

Impact of Anonymity and Perceived Safety on Youth in Joining Radical Groups and Propagating Digital Fascism

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Abstract

In this digitized world, anonymity on social platforms allows freedom of expression but this has also led to the evolution of extreme ideas like digital fascism. This paper explores how digital fascism propagates because of anonymity and perceived safety online since people can avoid being traced back to their real selves and avoid any accountability for their actions. The Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects theory, used in this study investigates how anonymity and perceived safety are associated with an increased likelihood of people joining online radical groups and propagating digital fascism given that people can disassociate with their identities and follow the collective ideologies of those groups. The methodology for the research was quantitative and used purposive sampling (n=272) of the students from the government universities of Lahore for the online survey. They were selected based on their usage of social networking sites who were between the ages of 18 to 25 years. An online Google Forms questionnaire was used as a tool that recorded the respondents' frequency of using social media, the effect of anonymity coupled with perceived safety, their willingness to share fascist content, join radical groups, and follow their activities. The data was gathered and then analyzed with the help of SPSS software. The findings revealed that the participants who choose to remain anonymous are more likely to propagate fascist material and those who perceive anonymity as safety will likely join online groups that promote fascist content.

Keywords: Digital Fascism, Anonymity, Radical Groups, Perceived Safety, Social Media

Introduction

One of the most important characteristics of the digital age is users' ability to express their opinions through social networks without revealing their identity. On one hand, this creates opportunities for freedom of speech and privacy but on the other hand, it becomes a concern as it fosters the diffusion of radical thoughts such as digital fascism. Digital fascism is a process in which people create and spread fascist ideologies using digital platforms. Anonymity is known to play a huge role in enhancing the spread of fascist content on social media platforms because of the perceived safety as people know that they will not face any consequences for their activities. It also facilitates the aggregation of groups that promote fascist ideologies that can be used to damage social and democratic stability. Online fascist communities create and share fascist content among various platforms to be consumed by users to increase their reach and conversion. (Clark-Gordon, 2019; Mirrlees, 2019; Stephens, 2023).

Digital fascism in real life leads to divisions at political and social levels and increases acts of hatred and even terrorism. This can get worse especially when social media platforms are unable to eliminate all forms of negative content. The absence of moderation and anonymity on social media play a huge role in this problem as it is difficult for these fascist communities to be stopped and the people behind them to be identified. Social media plays a huge role in the downfall of societies as considered by 64% of Americans, who believe that social networks have a negative effect on societies because they are used to spread fake news and hatred (Auxier, 2020; Fielitz & Marcks, 2019; Jhaver et al., 2023; Stephens, 2023).

Digital fascism breeds online hatred that can lead to offline violence, for instance, during COVID-19 citizens in America attacked an 89-year-old Chinese woman in Brooklyn and stabbed two Asian American women in San Francisco as they blamed them for spreading the virus. The Easter bombing in Sri Lanka in 2019 was organized through social media by fascist groups (Ahmed et al., 2020; Alba, 2021; BBC News, 2021; Pertwee et al., 2022; Sas et al., 2020). Thus, the need to understand the role of anonymity and perceived safety in spreading digital fascism and joining fascist groups is important.

Looking through the lens of the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects, the study seeks to discover how anonymity and the influence of group settings influence people's behavior while using the internet. In anonymous environments, users are likely to have less sense of obligation for what they are stating or posting and that is why such places become suitable for the radicalization of more people as well as their conversion (Spears, 2017).

Research Objectives

- To examine the relationship between anonymity and perceived safety and the sharing of fascist content online among undergraduate students.
- To investigate the association between anonymity and perceived safety with undergraduate students' willingness to join online groups that support fascism.

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent are anonymity and perceived safety related to university students' engagement in sharing fascist content on social media?

RQ2: How are anonymity and perceived safety associated with students' willingness to join online radical groups that support fascism?

Research Hypotheses

H_{1a}: There is a positive association between social media users' anonymity and their likelihood of propagating fascist content.

H_{1b}: There is a positive association between social media users' anonymity and their likelihood of joining radical groups.

H_{2a}: Students who perceive anonymity as safety are more likely to propagate fascist content.

H_{2b}: Students who perceive anonymity as safety are more likely to join radical groups.

Literature Review

The literature review provides studies on the topics of digital fascism, anonymity, perceived safety, and joining online radicalism and is categorized into themes. This paper discusses the latest concepts and theories, as well as frameworks and studies published between 2018 and 2024.

Digital Fascism, Anonymity, and Perceived Safety

Fascism started as a political movement first, then turned into a cultural factor that continued over time and has now entered the contemporary world. Today, it is more visible in the form of attitudes and behaviors instead of the organized rallies that helped the far-right and conservative movements. Digital fascism refers to the idea of the far-right and fascist agenda spread through social networking sites that are authoritarian, ultra nationalistic, and oppressive in nature (Mirrlees 2019). Anonymity means the quality or condition of being unknown or not recognizable. This idea arises from the roots of the Greek word *anonymia*, which translates to "without a name." Anonymity frees people from

their normally expected social roles thus making them act in more extreme and antisocial manners (Asenbaum, 2018).

Perceived safety is a psychological concept that defines how safe an individual feels in a certain environment which may affect his/her actions or choices. In the case of social media platforms where people feel safe when they are anonymous, perceived safety can lead the users to post or interact with hate speech or negative content that supports fascism without fear of facing any social or legal repercussions (Citron & Norton, 2019; Jaidka et al., 2022; Kim, 2019; Márquez et al., 2019).

By using social media networks, radical content is propagated especially those where people can operate under a pseudonym or anonymously. These forums and channels including 4chan, Telegram, and Reddit do not require users to give real-life identification, making them feel invincible. Also, the current algorithms of social networks promote content that causes a high level of user response, be it positive or negative, this increases the circulation of radical materials (Barrett, 2024; Jaidka et al., 2022).

Anonymity and Digital Fascism in Developing Countries

It can be observed that the characteristics of fascism in developing countries like Pakistan are more than those in the developed world. It is seen that despite the general perception that most people with fascist ideologies are illiterate, they possess university degrees as well. It is estimated that schools and universities are used as a recruiting ground for these groups, thus projecting the quality of education and fascism. Violent extremism (VE) is one of the most devastating social challenges to humankind and security which has continued to increase, especially in developing nations through the use of the exploding internet social media. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are used as solid grounds by fascists to prey upon youngsters and spread their messages. The Easter bombing in Sri Lanka in 2019 was organized through social media, which is an example of this problem. Anonymity has been a major factor in the global rise of online radicalization. Anonymity reduces accountability and increases users' participation in harmful activities. It means that it contributes to free expression and engagement-focused algorithms increase people's activities, it also fosters the growth of fascist and other extreme views which can result in online and offline violence (Amit et al., 2021; Barrett, 2024; Sas et al., 2020).

Digital Fascism in Real Life

China, Russia, and North Korea have authoritarian governments that use technology for implementing strict political influence and oppressing opposition and freedom of speech by limiting or blocking access to the World

Wide Web and analyzing the online activities of their citizens. In the real world, the perceived safety due to anonymity can be dangerous which can lead to cyberbullying, which is an extreme form of bullying that is used by people on the web to harass others. Ryan Halligan, an American student ended his life after being constantly harassed and bullied by his fellow students on social media. Likewise, Sladjana Vidovic was a victim of bullying due to her ethnicity and different accent which made her commit suicide at 16 years old (Chandel et al., 2019; Cohen-Almagor, 2020; Park, 2019; Ricks, 2022; Wijermars, 2022).

Digital fascism can also make social media platforms a ground for cyberterrorism as well as the cultivation of conspiracy theories. A major example of conspiracy theories that gained popularity among people on social media was the COVID-19 pandemic. These theories gave rise to extreme ideologies which surged further and raised concerns and fear about the virus among people. The social mobilization of false claims related to the source and safety of the virus and the vaccine harmed public credibility and resulted in many anti-lockdown demonstrations and even violence. One of the worst events that happened in the recent past is the increase in violence against Asians in the real world during the COVID-19 pandemic which triggered hatred and violence. The radical groups on Telegram and 4-chan platforms united like-minded individuals to promote hatred among Asians and stated that they were the reason behind the creation of the virus which made people attack them. This online hatred led to offline violence, for instance, the attack on an 89-year-old Chinese woman in Brooklyn and the stabbing of two Asian American women in San Francisco (Ahmed et al., 2020; Alba, 2021; BBC News, 2021; Pertwee et al., 2022).

The use of social media has been found to play a major role in the radicalization of youths in Pakistan. Research shows that with close to 30 million users across the country, social sites such as Facebook facilitate the radicalization of youths (Warraich et al; 2023). NACTA's study shows how terrorist organizations use social media to spread their message and enlist people. The real-life cases like Noureen Jabbar Laghari and Bushra Cheema fit into this category to show that youth is vulnerable to radicalization online (Hanfi, 2022; Khan et al, 2016; Web Desk, 2017). The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has benefited from covering its communication and radicalization operations in digital media and social networks, among others (Al Abd, 2022). Also, civil liberties have been slightly hampered by the government's increasing crackdown on freedom of speech and expression on the Internet via its restrictions of freedom of speech on websites such as X (previously, Twitter) and restrictions on the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). These actions which are aimed at reducing the content of extremism may also work to suppress actual dialogue and information. Therefore, the ever-growing reach of social media, its

misappropriation by terrorist organizations, and governmental actions on the digital front are important in understanding youth radicalization in Pakistan (Ahmad, 2024; Iram et al; 2022).

Solving this problem requires a differentiated approach that would foster the protection of certain sectors and digital liberties at the same time.

Strategies for Countering Digital Fascism

Media sensitivity and rationality are essential for fighting digital fascism since these provide a way of distinguishing between facts and lies which can help in combating disinformation. Social media must allow for the moderation of the content being uploaded as well as the fairness of the algorithms to recommend safe content to the users. When society allows persons to openly share their opinions on the internet without discriminating against each other, negativity arising from hate speech and radicalism will be reduced. Approaches for intervention like the Redirect Method (RM) and GLYPH technology can be used to tackle the problems created by digital fascism as these can help in re-targeting online searches for extreme content and preventing the re-uploading of reported materials (Amit et al., 2021; Barrett, 2024; Nuffield Foundation, 2021; Rea, 2022).

To the researcher's knowledge, no prior research has considered anonymity and digital fascism together. In the context of developing countries such as Pakistan, knowledge of how digital fascism works is very limited primarily because of cultural, social, and political disparities in contrast to developed countries where more literature is available. This work intends to fill the existing research gap in the literature by examining the relationship between anonymity and safety perception and their consequences on the psychological and behavioral responses of the youth in their consumption, sharing, and dissemination of fascist content. The research focuses on university students in Pakistan as this group is under-researched in this regard and therefore adds to the debate on anonymity and perceived safety that feeds extremism in the developing world. Therefore, the study is relevant for policymakers, educators, stakeholders, and developers of social media platforms. Such awareness can enable policymakers and educators to develop awareness and intervention programs, which will aid in preventing the growth of fascist content, hence enabling stable societies and democracy.

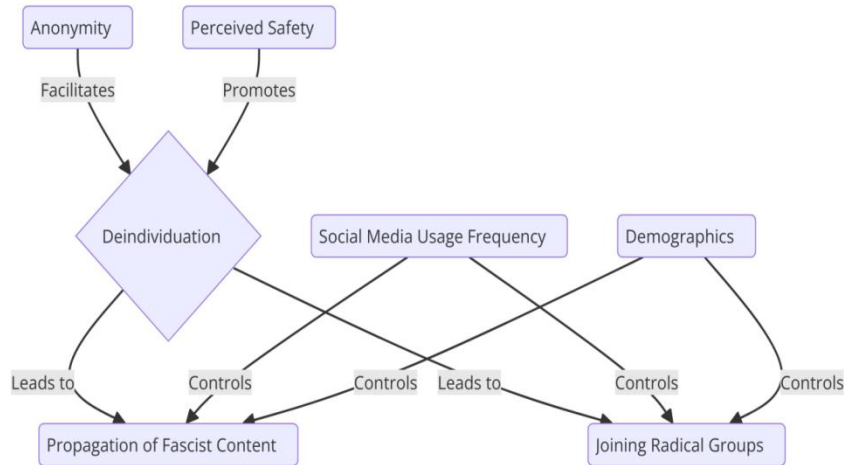
Theoretical Framework

SIDE (Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects) was developed by Martin Lea and Russell Spears back in 1992, which builds on the social identity theory. It focuses on the effects of anonymity and social isolation in group

settings on people's behavior within the digital world. According to SIDE, a person can detach from their identity and is inclined to follow the standards of the group that he or she wants to belong to. This deindividuation that is caused by anonymity makes a person reduce his or her personal accountability, which can cause them to show increased radical behaviors that mirror the collective identity of the group (Lea & Spears, 2001; Spears, 2017).

In virtual environments, particularly in social networks, anonymity changes the understanding of one's personality and social identity, making the person more receptive to the influence of radical groups (Lea & Spears, 2001; Tajfel, & Turner, 1985). This is especially the case in fascism, in which people can participate or support immoral content by following the group's identity. The SIDE model is relevant for this research with regards to how students from government universities studying in Lahore use anonymity under the influence of perceived safety post fascist content on the internet and become members of specific groups.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Note: The conceptual model illustrates the mediating role of deindividuation between anonymity and perceived safety, and their influence on propagating fascist content and joining radical groups, moderated by social media usage frequency and demographics.

Research Methodology

The purpose of this study was to find out the relationship between anonymity and perceived safety with the propagation of digital fascism among university students in Lahore, Pakistan.

Research Design

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional survey under positivist epistemology to find out if anonymity prompts people to join radical online groups and share fascist content on social media platforms.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

According to HEC, the amount of undergraduate university students in the five chosen universities is approximately 10,000, which means the total population would be around 50,000 (Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, 2022). A sample size of 272 was taken by using a sample size calculator with a 90% confidence level that ensured representativeness while maintaining feasibility.

A sample size calculator is a tool that enables a researcher to establish an accurate sample size to represent a given population within a specific confidence level and a given margin of error (Calculator.net)

For this study, the government universities were selected on the basis of their ranking according to the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan. They offered subjects that are, similar to digital data skills technical skills, or digital communication (Bureau of Statistics, 2021; HEC, 2022). A purposive sampling technique was used in the study to select the participants who use social media often and belong to diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Demographic Characteristics

Participants were selected based on their high level of usage of social media and varied demographic characteristics as they were from different cities, thus making them suitable subjects. The rationale for choosing the age range of the youth from 18-25 instead of expanding it up to 35 is based on prior studies that people in this age group are most likely to be active on social networking sites and likely to experiment with different social and political values. This group is also easily influenced and vulnerable to peer influence when using the internet (Baltes & Smith, 2004; Maclean et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2012).

Demographics of the Sample

The sample included n=272 undergraduate students (155 female, 117 male) aged between 18 and 25 (mean age = 20.4 years; SD = 1.92) who were selected

through purposive sampling technique from different government universities in Lahore. Most of the participants were from social sciences (38.9%), humanities (19.5%) and technical sciences (19.1%). The remaining (22.5%) students belonged to other disciplines.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

| Characteristic | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Gender | - | |
| Male | 117 | 43.0 |
| Female | 155 | 57.0 |
| Age | - | - |
| 18-20 years | 140 | 51.5 |
| 21-23 years | 100 | 36.8 |
| 24-25 years | 32 | 11.7 |
| Discipline | - | - |
| Social Sciences | 106 | 38.9 |
| Humanities | 53 | 19.5 |
| Technical Sciences | 52 | 19.1 |
| Others | 61 | 22.5 |

Instruments and Measures

In order to assess the identified variables, the study used validated scales. Anonymity was measured using the ASD scale (Anonymity and Strength Differential Scale by Barlett and Gentile (2012). Perceived Safety of Anonymity was measured by using the Perceived Psychological Safety scale that was developed by Zhang et al., (2010). The scale for The Propagation of Fascist Content was evaluated by the Online Disinhibition Scale developed by Udris (2014). Categorization in Online Groups/Forums Discussing Fascist Ideologies was measured using Brown et al., (1995) Group Identification Scale (GIS). All of these scales used a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistency, of these scales was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha, with the ASD scale showing an alpha of .58, the perceived psychological safety scale at .89, the Online Disinhibition Scale at .83, and the GIS at .84. The alpha of .58 in ASD scale is not very high but it is in agreement with the context specific results. Unlike other research that may seek to achieve maximum accuracy, this study focused on the findings that were obtained from the data. This practical approach is consistent with the study aims and recognizes that anonymity is subjectively lived through by the sample group.

Data Collection and Analysis

The survey was administered online and the data was collected through Google Forms. All the participants were approached through social networks to become participants of the study, they were informed about the goal of the study, and their anonymity was ensured. It took about 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Participants were asked to indicate their average frequency of social media usage and answer the questions that helped them understand the moderating role of anonymity in the relationship between social media usage and the impact of anonymity on the dissemination of fascist content. The demographic data of the participants was analyzed by using descriptive statistics while Spearman correlation analysis was used to measure the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

This research applied Spearman's correlation to test the relationship between the variables because it is ideal for use when dealing with ordinal data as was the case with the survey responses. This work is consistent with the study's initial objectives of examining each of the variables separately.

Findings

This section presents the results of the study on the propagation of digital fascism among university students in Lahore according to their social media usage frequencies. This study analyzed the data using Spearman correlation analysis.

Frequency of Social Media Use

The social media usage frequency was assessed first by using an ordinal scale with five categories. Due to the uneven distribution of responses, these were reclassified into three categories: (1) lower frequency (less than 2 hours per day), (2) medium frequency (2-4 hours per day), and (3) higher frequency (more than 4 hours per day). The reclassification revealed that 20.6% of participants reported lower frequency use, 39.0% medium-frequency use, and 40.4% higher frequency use as mentioned in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of Social Media Use (N = 272)

| Frequency Category | Number of Participants (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|----------------------------|----------------|
| Lower Frequency (less than 2 hours/day) | 56 | 20.6% |
| Medium Frequency (2-4 hours/day) | 106 | 39.0% |

| | | |
|--|-----|-------|
| Higher Frequency (more than 4 hours/day) | 110 | 40.4% |
|--|-----|-------|

Spearman Correlation between Variables

Spearman’s correlation test was used to measure the strength and the significance of the relationships between the variables.

Table 4: Correlation between Anonymity and Propagating Fascist Content

| | | | Anonymity | Fascist Content |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Spearman's rho | Anonymity | Correlation | 1.000 | .560** |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | | N | 270 | |
| | Fascist Content | Correlation | .560** | 1.000 |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | | N | 270 | |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings suggest that anonymity has a significant and moderate positive relationship with sharing fascist material with Spearman’s correlation coefficient, with $r(268) = .56, p < .001$. This shows that individuals are more likely to spread fascist content on social media when their higher levels of anonymity increase. The calculated significance value ($p = .000$) supports the hypothesis which demonstrates that anonymity plays a huge role in the sharing of fascist ideas on social media platforms.

Table 5: Correlation between Anonymity and Joining Radical Groups

| | | | Anonymity | Joining Radical Groups |
|----------------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------|------------------------|
| Spearman's rho | Anonymity | Correlation | 1.000 | .480** |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | | N | 270 | |
| | Joining Radical Groups | Correlation | .480* | 1.000 |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | | N | 270 | |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results show that there is a significant and moderate positive correlation between anonymity and joining radical groups, with Spearman’s correlation coefficient of $r(268) = .48, p < .001$. This signifies that the youth who have

increased levels of anonymity are more likely to join radical groups which also supports the hypothesis.

Table 6: Correlation between Perceived Safety and Propagating Fascist Content

| | | | Perceived Safety | Fascist Content |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Spearman's rho | Perceived Safety | Correlation | 1.000 | .530** |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | | N | 270 | |
| | Fascist Content | Correlation | .530** | 1.000 |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | | N | 270 | |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results demonstrate a significant and moderate positive correlation between perceived safety and propagation of fascist content, with Spearman's correlation coefficient of $r(268) = .53, p < .001$. This proved the hypothesis as it means that the students who perceive that they are safe because of anonymity are more likely to propagate fascist content online.

Table 7: Correlation between Perceived Safety and Joining Radical Groups

| | | | Perceived Safety | Joining Radical Groups |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Spearman's rho | Anonymity | Correlation | 1.000 | .500** |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | | N | 270 | |
| | Perceived Safety | Correlation | .500** | 1.000 |
| | | Coefficient | | |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | | N | 270 | |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results indicate a significant and moderate positive correlation between perceived safety and joining of radical groups, with Spearman's correlation coefficient of $r(268) = .50, p < .001$. This shows that the students who believe that their safety is enhanced because of anonymity are more likely to join radical groups, which proves the hypothesis.

Discussion

This study investigates the relationships that exist between anonymity, perceived safety, the joining of radical groups, and the propagation of digital fascism by undergraduate university students in Lahore. The survey-based study examines how these factors correlate with each other. The findings discuss and address the research objectives and hypotheses of the study. The frequency analysis showed that the majority of respondents were active social media users, with 40.4% who used it for more than 4 hours per day, and 39% used it between 2 to 4 hours per day. This shows that a considerable number of the participants use social platforms and are highly active on them. This high level of social media usage can therefore be used to explain that the students can express themselves more openly which may correlate with spreading digital fascism and joining radical groups.

The Spearman correlation analysis conducted in the study showed that the variables were significantly and positively related. The first part of the analysis examined the relationship between anonymity and the tendency of people to share fascist content. The results suggest that there is a significant and moderate positive relationship between anonymity and the spread of fascist content with a Spearman correlation coefficient value of .56 ($p < .01$). This implies that a person who feels more anonymous is more likely to propagate fascist ideologies online. The findings, therefore, go in line with previous studies proposing that anonymity leads to less responsibility and more tendencies to post negative content on the internet (Spears, 2017; Asenbaum, 2018).

One of the key issues of anonymity is that a person is no longer constrained by his or her social roles and thus is likely to conform to group behavior including in the case of spreading extremism. Reflecting on the survey's data, those respondents who seemed to feel more anonymous were more likely to share fascist content. This confirms that anonymity is a critical factor that makes users engage in extreme behaviors that they would otherwise not conduct in other non-anonymous settings. As has already been postulated by Spears (2017), cyber disguise provokes situations in which people are free to behave inappropriately without worrying about being punished by society.

The second phase opted to explore the relationship between anonymity and joining radical groups. A significant and moderate positive correlation was found, with a P-value of .000 and a Spearman's correlation coefficient of .480. This implies that anonymity also contributes to the chances of a student becoming involved with a radical group on social media platforms. The SIDE model further supports this result, suggesting that deindividuation resulting from anonymity can promote group behaviors. Those who felt safe because of anonymity were observed to be encouraged more to join fascist groups online and propagate their activities, thus supporting the observation made by Márquez

et al. (2019) that anonymous participants are inclined to engage in communities with extreme ideologies.

The third dimension of the study focused on perceived safety and its relationship with the propagation of fascist content. The results reveal a significant and moderate positive correlation ($\rho = .530, p < .01$) between perceived safety and the willingness to spread fascist content. Participants who felt secure in their anonymity were more likely to share fascist materials. This shows that when students believe their identity is safe, they feel more confident and engage in sharing content that has fascist ideologies, which is relevant to the findings of Citron & Norton (2019).

From this discovery, it can be easily assumed that students who have no fear of facing penalties for their actions online are more likely to spread fascism. This claim is well-supported by Kim (2019) who established that perceived safety granted freedom to users to engage in certain behaviors they would otherwise not be able to because of anonymity offered by technology. Thus, this supports the hypothesis of the study about perceived safety as one of the aspects influencing the sharing of fascist content.

The fourth dimension looked at in this study was the relationship between perceived safety and joining of radical groups. A significant and moderate positive correlation ($\rho = .500, p < .01$) was established between these variables, thus providing empirical support for the postulated hypothesis that posits that perceived safety motivates people to join radical groups and engage in perilous radical group activities. The findings align with Jhaver et al., (2023) who in their article pointed out that anonymity coupled with perceived safety influences radicalization in a given society. The results illustrate that as the perceived safety of the participants rises, so does the probability that they will join radical groups and mirror their activities, thus proving the role of perceived safety as a predictor of such behavior. The study's conclusions correlate with theories like the SIDE which states that anonymity makes people conform to the group's standards without worrying about consequences they would feel alone. This study also implies the need to curb the challenges that societies can encounter in the contemporary world of anonymity particularly within the regions experiencing a surge in political and social radicalism.

Conclusion

The study concludes that anonymity and perceived safety are mechanisms that affect the behavior of university students in sharing fascist content and becoming members of radical online groups. The research supported both hypotheses and answered the research questions. It showed empirical evidence

of how anonymity is significantly associated with university students sharing fascist content and similarly perceived safety is significantly associated with university students joining extremist online groups. The study is relevant to the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), proving that anonymity frees people from personal values, so they are inclined toward extreme behavior.

The findings explained anonymity as a factor that significantly determined the likelihood of the students posting fascist content. This is because when students engage in online discussions while they remain anonymous, they are more likely to hold extreme views that they would hesitate to evacuate in face-to-face settings because of the consequences. In a similar manner, perceived safety is positively correlated with the student's propensity to engage in online groups that advocate for fascism. Such behaviors develop due to the psychological liberty that entails anonymity, which also boosts their involvement in subversive activities with no risk of facing consequences.

The implications of this paper are useful for policymakers, educators, and developers of social media applications. Banning or finding ways to minimize anonymity on the internet is one of the things policymakers must do to curb the further spread of fascism and people joining radical groups. Employment of tougher policies like identity authentication and improved content moderation policies can limit the exploitation of anonymity. It is crucial to include digital literacy programs in schools and universities to educate learners about the danger that is posed by the radicalization of the internet.

This study has a few limitations such as the sample being limited to the government university students from Lahore and it can affect the generality of the results. Moreover, the study was cross-sectional which means that the participants may have not reported their true behaviors online. Moreover, the research was carried out in one country and therefore its results might not easily be applied to different cultures or nations.

It would be beneficial for future researchers to gather more participants from other cities as well as from other educational levels in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the effects of anonymity on Pakistani students. Subsequent studies in other countries would also be useful to further elaborate on the generalizability of these attitudes or if they are particular to the culture and politics of Pakistan. Moreover, future research should employ regression analysis with an aim of establishing causation and including procedural covariates.

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