

Exploring the Role of Hate Speech in Anti-Religious Discourse in Pakistan

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Abstract

Introduction: Religious extremism poses a significant threat to global communication, with sectarian divisions in Pakistan intensifying during the Muharram holiday. This surge in sectarian hate speech on social media, especially between Shia and Sunni groups, highlights the need for understanding its demographic influences.

Methodology: This study employs the Uses and Gratification theory to explore the relationship between user demographics and the dissemination of hate speech on social media. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to 200 Facebook users to assess the impact of gender, education level, and socioeconomic status on hate speech directed at particular groups.

Results/Findings: The findings indicate that sectarian hate speech is disseminated by individuals from various sects, with a significant correlation between religious affiliation and the spread of hate speech. Higher educational attainment and

socioeconomic status were found to influence the likelihood of sharing hostile content, with financially stable and well-educated individuals sharing less.

Future Direction: *Future research should focus on the role of online discussions in mitigating hate speech and fostering respectful communication. Promoting education, financial stability, and constructive dialogue can contribute to a more positive online environment.*

Keywords: *Religious extremism, Facebook, Hate Speech, Shia, Sunni*

Introduction

Social media is a potent tool for expressing our thoughts, ideas, and emotions. One of its greatest strengths is its unlimited reach, as social networking sites can influence users without boundaries. The impact of social media is not limited to the online world; it extends to a much broader sphere of influence. Everyone has the right to express themselves on social media, but unfortunately, this freedom often leads to hate speech being posted on these platforms. This has become a significant concern for media scholars discussing hate speech on social networking sites (Costello & Hawdon, 2018)

Hate speech on social media is a profound and far-reaching issue with worldwide ramifications. This is not a problem we can ignore or dismiss, as it harms individuals and communities alike. It has a staggering 3.09 billion monthly users (No Title Facebook User & Growth Statistics, n.d.) Facebook is a significant player in this conversation. We must consider its role in spreading hate speech and explore potential solutions. It is time to take action and create a safe, inclusive online space for everyone. The propagation of hate speech on Facebook has become a growing concern. Hate speech can be defined as inflammatory language, frequently employing insults and derogatory remarks directed towards a specific group or individual. It may or may not include a call to violence (Malik, 2018). The spread of such language can have severe consequences for the targeted individuals and society. Steps must be taken to address this issue and prevent the dissemination of hate speech on social media platforms (Nur'aeni & Ramdan, 2023). The Facebook administration has expressed grave concern over the escalating instances of hate speech postings on its platform. In response, Facebook declared its intention to remove an unprecedented number of posts containing hate speech from its network compared to previous years. Facebook recently announced that it has taken down an unprecedented number of posts containing hate speech from

its platform. The social media giant reportedly removed over 700 million posts containing hate speech by the end of 2019 (Abid et al., 2021), representing a significant increase of 59% compared to the beginning of the year. This action aligns with Facebook's ongoing efforts to address hate speech and promote a safe and inclusive social media environment.

The company's proactive approach to identifying and removing harmful content is crucial to creating a more responsible online community. Facebook's efforts to combat hate speech are commendable, as online hate speech has become an increasingly pressing issue globally. Modern communication technology has enabled the spread of hate speech and misinformation, leading to harm and discord in various communities.

By removing such content from its platform, Facebook is taking a stand against hate speech and promoting a culture of respect and understanding. This move reinforces the importance of ensuring social media platforms remain free from hate speech and other harmful content. Such actions help to create an online environment that is safer, more inclusive, and conducive to healthy discourse. Facebook's decision to remove an unprecedented number of hate speech posts is an important step forward in the fight against harmful content on social media. This commendable effort underscores the need for continued vigilance in promoting a safe and respectful online community.

In Pakistan, instances of hate speech are frequently witnessed in the form of sectarian division. The emergence of social media platforms has further facilitated the spread of hate speech and sectarianism. It has been observed that the use of social media has contributed to the worsening of sectarianism and the escalation of tensions. While individuals often resort to the defence of freedom of expression, their actions aggravate the situation by intensifying tensions and widening differences (Perrigo, 2019).

Such escalating tensions can have severe implications for social and economic stability. In today's world, social media can influence opinions and shape perceptions. As such, it is imperative to promote responsible usage of these platforms and ensure that individuals understand the impact of their actions on the broader community. Let us work together to create a safer, healthier online environment. One potential approach would be to promote a culture of mutual respect and tolerance, which would help to reduce the incidence of hate speech and promote harmony and social cohesion. When we encourage a culture of inclusivity and respect, it allows people to express themselves without any fear of discrimination, and it also helps to build a positive and collaborative atmosphere where everyone can thrive.

Hypothesis

1. There is a correlation between religiosity levels and the posting of hate speech material among Muslim Facebook users.
2. Higher levels of education and household income are associated with a decreased tendency among Facebook users to post hateful sectarian content on their profiles.
3. More religious social media content on Facebook during Muharram increases anti-sectarian feelings.

Rationale

The surge of religious extremism, notably apparent during events such as Muharram in Pakistan, presents a notable challenge, as social media platforms serve as fertile ground for sectarian discord and hateful rhetoric. This trend underscores the importance of thoroughly understanding the root causes that drive the proliferation of harmful content. Communication specialists across the globe acknowledge the pivotal role that user demographics play in shaping online behaviour. Consequently, this research delves into this aspect with confidence and conviction in the context of hate speech on social media platforms.

The motivation for this inquiry arises from the crucial necessity to thoroughly scrutinise the mechanisms behind the proliferation of hate speech online, especially concerning sectarian conflicts during significant religious observances like Muharram in Pakistan. By examining the potential connections between user demographics and the dissemination of hate speech, this study aims to illuminate the underlying drivers of such behaviours.

This research has the potential to bring about positive change in addressing online hate speech in Pakistan. The study aims to inform policymakers, social media platforms, and civil society organisations by uncovering the underlying drivers behind such speech and providing actionable insights. Through this research, we can work towards building a more inclusive and tolerant society where individuals are not targeted based on their religiosity, education, or socio-economic status. The findings of this study have the potential to inspire effective interventions that can mitigate the impact of online hate speech and promote peace and harmony in our society. This will equip them to effectively develop targeted interventions and strategies to curb the proliferation of hate speech online. With a comprehensive understanding of these underlying dynamics, we are confident this research will create a more inclusive and tolerant online environment, countering the divisive forces of religious extremism. The perception that one religion is the only true religion is increasing and gaining momentum faster.

Literature Review

Religious Scholars and Professionals are concerned that religious extremism is increasing, especially in Islamic Societies and particularly in Pakistan day by day (Hassan & Shalaby, 2019; Jo, 2012; Kanas et al., 2015; Kishi & Theodorou, 2016; Wibisono et al., 2019). The perception that one religion is the only true religion is increasing and gaining momentum faster (Alsaad et al., 2018). A lack of trust among religious groups can have significant consequences, including reduced interaction and heightened polarisation and extremism. Conversely, mutual trust among faiths is crucial for sharing responsibilities and collaborating effectively in society (Mehfooz, 2021; Valente & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2021)

Social media is a potent platform that enables individuals to express their thoughts and feelings, build relationships, and access information on various topics. Its impact on our economy, culture, lifestyle, and global perspective is immense and undeniable. Connecting with people from different backgrounds through social media has become vital to communication and information dissemination. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise and appreciate the pivotal role of social media in shaping our understanding of the world(Amedie, 2015). With the rise of social media, it has become clear that this platform is an excellent tool for building connections among people. People prefer social media because it provides a means to stay informed about their contacts' social, professional, and personal activities. Social media is also an effective tool for establishing social authority. Organisations and individuals can utilise social media to demonstrate their skills and expertise in their respective fields(Dowerah, 2012).

In the current era, media has become a more effective mode of communication available to people worldwide. It has given the freedom of speech and expression without ethical boundaries(Tiwari & Ghosh, 2014). After the advent of social media, it has become clear that it is the foremost means of connecting individuals. Social media platforms provide an unparalleled opportunity to increase awareness of the activities and movements of social, professional, and personal acquaintances. Furthermore, leveraging social media is vital in establishing social authority. Organisations and individuals can confidently showcase their expertise and skills within their respective fields by utilising social media. Social media represents an unprecedented opportunity for worldwide communication, information dissemination, and awareness. It is a platform highly valued by the public for its ability to enable free expression. Social media networks primarily comprise user-generated content, and most users engage and communicate with complete freedom. However, it is essential to recognise that this freedom should not be exercised in ways that threaten, offend, or denigrate groups based on characteristics such as colour, race, national origin, disability, or religion. In order to ensure that social media remains a safe and inclusive platform for all users, it is crucial to be aware of the influence our words and actions can have on others(Graciyal & Viswam, 2018). Social media platforms pose an enormous challenge as they provide a space for harmful discourses that target specific groups of people. These groups include individuals who face discrimination based on their race, behaviour, sexual orientation, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, and more. Recognising and addressing this problem is crucial to fostering a secure and welcoming online space for every user(Mondal et al., 2017). It is the most convenient

and inexpensive medium of spreading such content to provoke sectarian enmity and, at the same time, to increase followers and make themselves more popular (Al-Rawi, 2016). According to (Kopacheva, 2021), the objectives of online activism may sometimes align with the pursuit of social or political change. Instead, individuals may be driven by the desire for attention, personal fulfilment, or the commercialisation of a cause. This co-optation of social movements for commercial purposes can blur the lines between activists, influencers, and content creators. Because the market value of influencer marketing has doubled since 2019, amounting to a projected 16.4 billion USD in 2022 (Statista Research Department, 2022) (Tuovinen, 2022), movements may continue to be appropriated to reach larger audiences. This phenomenon has contributed to the proliferation of slacktivism, as it can be challenging to differentiate between genuine activism and commercially motivated participation.

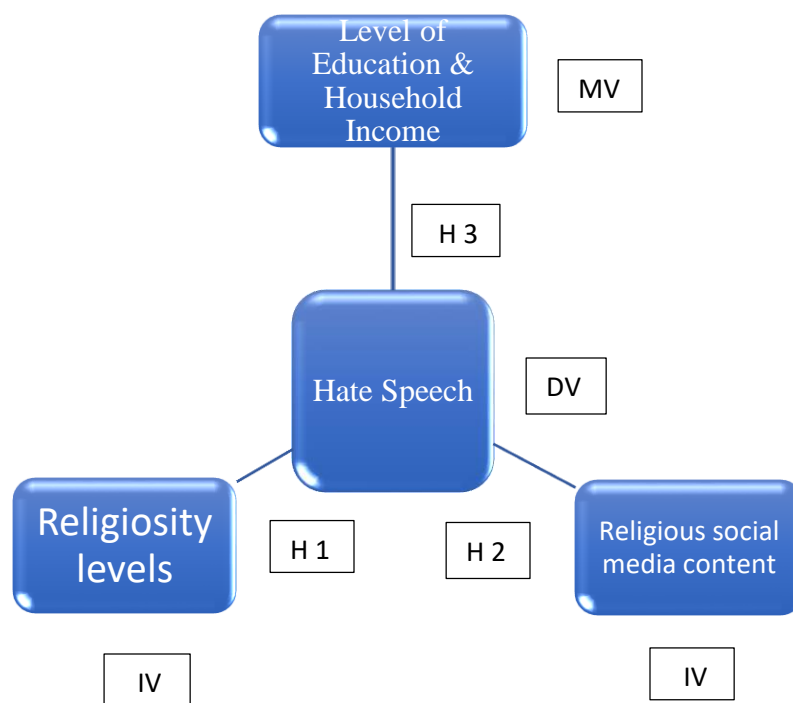
Facebook has emerged as a platform ridden with hate speech, prompting the social media giant to take strict measures against such content. Facebook has taken down millions of posts that contain hate speech. The company's efforts are a significant step in curbing hate speech, which has increased recently. By taking down such posts, Facebook is sending a message that it does not tolerate any form of hate speech on its platform. The company's commendable actions represent a positive step towards promoting a safe and inclusive online community. Facebook has implemented an advanced artificial intelligence system to detect hate speech on its platform. According to Facebook authorities, this system has proven to be highly effective, with a success rate of 80% in detecting instances of hate speech. This significant improvement demonstrates artificial intelligence's power in tackling online hate speech issues.

The use of AI in detecting hate speech is a significant development, as it enables Facebook to proactively identify and remove harmful content, thereby promoting a safer and more inclusive online community. By leveraging the capabilities of AI, Facebook has taken a significant step towards ensuring that its platform is accessible from hate speech and other harmful content.

Overall, Facebook's efforts to combat hate speech are commendable, and its use of advanced artificial intelligence technology is a promising solution to this ongoing problem. It is hoped that other social media platforms will follow suit and adopt similar measures to promote a more positive and respectful online environment. Hate speech is a pervasive and alarming global

phenomenon that regrettably finds expression in Pakistan in the form of sectarian division. Sectarian hate speech has been rampant in Pakistan for an extended period, and the problem of sectarianism is not novel to the Indo-Pak subcontinent. The issue of sectarianism in Pakistan did not arise suddenly but evolved in three distinct phases: 1947 to 1977, 1977 to 1988, and 1988 to 2004. It is pertinent to note that the problem of sectarianism is a complex issue that requires a multifaceted approach to be addressed comprehensively. The government, civil societies, and religious scholars need to collaborate and work in tandem to create an environment where hate speech and sectarianism are not tolerated. This approach will require a sustained effort to ensure that all segments of society are adequately sensitised to the dangers of hate speech and sectarianism. The first phase was relatively peaceful as both Sunni and Shi'a Ulama cooperated in creating a constitution for Pakistan based on Islamic teachings. The issue of Qadianis further strengthened their unity. However, in the second and third phases, sectarian conflicts rapidly escalated in terms of frequency, intensity, and scope across the country. This was primarily due to General Zia ul Haq's Islamization policies, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan, the Iran-Iraq war, and the emergence of sectarian organisations and religious madrasahs(Ahmar, 2007). With the rise of sectarianism, hate speech among sects has escalated. Initially, it spread through oral communication in mosques, as clerics shared their views on various sects. Subsequently, this hateful rhetoric was disseminated to the broader public via audio, video, images, and written content on social media(Shah et al., 2021). In Pakistan, as per blasphemy law, the case was registered and reported on social media. After that, it spread like fire; as a result of such a move, a bombardment of heated posts followed. This spreads hatred and creates intolerance among different sects(Noor, 2016). Extremist factions are sowing division among various sects. These groups have surged in popularity by advocating for blasphemy laws, both through street protests and on social media. The spread of fake news and its resulting hate speech is a growing concern, alongside religious-based discrimination. The 2018 general election saw a significant impact of fake news and misinformation, particularly concerning the blasphemy law and the negative role of the N league, which had a decisive impact on the voting trend. We must address this issue and take decisive action to end the spreading of misinformation and hate speech(Cheema et al., 2019)

Conceptual Framework



Religiosity Levels and Religious Social Media Content are depicted as independent variables influencing the likelihood of hate speech.

Levels of Education and Household Income are mediating variables that may influence the relationship between religiosity/social media content and hate speech.

Hate Speech is the dependent variable affected by religiosity and social media content and is mediated by education and income levels.

Research Methodology

Research Design:

- This study will adopt a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the phenomenon of hate speech in anti-religious discourse comprehensively.
- The quantitative component will involve surveys to measure religiosity levels, exposure to religious social media content, and instances of hate speech among participants.

- The qualitative component will include interviews or focus groups to gain deeper insights into individuals' attitudes, motivations, and perceptions regarding hate speech in anti-religious discourse.

Sampling:

The upcoming study will utilise stratified random sampling to ensure the optimum representation of diverse demographic groups within Pakistan. The study will encompass individuals across different age brackets, genders, socioeconomic strata, and geographic regions.

Furthermore, the research team will recruit participants from various religious backgrounds to capture a comprehensive spectrum of perspectives on the subject matter. This approach will aid in generating a well-rounded understanding of the subject matter and its impact on the participants.

The study selected 200 respondents through purposive sampling, with 100 respondents from the Sunni community and 100 from the Shia community residing in Lahore. Given the sensitive nature of sectarian issues, respondents were chosen carefully and only with their consent. Moreover, the questionnaire was meticulously designed to address the research questions. Specifically, the questionnaire was created on a 5-point Likert scale, which allowed for a nuanced examination of the data. The data was subsequently analysed using the Spearman correlation Cronbach Alpha test in SPSS.

Findings, Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Spearman Correlation of Religiosity Level & Hate Speech

Correlations

		Religiosity Level	Hate Speech
Spearman's rho	Religiosity Level	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.990**
	N		.000
			200

	Hate Speech	Correlation Coefficient	.990**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N		200

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

This table displays the correlation between religiosity level and hate speech. To interpret, consider the following:

Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficient:

- The correlation coefficient between religiosity level and hate speech is exceptionally high at 0.990, indicating a solid positive relationship.
- This means that as religiosity level increases, hate speech tends to increase as well.

Significance (2-tailed):

- The significance value for both correlations is 0.000, which means the observed correlation is statistically significant.
- This implies that the correlation between religiosity level and hate speech is not due to random chance but likely represents a genuine relationship in the population.

Sample Size (N):

- The sample size for both variables is 200, indicating a relatively large dataset used for the analysis.

Correlation Significance Level:

- The double asterisks (**) denote that the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), a stringent criterion for significance.
- This further strengthens the evidence for a significant relationship between religiosity level and hate speech.

Overall, based on this analysis, there appears to be a solid and statistically significant positive relationship between religiosity level and hate speech. This suggests that higher levels of religiosity are associated with higher levels of hate speech.

Correlations

			High-Level Education & Income	Hate Speech
Spearman's rho	High-Level E_I	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.282**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	200	200
	Hate Speech	Correlation Coefficient	-.282**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	200	200

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

The table provides correlation analysis results between "High-Level Education and Income" and "Hate Speech." Here is how to interpret it:

1. **Variables:** The two analysed variables are "High-Level Education and income" and "Hate Speech."

2. Correlation Coefficients:

- Spearman's rho coefficient measures the strength and direction of the relationship between the two variables.

- The correlation coefficient between "High-Level Education and Income" and "Hate Speech" is -0.282.

- This negative correlation coefficient suggests a negative relationship between "High-Level Education and income" and "Hate Speech." In other words, as levels of education and income increase, hate speech tends to decrease, and vice versa.

3. Significance Levels:

- The significance level indicates the probability that the observed correlation coefficient occurred by chance.

- In this analysis, the correlation coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This means there is a very low probability (less than 1%) that the observed correlation coefficient occurred by chance.

4. Sample Size (N):

- The sample size for both variables is 200.

Overall, the analysis suggests a statistically significant negative correlation between high-level education and income and hate speech, meaning that as levels of education and income increase, hate speech tends to decrease.

Table 3: Spearman Correlation of Exposure to Religious Social Media Content on Facebook

Correlations		Exposer_Religious_social_media	Hate_Speech
Spearman's rho	Exposer_Religious_social_media	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.993**
		N	.000
	Hate_Speech	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.993**
		N	.000

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

The table presents the Spearman correlation coefficients for exposure to religious social media content and instances of hate speech on Facebook. Here is how to interpret it:

1. **Correlation Coefficients:** The correlation coefficient measures how strong and in what direction two variables are related. Here, two correlation coefficients are presented:
 - The correlation coefficient between exposure to religious social media content and hate speech is 1.000.
 - The correlation coefficient between hate speech and exposure to religious social media content is .993.

2. **Significance Levels (Sig.):** The significance level indicates the probability of observing the correlation coefficient by random chance, assuming there is no actual correlation in the population. A significance level of .000 means the correlation is statistically significant.
3. **Sample Size (N):** The sample size refers to the number of observations or data points used to calculate correlation coefficients.
4. **Interpretation:**
 - The correlation coefficient of 1.000 between exposure to religious social media content and hate speech suggests a perfect positive correlation. This means that as exposure to religious social media content increases, instances of hate speech on Facebook also increase, and vice versa.
 - The correlation coefficient of .993 between hate speech and exposure to religious social media content also indicates a robust positive correlation.

In summary, based on this analysis, there appears to be a strong positive relationship between exposure to religious social media content and instances of hate speech on Facebook.

Conclusion

The results of a recent poll suggest that there is a significant amount of sectarianism among Muslim Facebook users in Pakistan, specifically between Sunni and Shia groups. The poll found that approximately 36% of respondents reported regularly posting religiously sectarian content on the social media platform, with 14% saying they do so monthly and 29% doing so every week. On the other hand, only 7.5% of participants reported never sharing religiously sectarian content on social media, while 8% did so every two weeks.

Participants were also asked to indicate their level of religiosity and frequency of prayer. Of those surveyed, 75% reported praying regularly, while 25% had no opinion. When asked about their views on communication regarding genuine religious issues and their preference for the harsh defense of sectarianism on Facebook, most respondents (79%) agreed, while only 21% disagreed.

Finally, the poll found that most participants strongly agreed that hateful communication should not be tolerated. It is worth noting that such communication can often fuel sectarianism and create tension between religious groups. Overall, the poll results highlight the need for greater understanding, tolerance, and respect between different religious groups in Pakistan, particularly on social media platforms like Facebook.

Limitation and Future Scope of Research

The present study recognizes the potential limitations of the research and highlights the future lines of inquiry that may further enrich the understanding of the topic at hand. In particular, the study's limitations include possible sampling biases, incomplete data, and methodological constraints.

To overcome these limitations and expand the range of research, future studies may consider more extensive and diverse samples, employ more comprehensive data collection methods, and incorporate alternative analytical approaches. Such efforts mitigate the potential biases and increase the generalizability of the findings.

Moreover, future research could explore related topics and build upon the current study's findings. For example, future research could explore of other variables' effects on the phenomenon of interest, examine the causal mechanisms underlying the observed relationships, or compare the findings across different contexts or populations.

In summary, while the present study adds valuable insights into the research topic, several areas of inquiry remain unexplored. By addressing the limitations and pursuing future lines of research, scholars can deepen their understanding of the topic and contribute to advancing knowledge in the field.

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