

Pakistani Mosque Imams' Perspectives on Youth Religious Extremism on Facebook and YouTube: A Diagnostic Survey

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Abstract

Religious extremism remains a persistent challenge in Pakistan, and the growing use of social media has intensified concerns about online radicalization among youth. This study aimed to examine mosque imams' perceptions of the role of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth and to test whether these perceptions differ by place of residence, educational qualification, and years of experience. Guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study employed a diagnostic, survey-based design. Data were collected through a 20-item questionnaire administered to 411 mosque imams from two regions of Punjab. The instrument demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$). Results indicate that a large proportion of respondents believe Facebook and YouTube contribute to the spread of extremist ideologies among youth. Agreement levels were higher among imams in one region of Punjab compared with the other, and perceptions also varied by experience and education. Imams with around ten years of experience reported the strongest agreement. Educational background showed mixed patterns, with Dars-e-Nizami holders more likely to strongly agree, while some Bachelor's degree holders expressed stronger disagreement. Chi-square and one-way ANOVA tests confirmed significant differences across residence, qualification, and experience. The study contributes empirical evidence by foregrounding imams as key informants in understanding online religious extremism. Practically, the findings imply a need for coordinated interventions involving digital literacy, community engagement, and structured collaboration

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between religious leaders, policymakers, and platform stakeholders to strengthen counter-narratives and reduce youth vulnerability.

Keywords

Facebook, mosque imams, religious extremism, social media, Uses and Gratifications Theory, YouTube

Introduction

Religious extremism has become a persistent concern in many parts of the world, and Pakistan is no exception. In a country where over 95% of the population is Muslim, extremist groups have operated for decades, drawing on local, regional, and global dynamics (Gillani 2021; Murphy 2012; Saeed et al 2014). In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube have been repeatedly identified as potential facilitators of radicalization, especially among young people. Against this backdrop, understanding how these platforms shape, amplify, or challenge religious extremism among Pakistani youth is both urgent and necessary.

Social media has become central to everyday communication, offering spaces for discussion, self-expression and connection across ideological and religious lines (Ross & Cappos 2017). These same features, however, can accelerate the spread of extremist ideas, provide low-cost tools for recruitment and create “echo chambers” that normalize radical views (Al-Rashidi 2017; Lazer et al. 2018). At the same time, social media can also host counter-narratives, dialogue and awareness campaigns that challenge extremism.

Religious extremism is commonly understood as rigid, literalist and exclusionary interpretations of religion that encourage intolerance, radicalization and sometimes violence (Al-Khawaja 2017). In Pakistan, this phenomenon has been shaped by historical conflicts, geopolitical rivalries, sectarian tensions and socio-economic inequalities, and has taken the form of various militant and terrorist movements.

Within this wider digital landscape, Facebook and YouTube are particularly influential. Studies show that extremist actors systematically exploit these platforms to disseminate propaganda, recruit followers and build online communities that reinforce extreme views (Hussain 2020; Bekkering 2019). Although both companies have introduced content-moderation policies, algorithmic changes and partnerships to detect and remove extremist material, the effectiveness of these measures remains contested (Kokesh 2017). Social media is therefore a dual-use space: it can promote pluralistic and educational content, but it can also enable the circulation and normalization of extremist ideologies.

Youth are often at the center of these dynamics. A growing body of work links youth vulnerability to extremism with their online experiences. Young people are highly active online and may be especially vulnerable when they experience marginalization, economic insecurity or a search for identity and belonging. Prior research suggests that online exposure to extremist narratives, combined with offline grievances and limited opportunities, can make some young people more receptive to radical ideas and even self-radicalization, without direct contact with organized groups (Rahman 2019; Mahmut 2019). Other studies similarly show that social media, as a primary outlet for youth self-expression, can both foster democratic engagement and generate harmful outcomes (Lane et al 2019; Jaafar & Akhmetova 2020; Apau 2018).

Research in other national contexts reinforces this picture. Among university students in Jordan, platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter and YouTube play a subtle yet powerful role in normalizing and circulating extremist discourse (Khataibeh 2017). In Kosovo, social media has been described as a “weapon” of radicalization and recruitment, especially of young people who are mobilized to fight in Middle Eastern conflicts (Çela 2018). These studies highlight how, in contemporary conflicts, social networks are strategically used to inject extreme religious ideas and operate across both physical and virtual domains.

In South Asia and Muslim-majority contexts, similar patterns have been documented. Talukder & Tanvir (2020) find strong associations between youth radicalization and social media use in Bangladesh. In Pakistan, Ramzan et al. (2020) argue that religious extremism and militancy are deeply rooted, driven by factors such as the expansion of certain madrasas, political instability and systemic injustice. More recent work explicitly links social media to religiously motivated hostility such as Abid et al. (2021) that report a strong relationship between levels of religiosity and posting sectarian hate speech on Facebook.

Overall, this literature demonstrates that social media can amplify religious extremism, particularly among young people, and points to key risk factors such as poverty, weak institutions and prior religious socialization. Although existing studies have examined the role of social media in radicalization and the broader patterns of religious extremism in Pakistan, relatively few have focused on how mosque imams themselves understand the role of Facebook and YouTube in shaping the beliefs and behaviours of youth. Within this context, mosque imams occupy a strategic position. As religious leaders, teachers, and community figures, they provide spiritual guidance, interpret religious texts, and shape everyday religious practice. Many imams actively promote peace, tolerance, and moderation, and some are involved in community outreach and youth work aimed at countering extremist influences. At the same time, there is evidence that certain religious institutions and leaders, in some contexts, have been associated with more rigid or exclusionary discourses. Efforts to counter religious extremism therefore increasingly emphasize the importance of working with imams and other religious leaders to strengthen moderate voices, correct misinterpretations of religious texts, and identify vulnerable individuals at an early stage.

In particular, there is limited empirical evidence on (a) the specific mechanisms through which social networks are perceived to support or undermine religious extremism among Pakistani youth,

and (b) how imams' perceptions vary according to their background characteristics, such as place of residence, educational qualification, and years of experience. This constitutes a key research gap in the current state of the art.

The central problem addressed in this study is the lack of a systematic and empirically grounded understanding of how mosque imams in Pakistan perceive the role of social networks specifically Facebook and YouTube in promoting or reinforcing religious extremism among youth. While religious extremism has become a serious concern and social networks are widely used by young Pakistanis, the perspectives of imams, who have intimate knowledge of youth religious engagement and community dynamics, remain largely undocumented.

This study seeks to address this gap through a diagnostic investigation of mosque imams' views. The specific objectives are (1) to examine mosque imams' perceptions and understanding of the influence of social networks (Facebook and YouTube) on Pakistani youth, particularly in relation to religious extremism; and (2) to identify whether imams' perceptions of the effect of social networks in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth differ according to selected variables of the study, namely place of residence, educational qualification, and years of experience.

In line with these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are mosque imams' observations and understandings of the influence of social networks (Facebook and YouTube) on Pakistani youth in terms of religious extremism? and (2) To what extent do mosque imams' perceptions of the role of social networks in the dissemination of extremist content among Pakistani youth differ according to their place of residence, educational qualification, and years of experience?

To enable statistical testing of differences in perceptions, the study formulates the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant difference in mosque imams' perceptions of the effect of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth according to their place of residence;

H2: There is a significant difference in mosque imams' perceptions of the effect of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth according to their educational qualification; and

H3: There is a significant difference in mosque imams' perceptions of the effect of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth according to their years of experience.

By focusing on mosque imams as key informants, this diagnostic study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it extends the literature on social media and religious extremism by incorporating the views of religious leaders who are directly involved in guiding youth and interpreting religious texts at the community level. It sheds light on how these leaders perceive the mechanisms through which Facebook and YouTube may act as allies or potential counterweights to religious extremism.

This study is grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, a communication perspective that explains how individuals actively select media to satisfy specific needs and desires (Katz et al 1973; Whiting & William 2013). People choose particular media platforms to meet psychological, emotional and social needs such as seeking information or entertainment, expressing opinions and beliefs, or building and maintaining social connections. In this study, the theory provides a lens for understanding how Pakistani youth may use Facebook and YouTube and how these uses relate to their exposure to religious extremism, as perceived by mosque imams.

Method

Research Design

Given the aims of the study, a descriptive and analytical research design was adopted. The study sought to identify the perceived impact of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth, from the viewpoint of mosque imams. A survey method was used to systematically collect imams' opinions on this issue.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised mosque imams in Punjab, Pakistan, specifically from two regions: Upper Punjab and South Punjab. The final sample consisted of 411 mosque imams, with 202 from Upper Punjab and 209 from South Punjab. Participants were selected using simple random sampling to enhance the representativeness of the sample.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher to assess the perceived influence of Facebook and YouTube on promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth. The instrument consisted of 20 items measured on a three-point Likert scale (strongly agree, neutral, strongly disagree), providing respondents with a clear and balanced set of response options.

The questionnaire was developed based on a detailed review of prior literature on social networks and religious extremism. In addition, input from mosque imams was used to ensure that the items were contextually relevant and understandable. A three-point scale was chosen for simplicity, clarity of responses and ease of interpretation within the study context.

Data Collection and Reliability

The finalized questionnaire was distributed to the 411 participating mosque imams and collected after completion. Responses were then entered into a computer for statistical analysis.

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in the relevant field. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.88, indicating good reliability of the scale.

Variables

The study focused on the following key variables: (1) Place of residence; this refers to the region in which the respondent lives and works, categorized as either Upper Punjab or South Punjab in Pakistan.; (2) Years of experience; this variable captures the length of time the imam has been serving in his role. It was measured in ordered categories (5 years, more than 5 years, 10 years and more than 10 years), reflecting different levels of professional experience; and (3) Academic qualification; this refers to the formal educational background of the imam, including certificates, diplomas and degrees obtained from schools, colleges or universities. In this study, qualifications were categorized as Undergraduate, Higher Diploma, Bachelor, and Dars-e-Nizami (considered equivalent to a master's degree).

Statistical Analysis

After data entry, statistical analysis was conducted to summarize and interpret the findings. Descriptive statistics were used to present the distribution of responses and to describe the sample in terms of key variables (e.g., residence, experience, qualifications). Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and one-way ANOVA, were employed where appropriate to examine differences and relationships between groups and variables, in line with the objectives of the study.

Diagnostic Procedures

Prior to full-scale data collection, the questionnaire underwent a diagnostic process to ensure clarity, validity and reliability. This involved (1) Item development: Questions were drafted based on the constructs of interest and aligned with the research objectives; (2) Expert review and refinement: Items were examined for clarity, relevance and alignment with the concept of social media-driven religious extremism; and (3) Reliability testing: Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.88$), confirming that the items reliably measured the intended construct. These steps helped ensure that the instrument accurately captured mosque imams' perspectives and enhanced the overall quality and trustworthiness of the survey findings.

Results

The study examined the impact of social networking sites (Facebook and YouTube) in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth from the viewpoint of mosque imams.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations and significance values for all questionnaire items. The p-value was .000 ($p < 0.05$) for each item, indicating statistically significant perceptions of the impact of Facebook and YouTube. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), along with significance tests, showed that the imams reported a high level of agreement with statements indicating that these platforms contribute to the spread of religious extremism. The findings suggest that, in the opinion of mosque imams, Facebook and YouTube play a substantial role in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth.

Table 1. Description of Mean and Standard Deviation, and Significance Values for the Questionnaire Across the Study Variables

Rank	Paragraph	Mean	Standard deviation	Sig.P. value
1	The treatment of religious extremism subjects by the social media networks affects young individual views trends on faith in Pakistan.	1.3990	.67093	.000
2	The social media networks are more effective to change the conflicting religion notions of Pakistani youth	1.4136	.78037	.000
3	Facebook and YouTube are the cause of diverse(exploding, disharmony) view of religion of youth	1.5523	.73190	.000
4	Facebook network is more influential on extreme religious views as compared to YouTube	1.3090	.62030	.000
5	YouTube network is more effective tool changing discard religion views of young people of Pakistan as compared to Facebook	1.4307	.67494	.000
6	Social network have prominent role in promoting the values of prejudice and fanaticism about the faith among youth of Pakistan	1.1971	.56963	.000
7	Facebook and YouTube are working on religious experts who promote the religious extremism	1.5109	.71346	.000

Table 1. (Continued)

Rank	Paragraph	Mean	Standard deviation	Sig.P. value
8	Social networks are working to promoting more concepts towards extreme ideology among young people of Pakistan	1.6496	.77703	.000
9	Religion lesson on both social networks are presented more neurotic doctrine regarding faith of youth	1.6764	.83806	.000
10	Facebook and YouTube are the enormous tool for propagation of diverse view on faith of youth	1.5109	.67481	.000
11	YouTube and Facebook networks are the main reason for said phenomenon in youth concept of religious views.	1.4526	.62825	.000
12	Social networks are spreading manipulative view of religion which cause of said philosophy among youth	1.6837	.79154	.000
13	Facebook and YouTube have devoted significant area of exposure promoting religious extremism	1.6375	.83664	.000
14	The treatment of religious ideas by the social media networks are following the youth without verifying them.	1.6302	.79906	.000
15	The visual representation related extreme view of religion on YouTube more accepted in youth	1.4307	.63778	.000

Table 1. (Continued)

Rank	Paragraph	Mean	Standard deviation	Sig.P. value
16	The social networks are beneficial tool of religious information for the young people of Pakistan	1.3066	.67240	.000
17	Facebook and YouTube promote the effective program awareness raising about religion	1.3333	.54846	.000
18	Social media networks are promoting radical views of religion among youth	1.3942	.54133	.000
19	Social networks sites can provide young individual different opportunities, distributing extremism.	1.4185	.73587	.000
20	Social network sites are presentation any dialogues that cause of curbing religious extremism among young people of Pakistan	1.4915	.59412	.000

Figure 1 shows that youth in South Punjab are more influenced by social media in relation to religious extremism than youth in Upper Punjab. In South Punjab, the proportion reporting a high level of influence (around 60%) clearly exceeds those reporting low or average levels. In contrast, in Upper Punjab the impact of social media networks is generally reported at an average level.

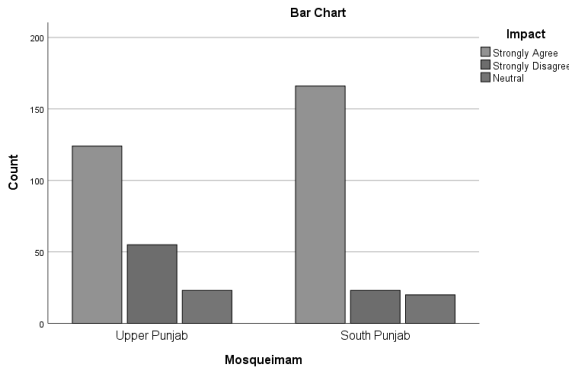


Figure 1. Degree of the Perceived Impact of Facebook and YouTube in Promoting Religious Extremism Among Youth

Figure 2 shows that more than 60% of respondents perceive YouTube as having a strong impact on young people in Pakistan. Extremist groups use YouTube to share radical content, recruit followers and spread their ideologies, raising serious concerns about the role of online platforms in amplifying extremist messages. These findings underscore the need for the government to balance freedom of expression with effective measures to counter religious extremism in Pakistan.

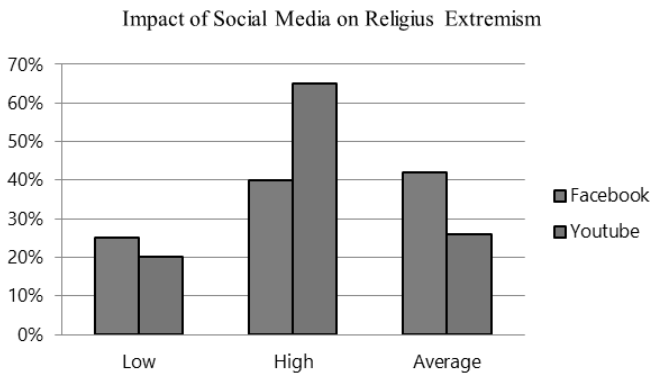


Figure 2. Comparative Degree of the Perceived Impact of Facebook and YouTube in Promoting Religious Extremism

H1: There is a significant difference in mosque imams' perceptions of the impact of social networks (Facebook and YouTube) on promoting religious extremism among youth, based on their place of residence

Table 2 shows that 79.4% of imams from South Punjab and 61.4% from Upper Punjab *strongly agreed* that social networks (Facebook and YouTube) promote religious extremism among youth. South Punjab is relatively less developed than Upper Punjab, and imams there reported an especially strong influence of social media in fostering religious extremism among young people in Pakistan.

Table 2. Crosstabulation of Mosque Imams' Views on Impact by Place of Residence

Variable	Impact			Total
	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	Neutral	
Upper Punjab	124 _a 61.4%	55 _b 27.2%	23 _{a, b} 11.4%	202 100.0%
South Punjab	166 _a 79.4%	23 _b 11.0%	20 _{a, b} 9.6%	209 100.0%
Total	290 70.6%	78 19.0%	43 10.5%	411 100.0%

A chi-square test was applied and showed a significant difference in the proportions ($\chi^2 = 19.307$, $p < 0.05$). These results indicate a statistically significant association between place of residence and mosque imams' views on the impact of social networks in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth. Thus, the findings support hypothesis H1.

	Nature
Chi-Square	19.307a
Df	2
Asymptotic Sig	.000

Table 3 shows a statistically significant difference in mosque imams’ perceptions of the impact of social media networks (Facebook and YouTube) on promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth. Using a one-way ANOVA, the analysis yielded a mean square of 400, an F value of 9.1 and a significance level of $p = .003$, indicating that place of residence is associated with differing views on this impact.

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA

Impact					
Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.050	1	4.050	9.177	.003
Within Groups	180.510	409	.441		
Total	184.560	410			

H2: There is a significant difference in the perceived impact of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism, based on mosque imams’ educational qualifications

Table 4 shows that mosque imams with 10 years of experience reported the highest level of concern, with 80.2% *strongly agreeing* that Facebook and YouTube promote religious extremism. Among those with more than 10 years of experience, 72% *strongly agreed* with this statement. These findings suggest that imams’ professional

experience offers valuable insight into the phenomenon and shapes their views on the impact of social media networks in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth.

Table 4. Crosstabulation of Mosque Imams' Perceived Impact by Experience Level

Variable	Impact			
	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	Neutral	Total
5 years	54 67.5%	16 20.0%	10 12.5%	80 100.0%
More than 5 years	53 51.5%	37 35.9%	13 12.6%	103 100.0%
10 years	77 80.2%	11 11.5%	8 8.3%	96 100.0%
More than 10 years	95 72.0%	28 21.2%	9 6.8%	132 100.0%
Total	279 67.9%	92 22.4%	40 9.7%	411 100.0%

The chi-square test was used to examine the association between experience level and perceived impact. The results showed a significant difference across experience groups ($\chi^2 = 23.264$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that imams' years of experience are significantly related to their views on the impact of social media in promoting religious extremism.

	Nature
Chi-Square	23.264a
Df	6
Asymptotic Sig	.001

Table 5 presents the one-way ANOVA results. This test assesses whether there are statistically significant differences between group means. When the variation between groups is significantly greater than the variation within groups, it indicates real differences in means. The ANOVA results here show a significant difference among the groups, with $F = 4.9$ and $p = .002$ ($p < 0.05$).

Table 5. One -Way ANOVA

Impact					
Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	6.377	3	2.126	4.983	.002
Within Groups	173.642	407	.427		
Total	180.019	410			

Figure 3 shows that mosque imams with more than 10 years of experience are most likely to *strongly agree* that social media networks (Facebook and YouTube) promote religious extremism among Pakistani youth. This highlights the importance of experience in shaping imams’ opinions and underscores the weight their perspectives carry in understanding how social media is perceived within the wider society.

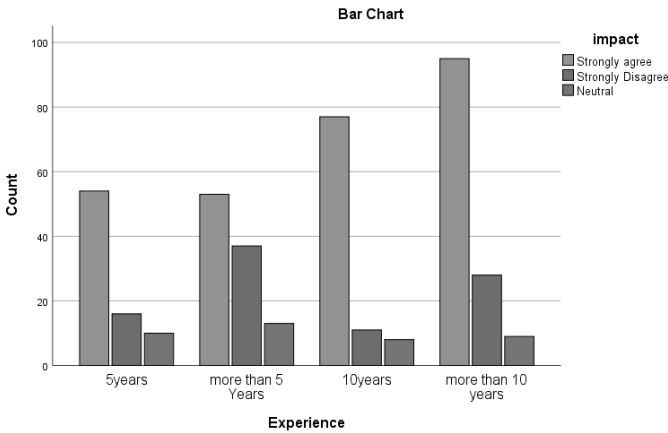


Figure 3. Degree of the Perceived Impact of Facebook and YouTube in Promoting Religious Extremism by Experience Level

H3: There is a significant difference in the perceived impact of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth, based on mosque imams’ years of experience

Table 6 shows how mosque imams’ educational backgrounds relate to their opinions about the role of Facebook and YouTube in promoting religious extremism among Pakistani youth. Among imams with a Dars-e-Nizami qualification (equivalent to a Master’s degree), 30.3% strongly agreed that these social networks promote religious extremism. In contrast, 32.7% of those with a Bachelor’s degree strongly disagreed. Imams with a Higher Diploma were more divided, with 50.0% taking a neutral position.

Table 6. Crosstabulation of Impact by Education Level of Mosque Imams

		Education				Total
		Undergraduate	Higher Diploma	Bachelor	Dars e Nizami	
Effects	Strongly agree	34 15.4%	54 24.4%	66 29.9%	67 30.3%	221 100.0%
	Strongly Disagree	21 21.4%	28 28.6%	32 32.7%	17 17.3%	98 100.0%
	Neutral	16 17.4%	46 50.0%	23 25.0%	7 7.6%	92 100.0%
	Total	71 17.3%	128 31.1%	121 29.4%	91 22.1%	411 100.0%

The chi-square test assesses the strength of association between variables by comparing the expected distribution of data with the observed distribution, and determines whether any differences are statistically significant. The results indicate a significant difference for the variable of experience, with a chi-square value of $\chi^2 = 32.780^a$ and an asymptotic p-value less than 0.05.

	Nature
Chi-Square	32.780a
Df	6
Asymptotic Sig	.000

Table 7 presents the statistical results of the one-way ANOVA. A one-way ANOVA is used to determine whether there are statistically significant differences among group means. When the variation between groups is significantly larger than the variation within groups, it suggests that at least one group mean differs from the others.

In this case, the ANOVA results indicate a significant difference among the groups, with an F-value of 10.4 and a significance (Sig.) value of .000, which is less than 0.05.

Table 7. One-Way ANOVA

Impact	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	19.416	3	6.472	10.407	.000
Within Groups	253.095	407	.622		
Total	272.511	410			

Figure 4 shows that mosque imams with a Dars-e-Nizami background (equivalent to a Master's degree) strongly agree that social media networks such as Facebook and YouTube promote religious extremism among Pakistani youth. Imams with a Bachelor's degree also tend to strongly agree with this view.

An individual's level of education can influence their opinions: higher education among mosque imams may contribute to stronger critical thinking skills, greater exposure to diverse perspectives, and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, as well as its religious and cultural context. However, it is important to note that opinions are multifaceted and shaped by many factors, including personal experiences, cultural background, and religious beliefs. Education plays a key role, but it is not the sole determinant of a mosque imam's perspective as a religious figure.

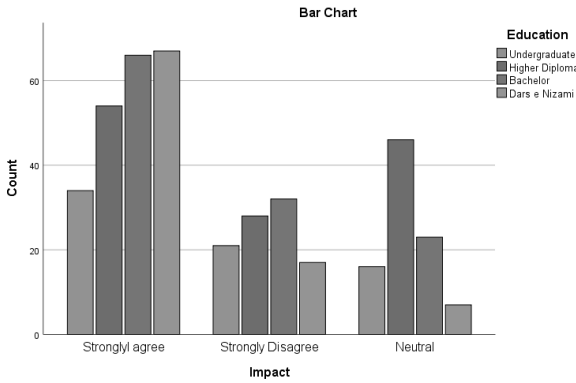


Figure 4. Mosque Imams’ Views on the Impact of Facebook and YouTube in Promoting Religious Extremism by Their Level of Education

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that mosque imams in Pakistan generally perceive Facebook and YouTube as playing a significant role in promoting religious extremism among youth. Many respondents, particularly those with Dars-e-Nizami and higher educational qualifications, strongly agreed that these platforms facilitate the circulation of extremist messages, provide avenues for recruitment, and accelerate the spread of radical narratives. This overall pattern is consistent with previous research showing that social media can amplify extremist discourse, create echo chambers, and normalize radical views among young users (Al-Rashidi 2017; Lazer et al. 2018; Tanvir et al. 2020; Mudaser et al. 2021). At the same time, imams also implicitly acknowledged the dual nature of these platforms, which aligns with studies emphasizing that Facebook and YouTube can simultaneously host counter-narratives, educational materials, and peace-oriented content (Ross & Cappos 2017; Daniel 2019; Jaafar 2020).

The findings also resonate with research from other contexts. Studies in Jordan and Kosovo, for example, have shown that platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube are used to circulate extremist discourse and mobilize youth for conflict (Khataibeh 2017; Lyra 2018). Similar patterns have been documented in South Asia, where youth and religious students are identified as key targets in early stages of radicalization (Khan 2017; Tanvir et al. 2020). The perceptions of Pakistani mosque imams reported here support this broader literature: respondents clearly indicated that Facebook and YouTube are seen as important channels through which extremist content reaches young people, often with limited critical filtering. In line with Abid et al. (2021) and Mudaser et al. (2021), who link social media use to sectarian hate speech and the wide circulation of violent content, the imams in this study described these platforms as central to contemporary radicalization dynamics.

At the same time, the results highlight important differences in perceptions across imams' background characteristics. The study found statistically significant variation in views according to years of experience, educational qualification and place of residence, confirming all three hypotheses (H1–H3). More experienced imams and those with higher religious qualifications (such as Dars-e-Nizami) were more likely to see Facebook and YouTube as contributing to extremism, whereas some imams with lower formal qualifications expressed relatively less alarm or adopted more neutral positions. This pattern may reflect the role of education in cultivating critical thinking, a deeper understanding of religious sources and a clearer ability to distinguish between moderate and extremist interpretations. It may also indicate that more experienced imams, who have had longer and closer contact with communities and youth, are more exposed to the practical consequences of online radicalization in their day-to-day work.

Regional differences further enrich this picture. In South Punjab—where social, cultural and religious dynamics are particularly pronounced—imams emphasized that social media

networks strongly shape young people's religious views and attitudes toward extremism. Facebook and YouTube were described as key spaces in which youth encounter religious content, engage in debates and form impressions of religious leaders and movements. In Upper Punjab, the study likewise found that social media influences youth perceptions and that imams recognize these platforms as important arenas where both constructive and extremist narratives compete. Across both regions, imams identified social media as a powerful force in shaping how youth think about religion, authority and legitimacy, although the intensity and framing of concern varied with local context and personal experience.

Taken together, these findings support and extend Uses and Gratifications Theory as the study's theoretical lens. The theory posits that individuals actively choose media to satisfy specific needs—such as information, identity, belonging or entertainment. The imams' accounts suggest that Pakistani youth use Facebook and YouTube to search for religious guidance, connect with like-minded peers and express their beliefs, but that these same gratifications can be exploited by extremist actors. The platforms meet genuine psychological and social needs, yet in doing so may expose youth to rigid, literalist or exclusionary interpretations of religion. By foregrounding the perceptions of mosque imams, the study adds the perspective of religious authorities who observe how youth media choices intersect with their offline grievances, aspirations and religious socialization.

The results have several practical implications. First, they underscore the importance of involving mosque imams in strategies to counter online extremism. As respected community figures, imams can help produce and promote credible counter-narratives on Facebook and YouTube, guide youth toward reliable religious content and challenge misinterpretations that circulate online. Second, the findings point to the need for digital literacy and critical media education, especially in regions such as South and Upper Punjab. Youth—and indeed religious leaders themselves—require

skills to evaluate online information, recognize manipulative content and resist recruitment efforts. Third, the variation in perceptions by education and experience suggests that training programs for imams could be tailored to strengthen their understanding of social media dynamics, algorithmic amplification and online radicalization pathways, equipping them to respond more effectively in sermons, counselling and community outreach.

At the policy level, the study supports calls for a more holistic approach that combines platform regulation, community engagement and religious leadership. While companies such as Facebook and YouTube have introduced content-moderation and reporting mechanisms, the imams' perceptions indicate that extremist material still circulates widely. Collaborative initiatives between state institutions, civil society, technology companies and religious leaders may therefore be necessary to monitor harmful content, amplify peace-oriented messages and ensure that measures against extremism do not inadvertently suppress legitimate religious expression.

This study also has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the data are based on mosque imams' perceptions rather than direct measures of youth behavior or radicalization outcomes. Imams are key informants with valuable insight, but their views may be influenced by personal experiences, theological orientations or generational gaps with youth. Second, the sample is geographically limited (primarily to regions of Punjab) and may not fully capture the diversity of imams' perspectives across all provinces, sects or institutional settings in Pakistan. Third, the study focuses on Facebook and YouTube, even though many young people also use other platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram, which may operate with different affordances and risks. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between social media use and religious extremism.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how mosque imams perceive the influence of Facebook and YouTube on religious extremism among Pakistani youth and to determine whether these perceptions differ by place of residence, educational qualification, and years of experience. Based on the findings, the study concludes that most imams view Facebook and YouTube as influential platforms that can facilitate the spread of extremist ideas among youth. In particular, respondents highlighted that these networks may enable the rapid circulation of extremist messages, support recruitment efforts, and strengthen radical viewpoints through repeated exposure to like-minded content and online echo chambers.

The results also directly address the second objective: imams' perceptions vary significantly across background characteristics. The statistical evidence indicates meaningful differences in views based on residence, education, and experience, suggesting that how imams interpret the impact of social media is shaped by both social context and professional or educational exposure.

This conclusion should be considered in light of several limitations. The study is based on imams' perceptions rather than direct measurement of youth behavior or platform-content analysis. The sample appears to be geographically concentrated, which may limit broader generalization across Pakistan. In addition, the focus on Facebook and YouTube excludes other rapidly growing platforms that may also shape youth religious attitudes.

Future research should expand the geographic scope and include imams from diverse sectarian and institutional contexts. Studies that incorporate the perspectives of youth, parents, and educators would provide a more comprehensive picture. Mixed-method approaches combining surveys, interviews, and systematic analysis of online content would also help clarify how specific forms of extremist material circulate and how algorithmic exposure may influence attitudes over time. Longitudinal research could further strengthen

understanding of whether and how social media usage contributes to shifts in beliefs and behaviors related to religious extremism.

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