also instilled aggression and anxiety in its users. A respondent said:

“I used to ignore abusive and hateful messaging on Facebook, even when someone was pointing at me or my political opinions. But now I argue harshly with them.” [R11]

A respondent shared that a political post on Facebook has impacted her personal relationships. She shared:

“I was once in a very beautiful place, enjoying my peace of mind. Randomly, I shared a political post on Facebook, which was a random act and did not mean to target anyone. But someone dear to me took that so personally that he sent me harsh messages over Messenger, which hurt me a lot...It resulted in ending our relationship.” [R13]

### ***Challenges to Counter Extremist Religiopolitical Narratives on Facebook***

When study respondents were asked about ways to prevent or counter violent extremism among youth amidst radical religiopolitical narratives on Facebook, they shared various challenges in doing so.

**Facebook is Not the Only Factor in Violent Extremism.** Some respondents viewed Pakistan as an extremist society; hence, extremist religiopolitical narratives on Facebook have a lesser role in radicalizing youth. They believe that radicalism and extremism in Pakistan exist in spite of social media, not because of it. For example, a respondent viewed:

“I believe pockets of extremism always existed in Pakistan, but they are now more prominent due to social media. Previously, those (pockets) were manifested and hidden, as there was no such platform where people could freely talk about them. Now even a minor incident (of extremism) can become a topic of conversation due to social media platforms like Facebook.” [R16]

Another respondent pointed out that Pakistan was established based on polarization, which has kept our society extreme in religiopolitical affairs. He said:

“I do not see much of the role of social media in religiopolitical polarization in our society as it existed even before. Look, Pakistan was established on the bases of polarization – the two-nation theory.” [R17]

**Fact-Checking is Not the Norm.** The study respondents shared that it is normal in the Pakistani society that social media users do not tend to verify a post before they believe in and/or act on that. For example, a respondent highlighted:

“People believe in religiopolitical propaganda without verifying or thinking critically about it. People keep commenting and sharing, which makes such posts viral. I think most Facebook users do not verify controversial posts. If they do, such posts will not go viral. I also have never tried to verify the originality of such viral posts.” [R1]

Another respondent also raised the issue of not verifying posts and said:

“Youth who do not have wider exposure, do not tend to verify religious or political posts on Facebook. They take Facebook as their news source and share posts or comment on them.” [R17]

Whereas a respondent brought in the lack of news infrastructure as an issue and mentioned:

“In my area, Baluchistan, where there are not many options of news sources, it is challenging to verify any news seen on Facebook.” [R2]

**Educating Other Online? Prepare for the Backlash.** Several respondents shared their fear of engaging in religiopolitical arguments over Facebook. One respondent was of the opinion:

“I am afraid to comment or react to a radical post on Facebook due to the religious dominance in our politics. Imagine if religious extremity goes against you at the extreme level and you being marginalized. Sometimes, the situation can escalate to an extent that leads to suicides or killings. That is how our society’s dynamics work.” [R8]

The respondents also shared that educating others to not spread radical propaganda online can raise questions about your Pakistaniness. She shared:

“On my recent political post, there were a lot of comments questioning my sincerity with Pakistan. I avoid discussions on Facebook, but such comments hurt my emotions that people force you to believe whatever they believe.” [R13]

**Risks of being Trolled or Lynched.** Yet other respondents highlighted the risks of being killed over the religiopolitical arguments on Facebook. For example, a respondent said:

“When it comes to social media like Facebook, our people do not know their limitations. Insanity is rare in individuals, but in groups like social media, it becomes a mob. There have been various mobs in Pakistan that were organized through Facebook.” [R8]

Another respondent shared his life experience of the fear of being killed over a religiopolitical argument on Facebook with a supporter of Jamat Islami. He stated:

“Once during a political debate online with a supporter of Jamat Islami, I used a slang that if Imran Khan will not solve Pakistan’s issues, angels from heaven will also not be able to solve them. That person got so mad, came to my area, and asked how you put Imran Khan higher than angels. I told him it was slang only, but he started shouting at me, which gathered the crowd. I was so scared of being a victim of mob violence and getting killed that day. I silently left the crowd came to my cousin's home and locked the door. I could not sleep that night in fear of being killed.” [R7]

**Regulating Social Media Could Oppress Already Oppressed.** When asked if regulating social media in Pakistan could be an option to prevent radical religiopolitical

narratives, the respondents from marginalized areas feared that it will only perpetuate the oppression of those already oppressed. For instance, one respondent said:

“Regulating social media may not restrict freedom of speech, as there is currently no freedom of speech in Pakistan. But it is very difficult to ensure that those in power do not abuse social media regulation.” [R1]

Another respondent added:

“Because social media like Facebook have provided a voice to marginalized communities like the Baluchis, regulating political content will perpetuate their marginalization. Social media has helped Balochis to raise their critical issues such as missing persons, private jails, etc. If we regulate the political content, it will undermine the democratic future of people in Baluchistan, (Azad) Kashmir, and Sindh, where extreme violations of human rights happen by the state.” [R3]

In terms of the state’s oppressions of certain ethnicities, the respondents found Facebook as a key tool to raise their voice against injustices and harms caused by the state. A respondent shared:

“People in our area (Bajaur, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) voice on Facebook their opposition to TTP’s (Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan) active militancy there. Our people call our region a “Dollar Region,” where fighting terrorism is a channel to get dollars from America. Our people call it (fight against terrorism) a “Dollar War,” which attracts our (military) establishment for not keeping the peace. But now Facebook has made people aware of the latent scenarios; hence people raise their voice through Facebook to demand politicians and (military) establishment for not engaging in another Dollar War.” [R7]

**Facebook Users Struggle with Critical Thinking.** Most of the respondents talked about reasons of limited critical thinking abilities among Facebook users in Pakistan and referenced shortfalls in educational system as the major reason. For example, a respondent shared:

“There are many people around me whose religiopolitical views have changed by the religiopolitical posts on Facebook. It is common in rural areas, where education is lacking, that people quote Facebook posts as the correct source but would never verify by themselves with Quran or Hadith.” [R4]

Another respondent pointed on the teaching practices and stated:

“At our high schools, there is just a *Ratta System* (memorizing the syllabus or books), and students do not have to think about anything except memorizing whatever task they got.” [R5]

A respondent pointed out national level narratives in the country’s education system that discourage critical thinking among students. He mentioned:

“They (teachers) teach that everything is going well in our country, political scenarios are all fine, you are just children, and you do not need to be worried about the country yet.

But they do not teach that you (students/youth) can think and have a political opinion.” [R13]

Some respondents emphasized the role of societal dynamics in critical thinking and expressed the belief that Pakistani society is manufactured with extremity. For example, a respondent stated:

“Not every user of Facebook thinks critically when they share and comment on politically radical posts. Since we live in a radical society, people cannot help making social media a safer place. For instance, if a religious or political leadership posts on Facebook calling for protests, their followers will blindly follow that because they have made their mind to not accept a different narrative.” [R3]

### ***Preventing Religiopolitical Radicalism on Social Media / Facebook: A Path Forward***

After gathering their perspectives on the dynamics and associated challenges, we asked the respondents to provide their recommendations to prevent or counter violent radicalism among youth interacting with religiopolitical narratives on Facebook.

**Avoidance Strategy of Individual Users.** Most of the respondents viewed that avoiding radical religiopolitical posts on Facebook could be a way to prevent the spread of extremist behaviors. For example, a respondent said:

“I tend to ignore extremist propaganda on social media like Facebook. When the amount of such content gives me anxiety, I block the obviously radical content.” [R3]

Another respondent highlighted the point of how Facebook algorithms can help in avoidance when we (users) do not like or comment on radical posts. She said:

“People should be social media literate enough to not give views to the radical posts on Facebook. They should ignore or report such posts because when such posts get views, it encourages those who post them to post more.” [R11]

Another respondent also stressed the same as:

“People think that they post this kind of stuff (radical content) to raise awareness. But in my opinion, posting such content rather multiply radical propaganda.” [R12]

**Facebook’s Role in Enhancing Users’ Safety.** Most of the study respondents thought Facebook has the responsibility to ensure user safety. They shared different suggestions, such as:

“Facebook should do better to warn its users whenever they are sharing extremist posts or seeing it. Facebook should have clearer instructions about user safety.” [R4]

Another respondent stressed the role of Facebook in educating their users for a safer experience online. He said:

“Facebook should better educate youth on reporting any harmful post or page using those three dots at each post. I think Facebook should include more options, including violence and extremism-provoking posts, when we try to report from those three dots.

There are few people who know this option or who use it to report harmful content.” [R17]

A respondent suggested that Facebook should enhance its trust and safety teams to actively monitor and remove radical content. She viewed:

“To ensure safer use of social media like Facebook, there should be human gatekeepers on the platform, not robots. There should be more people (at Facebook) looking into threatening content for restricting or removing that from wider circulations.” [R16]

**How Government Can Ensure Citizens’ Online Safety.** The respondents also reflected on their government’s critical role to ensure citizens’ safety online. A respondent said: “The government should ban unauthentic Facebook pages and counter the activity of pages spreading religiopolitical propaganda.” [R14]

Another respondent attributed citizens’ online safety to PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority). He viewed:

“PEMRA should lead in regulating social media, developing policies and procedures, imposing fine on users who do not follow safety guidelines, and deleting misinformation pages and posts.” [R17]

Some respondents highlighted the ways offline efforts by the government can help to prevent radical narratives online, including on Facebook. For example, a respondent mentioned:

“In far-flung areas having no TV or other news sources, people see news on Facebook as factual source of information. Government should spread critical thinking awareness for social media among those living in rural areas.” [R1]

**Staying Safe Online: How Education Can Help.** Several respondents thought social media safety education is the ultimate solution for online safety from radical religiopolitical narratives on Facebook. They viewed that real world knowledge is crucial to combat online religious or political propaganda. For example, a respondent said:

“My religiopolitical perceptions are not influenced by the radical content on Facebook despite I have been using it for the past ten years. I have studied various books, including the real teachings of Allah and Prophet Muhammad, which enables me to assess if someone is spreading fake content about political Islam.” [R4]

Another respondent shared similar thoughts, but for building offline knowledge about the country’s political affairs. He shared:

“Reading books and conducting comparative analyses of political posts on Facebook helped me to be critical, get closer to reality, and avoid misinformation. This practice changed my political views significantly from radical to moderate ones.” [R6]

The respondents who criticized the lack of critical thinking in the country’s education systems, recommended the pedagogy and curriculum to be more critical. A respondent said:

"Our education system does not give critical thinking to our students. Our youth need to study much more on their own to build critical thinking abilities for navigating the misinformation on Facebook." [R4]

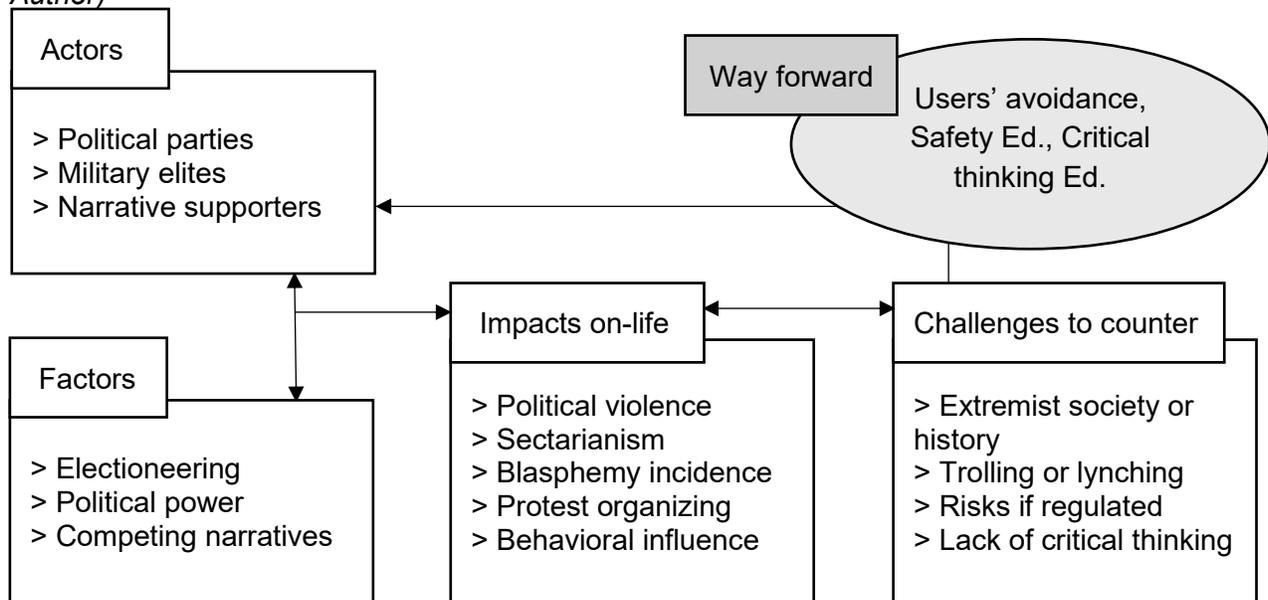
A respondent also recommended youth to build knowledge about political history and current affairs to be safe from radical propaganda online. She thought:

" People having knowledge about the history of religious or political affairs in a country and who are educated enough about the political dynamics do not buy manipulated narratives. Young people who do not regularly read books tend to lack critical thinking skills and are more susceptible to radical religious and political ideologies circulating on Facebook." [R13]

### Theoretical Discussion

Overall, this study revealed five factors associated with radical religiopolitical narratives through Facebook in Pakistan (Figure 7). These factors are discussed below in light of three theories, that is, root narrative theory (RNT) by Simmons (2020), routine activity theory (RAT) by Cohen and Felson (Miro, 2014), and social learning theory (SLT) by Albert Bandura (McLeod, 2024). Relevant social media posts and comments are also provided directly from different sources posted on Facebook to illustrate our analysis.

**Figure 77 Facebook Ecosystem of Radical Religiopolitical Narratives in Pakistan (Source: Author)**



### Major Actors who Use Facebook for Religiopolitical Radicalization

The study's findings revealed two major actors that spread religiopolitical narratives on Facebook, causing violent extremism among Pakistani youth. *First*, political parties misuse Islam for radical messaging and calls for violent protests to influence ruling political parties. This finding complements studies by Akram et al. (2024a), Mir et al. (2022), and Gautam (2022) that

PTI leads in spreading radical propaganda through social media like Facebook, followed by the TLP. These parties could not hold current strength in their narratives without social media. This study's respondents report PTI supporters on Facebook not only deny others' political views but also use hateful language against them. Among religiously-political parties like JUI and Jamat Islami, TLP was reported to have a higher degree of extremism in political content. Geographic factors in a political party's narratives online were also found. For example, respondents from Punjab viewed PTI and TLP as having more radical content on Facebook, whereas JUI was seen as the main perpetrator of online radical narratives by those from Baluchistan, and Jamat Islami was identified by those from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Comparably, similar parties have a significant on-the-ground presence in their respective areas. Therefore, there is a connection between online and offline political scenarios.

Secondly, numerous studies have found that the military elite routinely interferes in Pakistani politics (Rahman & Shurong, 2021). The RNT would frame such interference under security narratives employed to exploit their power over military status. The study respondents named various Facebook pages actively promoting religiopolitical narratives associated with those of the military elite (Figure 8).

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**Figure 88** Reviews of "Pakistan Defense" Facebook Page (Pakistan Defence, 2024)



Facebook has empowered people in Pakistan to critique the state's political narratives. In Figure 8, netizens criticized a Facebook page known as "Pakistan Defence" which has 7.6 million followers as of November 2024.

Since PTI was reported to have the strongest narratives on social media, it turned against the military elite after the ouster of Imran Khan. Amidst the ban on X/Twitter, PTI used Facebook to publicly expose the military elite's political interferences, which have created anti-military sentiment among youth (Zaidi, 2018) (Figure 9). For example, during the period of this

<sup>15</sup> Translation:

*Peer Saib*: This was my favorite page during ignorance. When we see it now, we curse.

study, various anti-military violent protests were conducted by Baluchis in Gawadar (Hussain, 2024a), Pashtuns in Bannu (Dawn, 2024), and Kashmiris in Muzaffarabad (Kelly, 2024), whose news was all over Facebook but not on military-influenced mainstream media. RNT would frame those protests as narrative competition for political and economic powers between these ethnic groups and the military elite.

Figure 9 reflects the association between PTI's politics of protests and anti-military sentiments in the country. When PTI was heavily posting on Facebook the calls for protest in November 2024, their supporters were commenting to express allegiance, which included some comments calling for abolishing the Pakistan army. After the ouster from the prime minister's office and later arrest, PTI's political manifesto was turned against the Pakistan army elite, which has been transmitted to the general public both online and offline.

**Figure 99** Anti-Military Comment on Facebook when, on Nov 21, 2024, PTI Called for Protest in Islamabad (Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf, 2024)

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The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook post and a comment. The post is from 'Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf' (PTI) and is in Urdu. The text of the post reads: 'جڑو گے تو جانو گے! خوف پیچھے چھوڑ کے جو آگ سے گزر سکو تو کیا ہے جو نہ کر سکو' (If you connect, you will know! Leaving the fear behind. Those who can pass through the fire. So, what is it that you can't do?). The post is dated '24 نومبر 2024' (November 24, 2024) and is from 'اسلام آباد' (Islamabad). Below the post, there is a comment by 'Muneera Azem' in English. The comment reads: 'Like Bangladesh, the army should be abolished and a new institution should be created in the name of Border Security Force. Whose task is only to protect the borders. All the businesses and assets of the army should be taken into government custody. All ranks above the brigadier rank should be abolish in government institutions. Deployment of retired and present service soldiers should be banned. Joining of retired soldiers in politics and political parties should be banned. And employment and residence of military officers should be banned.' The comment is dated '1h' (1 hour) and has a 'Like' button.

### Why Do Narratives Compete on Facebook?

Competition and struggle for political power were reported to be key drivers of narrative competition online. Religious and political parties misuse Facebook for electioneering (Zaheer,

<sup>16</sup> Translation:

If you connect, you will know! Leaving the fear behind. Those who can pass through the fire. So, what is it that you can't do? November 24, 2024. Islamabad. Captain (Imran Khan), we are ready. November 24, Khan's call.

2018), resulting in political uncertainty among young people (Rajendran et al., 2022). This study's respondents recalled election-related Facebook posts by TLP, PTI, PMLN, JUI, and Jamat Islami misusing Islam in their political arguments. For instance, they referenced supporters of JUI and Jamat Islami asserting that PTI voters would go to hell as voting for PTI is forbidden in Islam. This study argues that political misuse of Islam has been made easier with Facebook, misinforming youth about political Islam in addition to promoting radical and extremist behaviors.

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**Figure 1010** Competing Narrative Comments on Facebook when TLP was Banned by PTI (Express Tribune, 2021, 2024)

The image shows a screenshot of Facebook comments. On the left, there are three comments in Urdu. The first is from Faisal Kabli, who calls for a ban and prosecution of riot perpetrators. The second is from Zohaib Tariq, who asks if PTI/PAT should also be banned for storming PTV HQ and damaging public property. The third is from Atique UI Hasan, who asks if Zohaib Tariq is perhaps PMIN as well for storming the supreme court. Zohaib Tariq replies to Atique UI Hasan, stating that all parties should be banned if so is the case. On the right, there are two comments in Urdu. The first is from Najeeb Afridi, who addresses Maulana and asks for forgiveness, stating that Pakistan would not have been damaged as much if he had been a child of humanity. The second is from Israr Atal, who accuses PTI of being an international level munafiq group and asks for a record check on Maulana's 2018 stance against the constitutional amendment.

<sup>17</sup> Translation:

**Najeeb Afridi:** Dear Maulana, may God show right path to you and all of us. We have cursed you a lot. We ask forgiveness from you and God. But if you have been a child of human at that time, Pakistan would not have been damaged this much. Anyhow, there is still time to stand with truth. Do not greed to be become president of the country as already valued more than that.

**Israr Ital:** People of PTI are international level hypocrites. Maulana was against this constitutional amendment in 2018 as well. If it was in favor of brawl Imran (Khan), then it was good. But when army and establishment do not take side of D chowk protestors (PTI), then everything is wrong for them. Vow, amazing international joker Imran (Khan's) hypocrite group. Check the records of 2018, Maulana was against (this constitutional amendment) at that time as well.

As reflected in Figure 10, Facebook users criticized the interest-driven actions of different political parties. The PTI supporters advocate to ban TLP for organizing protests in 2021, but Facebook users remind PTI itself held massive political rallies when it is not in government. The comments on the right side of Figure 10 show a radical exchange of communication between supporters of PTI and Maulana Fazl-ul-Rehman's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI). Such cross-commenting on Facebook happened when, in 2024, Fazl-ul-Rehman first refused to support the 26<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendment allowing parliament to select the Chief Justice from the three most senior judges in the country and supported it later (Reuters, 2024). This is a reflection of how political narratives compete on social media like Facebook, where supporters of different political parties tend to defend their allegiance.

Applying RNT, PTI's liberty (from feudal/military politics) narrative and TLP's dignity (blasphemy laws/Islamic) narrative are dominant in Pakistan. Political parties use Facebook as a competitive platform to entice young people into their political agendas, whether through calling for violent change. RNT characterizes these situations as radical disagreements, where political narratives compete for public attention without engaging in dialogue (Figure 10). This is when the intention factor comes into play. This study reveals that political parties in Pakistan not only deliberately disseminate radical religiopolitical narratives on Facebook but also encourage their supporters to multiply them. Hence, the Facebook ecosystem in Pakistan has become a competing space for political manipulations leading to violent extremism (Akram et al., 2023).

### ***How Does Religiopolitical Radicalization Online Affect Real Life?***

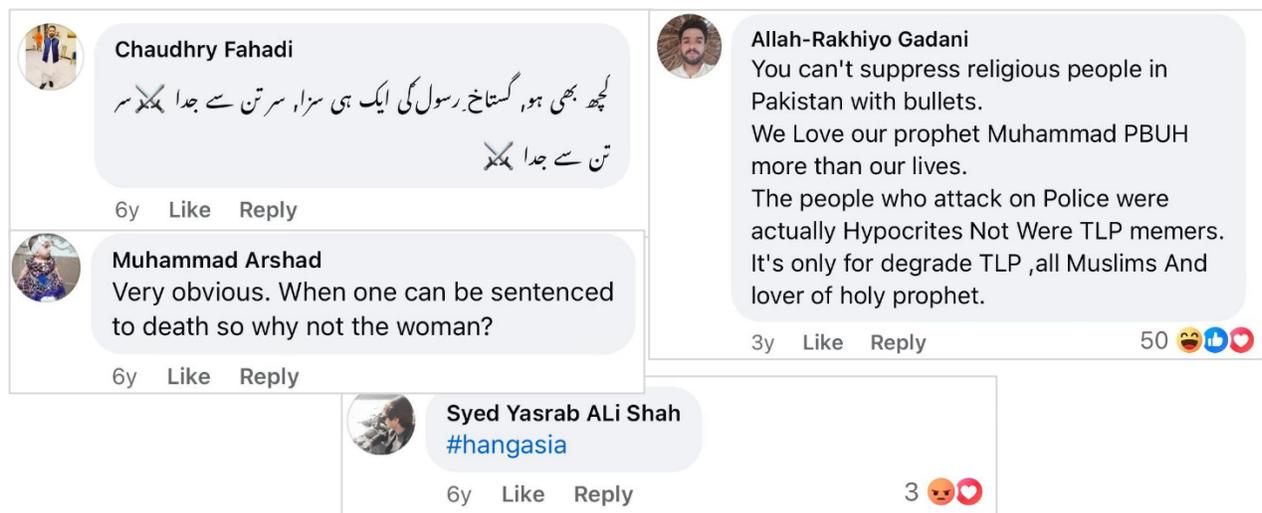
This study reports various ways radicalization through Facebook impacts Pakistan's sociopolitical scenarios. Religiopolitical misuse of Facebook has deepened the ideological polarization and marginalization of religious minorities, such as Shia Muslims (Ozer et al., 2023; Akram et al., 2021). For example, in the 2018 and 2024 elections, PMLN allied with Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), which is accused of killing Shias in various instances (Siddiqui, 2022). This study's respondents recalled that the alliance's handshakes and group photos were widely shared on Facebook. Routine activity theory (RAT) argues that victimization happens when a suitable target (Shia Muslims) and motivated offenders (ASWJ) come together at any place and time (electioneering/Facebook) in the absence of capable guardianships (Pakistani government) (Obermaier & Schmuck, 2022). As argued by a few Shia respondents, free speech on Facebook has not only increased anti-Shia extremism but further marginalized them politically. Blasphemy accusations have also increased with unchecked free speech on Facebook.

This study's respondents recalled Facebook posts of TLP accusing government politicians of blasphemy, e.g., for not expelling the French ambassador over Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) caricatures in France (Rashid, 2023). For similar issues, TLP organized violent protests through Facebook and WhatsApp despite no coverage by mainstream media (Akram et al., 2024a) (Figure 11). Other examples, referenced by study respondents, of protest organizing through Facebook include PTI after the ouster of Imran Khan, PTM during the late 2010s, and protests led by Mah Rang Baluch in 2024. Where these parties call political messaging on social media awareness, the military-influenced state of Pakistan called it digital terrorism (Hussain & Ahmed, 2024). The social influence model of violent extremism views that radical messaging on social media influences ideologies and behaviors resulting in violence

(Almazroi & Mohammed, 2024). Hence, this study argues that anti-state or anti-military elite's narratives on social media fuel political frustration and provide justification for violent reactions by youth.

Different comments on Facebook, as in Figure 11, reflect the extremity among certain groups of social media users in Pakistan. The Urdu text in Figure 11 states, "In any scenario, there is only one punishment for those who disrespect the Prophet (Muhammad): *cut their head, cut their head.*" They were referring to Asia Bibi, a Christian woman accused of blasphemy who spent eight years on death row before her acquittal in 2018 and departing to Canada in 2019. It is to note that TLP's politics surround blasphemy laws in the country.

**Figure 1111** TLP Supporters Justifying Violent Protests in 2018 (when Asia Bibi, accused of blasphemy, was released) and 2021. (Dawn.com, 2018, 2021)



This study demonstrates that religiopolitical debates on Facebook can escalate physical violence. According to SLT, interaction with deviant others can define attitudes and behaviors as deviant (Miller & Morris, 2016). Those who post religiously or politically controversial posts remain at risk of physical violence. This study complements the RAT that radical religiopolitical content online does affect real-life interactions and emotions. Akram et al. (2022) also found that political disinformation on social media like Facebook not only influences perceptions but also feelings and emotions. It has made young people less sensitive to seeing violence online but more radical to engaging in religiopolitical arguments.

### **What Challenges Prevent Countering Radical Propaganda Online?**

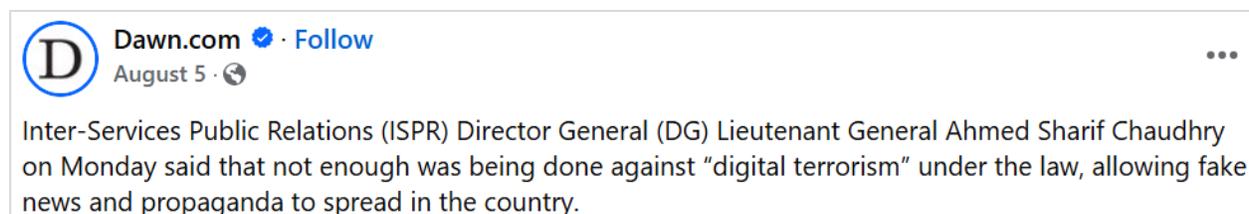
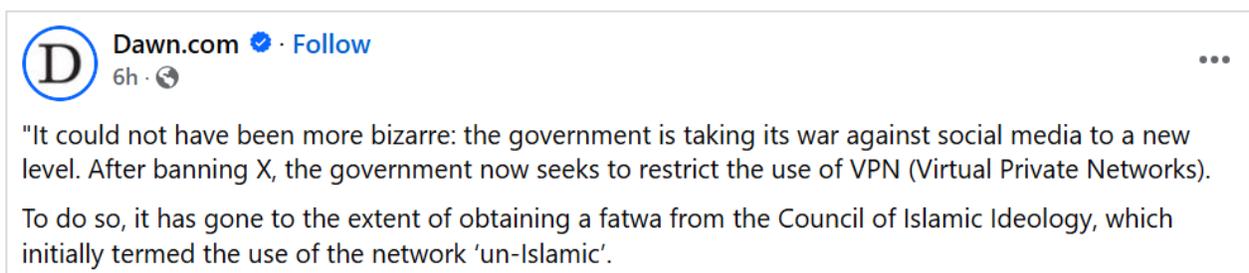
This study found four major challenges to preventing or countering violent radicalism through the Facebook ecosystem in Pakistan. *First*, since Pakistani society has deep-rooted tendencies of violent extremism, Facebook and its associated services like WhatsApp are not the sole reason for religiopolitical radicalism among youth. State-led extremist narratives, such as anti-USSR and anti-India Jihad glorification, radicalized youth well before the age of social media (Mohanty & Mahanty, 2010). Furthermore, politicians have a history of supporting religious extremism for their political interests, and now they do so through social media. After

social media, both online and offline drivers of violent extremism have become intertwined; RNT terms this a 'narrative collage,' where narratives compete in radical propaganda.

*Secondly*, regulating social media is not considered a viable approach to prevent and counter radical religiopolitical propaganda (Iftikhar et al., 2024). Like Pandya (2020), this study's respondents recalled the incidence of severe state-led human rights violations to oppress certain communities, particularly Baluchis, Pashtuns, Kashmiris, and some Sindhis. They were afraid of regulated social media, as Facebook has given them a voice to report human rights violations by the political and military elite. They added that regulating social media will push them back into the darkness of undocumented and unreported oppressions. Despite such fears, Pakistan introduced an internet firewall to crackdown on anti-state (i.e., anti-military) content online (Mehmood, 2024), framing that as 'digital terrorism' and launching terrorism cases against those accused (Hussain & Ahmed, 2024) (Figure 12). The state also allowed the military's intelligence wing, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to access any Pakistani's communication or content online, including phone calls and text records (Qarar, 2024) (see Appendix 7). These state actions confirmed the fear of this study's respondents that online platforms have become the state's surveillance tool to silence and torture opponent voices. RNT would frame this misuse of military power under the shadow of security narratives.

These two different Facebook posts, as in Figure 12, Pakistan military's information wing (ISPR) called fake news and propaganda against the military leadership as digital terrorism, and those deemed engaged in it will be arrested with terrorism charges. This was the time when PTI's Imran Khan was in jail at the perceived will of the military elite which publicly sparked anti-military sentiments in Pakistan. Though the military elite narrated that such sentiments are only on social media, almost everyone I spoke to during the data collection period of this study expressed similar sentiments. It confirms this study's argument that religiopolitical content on social media does not stay online but transmits to impact real life on the ground.

**Figure 12** Facebook Posts on Digital Terrorism and Fatwa (decree) against VPN (Dawn.com, 2024; Hussain, 2024)



*Thirdly*, most Facebook users are not aware of fact-checking or reporting radical content. Fact-checking misinformation online relies on pre-existing political knowledge and ideologies (Walter et al., 2019). This study's respondents said it's normal not to fact-check and take Facebook as a reliable information source due to distrust in mainstream media controlled by the political and military elite (Gossman, 2021). Hence, social media consumption has increased, making it a favorable space for building religiopolitical propaganda. According to RAT, higher social media usage risks encounters within online extremism (Hawdon et al., 2019). Thus, regular users of Facebook can build sympathy with politically or religiously extremist narratives (Rousseau et al., 2019; Harriman et al., 2020).

*Fourthly*, many young social media users lack critical thinking, restricting them from identifying radical propaganda latent in religious or political posts on Facebook (Sajid et al., 2024). The study's respondents attributed the limited critical thinking abilities to poor education systems that discourage critical debates in classrooms. As to Qazi (2020), this study's respondents also found larger state narratives in schools' syllabi that do not allow students to question certain topics in political history.

### ***Educating Critical Thinking to Facebook Users***

This study's respondents viewed critical thinking education as a key strategy to prevent and counter radical religiopolitical narratives on Facebook. To do so, they highlighted various approaches, such as avoidance strategies at the user-level. Facebook users should avoid interacting with radical content latent under religious and political messaging. Since interaction with religiopolitical content risks building radical views (Akram & Nasar, 2023), avoiding such content will inform algorithms of no interest from social media users. Hence, users may not see radical content on their Facebook feed. This avoidance behavior requires critical thinking education of Facebook users on identifying radical posts and why/how to avoid and report them (Abaido, 2019).

This study recommends a CSML education focused on radical and extremist narratives (Festl, 2020; Stefania et al., 2021). High and (under)graduate school curricula could incorporate CSML, along with social science and communications courses. Furthermore, teaching pedagogies should allow arguments and debates rather than discourage students from questions on religiopolitical issues.

At the platform level, this study urges Facebook to play an improved role to prevent radical religiopolitical propaganda. Facebook should expand trust and safety teams specializing in radical religiopolitical narratives. It should also train its algorithms in regional languages, such as Pakistan (Corazza et al., 2020). Since majority of Facebook users in Pakistan are not aware of identifying and reporting hateful or radical posts, as reported by this study's respondents, Facebook should launch educational programs on its community guidelines (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2020).

The government of Pakistan also has a critical role in citizens' safety online. Along with civil society, the government should launch social media safety education programs, particularly in schools (Mirahmadi et al., 2016). An institution, independent from political influence or bias, should monitor and counter radical propaganda online. Currently, the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) is doing so, but NACTA is influenced by military retirees serving

the state's security narratives. Furthermore, Pakistan should transform its strategy to counter extremist content online from punitive to educative.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, religiopolitical misuse of social media like Facebook has complicated the already complex issues of violent extremism in Pakistan. Such misuse of Facebook has facilitated radical narratives of military elite and feudal politicians, which are now challenged by the 'dignity' and 'liberty' narratives of PTI, especially after the ouster of Imran Khan. It has created a narrative competition in the online spheres of Pakistan where the military-influenced state is using all its powers to curb their unfavorable narratives, such as those of PTI. As a result, young people become polarized over which narrative to believe, leading to a loss of faith in the country's political system.

Amidst competition of radical religiopolitical narratives on the Facebook ecosystem in Pakistan, CSML could help young people have safer online experiences. This study urges educationists and civil society to promote critical thinking and skills to analyze nuances in religiopolitical posts on Facebook. They can engage the government for politically unbiased monitoring and countering of radical content, launch critical thinking education programs, and engage Facebook to educate users for safer experiences on the platform.

## CHAPTER 5: Synthesis of Research Findings

This chapter synthesizes the findings from three sub-studies (presented in chapters 2, 3, and 4) comprising this dissertation to consolidate conclusions and make recommendations. Together, the three sub-studies contribute to the overarching objective of this dissertation. The overarching objective of this dissertation study was to understand the role of religiopolitical content on social media like Facebook concerning radicalization to violent extremism among Pakistani youth. It also aimed to explore how critical social media literacy (CSML) can be a skill for youth to safely operate and socialize on social media. To pursue this goal, sub-study 1 explored the role of social media like Facebook in shaping violent extremism discourses in Pakistan and provided the scholarly grounding to sub-study 3 - an ethnographic qualitative study of Pakistani youth perceptions. Sub-study 1 identified various social media factors behind violent radicalism among Pakistani youth. This led to sub-study 2 which aimed to explore if/how CSML could be a counter to prevent violent radicalism online. For sub-study 3, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 (under)graduate students at four public universities in Pakistan to elicit their perspectives about religiopolitical content on Facebook concerning violent radicalism and extremism.

This chapter summarizes the key findings of each sub-study in a concise way by highlighting their unique contributions to the broader research objective. It also ties the theoretical framework by talking about how the results from three manuscripts support, add to, or question the theories that make up this dissertation's conceptual framework. Subsequently, it provides implications of this study and draws overall conclusions.

### **Triangulating Key Findings**

The findings of three sub-studies in this dissertation complement each other in a sequential flow.

#### ***Sub-Study 1***

The sub-study 1 revealed three types of social media narratives that result in inculcating radical and extremist mindsets and values among the Pakistani youth: narratives propagated by the state of Pakistan and its military elite, narratives of groups with extremism agenda such as Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and finally, narratives of youth who themselves are experiencing an identity crisis. The state-led Islamic fundamentalism movements, especially in the 1980s, promoted religious radicalism and conservatism through state actions like the glorification of Jihad against non-Muslims, criminalization of blasphemy laws, legal declaration of the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslims (see Figure 13)<sup>18</sup>, and establishment of Federal Sharia Court. Combined with the Soviet-Afghan war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's support of the Afghan fighters (Mujahideen), such steps not only brought radical religious influence and control over the state institutions and in the lives of young people, but they also changed the political dynamics in the country. The state actors increasingly misused Islam to manage perceptions of young people for building and strengthening their influence on political narratives

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<sup>18</sup> During this study, I observed anti-Ahmadiyya campaigns even in rural Pakistan. Figure 13 is the photo I took in my neighborhood in Pakistan, which states, "Ahmadiyya are infidel." Someone unknown did this wall chalking throughout my neighborhood overnight during January 2025.

in the country. The advent of social media eased the management of youth's political perceptions, especially by Imran Khan from the 2013 general elections onwards.

**Figure 1313** "Ahmadiyya are infidel", Wallchalking in a Village Where I was Staying during Data Collection of this Study.



The political fragility and economic instability in Pakistan, combined with the anti-Islam narratives in the Western media, pushed young people to distrust mainstream media and turn to engage in political conversations on social media. It added political anxiety and curiosity among young people, which urged them to rethink their identity of Pakistaniness while belonging to their individual ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities. Social media provides youth with platforms to pursue individual identities while looking into the state's articulation of Pakistaniness. Uncertainties and conflicts related to individual and collective identities made the Pakistani youth susceptible to the radical and extremist ideologies floating online, such as those extremist and terrorist groups. Consequently, youth eager to connect with their sense of Pakistani identity often share their emotional and identity-related insecurities online. This exposure makes them vulnerable to politically motivated radical and extremist propaganda, as well as targeted efforts by designated terrorist groups like the TTP.

The literature reviewed for sub-study 1 demonstrates that there is a dearth of in-depth research on religiopolitical misuse of social media as a key factor in violent radicalism among Pakistani youth. Most of the studies reviewed for sub-study 1 either mentioned social media briefly while mainly focusing on radicalization or extremism or briefly touched on radicalism while focusing on social media dynamics in the country. This represents a major gap in the existing literature on social media and radicalization. At the time of sub-study 1, there was no published article found in the WoS or Scopus databases that thoroughly and specifically focused on the religiopolitical content on social media in relation to violent radicalism in the country. Such gaps in literature motivated the design of sub-study 3 which is a key output of this dissertation.

In addition to thoroughly studying the role of religiopolitical narratives on social media concerning violent radicalism among Pakistani youth, sub-study 1 also focused on exploring the ways youth can prevent or counter such narratives online. The literature analyzed for sub-study 1 provided an overview of the role of social media platforms and governments can/should play in ensuring citizens' safer and more critical social media experiences. Sub-study 1 focused on what young people, who become victims of radical narratives, can do to prevent or counter radical religiopolitical narratives. As a natural progression, the second sub-study undertook a systematic review of the literature of published research on CSML as a potential means to prevent and/or counter radical and extremist narratives on social media.

### ***Sub-Study 2***

This sub-study delved deeper and argues for CSML education for the young consumers of social media who are increasingly exposed to religiopolitical narratives. It demonstrates why young social media users must have CSML skills so that they can critically assess the linguistic nuances in the religiopolitical narratives that result in violent radicalism. This sub-study also urges parents to play a key role in educating their children to be critical and careful during their engagement with social media like Facebook. To perform such a role, parents themselves should have CSML skills as well. Recognizing the centrality and importance of formal education, sub-study 2 argues for the critical role of education systems in inculcating CSML skills among young people. The recommendation is to integrate critical thinking into the teaching pedagogies of school and college curricula, particularly in the field of social sciences. The results of sub-study 2 also support the idea that the sense of responsible citizenship in online spheres could make young people more aware of politically manipulative content on social media and more tolerant of people who have different political views.

Complementing sub-study 1, sub-study 2 assigns critical roles to social media service providers, such as Facebook, and the governments to inculcate CSML among youth. It calls for social media algorithms to be contextually informed and trained, with the help of CSML-skilled educators and users, in identifying radical and extremist content in multiple languages rather than just in English. This sub-study also urges governments to launch CSML education initiatives for young people and hold social media companies accountable for radical and extremist narratives on their platforms. Hence, sub-study 2 argues that gaining CSML skills is not just a responsibility of individual users or young people; governments have a key role in providing a favorable CSML education ecosystem, and platforms like Facebook need to plug in more features to educate users for critical thinking.

Furthermore, among the articles reviewed for sub-study 2, only a few discussed or referenced Pakistan, which is the focus of this dissertation. That means CSML has been least discussed in Pakistan amidst an abundance of radical religiopolitical content online, which often results in radicalizing behaviors of young people. Reflecting on the findings of sub-study 1, social media factors in radicalizing young Pakistanis have also been understudied, which called for in-depth research specific to religiopolitical disinformation through social media concerning violent radicalism in the country. Hence, sub-study 3 was undertaken to understand young Pakistanis' perspectives about religio-political content on Facebook and how/if that radicalizes the behaviors of youth.

### **Sub-Study 3**

This sub-study sought to provide empirical and qualitative data to fill in the gaps identified in sub-study 1 and sub-study 2. Through respondents' narratives elicited in the in-depth interviews, sub-study 3 argues that political parties have become key contributors to religiopolitical radicalism in Pakistan, especially since the 2013 general elections. Since then, social media like Facebook has penetrated deeply into the country's political discourse and has been massively misused for building or promoting radical religiopolitical narratives such as TLP's blasphemy laws saviorism. Hence, social media like Facebook facilitated political parties to be a key factor in religiopolitical radicalism, whether through complementing the state narratives or competing with them depending on the respective political interests.

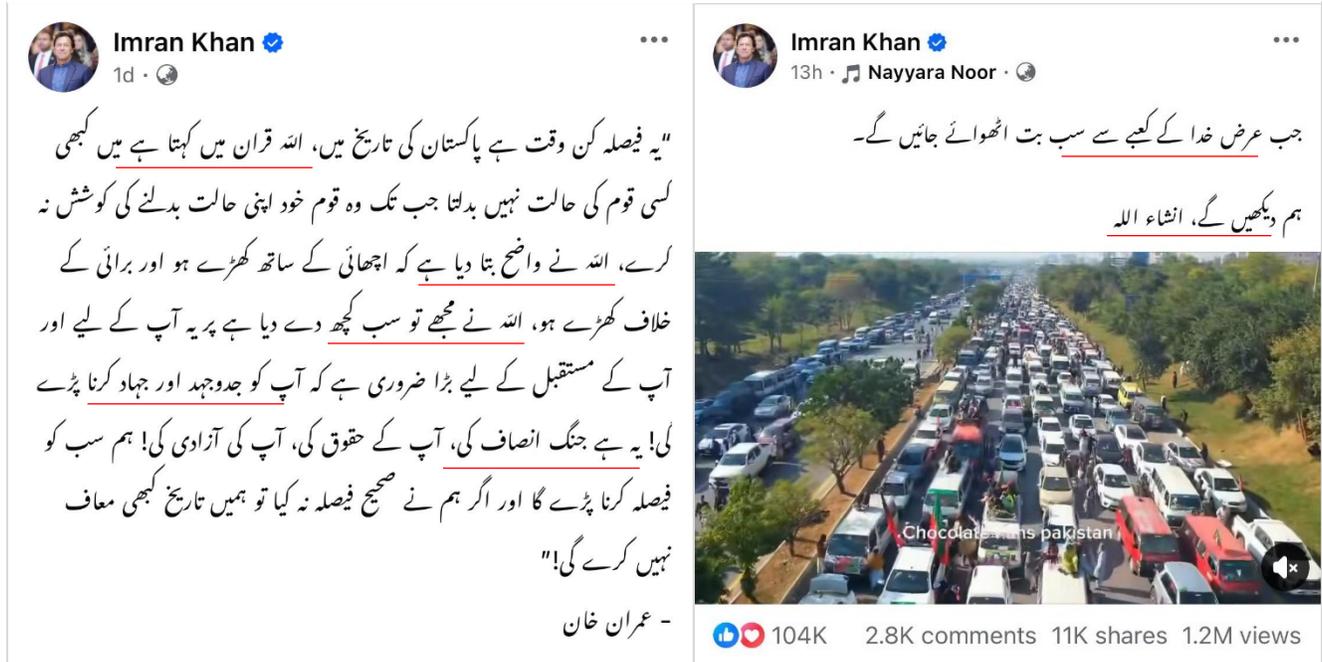
By eliciting and exploring the lived experiences of Pakistani youth in relation to online radicalization, the sub-study contributes to the scholarly literature by identifying real-life impacts of radical religiopolitical narratives on social media, particularly Facebook, in Pakistan. The literature analyzed for sub-study 1 provides an understanding of the role of social media in the increased occurrence of sectarianism and blasphemy incidence. Sub-study 3, on the other hand, brings forth specific incidents where sectarian (anti-Shia) prejudice and misuse of blasphemy laws on Facebook impacted real-life political scenarios. The PTI's decision to collaborate with the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) after initial plans to collaborate with Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM) is such an example. Since MWM belongs to and is led by Shia Muslims who are persecuted by the extremist factions of Sunni Muslims, such extremity was evident on Facebook when PTI's Imran Khan announced a collaboration with MWM after the 2024 elections. PTI's decision was criticized and trolled online, which influenced them to withdraw from MWM and collaborate with SIC instead, which belongs to Sunni Muslims. This example reflects the role of social media like Facebook in shaping and reshaping the political discourses in Pakistan. Sub-study 3 further contributes to unveiling the role of Facebook in organizing mass protests, such as by the PTI and TLP, which often resulted in political violence and hijacking of the country's politics and public life operations. Sub-study 3 uncovers various incidents when religiopolitical narratives on Facebook resulted in physical violence at the community as well as the country level (see Figure 14). Recognizing the lacunae in literature as evidenced by sub-study 1, sub-study 3 is a pioneering effort in revealing rich, thick accounts of users' experiences of religiopolitical disinformation on Facebook resulting in political anxiety leading to violent radicalism among youth.

Figure 14 is an example of how PTI's Imran Khan misuses Islam for his political organizing and narrative building. Figure 14 shows Khan's posts on Facebook during the organization of protests in November 2024. In his post (having a photo of a car rallying), he said, "When idols will be taken away from the house of God (Kaba). We will see, InshaAllah." Khan's this post uses a revolutionary verse from Faiz Ahmad Faiz's<sup>19</sup> poem entitled "Wa yabqa Wajhu Rabbika" (A verse from Sura Al Rahman in the Holy Quran, 55:26-27). Khan was probably referring to opponent political leaders and military elite as idols and Pakistan's parliament as the house of God.

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<sup>19</sup> Faiz Ahmad Faiz was a poet and journalists whose poetry was about social justice, inequality, and revolution. He was also a target of political repression due to his poetry.

**Figure 1414 Imran Khan's Facebook Posts while Organizing Mass Protest in Islamabad on 26 November 2024 which Resulted in Violence and Deaths of Civilians (Shahzad et al., 2024)**



In the other post (without photo), Khan states that “this is decisive time in the history of Pakistan. Allah says in Quran, ‘I never change the situation of a nation unless that nation tries to do so’. Allah has made it clear that we should align ourselves with goodness and resist evil. Allah has given me everything, but this is very important for you and your future: to struggle and do Jihad. This is a war for justice, your rights, and your freedom! We all need to decide, and if we do not, then history will never forgive us! Imran Khan.” In this Facebook post, Khan references Surah Ar-Ra'd (13:11) from the Quran urging people to *change their situation* by standing against military elites and political parties ruling the country, such as PMLN. He meant himself and his PTI to stand with *good* and the other political parties and their leaders as *evil*. Then he calls for Jihad against the sitting government and frames that as a war for justice and fundamental rights. This post reflects that Khan believes in self-exceptionality and justifies that by quoting verses from the Quran and Islamic history.

An interesting finding of sub-study 3 is that the advent of social media has also generated competition among the politico-military and religiopolitical elite in Pakistan for narrative supremacy, which seek young people’s support for a competing religiopolitical agenda. Amidst such a competition, young people struggle to differentiate right from the wrong, the truth from falsehood in online political narratives, which makes them vulnerable to the competing narratives calling for radical changes while justifying violence. For example, during the triangulation of this study, PTI’s 26 November 2024 protest in Islamabad turned violent with the state’s aggressive response by justifying law and order while PTI leadership was justifying their protest in the red zone. As a result, tens of civilians and some law enforcement officials died, and others carried injuries (Hussain, 2024c). This sub-study argues that young people in Pakistan find it hard to realize the latent motives in political content, such as electioneering and

the chase for political power. Often enough they develop radical views for political change and engage in protests and violence. Continuous engagement with such content and sustained inability to assess the political nuances drives youth to justify violence upon their leader or party's call. Such trends in youth's behaviors highlight the need for critical thinking education and political awareness during their interaction with social media like Facebook, as argued by sub-study 2.

Most of the respondents of sub-study 3 shared that they rarely think through the political content before believing in or making their perception about that. For example, a respondent shared his experience of how a political argument on Facebook, related to Imran Khan, put his life at risk from hardline religious individuals, who were likely affiliated with Jamat Islami. Sentiments against Shia Muslims on Facebook were another such example shared by the respondents of sub-study 3. Hence, complementing the findings of sub-study 2, sub-study 3 argues for CSML among young social media users in Pakistan who often react to a religiopolitical post without engaging in critical thinking and assessing the political scenarios.

The respondents of sub-study 3 also shared risks of being trolled or lynched as a result of posting views on certain topics such as anti-PTI or anti-TLP stance (see Figure 15). Thus, sub-study 3 is also unique in identifying challenges to countering religiopolitical radicalism on Facebook and found various risks associated with remedial or mitigation efforts. The previously published literature, as analyzed for sub-study 1, rarely touched upon such risks. The sub-study 3 attributes such aggressive online behaviors to a lack of critical thinking and ability to analyze political nuances in the social media content. It argues that individual social media users bear the responsibility to think critically before reacting to manipulative political content online. Hence, it calls for CSML among young people as a crucial skill to prevent or counter radical religiopolitical narratives floating around social media platforms like Facebook. The respondents of sub-study 3 also named the government and platforms like Facebook to educate youth on safer use of social media, but such initiatives would also require engaging individual users.

Furthermore, sub-study 3 argues that radical narratives on Facebook or other social media are not the only reason for violent extremism in Pakistan. Radicalism has been embedded in society through pre-Facebook state-led radical narratives such as anti-USSR or anti-India Jihadism. Such factors have complicated the countering of radical narratives on Facebook, and it risks trolling at the minimum or lynching at the extreme if someone tries to do so. The respondents shared various examples and observations from their experiences when arguments on Facebook resulted in emotional damage and/or physical violence. Such radicalization can be attributed to the lack of critical thinking and the inability to analyze political nuances in the Facebook content. Almost all the respondents of sub-study 3 believed the majority of Facebook users in Pakistan do not engage in critical thinking before they react to a post.

Figure 15 reflects how political trolling on Facebook uses unethical and indecent language against those having a different political opinion or affiliation. In this post, the indecent language was started by the affiliates of PTI, who are largely perceived to have a radical approach to social media messaging, such as on Facebook.

**Figure 1515** Netizens Trolling Each Other When Imran Khan Called for Protests in October 2024 (Khan, 2024)



**Translation:**

Arif Khan: The only revolution of Youth-ias (slang used for PTI supporters) starts from escaping to escaping.

Farman Ullah PTI: Everything is useless, we do not need, you take them to your home.

M Shoaib Bhatti: Sons of dancer women (slang used for PTI)

Ferman Ullah PTI: You also take to your home.

M Shoaib Bhatti: Your elder sisters are good in protests only.

**Revisiting Theoretical Framework**

The findings of this study complement its theoretical framework in different ways. Since platforms like Facebook work on the notion of free speech, they become sources of radical disagreements when users with conflicting opinions argue online for political right and wrong. According to RNT, those users do not engage in productive communication or dialogue because of their ideological affiliation to certain political narratives. In the case of Pakistan, this study revealed three major sources of radical narratives on social media, that is, extremist groups, political parties, and the state or military elite. Where the state carries its security narrative to attain and sustain political influence, the political parties pursue their narratives of liberty from military influence (PTI, PTM), un-Islamic democracy (TLP), PTI’s unethical propaganda (PMLN), and so on. Young social media users with limited critical thinking abilities fall for such narratives,

embrace them at face value, and engage in radical arguments that often impact their offline relations, emotions, and interactions. Sub-study 3 provides various examples of when politically radical disagreements on Facebook resulted in extremist behaviors and violence offline.

The political narratives compete on social media like Facebook to seek youth's attention, such as for electioneering and remaining uncritical about the abuse of military or political powers as outlined by RNT. In such competition, the young people who are allegiant to certain political ideologies engage in radical arguments online. Since youth spend comparatively more time on social media like Facebook, RAT views them as at risk of interacting with politically radical content and reacting to it. This study confirms the conceptual articulations of RAT by identifying Pakistani youth as a suitable target of radical religiopolitical narratives by the state and political parties that RAT would frame as motivated offenders. Social media like Facebook has been utilized by the state and political parties as a tool to shape and manipulate political narratives that influence public opinion. Hence, Pakistani youth's encounter with radical religiopolitical narratives online is not accidental rather intentional (by the state and political parties). According to SLT, young social media users in Pakistan learn extremist behaviors from the intentionally spread radical religiopolitical propaganda online since they spend a significant amounts of their time in these online environments and find it hard to decode the hidden potentially radicalizing narratives.

This study adds theoretical value by arguing that radical narratives flourish when they serve political interests of the political, military, or religious elite. It must, however, be noted that social media also provide a space where competing political and religious narratives challenge the state's monopoly over the narrative. This has created a war of narratives in Pakistan. Young people remain prime targets in such competition, causing political anxiety and future uncertainty among them, often resulting in support for radical and/or violent political change. Due to rote memorization culture in the education systems, young people's vulnerability gets multifaceted amidst a lack of critical thinking and ability to analyze nuances in the religiopolitical disinformation. Hence, uncritical education systems result in youth's inability to identify and counter radical religiopolitical narratives on social media that drags them into violent extremism.

### **Mapping the Study Implications**

This study provides critical implications for academia and policymakers. It is the first in-depth study about religiopolitical content on social media, particularly Facebook, that can and/or does result in violent radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth. Whereas the previous studies on radicalization in Pakistan were impervious to social media's role or solely located radicalization as a result of extremist and terrorist groups and sometimes the state of Pakistan. The present study has opened the scholarly debate on the use of social media by the mainstream political parties that compete for youth's attention and openly call for radical changes through extremist and violent means. The study has specifically concentrated on how political narratives on social media exploit religion for the advancement of specific political ideologies.

This study also sheds light on the potential application of CSML in countering and preventing violent radicalism among young social media users. Sub-study 2 identified the gap in the literature, i.e., the link between CSML and the prevention and countering of radicalizing narratives. This study draws on the scholarly base on CSML and contextualizes the factors of

radical religiopolitical narratives on social media and how CSML could be a crucial skill for young people. Sub-study 2 could be a source for future studies digging deeper into the ways CSML can be an effective skill for young social media users. It can also serve as a foundation for policymakers and educationists who are designing programs to foster critical thinking among young social media consumers. Since governments have a critical role to prevent and counter radical content (Hoffman, 2021), they could launch initiatives for inculcating critical thinking among young people. Such initiatives best serve the purpose when launched in an education system where schools and colleges can provide their students with CSML skills tailored for safer online experiences (Manca et al., 2021). Interactive and critical pedagogies can help students identify and counter extremist propaganda (Atif et al., 2019).

For social media platforms like Facebook, this study identifies the blind spots and calls for contextual and multilingual algorithms that can analyze the nuances of political content and filter out the content calling for radical behavior and extremist actions. Linguistically and contextually informed algorithms will help the platforms to efficiently flag, nudge, and educate their users on identifying and reporting harmful, radical, and extremist content online. This study also invites educationists to integrate CSML in the curriculum of social sciences, at least, and encourage teachers to embed critical thinking in their teaching pedagogies.

### **Conclusion of this Dissertation Study**

This study concludes that social media, particularly Facebook, has become a space for narrative competition of religiopolitical ideologies in Pakistan. The political and religiously-political parties have significantly used social media to build and strengthen their narratives, such as PTI's narrative of liberty from feudal and military-elite rule and TLP's narrative of Islamic dignity in the country's political system. On the other hand, military elite influenced state also use social media to strengthen their security narratives and frame the dissent on social media as foreign agents or even terrorists. Amidst such narrative competition on social media, young people in Pakistan live in political anxieties and uncertainties, radicalizing their (political) behavior often resulting in extremist actions or violence. Since the country's education system does not inculcate critical thinking among students, young people remain unable to analyze nuances and latent motives in social media calls for radical change in the country's politics.

This study argues that religiopolitical narrative competition on social media has made political extremism equally concerning as religious extremism in Pakistan. Since the 2013 general elections, when social media influx into the country's politics through Imran Khan's PTI, various events of mass political violence have been organized through social media. This study rejects the notion, as repeatedly claimed by PMLN and military spokespersons, that political messaging on social media stays on social media and does not reflect in real life. The respondents confirmed that political narratives, such as of PTI's anti-military stance for political interference, is also evident among local people who do not use social media. Hence, this study confirms that radical messaging through social media influences young people's political perceptions and radicalizes their behaviors. The lack of critical social media literacy (CSML) restricts young people from assessing the political intent in radical messaging on social media believing in the manipulative content and responding to calls for change, such as through violent protests.

Amidst religiopolitical disinformation, in which the state itself is also involved, this study found individual traits such as CSML being crucial to prevent or counter radical and extremist messaging on social media. This study advocates for CSML as a fundamental skill for young people, as governments in fragile politics, like Pakistan, intentionally spread radical propaganda by themselves and use internet-related laws to oppress dissent. On the other hand, social media companies like Facebook apply their community safety guidelines ineffectively and selectively. Young people must acquire the necessary CSML and critical thinking skills to safely navigate their social media engagement.

The educationists must take the lead to encourage critical thinking and incorporate in studies at schools and colleges the CSML skills specific to identifying, preventing, and countering radical religiopolitical messaging on social media. The curriculum and pedagogies, particularly of social science programs, should focus on responsible digital citizenship among students/youth, which will foster critical thinking and social media analysis, enabling them to decode linguistic nuances in the political content online. This study calls for Pakistan's educational institutions to safely swift from the state's political influence and narratives, and prepare future citizens who are curious to question radical propaganda online.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Concordia University's Certificate of Research Ethics Acceptability



#### CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

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Name of Applicant: Muhammad Akram  
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science\Education  
Agency: N/A  
Title of Project: Understanding Religiopolitical Content on Social Media (i.e., Facebook) Concerning Radicalization to Violent Extremism among Pakistani Youth  
Certification Number: 30019935

Valid From: April 09, 2024 To: April 08, 2025

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard DeMont".

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Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

## Appendix 2: Information and Consent Form



Study Title - Understanding Religiopolitical Content on Social Media (i.e., Facebook)  
Concerning Radicalization to Violent Extremism among Pakistani Youth

Researcher: Muhammad Akram

Researcher's Contact Information: [akramuhammad1@gmail.com](mailto:akramuhammad1@gmail.com),  
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Faculty Supervisor's Contact Information: [adeela.ayaz@concordia.ca](mailto:adeela.ayaz@concordia.ca)

Source of funding for the study: N/A

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating in this study would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

### A. PURPOSE

The purpose of the research is to understand the role of religiopolitical content on social media, particularly Facebook, concerning violent radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth.

*[When I say "religiopolitic(s)(al)", it means the (ab)use of religious values and terms for political interests. For example, a politician uses religious sayings or gatherings to gain political favors such as votes or public support.]*

### B. PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to respond to a set of questions about your observations and experiences related to religiopolitical content on social media. You will be further asked if such content can lead to youth's interest in or behaviors for violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan.

In total, participating in this study will take 90 to 120 minutes of your time. Please note that the interview conversation will be audio-recorded to later transcribed for analysis and synthesis of the findings from this study. The following information will be collected as part of this research: 1) your views about religiopolitical content on social media and whether that may lead to violent radicalism and extremism among youth; 2) your personal experiences of encountering such content urging for violent radicalism; 3) your recommendations to prevent or counter the spread of violent radicalism and extremism in Pakistan through social media platforms.

Please note that this study prioritizes your convenience, personal safety, and security. Considering your circumstances, you can choose to participate in this study either in person or virtually. The virtual interviews will be conducted via Zoom, an internet-based calling app, whereas in-person interviews will be conducted in specific district capitals of Punjab province: Lahore, Sheikhpura, Gujranwala, Rawalpindi/Islamabad, Faisalabad, or Multan. Depending on the participation interest, participants from other district capitals may also be interviewed. The venue for in-person interviews will be a safer space with limited public access and confidentiality for the interview process.

### C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

There are possible risks associated with participating in this study as the questions may trigger emotional or patriotic sensitivities for you. To address such a scenario, we will be open to take breaks whenever you need to during the interview, divert the discussion to something of interest to you for the time being, or mitigation of your preference. In addition, you will be provided with relevant resources to consult for building your knowledge on overcoming psychological or emotional stress when living in situations of violent radicalism and extremism. Furthermore, this study will not reveal your personal information, you are also expected not to disclose this study to anyone to avoid any unforeseen or unexpected issues for you.

Potential benefits of participating in this study include your valuable contribution to informing Pakistan's policies to prevent or counter violent radicalism and extremism among youth. It will also help make social media a safer space for the country's youth.

This research is not intended to benefit you personally.

### D. CONFIDENTIALITY

No one except me, the researcher, will be allowed to access your personal information. I will only use the information in your responses to the questions after anonymizing your personal or identifiable information. The information gathered will be coded. That means that the information will be identified by a code. The researcher will have a list that links the code to your name. The information gathered will be masked by assigning codes to your identifier information, and it will not be possible for anyone else to identify you from the findings of this research. Since I will be the key resource for processing interview transcripts and analyzing the findings from the interviews, no one else will have access to your interview material.

We will protect the information by storing it in a password-protected online drive only accessible to the researcher of this study, myself, and your identity will be removed from the data stored in the drive. All the interview transcripts will be discarded three years after publishing the manuscript derived from this study. Please note that it will not be possible to identify you in the published results as your identity information will be removed immediately after the interviews and before the transcripts are processed to compile the results of this study.

### F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

The decision to participate in this research is entirely yours. If you do participate, you can stop at any time during the interview. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you do not want us to use your information, you must tell the researcher before the end of the interview. Once research

findings are submitted for review, you cannot withdraw your responses. Your participation will be voluntary with no financial or material reward associated with it.

There are three scenarios if you intend to withdraw from this study after agreeing to participate. 1) If you withdraw from participation before completing 80% of the interview (i.e., 80% of the questions in the interview guide), the pieces of your personal information and the content of the interview completed will be destroyed and not included in the analysis and further reporting in this study. II) If you withdraw within two weeks following the interview, your personal and interview data will also be removed; whereas III) if you withdraw after four weeks of the interview, your data will not be removed as that will have already been analyzed as part of analyses. For scenarios I and II, the recordings and notes of interviews will be discarded right away but the count of such interviews will be documented to assess the success ratio in the data collection phase and circumstances around your withdrawal after consenting to be interviewed.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

#### G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions, and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or [oor.ethics@concordia.ca](mailto:oor.ethics@concordia.ca)

### Appendix 3: Key Measures of Limiting Social Media Spaces in Pakistan during 2024

Month, 2024	State Measures related to Social Media
Ongoing	There were various instances when Facebook and its services, like WhatsApp and Messengers, were blocked on mobile phones in the country, particularly when viewing, posting, and sharing multimedia content on them (News Desk, 2024a). Major occasions when it happened include during the general elections in February (Freedom House, 2024) and when PTI organized mass protests such as in September and November (Pant, 2024).
December	The government announced amendments to its cybercrime laws to tighten the knot over social media freedoms in the country. The new laws hold social media companies accountable for fake news and recommend stricter punishments for those who post anti-state content for political propaganda. (Guramani, 2024)
December	Pakistan Army's chief reiterated severe actions against those spreading propaganda against the country's military leadership and called the government to implement strict regulations against such social media users (Syed, 2024). In response, the government announced severe actions against social media users sharing their political opinions against the state's actions, such as the use of force against PTI's protest in Islamabad on November 24 (News Desk, 2024b).
November	Due to the concerns of national security and alleged misuse by terrorist groups, the Ministry of Interior wrote to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to ban the illegal Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) in the country (News Desk, 2024c). The activists called such a proposal as another step for Pakistan to become a techno-authoritarian state. Whereas the state tried to religiously justify its proposal by having support statement from the Islamic Ideological Council (IIC) (Zaman, 2024c). Later, the PTA decided not to ban the VPNs "over lack of legal grounds," which may change in the coming months (Ali, 2024).
November	The Islamic Ideological Council (IIC) also issued a declaration on the Islamically responsible and Sharia-compliant use of social media (see Appendix 8). This declaration called to promote social media usage for Islamic teachings rather than unethical, extremist, and hateful content.
August	The government installed a country-wide internet firewall to monitor anti-state, or more specifically anti-military, content or activity on social media. This firewall was aimed at filtering out anti-state content and surveiling those who post it so that they can be tracked and arrested (Zaman, 2024a). The activation of this firewall created internet accessibility and speed issues in the country.
July	The government launched a messaging service known as Beep, which is aimed to replace WhatsApp in the near future (Ministry of IT and Telecommunication, n.d.). Concerns exist that the replacement of Beep with WhatsApp could potentially spy on citizens' personal communications and political opinions.
July	The government officially allowed its secret agency known as Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to access and monitor any Pakistani's social media, text

Month, 2024	State Measures related to Social Media
	messages, and call records in real time as well as previous records. This sparked serious concern among social media netizens about their compromised privacy and challenged freedoms. (see Appendix 2)
July	Pakistan Army called anti-military content, that is, social media posts criticizing the military elite's interference in politics, "digital terrorism" and stressed the need to track down such social media users for trial in anti-terrorism military courts (Hussain & Ahmed, 2024). Soon after, various PTI-affiliated people were as arrested on charges of digital terrorism (Hussnain, 2024).
July	After the announcement of another military operation named Istehkaam-e-Pakistan (Stability for Pakistan) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, massive anti-military protests were organized in the Bannu district (Dawn Report, 2024). Similar protests in the same month happened in Gwadar, Baluchistan, where Baluchis were demanding their human rights and raising issues of missing Baluchis (Zaman, 2024b). In both protests, there were clashes between the military and the people; and both protests were organized through social media, as mainstream media did not report them. The military leadership attributed these clashes to anti-military propaganda on social media.

## Appendix 4: Interview Guide



### INTERVIEW GUIDE [SUB-STUDY 3]

#### Understanding Religiopolitical Content on Facebook Concerning Radicalization to Violent Extremism among Pakistani Youth

##### *Screening for inclusion criteria*

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. To ensure that you have the required characteristics to participate in this study, let me ask you a few questions to assess your eligibility.

Are you currently enrolled in a (under)graduate-level degree in social sciences?

1. Yes
2. No [end the interview]

Are you an active (daily) user of Facebook?

1. Yes
2. No [end the interview]

Have you seen or been exposed to any religiopolitical content on Facebook?

1. Yes
2. No [end the interview]

Are you affiliated with any political party?

1. Yes [end the interview]
2. No

What is your age?

1. Under 18 years [end the interview]
2. 18 to 20 years
3. 20 to 25 years
4. 25 to 30 years
5. 30 to 35 years
6. 35 to 40 years [exceptional case eligibility]
7. 40 years or above [end the interview]

Thank you for confirming your eligibility to participate in this study. Let's proceed with the interview.

## INTRODUCTION

Again, thank you for taking the time today to meet with me. My name is Muhammad Akram, originally from Pakistan, and currently working on my doctoral degree at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. My doctoral research intends to understand religiopolitical content on social media, particularly Facebook, and if/how it plays a role in radicalization to violent extremism among Pakistani youth. The interview will take 1-2 hours of participatory discussion and will require your attention to my questions so that we can have focused and relevant responses. I will be recording our discussion because I do not want to miss any piece of your valuable feedback on my questions. Please be assured that our discussion and its recording will be anonymous, will not be shared with anyone, and will be discarded after anonymously synthesizing the findings from all the interviews being conducted under this study. Remember, you do not have to talk about anything you do not want to and you may end the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable – we will respect your decision.

Please note that when I use the word “religiopolitical” content or narrative; it would mean political content referencing religious personalities, events, norms, values, or related terms. Religio-politics can be defined as “situations in which relations with God (or other religious values or personalities) provide shape and meaning to one’s political actions and orientations” (Green, 1985, p. 314).

Are there any questions about what I have just explained? If not, should we proceed with this interview? Thank you!

Interview date: 2024, _____	Interview ID: _____
Gender of interviewee: _____	Education completed: _____
Optional > Affiliation: _____	Location (city, district): _____

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How often do you use Facebook, and what type of content you interact with during your Facebook activity?
  - a. Do you interact with any religiopolitical content on Facebook? i.e., the content in which religious values or personalities were quoted or referenced for political purposes?
  - b. If you encounter religiopolitical content on Facebook, please explain the nature of the content - i.e., who shares such content and how do you come across that? For example, in your Facebook feed, you follow specific groups or pages that post this type of content.
2. Do you (actively) participate in religiopolitical discussions on Facebook? If yes, what drives you to engage in such discussions? If not participate in such discussions, why not?
  - a. How do your Facebook friends or connections react to or engage with religiopolitical content? Please share some examples.

3. Do you think interaction with religiopolitical content on Facebook influences your perceptions or worldviews about political dynamics in the country? If yes, please explain how. If not, why not?
  - a. What types of political themes or narratives do you observe in such content? Please share some examples.
4. Do you think critically to assess the credibility or intent behind religiopolitical content you encounter on Facebook? If yes, please share how you do that. If not, why not?
  - a. Have you ever thought of the intent behind such content you encounter during your Facebook activity? If yes, how? If not, why not?
5. Did you ever realize an instance when you felt the interaction with such content influenced your behavior to be aggressive or radical? If yes, please share an example.
  - a. Did you notice any change in your religiopolitical views since you are using Facebook? If yes, please describe the nature of the change.
6. Did you ever witness radical and extremist behaviors on Facebook happening in real life? Please detail your observations.
  - a. Have you engaged in a political argument offline after seeing a piece of religiopolitical content on Facebook? Please explain your response.
  - b. Do you think such religiopolitical content on Facebook has influenced Pakistani youth's behaviors in social and political life? Please detail your response.
7. Did you ever see religiopolitical content on Facebook calling youth for violent and radical actions in real life? Please give some examples.
  - a. What was the response of you or your friends to such calls of violent actions such as protests? Please share your experiences or observations.
  - b. Which type of people or parties are more active on Facebook, or are responsible for radical and extremist behaviors among Pakistani youth? Please justify your response with examples.
8. Do you think religiopolitical content on Facebook has a role in violent radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth? Please details on your response.
  - a. How frequently do you interact with such content on Facebook that you think may cause radical or extremist behaviors among youth?
  - b. Do you think radicalism among youth has increased with the increased use of Facebook? Please justify your response.
9. Which political party or entity do you think has a more radical presence on social media particularly Facebook? Please justify your response.
  - a. Do you think there are organized religiopolitical campaigns on Facebook influencing youth's perspectives and worldviews? Please share some details.

10. What are your thoughts on preventing or countering the spread of violent radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth happening through Facebook?
  - a. Who has the key responsibility of ensuring Facebook is a safe space for youth to interact online?
  - b. What strategies can help youth safely navigate or utilize social media like Facebook amidst religiopolitical mis/disinformation?
  
11. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your time and valuable feedback today. After the completion of all the interviews, we will be analyzing the findings of this study and will be happy to share with you the key findings drawn from this study.

Have a great day!

< END >

## Appendix 5: Letter for Referral of Study Respondents

*Dear [name of contact person],*

As you are aware I am pursuing my doctoral degree at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, which has been a great learning journey so far. I have completed the course requirements, defended my proposal or plan for my dissertation, and have been entitled to a Ph.D. Candidate. For my dissertation, I am studying the perspectives of Pakistani youth about the role of religiopolitical content on Facebook in terms of radicalism to violent extremism. My dissertation research has a qualitative research design which includes conducting in-depth interviews with 15-20 educated youth in Punjab, Pakistan.

Since my research has entered the phase of data collection, I am looking for your support to recruit suitable and eligible respondents to participate in my dissertation research. The criteria to participate in this research are as follows:

1. Be nationals of Pakistan
2. Age between 18 to 35 years (40 years will be the upper limit in exceptional cases)
3. Active (daily) users of Facebook at the time of data collection
4. Exposed to religiopolitical content on Facebook
5. Not affiliated with any religious or political party
6. Currently enrolled in (under)graduate studies at a university
7. Willing to voluntarily participate in this study

Since you are actively engaged in the field of extremism and/or peacebuilding in Pakistan, I would appreciate your support in referring suitable youth from your network to participate in this study. Please make sure that they meet the above-stated inclusion criteria which are required for undergoing this study.

For your reference, I have attached the Participation Consent Form and Interview Guide. Please let me know if you need any further information. I will appreciate your encouraging response.

Best,  
Muhammad Akram  
Concordia University,  
Montreal, Canada  
Email: akramuhammad1@gmail.com

## Appendix 6: Thank You Note for the Participation in the Study

2024, Month, Date

*Dear (Name of the Participant),*

I hope you find this note well. I am writing to express my sincere thanks for your participation in the research study entitled “Understanding Pakistani Youth’s Perspectives about the Role of Religiopolitical Content on Facebook in Terms of Violent Radicalism and Extremism in Pakistan”. Your cooperation in sharing your valuable responses and experiences during the interview was highly valuable and helpful, and I sincerely appreciate the time and attention you gave to engage in the conversation.

Your perspectives on research questions added significant depth to the findings of the study, which will help contribute to an enriched understanding of the role of religiopolitical content on Facebook concerning violent radicalism and extremism among Pakistani youth. It's participants like you who make it possible for us to gather meaningful data and work towards impactful findings.

Please know that your contribution to this study is not only acknowledged but also respected. All the insights you shared will be used ethically and will contribute at high value to pursue the objectives of this research. Your insights will be utilized to foster greater understanding and inform future initiatives and policy recommendations for stakeholders relevant to the scope of this study which will help shape a bright future for the Pakistani youth.

As this study progresses, I will keep you updated on the completion of its different steps, and the findings and conclusions drawn from it. I hope that the completion of this study will help contribute to achieving an inclusive society where youth can lead the nation toward a prosperous future.

Once again, thank you for your valuable contribution to this study and for being a part of this research critical for the youth of Pakistan. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

Wishing you all the best,

Muhammad Akram  
Concordia University,  
Montreal, Canada  
Email: [akramuhammad1@gmail.com](mailto:akramuhammad1@gmail.com) ”

**Appendix 7: Government of Pakistan's Letter Permitting ISI to Access Any Pakistan's Communication**

REGISTERED No.  $\frac{M - 302}{L-7646}$

**The Gazette of Pakistan**



EXTRAORDINARY  
PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY

ISLAMABAD, MONDAY, JULY 8, 2024

PART II

Statutory Notifications (S. R. O.)

GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN  
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND  
TELECOMMUNICATION  
(Digital Pakistan)

NOTIFICATION

*Islamabad, the 8th July, 2024*

S. R. O. 1005(I)/2024.—In exercise of the powers conferred under section 54 of the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act, 1996 (the Act), the Federal Government in the interest of national security and in the apprehension of any offence, is pleased to authorize the officers not below the rank of grade 18 to be nominated from time to time by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to intercept calls and messages or to trace calls through any telecommunication system as envisaged under Section 54 of the Act.

[F. No. 1-156/2008-DL.]

MUHAMMAD RAFIQ,  
*Deputy Secretary.*

(1913)

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## Appendix 8: Declaration by Islamic Ideological Council on Social Media Usage

سوشل میڈیا کے استعمال کے حوالے سے اسلامی نظریاتی کونسل کا اعلامیہ



اسلامی نظریاتی کونسل کا ۲۳ و ۲۴ جولائی ۲۰۲۳ء بروز بدھ جناب علامہ ڈاکٹر محمد راغب حسین نعیمی کی زیر صدارت منعقد ہوا۔ جس میں کونسل کے حسب ذیل اراکین نے شرکت کی:

جناب علامہ حافظ محمد طاہر محمود اشرفی، جناب ملک اللہ بخش کلیار، جناب جسٹس (ر) الطاف ابراہیم قریشی، جناب علامہ ڈاکٹر عبدالغفور راشد، جناب محمد جلال الدین ایڈووکیٹ، جناب علامہ ملک محمد یوسف اعوان، جناب مفتی محمد زبیر، جناب علامہ پیر شمس الرحمن مشہدی، جناب علامہ سید افتخار حسین نقوی، جناب پروفیسر ڈاکٹر مفتی انتخاب احمد اور جناب صاحبزادہ محمد حسان حبیب الرحمن۔

جبکہ جناب ڈاکٹر عزیز محمود الازہری اور محترمہ فریدہ رحیم نے اجلاس میں آن لائن شرکت کی۔ آج کے اجلاس میں شریک تمام اراکین کونسل نے اتفاق رائے سے حسب ذیل اعلامیے پر اتفاق کیا:

### اعلامیہ

آج کے اجلاس میں کونسل کی سابقہ سفارشات کی خواندگی کی گئی اور ان باتوں پر اتفاق کیا گیا:

- ۱- سوشل میڈیا اپنے خیالات و آراء کے اظہار کا موثر ترین ذریعہ ہے، اس کو بجا طور پر اچھے اور عمدہ مقاصد کے لئے بھی استعمال کیا جاسکتا ہے اور منفی اور غلط مقاصد کے لئے بھی اس کا استعمال ممکن ہے۔ ایک مسلمان پر لازم ہے کہ وہ اس کا استعمال اسلامی تعلیمات کی پیروی میں کرے۔
- ۲- سوشل میڈیا کو اسلامی تعلیمات کے فروغ، اخلاق و کردار کی تعمیر، تعلیم و تربیت کی ترویج و ترقی، تجارتی مقصد، ملکی امن و سلامتی کے استحکام اور دیگر جائز مقاصد کے لئے استعمال کرے۔
- ۳- سوشل میڈیا کو توہین و گستاخی، جھوٹ، فریب، دھوکہ دہی، غیر اخلاقی مقاصد، بد امنی، فرقہ واریت، انتہا پسندانہ اقدامات اور دیگر غیر قانونی و غیر شرعی مقاصد کے فروغ کے لئے استعمال نہیں کرنا چاہیے۔

- ۴- عمومی مشاہدہ ہے کہ انٹرنیٹ کے استعمال کے دوران مختلف مقاصد کے حصول کے لئے وی پی این ایپ استعمال کی جاتی ہے۔ کوئی وی پی این، سافٹ ویئر یا کوئی بھی ایپ بذات خود ناجائز یا غیر

شرعی نہیں ہوتا، بلکہ ان کے درست اور غلط استعمال پر شرعی حکم کا دارومدار ہوتا ہے۔ اگر توپین، گستاخی، بد امنی، انارکی اور ملکی سلامتی کے خلاف مواد کا حصول یا پھیلاؤ ہو تو بلاشبہ ایسا استعمال شرعی لحاظ سے ناجائز ٹھہرے گا اور حکومت وقت کو اختیار حاصل ہو گا کہ ایسے ناجائز استعمال کے انسداد کے لئے اقدامات کرے۔

۵- اگر وی پی این کے استعمال سے کوئی جائز مقصد حاصل کرنا پیش نظر ہو، جیسا کہ بات چیت کے لئے کسی ایپ کا استعمال یا تعلیمی و تجارتی مقاصد کے لیے استعمال درست اور جائز ہو گا اور اس حوالے سے حکومت کے قوانین پر عمل کرنا چاہیے جیسا کہ حکومت نے وی پی این کی رجسٹریشن شروع کر دی ہے۔ لہذا رجسٹرڈ وی پی این کے استعمال کو ترجیح دی جائے، غیر رجسٹرڈ وی پی این استعمال کرنے سے حتی الامکان اجتناب کیا جائے۔

۶- ایک اسلامی حکومت کی ذمہ داری ہے کہ وہ اپنے شہریوں کے لئے درج بالا جائز مقاصد کے حصول کو آسان بنائے، اور ناجائز مقاصد کے لئے سوشل میڈیا کے استعمال کو روکنے کے لئے اقدامات کرے۔

۷- میڈیا و سوشل میڈیا سے متعلق تمام حکومتی ادارے اس حوالے سے فعال کردار کریں اور اس سلسلے میں استعمال ہونے والے تمام پلیٹ فارمز اور ایپس کی نگرانی کریں۔

۸- آئین کے آرٹیکل ۱۹ کے مطابق اسلام کی عظمت، ملکی سالمیت، امن عامہ، تہذیب اور مناسب قانونی پابندیوں کے تابع ہر شہری کو تقریر، اظہار خیال، پریس کی آزادی اور معلومات تک رسائی کا حق دیا گیا ہے۔

۹- سوشل میڈیا اور ٹیکنالوجی کے دیگر جدید ذرائع کی اہمیت سے انکار ممکن نہیں، اور ان کا مثبت استعمال وقت کی اہم ضرورت بن چکا ہے، لہذا ان جدید ذرائع کے غلط استعمال کو روکنے کے لئے انتظامی تدابیر اختیار کرنے کی ضرورت ہے۔ کونسل سمجھتی ہے کہ جدید ذرائع پر محض پابندی عائد کرنا مسائل کا حل نہیں، بلکہ اس کے ساتھ ساتھ یہ بھی ضروری ہے کہ ان ذرائع کے مثبت استعمال کو ممکن بنانے یا ان کا مناسب متبادل پیش کرنے کے لئے بھی اقدامات کیے جائیں۔

۱۰- کونسل نے ماہرین کے ساتھ مشاورت کے ذریعے اس موضوع پر شرعی حوالے سے مزید تحقیقی کام کرنے کا بھی فیصلہ کیا۔

  
(رانازاہد)

میڈیا کو آرڈینیٹر

## Appendix 9: Letter of Acceptance for Publication of Sub-Study 2

1/21/25, 6:00 PM

Gmail - MS #1942 - Journal of Media Literacy Education



M. Akram <akramuhammad1@gmail.com>

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### MS #1942 - Journal of Media Literacy Education

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Julian McDougall <editor-jmle-1942-1938530@dcurl.bepress.com>

Tue, Jan 21, 2025 at 1:13 AM

To: =?UTF-8?Q?=22Muhammad\_Akram=22?= <akramuhammad1@gmail.com>

Cc: The Authors <authors-jmle-1942@dcurl.bepress.com>, The Editors <editors-jmle-1942@dcurl.bepress.com>

Dear Muhammad Akram PhD(c), Adeela Arshad-Ayaz Dr., and Muhammad Ayaz Naseem Dr.

Subject: MS #1942 - Journal of Media Literacy Education

Your submission "Leveraging Critical Social Media Literacy (CSML) to Safeguard Youth Against Violent Radicalization and Extremism" has been accepted into Journal of Media Literacy Education.

Please now conduct a thorough proof check and ensure that your article fully adheres to the formatting and referencing requirements at <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jmle/styleguide.html>

This is a condition of acceptance.

When you are satisfied that your submission is ready, please upload your revision with the word FINAL in the filename.

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Thank you for your support of the scholarly and professional community of media literacy educators!

Maria Ranieri, Julian McDougall and Lucas Jacob  
Co-Editors, Journal of Media Literacy Education