Exchanges of Sectarian Hate Speech in Pakistan: Analyzing Social Media's Role in Amplifying Violent Religious Extremism

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the role of social media in spreading violent religious extremism through examining exchanges of online hate speech in Pakistan. In recent years social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, X(Twitter), Instagram and WhatsApp have increasingly transformed into incubators of exchanges of hate-filled speeches between and among religious and sectarian groups and individuals. Social media's VE content exacerbates divisions in society through fanning the flames of religious, sectarian and ethnic/nationalist intolerance. This paper will utilize the conflict escalation theory of political sociology, which asserts that conflicts escalate over cycles of action and reaction. This is especially relevant in the current digital age where hatred among religious and sectarian groups or ideological rivals is frequently augmented in a cyclic manner. Additionally, this paper will also utilize the Social Identity Theory, which focusses on how in-group identities are strengthened in opposition to out-groups. The findings suggest that hate speech spreads faster than counter-narrative measures, often reaching vulnerable communities and target audiences faster than their counterparts. It recommends a multi-stakeholder approach of government, digital tech companies, civil society, and academic community that can collectively create a joint mechanism to oversee online content, create awareness on digital literacy, and strengthen counter/alternate narratives.

Keywords: Religious Extremism, Hate Speech, Online Violence, Social Media, Pakistan.

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1.   Introduction

Pakistan's religious landscape is complex and sensitive marked by deep-seated sectarian divisions that have intensified over the years. This diverse and complicated sectarian landscape has both been amplified and intensified by recent advances in social media. With hate speech thriving on easily accessible and unregulated digital platforms, its adverse consequences are felt in terms of societal harmony and national security. Social media's violent content exacerbates divisions in society through fanning the flames of points of conflict and divisions between rival sectarian groups.

The rapid dissemination of sectarian hate speech over social media platforms and away from social interactions is a major challenge for social cohesion and national security of the country. The digital world has acted as a medium for the circulation of extremist ideologies, which in turn has resulted in polarization, attacking members of religious minorities, and carrying out acts of violence against them. The concerns about religiously motivated hate speech in social media have become the growing concern of scholars, civil society, law enforcement departments and policymakers in Pakistan. The problem is rather multidimensional, ranging from demographic issues, platform-oriented factors, and the changes in extremist groups' methods.

As for problem statement, despite legal and regulatory actions by the State of Pakistan, the digital social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter (X) and YouTube, WhatsApp are constantly hosting inflammatory content that provokes sectarian hatred and interfaith divisions, leading to real sectarian clashes, violent religious extremism and targeted sectarian attacks. Thus, this research pursues to investigate the role of social media platforms in

accelerating sectarian hate speech in Pakistan and examines its impact on violent religious extremism. It also evaluated the effectiveness of existing counter narrative strategies.

2. Literature Review

This section evaluates existing literature on the topic to assess the role of social media in spreading hate speech and its impact on rising sectarian tensions in Pakistan. While this topic has attracted substantial academic attention, however, there is still a need for a comprehensive investigation of how digital platforms amplify sectarian and extremist narratives and what are effects of counter-narratives and the overall effectiveness of counter narratives to address the problem.

Social media platforms are now an essential part of the daily lives of the people; however, the ease with which misinformation spreads is a serious concern, and this can be exploited to disseminate religiously charged falsehoods or propaganda, potentially contributing to intolerance or extremism.[1]

A study by Shah notes that Pakistani society has been significantly impacted by religious extremism since the 1980s.[2] This study indicates that state support in different periods has contributed to the growth of extremism within groups like the extremist strands of Deobandis in the 1980s and, subsequently, fanaticism in some factions of Barelvi sect as a counter-reaction in the first quarter of 21st Century. The research concludes that Pakistan faces the challenge of ongoing militancy by a section of radical sectarian hardliners and the

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[1] Syed M. Haider, "Impact of Social Media on Various Aspects of Human Life," *Journal of Social Sciences and Media Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 35–40.

[2] Syed S.H. Shah, "Religious education and extremism in Pakistan: from Deobandi militancy to a rising Sufi fanaticism," *The Journal of Education, Culture, and Society* 9, no. 1 (2018): 11–26.

emergence of a "more challenging" strand of sectarian fanaticism, characterized by radicalization and extremism, particularly concerning blasphemy issues.

Abid et al. have established a strong relationship between users' religious zeal and the incidence of sectarian hate posts made on Facebook. High educational levels and high income would make one less likely to post any inflammatory content, while greater religiosity associated with lower socioeconomic status would increase the likelihood of posting hate speech[3]. Another article by Imran builds on the above findings that anti-religious discourse dissemination was affected by the demographic profile of the content producer and sharer.[4]

According to Adnan et al., Facebook pages containing sectarian content provide a platform-level analysis of both Shia and Sunni sectarian groups. The authors have shown how the pages supply a sort of echo chamber in reinforcing ideological narratives to vilify the sects with the help of memes, religious texts, and historical grievances.

In 2023 Akram et al. created an Interfaith, Sectarian and Ethnic (ISE-Hate) dataset, which contains more than 21,000 Urdu tweets labeled for inter-denominational and sectarian hate. It is instrumental for automating detection of keywords in regional languages and further emphasizes a challenge in technology to moderate hate speech. The concluding finding indicates that rhetoric which is liable to religious connotation is more widely spread and algorithmically favored

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[3] Abid Ali Abid, Savera Shami, and Ayesha Ashfaq, "Facebook and Hate Speech: Analyzing Relationship between Consumers' Attributes and Islamic Sectarian Content on Social Media in Pakistan," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 1 (2021): 453–62.

[4] Muhammad Imran, "Exploring the Role of Hate Speech in Anti-Religious Discourse in Pakistan," *Spry Journal of Literature and Linguistics* 1, no. 2 (2023).

due to high metrics of engagement.[5] Shah has traced these online dynamics into the past, revealing how the Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), among others, has relocated its publicity efforts from street politics to social media. His work lays the foundation for an understanding of how sectarian organizations adapt approaches of transferring their core ideological tenets to changing communication technologies.[6]

Shanila and Baloch in a study on the spread of hate speech and social polarization on popular social media sites have shown that Facebook and Instagram have emerged as two of the most potent agents of societal polarization in Pakistan. These social media platforms appear to have developed into laboratories or arenas for creating hostile or negative discourse that would deepen divisions between the social, political, cultural, religious, or ideational lines. Their investigation employs a variety of global and local case studies to demonstrate the lack of regulatory frameworks in developing countries like Pakistan which, inadvertently allow hate speech to flourish unchecked and unfiltered.[7]

A comprehensive study by Shabbir and Roman delves deep into the online platforms that are triggering radicalization and extremism in Pakistan. The study points out how certain groups (such as political parties) make use of digital media to instill political narratives so as to reach the general population without filters from traditional media. The authors utilize the theory of the Public Sphere, Social

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[5] Muhammad H. Akram, Khurram Shahzad, and Maryam Bashir, "ISE-Hate: A benchmark corpus for inter-faith, sectarian, and ethnic hatred detection on social media in Urdu," *Information Processing & Management* 60, no. 3 (2023): 103270.

[6] Muhammad N. Shah, "Evolution of sectarianism in Pakistan: A threat to the state and society," *South Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020).

[7] Shanila and Dr. Muhammad F. Baloch, "The Role of Facebook and Instagram Hate Speech in Societal Polarization: Evidence from Pakistan in a Global Context*", Journal of Quranic and Social Studies* 5, no. 2 (May–August 2025): 1–17

Identity theory, and Echo Chamber theory to explain events concerning radicalization on the web.[8]

Another study by Sohaib and Adnan identifies online radicalization as a major strategy for militant groups and points out how digital platforms can provide anonymity, scale, and borderless reach making them very effective in propagating extremist ideologies. They further note that violent groups are using encrypted messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram to bring out supporters and prepare them for violent actions beyond the digital space.[9] Mehfooz and Parveen in an article on how the search of sectarian violence in Pakistan is to be tackled, call for a ban against sectarian literature and regulation of online religious content. Their work advocates for more substantial state intervention and legal mechanisms in dealing with ideological polarization.[10]

Digital platforms are having an increasing impact on young people's active participation in political processes, especially in situations where democratic institutions are either weak or in transition.[11] Young people can use social media to organize for causes that call for institutional accountability, share their opinions, and take part in civic, political, religious discussions. This digital activism has been seen to serve two purposes in nations such as Pakistan: it empowers youth engagement for democratic reform while also making it

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[8] Zain Shabir and Muhammad Roman, "Influence of Social Media in Promoting Radicalization, Extremism and Terrorism in Pakistan: Case Study of PTI and BYC," *Wah Academia Journal of Social Sciences* no. 1 (June 2025): 1000–1019.

[9] Abdul Q. Suhaib and Malik Adnan, "Religious Extremism and Online Radicalization in Pakistan," *Islamic Studies* 59, no. 2 (2020): 239–54.

[10] Musferah Mehfooz and Safia Parveen, " How can the surge of sectarian intolerance in Pakistan be tackled? Bridging the widening divide," *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 9, no. 3 (2021): 981–85.

[11] Arshi S. Hashmi, Maria Hamid, and Syed MA Hashmi, "Youth, Counter Violent Extremism and (Social) Media: A Case of Pakistan," *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability* 5, no. 1 (2022): 61–72, http://doi.org/10.37540/njips.v5i1.122.

susceptible to manipulation by extremist groups that aim to propagate hate narratives.

The existing literature on online hate speech in Pakistan extensively examines its socio-political impact, legal frameworks, and psychological effects, yet a critical gap remains. None of the studies sufficiently address the proactive role of content moderation by social media platforms as the primary solution. While scholars of contemporary literature have highlighted state regulations and societal awareness, there is little emphasis on structured collaboration between the Pakistani government, civil society, and tech companies to systematically detect and remove extremist content. Future research must focus on this coordinated approach, emphasizing policy recommendations for joint monitoring mechanisms, AI-driven content filtering, and accountability measures for platforms that fail to curb hate material. Without such interventions, reactive measures alone will remain inadequate in countering digital sectarianism.

3.   Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In this study the Conflict Escalation Theory is applied on the premise that conflicts magnify through reciprocal actions that can be seen in the exchanges of perspectives between different religious sectarian communities. Conflict Escalation Theory has been studied under conflict studies and social psychology to present explanations for how interpersonal and intergroup tensions build over time. No conflict tends to remain static; it is a development through reciprocal exchanges which grow increasingly hostile with each party reacting to the other's purportedly threatening actions. These reactions often come about because the conflicting parties feel threatened or challenged in their identity, or are

emotionally aroused, and this prevents an open dialogue or any form of compromise from taking place between them.[12]

Normally, one could easily imagine these occurring in digital communication, particularly on social media platforms. Such interactions are known to encourage swift responses to provocative or incendiary content, thereby creating a cycle of retaliation. This theory especially helps analyze sectarian and ideological confrontations in cyberspace, as it underscores the generative potential for digital environments in transforming initial disagreements into larger societal divisions. In this case, one group sends out hate messages while the other retaliates; reciprocating actions keep the pot boiling in a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat violence and confrontation.

Conflict Escalation Theory helps to trace the progression of online sectarian disputes from initial disagreements to potentially entrenched hostility, highlighting the role of reactive behaviors in this intensification. Understanding this escalation process online is crucial for identifying potential intervention points to de-escalate tensions before they manifest in offline conflicts.

Social Identity Theory also inspires this analysis by focusing on how group identities are strengthened in opposition to out-groups-an inherent part of online sectarian discourse. This theory allows for an examination of how online platforms can serve as arenas where sectarian identities are reinforced through contrast with out-groups, contributing to heightened intergroup biases.

To ensure a contextualized exploration of sectarian hate speech on social media in Pakistan, this study embraced a multi-level qualitative research design

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[12] Richard Bösch, "Conflict Escalation," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies.* 20 November, 2017

and employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The multi-form design provided a rigorous interrogation of the textual and visual content of social media to offer a glimpse of how language, ideology, and digital culture intersect. The purposive sampling strategy centered on social media content carried either explicit or implicit sectarian meanings, with an emphasis on incorporating as many forms of digital content as possible (from comments and captions to memes and video clips). The purposive sampling identified the largest sample of social media material based on virality and user interactions to understand the content likely impacting a wider public discussion. The data was coded by hand and thematically analyzed to isolate patterns in recurrent rhetorical formations, discursive strategies, and visual tropes that support sectarian ideologies in Pakistan's online presence. Triangulation helped to ensure validity by comparing the discourse across different platforms and types of content - and involving a conversation by situating individual posts in broader socio-political and historical stories. These methodological measurements would allow for description not only about what is said or shown, but how and why it is eliciting online discussions in Pakistan's digital public sphere.

By understanding the psychological underpinnings of group identity in online settings, the study aims to shed light on the mechanisms that fuel sectarian division and antagonism in digital spaces. This article explores sectarian hate speech and social media interactions in Pakistan using qualitative, multimedia approaches based on CDA. Together, these essentially qualitative techniques empower a detailed and carefully nuanced study of the content and context of religious hate speech in digital spaces and its repercussions. CDA provides a robust framework for this research, enabling a deep and nuanced understanding of the sectarian hate speech prevalent in Pakistani social media interactions.

Going beyond surface-level content, CDA allows for the examination of how specific linguistic choices, framing techniques, and rhetorical strategies are employed to construct negative representations of religious out-groups and incite antagonism. By focusing on language as a social practice embedded within power structures, CDA facilitates a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which online language contributes to sectarian conflict, paving the way for more informed interventions.[13]

The study focused on detailed analysis of some public social media posts from different premier platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp (by means of forwarded messages and screenshots shared in public groups). These platforms were chosen because of their high penetration rates in Pakistan and their associated sectarianist discourses, as evidenced by the studies discussed in the literature review. Selection criteria for the social media posts is as following: reference to a sectarian group or ideology, use of religiously derogatory language, posts that received high engagement (likes, shares, comments) and posts related to religious events, political speeches, or violent incidents.

In addition to textual posts, this study analyzed some images, memes, and short videos, with a focus on those that were widely shared and embedded within sectarian narratives. Many of these visuals employed symbolic violence use of flags, religious symbols, or images of slain sect leaders intended to evoke emotional responses and strengthen in-group loyalty while demonizing out-groups.

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[13] Adisa Rasaq, Patrick Udende, Abubakar Ibrahim, and La'aro Oba, "Media, politics, and hate speech: A critical discourse analysis," *E-Academia Journal* 6, no. 1 (2017)

4. Data Analysis and Discussion on Hate Speech

This section presents the analysis of the collected data focusing on the troubling manifestation of online sectarian hate content and it is even more troubling real-world consequences. It explores how digital hate takes shape and manifests, presenting its various forms and methods of dissemination. It also provides a critical discussion on the impact this toxicity has on real life, such as some well-documented correlations between acts of digital hate speech with instances of violence, destruction of the social order, and individual harm.

4.1. Data Collection

This study employed the mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the character and consequences of online sectarian hate speech in Pakistan. The data was primarily gathered using openly accessible social media reports, including Facebook posts (texts, photos), video sermons, reels, and comment threads that included sectarian words, images, or religious symbols. Concrete cases regarding the arrest of individuals for inflammatory remarks were used as documented examples to track the impact of online conversation on real-world consequences. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted among young social media activists (15–30 years), particularly from madrassa and low-education backgrounds, to analyze firsthand accounts of digital engagement with sectarian conversations. National survey data and rights-based reports were utilized in order to construct demographic profiles of users suspected of disseminating hate speech, with visualization data added for depth. Case study examination of high-profile cases (e.g., Mashal Khan, Priyantha Kumara) was also included in the study in order to examine the transition from online hate to offline violence. Content sharing patterns, engagement numbers, and algorithmic boost were examined critically across the social media platforms.

4.2.   Proliferation of Hate Content

The data revealed that sectarian hate speech is not only frequent but highly ritualized and symbolic, often invoking tragic events of Islamic history such as Karbala, historic happenings to Muslims in Indian sub-continent such as execution of Ghazi Ilm-ud-Din or references to colonial-era Islamic reformist debates. These posts operate through linguistic violence, employing terms like *kafir* (infidel), *rafidi* (derogatory for Shia). A Facebook post falsely attributed a fatwa to Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, declaring various Shia sects as "deviant" and "hell bound".[14] Though clearly fabricated, the post mimicked religious language and design to appear authoritative. Such misleading content exploits religious figures to incite sectarian hatred and deepen social divides.

Social media posts frequently target symbols of opposing sects such as prominent clerics, seminaries, or even architectural styles (e.g., shrine vs. mosque aesthetics) to delegitimize theological authenticity. This symbolic warfare is not limited to textual posts; memes, reels (short videos), and video sermons are also particularly effective in encoding sectarian hostility into digestible, shareable content.

A Facebook user named Mian Nawaz Balakoti posted a blasphemous comment targeting the Ahle Bait (AS), the family of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) while reacting to a local incident.[15] His derogatory comparison of sacred historical figures to deceitful women was widely condemned. The Balakot police arrested him under Pakistan's blasphemy laws

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[14] Shabbir Ahmed Baloch, "Fatwa by Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani Declaring Shia Sects as Deviant," Facebook, January 23, 2025, https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=8982428878477823&set=a.2274745452579566.
[15] Mian Nawaz Balakoti, "Blasphemous Comment on the Women of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) family,", Facebook, April 2025, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1372037124140881&set=a.708404860504114

for publicly inciting sectarian hatred through social media. Another Facebook user who commented on the same incident was booked under law by the police in Battagram.[16]

Social media users, particularly those aged 15–30 years and especially males, have proven to be the most active producers and consumers of sectarian content. Interviewees describe their role in potential online sectarian narratives as: "It gave me a purpose. Now I know who the real enemies of Islam are" (22-year-old student from Jhang). There is a deep connection between social media use among Pakistani youth and the increasing spread of societal intolerance.[17]

Youth from madrassah backgrounds, often reinforced by online peer validation, expressed feelings of sectarian pride and ideological purity. They frequently cited religious authorities and WhatsApp-shared PDFs as sources of 'authentic' knowledge, dismissing mainstream religious scholars who advocate peace as compromised or "liberalized." In turn, this self-radicalization created a strong in-group VS out-group dynamic. Students are frequently socialized into sectarian worldviews through educational content and peer interactions. This socialization fosters a strong in-group versus out-group dynamic, aligning with Social Identity Theory, where group affiliation shapes perceptions and justifies exclusion or hostility toward others.[18]

Online anonymity also emboldens users to express more extreme views than they might express offline, contributing to what scholars have termed

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[16] Muhammad Sajjad Gujjar, "Blasphemous Comment on the family and companion of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH)," Facebook, April 2025,
https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1721978132083370&set=pcb.1721978245416692
[17] Majid Ul Ghafar, Muhammad Adil Khan, and Azhar Rashid, "Role of Social Media Applications in Creating Intolerance among Pakistani Youth," *Online Media & Society* 5, no. 1 (2024): 12-13
[18] Nosheen Ali, "Sectarian Imaginaries: The Micropolitics of Sectarianism and State-Making in Northern Pakistan," *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2010): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srq001.

"cyber-militancy." The lack of accountability and low risk of repercussions in digital spaces allows fringe ideologies to flourish and escalate rapidly.[19]

4.3. Demographic Profile of Online Hate Speech

The propagation of sectarian hate speech on social media in Pakistan is championed mainly by the youth and more particularly young male demographic, with low educational attainment. National survey and rights' reports (Figure 1) have concluded about 70% of people forwarding such hate messages are those within the age limits of 15-30 years; reflecting on the context of youth domination in these online spaces in Pakistan. This phenomenon is primarily male dominated; accounting for more than 75% of such social media handles.[20]
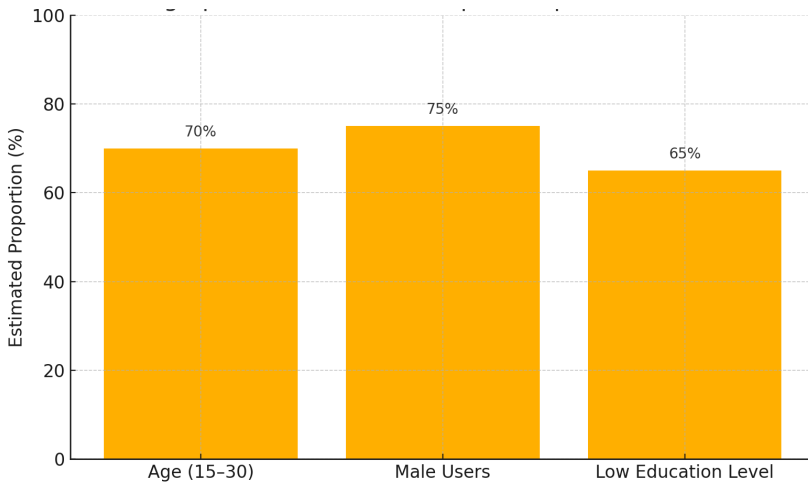

Figure 1: Demographics of Online Hate Speech Spreaders in Pakistan.

A similar trend is viewed among users who are less educated or from religious schooling backgrounds. Such users are very likely to be affected by ideological manipulation and prone to post inflammatory religious content. Such

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[19] Saqib Khan, and Khalid M. Butt, "Cyber technology, radicalization and terrorism in Pakistan," *Journal of Indian Studies* 3, no. 02 (2017): 119-12
[20] Nizar Ahmad, Jun Sung Hong, and Paghunda Bibi, "Understanding the issue of hate crimes in Pakistan: concepts and prevalence," in *Research Handbook on Hate and Hate Crimes in Society*, ed. (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024), 216–30.

association shows that limited access to critical thinking frameworks coupled with exposure to radicalized digital networks fuels the proliferation of hate speech. These trends convolute the demand for urgent targeted digital literacy programs for the youth and madrassah-educated population to combat the echo chambers, breeding intolerance and online extremism.

The algorithm behind social media platforms is thought to promote extremist content with engagement metrics. Generally, any content that engages viewers with provocative titles or imagery will receive exponential traction.[21] Videos with outrageous religious titles like "Yazeed's Followers Today" or "Enemies of Ahl-e-Bait in Pakistan" routinely appeared in trending content using religious hashtags.

Hate speech in Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto continues to escape the scrutiny of AI detection systems because localized language-processing capabilities does not exist for these local languages. Even if a user reports some hateful content, the processing time is slow, and there is hardly any transparency in the appeals mechanism.[22]

The dominance of sectarian hatred by Pakistani youth, often low-educated males on social media platforms reflects not only the crisis of digital literacy but also shows the failure of state institutions and civil society to respond effectively. Despite the clear trends and recurring violent consequences, the government has not implemented any targeted education or deradicalization programs for youth. Civil society's efforts remain irregular, underfunded, and disconnected from the

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[21] Observer Research Foundation, "From Clicks to Chaos: How Social Media Algorithms Amplify Extremism," *ORF Expert Speak*, accessed May 4, 2025, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/from-clicks-to-chaos-how-social-media-algorithms-amplify-extremism.

[22] Muhammad Akbar and Aasima Safdar, "Exploring Ethnic Discrimination and Hate Speech in Online Political Discourses: A Comprehensive Analysis from the Pakistani Context," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2024): 271–283.

communities most at risk. Meanwhile, platform regulation and state oversight of algorithmic amplification and local-language hateful content remains minimal or ineffective, allowing harmful narratives to circulate unchecked.

4.4.   From Digital Hate to Physical Harm

Several incidents over the past decade in Pakistan vividly illustrate how online hate speech and misinformation can lead to lethal offline consequences. In 2013, Junaid Hafeez, a university lecturer in southern Punjab, was arrested for alleged blasphemy based on fabricated Facebook posts. His lawyer, Rashid Rehman, who bravely defended him, was later assassinated. Over ten years later, Hafeez remains imprisoned, with his trial still unresolved.[23] In 2017, Mashal Khan, a student at Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan, was brutally lynched by fellow students. False Facebook posts created in his name accused him of blasphemy, although investigations later revealed he had only been vocal against university corruption.[24] Then in 2021, Priyantha Kumara, a Sri Lankan factory manager in Sialkot, was killed by a mob after blasphemy accusations circulated via WhatsApp and Facebook, based on visuals later confirmed to be misinterpreted and misrepresented.[25]

In 2022, a mentally ill man in Nankana Sahib was accused of burning Quranic pages and lynched by a mob. The incident gained traction after videos allegedly showing the act went viral on WhatsApp, with additional incitement spreading rapidly through Facebook groups.[26] The cycle of digitally instigated violence persisted into 2024, when in Sindh Province, a Muslim doctor named Shah

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[23] "Junaid Hafeez: Pakistani Academic on Death Row for Blasphemy," *BBC News*, December 21, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50878305.
[24] "Who Was Mashal Khan? Pakistani Student Lynched Over Blasphemy Accusations," *Al Jazeera*, April 13, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/4/13/who-was-mashal-khan.
[25] "Pakistan Mob Kills Sri Lankan Over Blasphemy Allegations," *BBC News*, December 3, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-59514472..
[26] "Mob Kills Man Accused of Blasphemy in Nankana Sahib," *Dawn*, February 12, 2022, https://www.dawn.com/news/1674605.

Nawaz Kumhbar was shot dead by police after being accused of sharing blasphemous content on social media. Before his assassination, Shah Nawaz repeatedly rejected allegations and denied having any such social media account.[27]

Another incident happened in 2024 where a young woman in Lahore wearing a traditional outfit featuring Arabic calligraphy was accused online of insulting Islamic symbols. Public outrage exploded on social media, with widespread calls for her arrest on baseless allegation of insulting Islamic inscription. Prompt clarification by the Punjab Police prevented potential mob action, but the incident showcased how quickly digital misinterpretation especially of visual content can evolve into real threats of violence.[28]

These cases confirm that sectarian outrage on social media has real-world stakes turning symbolic violence into physical violence through public shaming, mass mobilization, or vigilante justice. State institutions and civil society in Pakistan have largely failed to address the rise of sectarian hate speech online. Legal responses are often delayed or absent, and civil society efforts remain fragmented and under-resourced. Authorities tend to act only after violence occurs and not to prevent it proactively. This inaction enables online incitement to escalate into real-world attacks and violence.

5.   Major Findings

The discussion in this part outlines the major findings of this research, highlighting the dangerous consequences of online sectarian hate speech, and puts

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[27] Asad Hashim, "Pakistan Doctor Killed by Police After Blasphemy Claim," *Al Jazeera*, March 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/21/pakistan-doctor-shot-dead-by-police-over-blasphemy-claim.

[28] "Punjab Police Quells Religious Outrage over Viral Dress Photo," *The News International*, February 2024, https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1111123-punjab-police-quells-religious-outrage-over-viral-arabic-calligraphy-dress.

forth a set of recommendations to combat this growing threat. The findings underscore the fact that digital platforms are often used to spread hateful narratives that not only sustain a dangerous discourse on violent persecution but also translate into real-world violence, online discourse to tangible and deadly outcomes. Considering these findings, the recommendations emphasize the need for coordinated action across various sectors.

5.1. Findings

The research highlights the fact that online hate speech of a sectarian nature in Pakistan serves far greater purposes than just symbolic provocations; it is often a cause for great cause-related real-world harm. As highlighted by notable precedents, the digital propagation of hate by means of either grossly misinterpreted images, forged posts, or calculated disinformation often leads to incidents of mob violence, torture, or state-sanctioned killings.

In the year 2021, Priyantha Kumara a Sri Lankan manager was beaten and burnt alive in Sialkot upon hearsay of blasphemy due to sharing of WhatsApp forward messages and subsequent widespread Facebook rage. This incident is a harsh and brutal reminder of how swiftly social media outrage can transform into mass violence.

In subsequent events including the 2024 lynching of the Muslim doctor Shah Nawaz Kumhbar in Sindh, again social media served to escalate matters as blasphemy allegations were posted on social media, contributing to his execution by the local police under bluff pressure. Such scenarios show that both vigilantes and authorities can act under the influence of digital radicalization.

In 2024, the Lahore calligraphy case, in which a woman accused of offending Islamic symbols by wearing Arabic-script dress also erupted from

completely online sources. While it was immediately established that no religious or legal violation was committed, the speed and intensity with which the rabid backlash assumed following protective custody by police, shows how harmless visual cues can be manipulated and weaponized without having digital literacy and tolerance in society.

Similarly, the 2022 lynching of a mentally ill person in Nankana Sahib and the decade-long persecution of academic Junaid Hafeez are examples of continued trend of digital extremism, devoid of merit and substance. Such public outrage is the evidence of blanket condemnation and ostracization, and mob justice, especially in religious context.

Viral Content: Cause of Violence

The lynching of Priyantha Kumara (2021), Mashal Khan (2017), Shah Nawaz Kumhbar (2024), the Lahore dress case (2024), the Nankana Sahib incident (2022), and Junaid Hafeez's persecution all reflect how unchecked social media outrage, fueled by religious sensitivity, misinformation, and low digital literacy, can trigger mob justice and blur legal boundaries. All these cases share a single factor: amplification. Viral videos, messages and images frequently serve as triggers and amplifiers for violent extremism. This reality reaffirms what theorists of digital radicalization and conflict escalation have long posited: online discourse is not abstract-it is material, mobilizing, and deadly.

Dearth of Viable Counter/Alternate Narrative

Despite growing symbolic and ritualized nature of sectarian hate speech and its deep traction among youth, targeted positive and constructive interventions by state institutions and civil societies have remained largely minimal. Even though there is now newly approved National Prevention of

Violent Extremism Policy, efforts to promote inter-sectarian understanding remains largely weak or absent in digital spheres. This relative institutional silence or absence in the digital domain has allowed sectarian cyber-militancy to flourish unchecked.

Insufficient Measures by Tech Companies

There is a systemic failure so far as the role of Tech Companies in countering online radicalization is concerned. The moderation tools of tech companies are inherently weak for Urdu and regional languages, while state regulations have been inconsistent and often also accused of being utilized for political purposes or by sectarian loyalties. Social media platforms often tend to serve extremist and provocative content because when unchecked they recommend it in accordance with their own algorithms, regardless of how harmful the content might be.

The cases discussed earlier confirm that online religious hate speech is not a secondary or tertiary motivator, in fact it plays a primary role in creating sectarian ill-will and radicalization of populations. It dissolves institutional credibility and delivers injury that is difficult repair. A WhatsApp text message has become a very short and dangerous distance between a person dying and mob violence. Moreover, encrypted platforms like WhatsApp limit content visibility, and AI-driven detection of hate speech in regional dialects like Punjabi and Pashto remains underdeveloped. The Tech Companies must therefore step up and be empowered to develop necessary tools and algorithms to address the existing technical shortcomings in the digital domain.

6.   Conclusion and Recommendations

In light of the preceding discussion this study proposes some recommendations to address the problem of online radicalization, extremism hate speech:

Coordinated Efforts

There is an acute and urgent need for coordinated interventions in technical, institutional and educational domains. At the moment, most of these interventions are either being done independently or in complete isolation from one another. Operating in silos has thus far compounded the problem of online radicalization and extremism. There is therefore an urgent need to ratify this shortcoming.

Uniform Laws on Cybercrimes

Mistrust and enablement of extremist groups are typically furthered by selective or politicized enforcement. Laws, therefore, must also be uniform across sectarian, religious and ethnic lines on issues involving cybercrime and hate speech. It is worth keeping in mind that creation and enforcement of such legal frameworks could also inadvertently restrict genuine religious and nationalist expressions. Adequate care and caution must, therefore, be employed while creating all such laws and regulations.

Fair and Speedy Judicial Trial

Trials involving issues of radicalization and blasphemy have tendency to linger on for years and sometimes even decades (as witnessed in the case of academic Junaid Hafeez). This unnecessary and unfair delay creates the impression that religious violent extremism enjoys a degree of judicial immunity in the country. This prevailing impression of judicial process serves as an encouragement for extremist and radicalized individuals. It is therefore

imperative to have fair and speedy judicial trials especially in cases involving online radicalization and extremism.

Role of Tech Companies

Digital platforms that operate specific content moderation tools for Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, and other local languages in Pakistan should focus on refining such region-specific moderation tools. Algorithms should instruct systems not only to flag the traditional forms of hate speech but also identify covert religious derogatory comments, dog whistles, and pictures of provocation. Local moderators, who know well the sectarian realities in which they operate, will dramatically increase the accuracy-timeliness ratio of the removal of the objectionable content. Furthermore, the Tech companies must also issue transparency quarterly reports and statistics about the actions taken against online extremism and radicalization.

Responsibility of Civil Society

Civil society organizations must be empowered to develop grassroots counter/alternate narratives that resonate with respective religious communities. Engaging clerics, scholars, madrassah networks, and youth influencers who could carry the ideal messages about coexistence and inter-sectarian understanding will be part of this civil society led initiative. Counter/alternate-speech campaigns must also be rooted in genuine theological interpretation cultural symbols familiar to the target audience. One-off or foreign-framed campaigns tend to be rejected as irrelevant or externally imposed and must therefore be resisted.

Role of Educational Institutions

Educational institutions must include digital media literacy, religious pluralism, and ethical discourse-training courses across school and university

curricula. Most of those indulged in online sectarianism neither possess critical evaluation ability regarding misinformation/disinformation, nor can they tell the difference between theological debate and incitement. The educators ought to encourage students to question, verify, and enter constructive dialogue so as to not being consumed by inflammatory content.

Role of Religious Leadership

Religious leadership has great power in shaping the attitude of its followers toward wars, defense, and peace in the world. It should thus come together across sectarian divides and publicly condemn hate speech, disavow violence committed in the name of faith, and collectively issue fatwas or statements condemning such digital incitement. Silence or neutrality from religious leaders allows extremists to dominate the narrative space. Paigham e Pakistan in the vein is a very encouraging document that needs full support and endorsement by all religious quarters across the country.

State, Tech, Religious and Civil Collaboration

Collaboration between state, technology companies, religious authorities, and civil society can result in the establishment of a national digital ethics task force. This will positively and constructively monitor emerging issues, advise on policy revisions, coordinate rapid response to viral threats, and create sustainable tools for content moderation, reporting, and education. Most importantly, this body must have independence from state's institutionalization, so as to allow transparency and representation from all segments of society.

Legal and Psychosocial Support

Victims of online religious persecution, harassment, or misidentification must have accessible legal and psychosocial support. Reporting mechanisms must

be streamlined and followed by protective measures to prevent the recurrence of violence or intimidation. In these cases, justice delayed or denied only reinforces a culture of impunity which further aggravates extremism.

These recommendations aim not only to regulate speech-they aim also to build a social and digital ecosystem that resists extremism, encourages respectful discourse and protects the lives and freedoms of all religious communities in Pakistan.