



SOCIAL MEDIA AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION ABOUT RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGIES

**Hafiz Muhammad Muddser* <mudersaleem@hotmail.com>

Lecturer Mass Communication,

Riphah International University Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan

***Muhammad Majid Hamid Nasir* <majidhamid@gcuf.edu.pk>

Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication,

Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

****Dr. Imran Muslim* <imranmuslim@gcuf.edu.pk>

Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication,

Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

VERSION OF RECORD

Received: 20-Jul-20; **Accepted:** 01-Aug-20; **Online/Print:** 30-Dec-20

Abstract:

Use of social media for dissemination of authentic or false ideologies about religion is one of the burning discussion topics among intellectuals. This study has tried to examine some basic aspects of religious extremism and, their relationship with the users of social media. The main objectives of the study were to explore the role of social media in boosting religious extremism and to find out the factors which act as catalyst for the religious extremism. In order to explore the various forms of religious extremism and to study the effects of religious extremism on society, Primary data was collected from 305 respondents. Survey questionnaire was used to collect the information from respondents. Results of the study proved that there is no relationship between the preaching through "Quran" and the education level of the respondents. Furthermore it was found that users of new media got influenced by the un-authenticated content, without having a deeper look into messages.

Keywords: *Un-authentic Content, Religious Extremism, Social Media, Perception of Users.*



Introduction

In recent years, new waves of religious extremism have been observed in the world, seriously interfering with humanity. Whether for religious, ethnic or political reasons, extremism, contributes to the subordination of a specific group and confronts a more tolerant and inclusive society. It presents two different but interrelated challenges for modern societies: the rise of violent extremism and its spread across national borders, and the governance of increasingly diverse and multicultural societies. It is very easy to focus on isolated acts of terrorism and extremism and ignore global patterns of such violence.

A famous passage in the Qur'an (2: 256) says: "Without religious restrictions, right direction is clearly different from wrong." Faith is a very personal matter and it is obvious that each person needs to be allowed to find their own way in life.

(There is no compulsion in religion), that is:

"Do not force anyone to become a Muslim because Islam is upright, its testimonies and proofs are clear and simple. Therefore, no one needs to convert to Islam by force. Any one will convert to Islam as per his/her own will and he/she will enlighten his/her mind to accept Islam".

The Ansar (Native residents of Madinah, KSA) are said to be the cause of the revelation of this verse, although their reference is general. Ibn 'Jarir reported that Ibn' Abbas said before Islam: "a woman (Ansār) does not give birth to children who can live, she swore that if she gave birth to a living child, she would raise him Jewish. It would be. "The Banu al-Nazir (Jewish tribe) was evacuated from Al-Medina, and some *Ansār* children grew up among them. *Ansār* said," We will not leave our children. "Allah said.¹

People who practice Islam are protected from destruction and deprivation. For this reason, that person is compared to a person holding a "ring", a strong rope to prevent falling. There is no fear of destruction and loss in Islam, because the rope is not afraid to break and fall - if someone just throws the rope, it is all over different. And if one leaves Islam alone, that is very different. Given this verse, some are inconsistent. They refer to the teachings of Jihad in Islam against this principle, but this verse tells us that it does not require belief. It is clear that this denial is baseless, even though the teachings of Jihad and the Revenge in Islam are not intended to force people to accept their faith. If so, why do Islamic "*Jizyah*" (Islamic way of taxation) documents guarantee the protection of infidels, who protect their life, property and dignity. In fact, it is designed to prevent unrest. Because Allah Almighty does not like the appearance of the face, that is what the disbelievers want.²

Today we share a series of updates and changes that improve our fight against extremists, violent groups and hate organizations on Facebook and Instagram. These changes mainly affect our violent people and organizations policy, which is designed to protect people and prevent real damage to our society.³

Some of these changes existed before the horrific terrorist attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, but these attacks and the global call to respond to Christchurch have had a huge impact on people's recent mindset. The attack originally exposed the misuse of technology to spread radical hate speech and steered where we wanted to improve detection and protection against violent content. In May, New Zealand announced restrictions on who could use Facebook Live and met with world leaders in Paris to sign the New Zealand government's call to action. Microsoft, Twitter, Google and Amazon developed a nine-point industry plan outlining the steps to tackle the misuse of technology to distribute terrorist content.

Many believe that cyber extremism poses a serious threat to the economies of countries, and fear that this attack could lead to another Great Depression. Some leaders agree that cyber extremism has the highest threat percentage of other potential attacks on American soil. While natural disasters are considered serious threats and have proven devastating to people and countries, ultimately little can be done to prevent such events. Therefore, it is expected that more attention will be paid for preventive measures to counter Internet attacks.⁴

As the Internet continues to expand and computer systems take on more and more responsibility as they become more complex and interdependent, sabotage or extremism on the Internet could become a more serious threat and potentially one of 10 major events that will "end to humanity." Humans have much easier access to illegal intrusion into cyberspace due to their ability to access a portion of the Internet known as the Dark Web. The Internet of things promises to further unite the virtual and physical worlds, which some experts see as a strong incentive for states to use terrorist to achieve their goals.⁵

Worldwide, dependence on the Internet is growing rapidly, creating a platform for international cyber-terrorism intrigues that can be formulated and implemented as a direct threat to national security. Cyber-attacks have clear advantages over physical terrorist attacks. They can be performed remotely, anonymously, and relatively cheaply, and do not require significant investment in weapons, explosives and personnel. The effects can be widespread and severe. It is likely that the number of incidents of cyber extremism will increase.⁶

Cyber-attacks by Iran and North Korea, The New York Times notes: "The appeal of digital weapons is comparable to the appeal of nuclear power: it is a way for a backward, underfunded state to level the playing field. ... "Countries are treating cyber weapons the same way they are treating nuclear weapons," said James A.

Lewis, a computer security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. They are determined to get it.⁷

Differentiation between Religion and Extremism:

Religion is the basic belief of an individual regarding his/her way of life with spiritual guidelines while extremism is considered to be the extra ordinary thoughts about other people's perception of the religion.

Any analysis of terrorism patterns is faced with serious problems simply because of the lack of reliable and comparable data and because of the tendency to divide the study into specific threats, countries and regions. The problem is exacerbated when the analysis aims to address controversial issues such as the relationship between Islam, extremism and terrorism.

Social networks in most parts of the world are inhabited by many clearly liberal participants. Religious extremism can be found everywhere in multiple online sources. The term "religious extremism" means that religious activity, which must be carefully considered, in trying to hurt others. It includes prominent religious events, activities that are good or sacred and surprisingly enough to provoke medical distress and beliefs that have been damaged by mental or physical harm by family violence. Religious fanaticism is a radical and biased view that is generally allowed for the use of the opposite to advance a particular, political problem with religious turmoil. Religious extremism, which is believed to be necessary today to use extreme methods to create great social change, has many coherent characteristics. Among the most important are feelings of abuse, a sense of criminal behavior, allowed by a stronger idea-based substance, such as a lack of religious attention and a desire to keep religion out of power. Finally, the idea that sacrifices is required to achieve team goals. Religious extremists do not generally consider themselves to be extremists. Instead, they are alternately called victims, protectors and saviors.

Social Media and Sectarianism:

Social media is a space where sect is often seen, but does not need to be tracked or reported.⁸

Without considering the meaning and context of the concept of Islamic extremism and its interpretation, there are a limited understanding of this phenomenon and its consequences. This tactic has led to a description of Islamic extremism, the government needs counter- extremism and military interventions in response to terms such as "extremism" and "Islamic radicalization" to combat this type of extremism. An analysis of the possible context of the fight against extremism in general and against Islam in particular, provides further insight into possible

solutions. It was encouraged by Government action to ensure adequate access to counter cyber extremism.⁹

The history of extremism in Pakistan continues to the main anti-state groups that how they relied on appropriate design choices, hierarchy and restraint. Pakistani military and civilian leaders who survived militarism and extremism founded by said researchers, in the present case, counter-terrorism programs are based on theoretical concepts of extremism and often tested radical violent mobilization.¹⁰ Pakistan is blamed for lack of honest association, unacceptable reactions to segregation and religious brutality, its failure to protect minorities, and even the rule of law in the country. It is necessary to look in the mirror and make significant changes, especially in the management of the madrasah.¹¹

Greater emphasis on the right to change religion, as well as other rights in the section on freedom or religious belief, can be added to the war on religious extremism and threats to global security. First of all, the truth of the matter is that Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and so on are all the main teachings of all the world's major religions. They promote reconciliation, moderation, unrighteousness and other ethical issues, lessons against extremism of any kind. Thus, greater freedom to express and teach different religious beliefs is a powerful antidote to religious extremism.¹²

Objectives:

The scope of the topic (Perception of Audience Regarding Dissemination of Religious Extremism Through social Media) the objectives of this report are being carefully defined in order to highlight and observe all the aspects of some specific areas completely.

- To explore the role of social media in religious extremism
- To determine the factors affecting religious extremism
- To explore the various form of religious extremism
- To evaluate the effects of religious extremism on society

Rationale of the Study:

Like other developing countries most of the people of Pakistan are not well off and literacy rate is very low as well. Apart from this fact, the neoliberal market policy is encouraging extremism in the country. As a new means of communication, social media is being used widely by youths and it has created a significant online community in Pakistan. In this Pakistani online community 'believer-atheist debate' has become one of the most discussed issues. Besides of this, different online groups tend to promote Islam as per their own secretion view point. Attacks on minority communities are also becoming common phenomena in the country. As social media is being greatly used to call on such kind of attack, it is important

to know the exact role of this new media in promoting Islamic extremism. This study tries to contribute in the growing debate on the negative use of social media.

Research Questions:

- i. To what extent social media is responsible in increasing hate among Muslims?
- ii. What is the reaction of people towards the activities of extremists groups on social media?

Research Method:

This research study was conducted to judge the perception of respondents about extremism, propagated through social media so survey questionnaire was the method, preferred for data collection. In some selected cases where people were finding it difficult to understand the written questions, they were asked verbally and responses were added on questionnaire by researchers themselves.

Population and Sampling:

Female residents of Faisalabad city, falling in the age slot of 20 to 60 years, were the population for this study. Thought behind choosing this age segment was that people in this age group are not only mature but reactive in nature as well. The variables like “perception of general public about the role of social media” played a critical role in the determination of the type of population. Data collected from the general public including graduates, post graduates, youth, and other people from different walks of life. Survey questionnaire was used to collect the data from selected sample. The sample size of the study is 500 respondents from general public from district Faisalabad. Multi-staged cluster sampling technique was used to select the required number of respondents from the large population.

Results and Findings:

Multi types of tables, graphs and statistical tests carrying numbers and values, have been mentioned in this section. All the values have been developed through research by collecting responses from the population. Finally it is in presentable form.

Figure 1.1 Education Levels of the Respondents

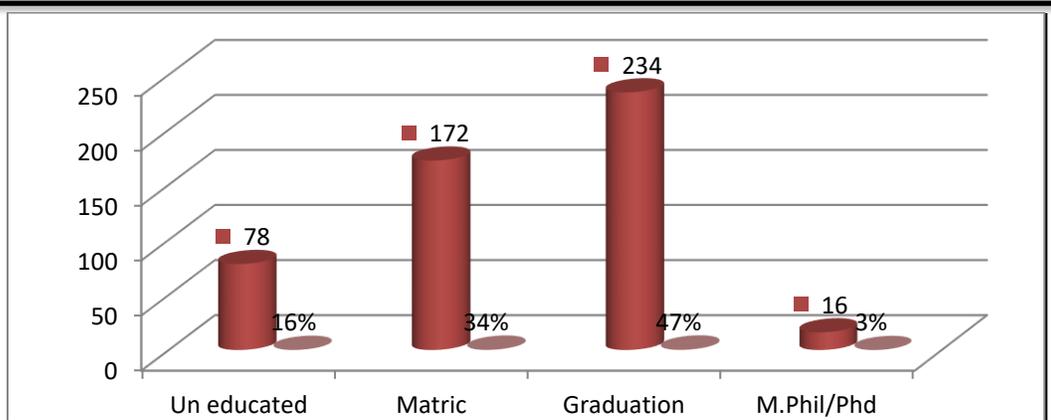


Figure 1.1 shows the qualification level of the respondents highest proportion which is 47 % belongs to the population who are graduates and 34 % of the population have education level is matriculation only, while 08% of the total population are the master’s degree holder, 16% of population is un-educated.

Table 1.1 Preferred Usage of Social Media Platform

Social Media Platform	Number of Users	Percentage
Face Book	209	42%
Twitter	64	13%
Instagram	43	9%
WhatsApp	177	35%
Others	7	1%
Total	500	100%

Table 1.1 suggests that the highest segment of total population being 42.0% and 209 in number prefer Facebook as a best social networking site, second major proportion being 35% prefer to use WhatsApp, 13% of population rely on twitter for social networking and lowest proportion of population that is 09% which makes only 43 respondents use Instagram. So we can say that Instagram is the least common networking site among the people, while Facebook and WhatsApp are preferred to use as social media platform.

Religious Extremism through Social Media

Table 1.2 Perception about relationship of the Quranic verse: “let there be no compulsion in religion”, and to negate extremism.

Perception of Quranic Verse	Frequency	Percent
“Yes” This verse negates extremism in Islam	396	79%
"No" It’s about other religions	104	21%
Total	500	100.0

Table 1.2 states that major portion of the population being 79% strongly agreed with the perception that, this Quranic verse totally negates the extremism, while 21% dis-agreed the statement.

Table 1.3 Frequency of observing any post, notification or message that seems to convey or propagate extremism

Frequency of watching Extremist Messages	Number	Percentage
Never	102	20%
Rarely	112	22%
Undecided	42	9%
Often	188	38%
Very Often	56	11%
Total	500	100%

Table 1.3 shows that 38 % of the total population have observed any post, notification or message that seem to convey or propagate extremism often and 11 % respondents have observed very often, while second major portion which constitutes 22 % have observed very rarely , while and 20 % have never observed. So it can be concluded that 49 % (38+11) often watch the extremist massages while 42% (20+22) rarely watch these types of contents. In this way there is a little bit difference between both responses.

Figure 1.2 Reaction of people towards the activities of extremist contents on Social Media

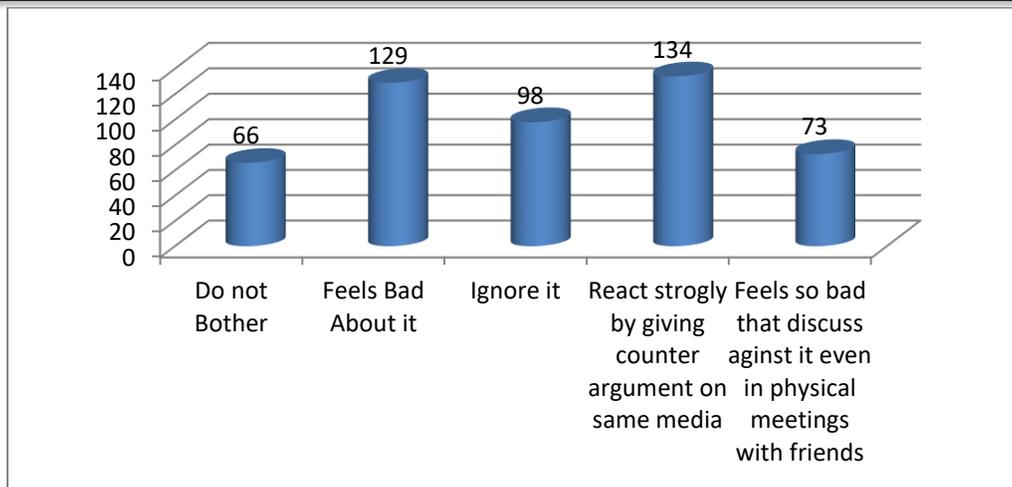


Figure 1.2 explains that 134 of the total population reacts greatly by giving counter argument on same media about the reaction towards activities of extremist, while 129 respondents feel bad about it. 73 respondents feel so bad that discuss against it even in physical meetings with friends. On other side 66 respondents don not bother it and 98 persons ignore it. Finally it is summarized that a large number of respondents (134/500) react strongly towards activities of extremist. That is remarkable as compare to other responses.

Table 1.4 Relationship between Understanding of Quranic verse “Let” and level of education

		Qualification level	“let there be no compulsion in religion”
Qualification level	Per Person Correlation	1	-.005
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.927
“let there be no compulsion in religion”	N	500	500
	Pearson Correlation	-.005	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.927	
	N	305	305

Religious Extremism through Social Media

In above statistical data, Pearson Correlation value (-.005) shows that there is almost no relationship between level of qualification of the respondents and his/her understanding about the QURANIC verse in which Allah mentioned “*let there be no compulsion in religion*” (Al-Quran 2:256) explaining,

"Do not force anyone to adopt ideologies of your choice and let everyone understand the religion as per his/her liberty. It proves that evidence is plain and clear. Therefore, there is no need to force anyone to criticize or admire any religion."

It is all about belief and understanding about Quran. It is summed up that qualification doesn't matter in this regard.

Discussion:

The prevalence of hate through social media is a public concern but a few studies have analyzed the extent to which society are expose to such hate. Media deeply have an effect on our lives as media has the control to influence our thinking. This influence is a little bit optimistic and sometimes depressing. Media is the most leading one for the people to resort violent behavior. Hate is a powerful emotion it's so powerful that it can take down nations and wipe people from the face of the earth. It's a tool that wicked people will use for their own gain because most of us are so susceptible to hating because we are a little scared of the other. Study contains that the experience to viciousness on TV, film and recreations make the natives more rough, frightened, less trusting and additional tolerant of savagery. This does not imply that they will start bring weapons but rather they will be extra fierce and less trusting towards their companions, teachers and kin. A few commercials attempt to convince the general population by revealing to them the significance of surely understood things. Accordingly kids and youths progress toward becoming status cognizant and imagines that by utilizing these things they can demonstrate their high status in the general public. To finish their necessities or to inspire others they commonly go brutal to get cash. Each coin has opposite sides; likewise Media has positive and negative impacts.

Impact of religious differences has a major effect on the general public. Religious discrimination has been the reason for a large portion of conflicts among people. Religious segregation includes treating a man negatively on account of his or her religious convictions. Social media can play both the negative and positive in this regard as a coin has two side good or bad similarly it is seen that social media is inclined words inflaming the negative effects only. Media distortions encourage religious discrimination. Religion has always been at the center of conflict. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have struggled to find their place in certain societies, and their followers have also faced prejudice. Muslims around the world

are currently facing harassment and hate because of ISIS, who is trying to impose upon the world the ideas of radical Islam. The media has also helped in the spread of anti-Islamic ideas and the fear of Islamophobia. Islam is a religion of peace, and nowhere in the holy book Quran has violence been promoted. The media, in order to garner attention and increase viewership, portrays the ideology of extremist groups as the true face of Islam.

There are some extremists groups that openly link Islam to violence or terrorists of the Islamic situation may activate fears in non-Muslim persons. The severe media coverage in relation to the Islamic State has raised concerns regarding useless and negative things on news users' opinions of Muslim citizens living in Western society. The social media should report about these issues they should portray the positive side because the media can increase the fear and hostile perceptions of people about any concept. Social media is a platform through which the general people can give their reaction about any controversial all around the world, through the social media the world has become a global village, in no time any news can spread like fire in the woods, in the whole world. So now the people are in more ease to give their opinions and reactions. This study proves that one fourth of the total population reacts greatly about the activities of extremists, while almost similar proportion of the population gave a little reaction about it. Almost 25% of the respondents did not react at all, while 11.1% population did not have any sentiments and said they don't care. There was a little minority (8.5%) which does not reacted in negative terms.

Conclusion:

Rationale of this study apprehended that excessive consumption of new media may lead towards misunderstandings and wrong perceptions about different religions specially Islam.

To conduct this study, one of the basic preaching of Islam "*let there be no compulsion in religion*" was taken as a reference since this phrase is quite frequently quoted by the new generations while discussing the religious issues. Findings of the study prove that, audience not only noticed the extremist campaigns on new media but also reacted to the misleading and un-authenticated information. Respondents were aware of the fact that they could not avoid the flow of information while using different social media options and at some occasions they could not differentiate between facts and fictitious content. It was un expected to notice that education level of the respondents has nothing to do with the understanding of Islamic guidance of Islam. It is important to mention that counter arguments were given by the people to the person, uploading the doubtful contents and he/she was not given full freedom to spread the extremist ideologies.



@ 2021 by the author, this article is an open access article distributed Under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

-
- ¹<https://quran.com/2:256/tafsirs/en-tafisr-ibn-kathir> accessed January 17, 2020.
- ²<https://quran.com/2:256/tafsirs/en-tafisr-maarif-ul-quran> accessed December 02, 2020.
- ³ Sultan, Oz. "Tackling disinformation, online terrorism and cyber risks into the 2020s." *The cyber defense review* 4, no. 1 (2019): 43-60.
- ⁴ Sean, Costigan. "Cyber Terrorism must be jointly tackled." *Sunday Gaurdian*, 2015.
- ⁵ Joel Brenner,Jon R. Lindsay. "Debating the chinese cyber threat." *International Security* 40, no. 1 (2015): 191-195.
- ⁶ Vilice, Vida. "Dark web, cyber terrorism and cyber warfare;dark side of the cyber space." *Balkan social science review*, 2017: 7-24.
- ⁷ Warf, varney. "Relational geographies of cyber terrorism and cyber war." *Space and polity* 20, no. 2 (2016): 143-157.
- ⁸www.actiononsecterianism.info accessed October 02, 2019.
- ⁹ Olcott, Martha brill. "Freedom of religion,tolerance and security in central asia." *The review of faith and international affairs* 15, no. 3 (2017): 24-34.
- ¹⁰ Weinbaun, Marvin G. "Insurgency and violent extremism in pakistan." *small wars and insurgencies* 28, no. 1 (2017): 34-56.
- ¹¹<http://www.nrdf.org.pk/publication/religious-extremism-in-pakistan.pdf> accessed March 03, 2019.
- ¹²www.tribune.com.pk accessed September 20, 2019.