

Exploring Political Extremism among Youth in Digital Age: A Perspective of Pakistani Media Academics

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of Pakistani media academics regarding the factors that contribute to rising political extremism among the youth in digital age.

Methodology: Keeping the users and gratification theory as the basis of theoretical framework, this paper used qualitative research design and carried out in-depth interviews from the media academics belonging to various academic organisations based in Islamabad/ Rawalpindi area.

Findings: The study came out with four themes that contribute to political extremism among the youth in the digital age. These themes included factor of virtual echo chambers, lack of digital media literacy skills, belief on conspiracy theories and emotional appeal to radical online content.

Conclusion: The study underscores the importance of digital media literacy for the Pakistani youth and has also forwarded several recommendations in light of the insights obtained from the Pakistani academics in reducing the effects of rising political extremism among the youth in Pakistani society.

Keywords: Digital Media Literacy, Political Extremism, Pakistani Youth, Digital Age, Social Media, Extremism, Radicalization, Critical Thinking.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The tremendous growth of Digital media platforms over the period has given the individuals numerous options to communicate, connect and socialize with large audiences around the world. However, at the same time, the extremist outfits/ groups have started to use these platforms to propagate their radical views and ideologies across the various societies at large (Etumnu & Williams-Etumnu, n.d.). The extremist groups, organizations and sometimes political parties also launch misinformation/ disinformation campaigns which influence the young minds over the digital realm. Not necessarily, the extremist content is always propagated by the known sources. Nazmine is of the view that majority of the hate speech and radical content is promoted by the anonymous sources that's why it gets the recipient off guard and become more susceptible to propaganda (Nazmine et al., 2021). It is also observed that the youth especially the university and college students, use these digital platforms not as a necessity rather

they consider it as the social phenomena that can't be avoided (Al Homran et al., 2021; Safdar et al., 2025; Safdar and Eman, 2025; Safdar and Khan, 2025; Shabir et al., 2015). The youth globally have to face this menace of fake news, propaganda, diverging extremist viewpoints and ideologies on daily basis. The threat is not only limited to propagation of extremist content, only. The extremist outfits, sometimes, use these online digital platforms to sponsor recruitment of interns and dissemination of radical ideologies in shape of literature as well (Ware, 2023). The impact on the Pakistani youth is no exception. It is observed that political extremism and radicalization among Pakistani youth have been on a rise and is a matter of concern for the society (Fazli Rahman et al., 2025). And also there is a need to examine the text and visuals for their authenticity before making an opinion (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2005). The history of Pakistan with regards to political freedom is also not promising. Since independence, Pakistan has not succeeded in maintaining a stable political system which has created disenchantment among the masses especially the youth (Riffat, 2002). This has led to exponential rise especially in the area of political extremism among the youth in the Pakistani society. However, first we need to define the term political extremism. Many scholars of political extremism have explained the concept. Roger Eatwell explains that political extremism is total negation of principles and values that are the core of any democratic process in the society. It pursues ways and means to deny the opposing groups and parties to promote their opinions with a purpose to establish own rule to govern the state of affairs (Jones, 2020). Others define it as inclination to do whatever it takes to impose your own political views on other with a purpose to gain political control (Jasko & Webber, n.d.).

Many researches have been made in the area of political extremism and an effort has been made to define, explain the term alongside finding the reasons of these phenomena. Homran et al in their study explored the role of social media in propagating culture of extremism in the society. In this study they have analyzed the perceptions about the rise of extremism in religious, political and social domains of students through the eyes of school teachers (Al Homran et al., 2021). The researchers while focusing on the religious and political extremism during Musharraf era in Pakistan have highlighted the loop holes in the Pakistani political system and have analyzed the political regimes of that era. They have also recommended steps to improve the system (Riffat, 2002). However, the study has not underlined the causes of especially with regards to digital platforms. In another study the researchers have carried out research to perception of the student's higher education institutions of Punjab regarding the political and religious extremism. The study mainly focused on understanding the psychological, socio-cultural and personal aspects of the problem (Maqsood, 2020). In the realm of exploring the importance of digital media literacy among youth, many studies have been carried out as well. Researchers Mrisho et al have examined the importance of digital media literacy skills and are of the opinion that these skills help the people to logically analyze the authenticity of the online content and led them to make independent choices (Mrisho & Dominic, 2023).

It has been observed that the Pakistani society has been radicalized to an extent that people are not ready to listen the opposing political views and remain fixated to their own political ideologies and frame of mind. It has exceeded to an extent that sometimes, the people consider political violence as a legitimate right to pursue and dictate their political views on the opponents (Ruggeri et al., 2025). The causes of this rise in political extremism can be manifold. There reasons can be socio-economic, psychological, cultural, religious, ethnical etc. Many studies have been carried out to study political extremism at the global and domestic levels with varying angles. However, there are very limited studies with a scope to explore the underlying factors which may influence the young minds in digital age. That's why, there is a need to discover these aspects and that's why this study has been carried out to explore the various factors which contribute to rise in political extremism among youth especially in Pakistani society in the present digital age.

1.1 Problem Statement

While analyzing the available literature, it has been observed that numerous researches and studies have been carried out to understand and explain the concept of political extremism. Literature on political

extremism and media literacy is also available in abundance. However, there are very few which corresponds to finding out the reasons of rising political extremism trends among the youth especially in the context of digital media in the age of digitization. Hence this study has been carried out with an aim to explore the factors which are responsible for contributing rise in political extremism among the youth in the today's highly volatile digital age.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study has been carried out with an objective to explore the perspectives of Pakistani media academics regarding the aspects that contribute to political extremism among Pakistani youth in the digital age.

1.3 Research Question

The study is based on the following research question:

RQ: What are the perspectives of Pakistani media academics regarding the aspects that contribute to political extremism among Pakistani youth in the digital age?

2. METHODOLOGY

The research is based on qualitative research design in which in-depth interviews were considered to be the most suitable and appropriate method to collect valuable insights from the respondents (Boyce, 2006). In this regard, in-depth interviews have been carried out from the Pakistani media academics who have sufficient expertise in political communication and adequately understand the importance of digital media literacy. While conducting in-depth interviews, when the researchers recorded opinions of 11 media academics, the data saturation was achieved. Hence, it was felt that there was no need to carry out further interviews and the data so collected was locked. The sampling was purposive and the inclusion criteria for the media academics were Pakistani citizens, Phd as the minimum qualification, academic experience more than 15 years and belonging to Islamabad/ Rawalpindi areas as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Media Academics

Participant	Gender	Professional Experience (Years)	Institution
R1	Male	22	NUML
R2	Female	20	IIUI
R3	Female	15	Szabist University
R4	Male	21	Air University
R5	Female	17	Iqra University
R6	Female	23	NUST
R7	Female	19	CUST
R8	Female	25	Bahria University
R9	Male	18	QAU
R10	Male	20	AIOU
R11	Female	24	Fatima Jinnah University

3. DATA ANALYSIS

For carrying out data analyses of the collected data obtained through in-depth interviews from the academics, the researchers have used thematic analysis technique. It is considered to be the most appropriate technique for data collection as advocated by majority of the scholars and researchers (Dawadi, 2020). The themes and sub themes so obtained from the in-depth interviews are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Themes of the Study

Sno	Main Theme	Sub Themes
Theme 1	Virtual Echo Chambers	Inclusive discourse Group behaviors Content filtering Prioritize content while using algorithms Exposure to a selective online content Content that re enforces the existing views
Theme 2	Lack of Digital Media Literacy Skills	Ability to access digital media platforms and internet Capability to create online media content with ease Skill to critically evaluate the online media content for fake news, fact checking Act responsibly while working in groups/ communities Reflect maturely with responsibility while understanding the consequences of cybercrime
Theme 3	Conspiracy Theories	Hidden forces control the flow of information Every ill in the society is attributed to hidden forces Propaganda, misinformation, disinformation campaigns are controlled by the hidden forces Powerful individuals, groups, elite, organizations control and manipulate the flow of information
Theme 4	Radical Online Content	Radical religious, ethnic online media content appeal the youth Diverse radical content influences the youth Nationalist, racist views attract the interests of the youth Purposive hate speech appeal to masses Online content that creates political divide

Theme 1: Virtual Echo Chambers

The majority of the respondents pointed out during the in-depth interviews that the factor of echo chamber plays an important role in enhancing political extremism among the youth. The concept implies that when under the influence of virtual echo chambers, the youth tune to a particular medium and to a particular media content or opinions which reinforces their existing radical political views thus isolating them from counter argument and opposing views. Present day algorithms imbedded in the digital media platforms play an important role in throwing the online content to the individual which satisfies their information needs thus leading them to the environment of inclusive discourse. These individuals not only gratify their needs but also share the same information with likeminded groups who share the similar political ideologies. It is believed that echo chambers encourage the propagation of fake news, rumors, propaganda, misleading information etc that lead to polarized groups in the society.

Theme 2: Lack of Digital Media Literacy Skills

The media academics are of the view that present day digital media platforms are cluttered with diverse content and youth is exposed to huge amount of unreliable information which is difficult to sift and make

sense of. It is a great challenge for the youth to understand the underlying meaning of the online content they are exposed to and to differentiate between the propaganda and fact. There is so much fake news and information on the digital platforms that it is hard for the youth to investigate the fact. On the other hand, the academics believe that adequate digital media literacy skills are the only answer to fight these factors. The academics have adequately defined the concept of digital media literacy in line with the academic definitions given by the scholars of this field. They are of the view that ability of the individual to access, create, evaluate, act and reflect are the core capabilities which fall under the concept of digital media literacy. The ability to access indicates that the individual has the capability to access the internet with required hardware/ software components and can carry out routine jobs using the digital platforms. The term create means that the individual can satisfactorily create online content like write and read emails, work with multi media files etc. The capability of critically evaluating is the prime capability of digital media literacy which enable the individual to analyze the media content to sift the truth from the fake. This ability helps the person to understand the motives of the sender of the content, differentiate between propaganda and fact, perform fact checking before coming to a conclusion, critically read between the lines of the intended message etc. The capability of 'Act' implies that the individual knows the importance of working together in groups in a community environment and act responsibly while interacting with others. The ability to 'Reflect' suggests that the individual knows the consequences of indulging in cybercrimes, do not propagate a false or misleading messages on the digital platforms etc. The academics are of the view that present day youth have technical skills to 'access' various digital media platforms and 'create' online content adequately. However, they badly lack the digital media literacy skills particular in the areas of critical evaluation of the online content, reflect and act. This is where they fall prey to the online radical and extremist content which leads to political extremism.

Theme 3: Conspiracy Theories

The Pakistani media academics have also pointed out that the youth heavily believe in the reality of the concept of conspiracy theories. They are of the view that it is a general perception in the society especially among the youth that hidden forces are in control of ever action, good or bad, in the country and nothing can be done to change this phenomenon. The political and democratic changes in the country are brought by these hidden powers and they can apply themselves whenever they want to. These hidden forces are the powerful elite, the government organizations, external forces or sometimes the nexus of all to control the flow of information in the society. These forces create and propagate their agendas over the digital mediums to form a narrative which suits their interests. The media academics believe that digital platforms play an important role in dissemination and proliferation of the hidden agendas and narratives. These narratives are developed and curated in a manner that appeal the masses. These theories also counter the official narrative propagated by the opposing forces thus achieving the planned objectives. Another factor is that these conspiracy theories get more popularity among the youth as they generally challenge the status quo, the normal and points towards the hidden possibilities which are not that very obvious.

Theme 4: Radical Online Content

The academics are of the opinion that the youth is heavily under the influence of large amounts of radical online content propagated through digital platforms. Various online sources, communities, organization, political parties etc tend to propagate misinformation/ disinformation for obvious reasons which is hard to evaluate by the youth. The extremist outfits and political parties exploit the grievances of the youth in their online content that resonates with their existing believes. These grievances are disenchantment with the current political systems, democratic governments not delivering their promises and disillusionment because of lack of opportunities. The young minds are thus more susceptible to this type of radical content and more vulnerable. Sometimes these narratives also target the personal vulnerabilities of the individuals, identity crises, peer pressures and search for the absolute truth. The youth also fall prey to these agendas as they generally look out for alternatives, challenge the existing systems and have the

inherent liking towards revolt. The academics believe that prolong exposure of youth to online radical content while using the various digital platforms could lead them to political extremism.

4. FINDINGS

The data analyses have led the researchers to the following findings:

- a) Under the influence of echo chambers, the youth select those online digital platforms or come across online content that coincides with their existing political views. The algorithms embedded inside the hierarchy of digital platforms also ensures that only that online content is thrown to the viewers which gratifies their existing political ideologies. This factor totally isolates the youth from the available opposing views or ideas thus contributing to political extremism. The youth deliberately try to ignore the diverse views neglecting their authenticity and logical nature.
- b) Lack of digital media literacy skills is another factor which contributes to growing political extremism among the youth. Academics believe that majority of youth have adequate capabilities to engage the various online digital platform, however, they lack the skill of critically evaluating the online media content. They find it difficult to cross check, fact check and understand the underlying meaning of the message they are exposed to. They also lack the skill of reflect and act responsibly while working in online groups and communities.
- c) Strict believe on the aspect of conspiracy theory is another factor which leads the youth towards radicalization. Academics are of the view that there is tendency among the youth that they attribute every evil or bad in the society to the hidden forces. They believe that powerful organizations, elite and groups control the flow of information especially in the digital realm and nothing can be done about it.
- d) The media academics have pointed out that the digital media platforms in the garb information sharing, providing news and their meanings, sometimes share extremist literature and materials, propagate hate speech in the name of freedom of speech. The exposure to such online radical content leads the youth towards political extremism. It also depends on the amount of exposure to the digital platforms. The more the exposure there is a likely that the levels of extremism.

5. DISCUSSION

While recording insights from the media academics, this study has significantly added to the existing body of researches carried out in the similar domain. The media academics have pointed out four aspects of the digital platforms which contribute to the rise in political extremism among the youth. These factors are virtual echo chambers, lack of digital media literacy skills, belief on conspiracy theories propagating on digital realm and abundance of online radical content. The academics are of the view that lack of digital media literacy skill among the youth is the prime reason. They have highlighted that the youth is adequately skilled to interact with digital media platforms in creating and accessing the online content, however, they lack the capability critically evaluate the media message. They find it difficult to understand the underlying meaning of the content they are exposed to and lack the skill of fact checking (Jad Melki, 2017). Also, they are not aware of the consequences of creating content that is not in line with cyber laws and regulations (Turner et al., 2025). The digital media literacy enables them to work responsibly in online groups and communities while understanding its limitations. The academics have suggested steps to arrest these rising tendencies of political extremism in the society. They are discussed in the recommendation section of this study. Most of the recommendations are in line with the studies carried out in the realm of digital media literacy e.g. (Arbab & Arbab Abbasi, 2020), (Nosharwan Arbab Abbasi & Dianlin Huang, 2020), (Mrisho & Dominic, 2023). It is noted that the findings of this study are inline with similar studies like (Ruggeri et al., 2025), (Sundar & Limperos, 2013), (Brückner & Grüner, 2020), (Kruglanski et al., 2014), (Jungkunz, 2022) carried out in this domain.

5.1 Recommendations

In light of the suggestions put forward by the media academics, the study recommends the following to curtail the ever-increasing political extremism among the youth:

- a) Efforts are to be made at national/ provincial government levels to promote the importance of acquiring digital media literacy skills among the masses
- b) There is a need to revise the academic curricula at school, college and university levels while including the media literacy as a subject to be taught to students
- c) The Ministry of Education should make efforts to train the teachers and faculty at all academic levels in the discipline of media literacy
- d) Legislation is required to arrest the growing threat of fake news, hate speech and propaganda on the digital platforms

6. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that political extremism among youth is on the rise in the society. The floods of fake news, misinformation, propaganda, extremist content available on the digital platforms effecting the opinions, perceptions and psychological aspects of the young minds. The study explores that there are various factors which contribute to this rise in political extremism. These factors are virtual echo chambers influencing the thought process of youth, lack of digital media literacy skills possessed by the youth is also another factor which plays a significant role in this aspect. Other factors include large amount of online radical content which promotes political intolerances and lastly the youth's increasing belief on the effectiveness of the conspiracy theories in the society. The study concludes that efforts are to be made at various levels of the governance to enhance the digital media literacy skills of the youth so that the effects of rising political extremism can be curtailed. Some of the studies have also concluded the similar results. Mehmet Karacuka et al in their study of digitalization and political extremism have also concluded that the digital technologies can be blamed to some extent for propagating extremism and radicalization among the people. They have also concluded that levels of education can decrease the levels of extremism in the society (Mehmet Karacuka et al., 2022). The study suggests that there is a need to propagate the importance of digital media literacy among the masses especially the youth so that they become responsible digital citizens in the present digital age.

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Conflict of Interest

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