



Social Media and the Emergence of Non-Violent Political Extremism Among Pakistani Youth (2018-2022)

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ABSTRACT

A significant change in political engagement among the youth of Pakistan has been observed between 2018 and 2022. Social media has emerged as the primary venue for the discussion of ideas and for political mobilization; Political extremism of the violent kind is declining, whereas non-violent political extremism is surging. This paper examines the role of social media in neutral extremism and violence and the degree to which exclusionary and extreme political views are becoming normalized among the youth of Pakistan. The research relies on Media Dependency Theory for the explanation that, in this case, the dependency of the Pakistan youth on social media for the political understanding is the reason that the political actors are resorting to the massive cultivation of politically and socially divisive messages that also erode the basis of social democracy. This is evident in the heavy use of divisive algorithms, echo chambers, social media influencers, and memes. It is true that the non-violent kind of extremist movements is less visible than the previously dominant violent movements extremism. It is also true that it poses a danger to the democratic culture and social cohesion in the politically evolving digital space in the country.

Keywords: Pakistan; Youth Radicalization; Social Media Politics; Non-Violent Extremism; Media Dependency Theory; Political Polarization.

INTRODUCTION

The last ten years have seen fundamental changes in the ways politics has been communicated in Pakistan. Traditional channels for socialization of youth into politics, particularly student bodies, political party apparatuses, mosques, social

media, and print media, have lost ground to conventional digital media. In the period from 2018 to 2022, social media sites like Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok became primary sites of political engagement of the youth where they were, and in many cases, hands on, discussed, and then politically socialized. In addition to being sites for dissemination of information, these platforms were sites that constructed and provided frameworks for political reasoning, political emotion, and political validation.¹

There is a clear digital transition, however, a paradox comes to the security environment in Pakistan. While militant groups were having trouble operating, on the other hand, public discourse shows growing ideological intolerance cast in more rigid forms, especially across social media. The author has attributed this phenomenon as the increase of non-violent extremism which is a kind of political-activity that adopts an aggressive attitude towards dissent, is intolerant of pluralism, and is morally absolutist.² It also conjures the idea of political others as adversaries who must be demonized as existential threats, rather than mere political contenders.

Extremism that does not include violence is not about bombings or insurgencies. It is about social exclusion and the aggressive discourse that undermines the legitimacy of democracy. Its effects can be just as destabilizing. When large numbers of uncompromising ideologues take hold of a society, moderation and democracy become almost impossible. Hostility is directed at minorities, and politics is reduced to a moral crusade in a zero-sum game.

This research shows how platforms online did not just reflect divides among young people in Pakistan - they deepened those splits over time. Built-in patterns of algorithms, along with how users interacted, gave sharper voice to radical views while quieter perspectives faded. Mainstream politicians, faith-based organizations, and tightly knit nationalist clusters shifted their messaging to fit what spreads fast: strong feelings, loyalty cues, shared symbols. Each tailored posts not merely to inform, but to ignite reaction and deepen belonging.³

Youth find themselves especially affected by certain influences, according to Media Dependency Theory. The heavier someone leans on media to make sense of politics, the stronger its impact becomes. Given Pakistan's shaky institutions, financial strain, and constant political shifts, young people turned sharply toward social platforms - not just for news, but for connection, purpose, and direction. Under such conditions, online narratives charged with emotion began steering opinions far more than neutral sources ever could.

Theoretical Framework: Media Dependency in a Polarized Society

Starting from a place where few guides exist, people turn more to media when familiar anchors like schools or elders lose sway. This shift builds reliance, not because screens pull harder, but because fewer voices compete. Sandra Ball-Rokeach and

¹ Ayesha Sahoo, *Countering Extremism Through Social Media: A Case Study of Pakistani Youth (2018–2022)* (MPhil thesis, National Defence University, Islamabad, 2022).

² Ibid

³ Sahoo, *Countering Extremism*.

Melvin DeFleur shaped this idea into what is now called Media Dependency Theory.⁴ When pathways to meaning shrink - family quieted, leaders doubted - media step in as filters for sense-making. Their power rises precisely when other ways of knowing fade. Reality, then, gets framed less by experience, more by exposure. What counts as true begins aligning with what circulates widely.

During the time covered by this research, Pakistan showed clear signs of deep societal reliance. Young people dealt with joblessness, financial instability, uncertain prospects ahead. Political bodies struggled to gain credibility - accusations around favoritism, dishonest practices, and rigged voting damaged their image.⁵ Mainstream news outlets seemed distant to younger audiences, seen either censored or swayed by partisan interests. Instead, digital networks began drawing attention, offering raw updates, comfort during stress, connection among peers. For many youths, these online spaces became go-to spots when traditional sources failed.⁶

Still, reliance goes beyond simple contact. Messages shift how information gets interpreted. When people turn to media for guidance, they tend to embrace ideas offering clear thinking and strong values.⁷ Online platforms excel at delivering content stripped down, rich in symbols, and tied to group belonging. According to Media Dependency Theory, times of upheaval push people toward outlets that lessen doubt and reinforce who they believe themselves to be. Such dynamics shaped Pakistan's digitally driven political scene, where young users leaned into stories dividing society along sharp moral lines: loyal versus disloyal, faithful against nonbelievers, honest changemakers opposed to tainted leaders.

What stands out is how emotion plays a central role. Far from just delivering information, media offer psychological support while connecting people socially. Belonging to online political communities fulfilled such desires through common identity and joint feelings. As a result, reliance grew - digital stories became harder to resist.

Digital Political Socialization of Youth

Young people in Pakistan began turning to online networks during 2018–2022, shaping how they understood politics. Instead of only listening at home or sitting in classrooms, many started forming views through digital exchanges. Family talks still mattered; however, feeds and posts increasingly influenced opinions. Schools and faith-based lessons once led this learning now platforms competed closely, sometimes surpassing them. While traditional spaces did not vanish, attention shifted toward viral content and peer-driven discourse. Digital interaction, therefore, took on a central role in political awareness among younger users⁷

Spending time online meant young people often stumbled upon politics

⁴ Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur, "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects," *Communication Research* (1976).

⁵ Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur, "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects," *Communication Research* (1976).

⁶ Ania Izabela Rynarzewska, Casey Michelle Waldsmith, and Atanas Nik Nikolov, "Polarization: Linking Loneliness and Social Media Dependency," *Journal of Services Marketing* (2025): 1–14.

⁷ Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur.

without searching for it. Where they went for fun - like meme pages or video platforms - also carried opinions about power, justice, or policy. Scrolling through jokes could lead straight into serious talk, sometimes within the same post. Conversations once limited to classrooms or dinner tables now unfolded in chat groups after viral clips. Watching a comedian critique leaders felt like entertainment, yet shaped views just the same. Comment threads turned casual reactions into shared arguments, reshaping how beliefs were formed.⁸

A key part of digital political socialization involved shaping personal identity. Online spaces tended to revolve around common beliefs, where individuals affirmed one another's perspectives while expressing shared frustration over perceived wrongs. Repeated contact with like-minded ideas made some notions seem ordinary - such as seeing rivals as inherently dishonest, viewing resistance as harmful to cohesion, or treating negotiation as betrayal.¹⁰

Nowadays, showing support often looks like performance. Standing out meant sharing slogans online, circulating trending clips, or defending figures in comment threads. Public approval - measured through reactions, reposts, clicks - pushed young people to broadcast where they stood.⁹ Mild opinions rarely gained attention; instead, intense expressions moved fastest across networks. Over months and years, those patterns nudged many toward sharper stances, less open to doubt. What spread easily shaped what felt acceptable.

So social media shaped young people's politics while quietly teaching them what it means to act politically - through feeling, signs, or shared effort.

Mechanisms of Online Radicalization

Non-violent radicalization in the digital Pakistani context was not a straightforward process. Instead, it was a highly complex process that emerged from the intersection of structural and psychological mechanisms embedded in social media design and political communication.¹⁰

Algorithmic Amplification

What spreads fast online often isn't what's true, but what stirs emotion. Outrage, pride, shame, or fear - these responses push posts into more feeds. Algorithms favor reactions, not reflection. Over time, political messaging adapted to fit this pattern. The loudest voices grew louder because the system rewards them.¹¹

Young users began seeing politics as endlessly unstable, simply because each event felt like an emergency. Not only did disputes seem world-ending, but rivals appeared threatening too. As feelings intensified, balanced views grew harder to maintain, pushing youth toward rigid stances. Exposure to relentless messaging gradually numbed reactions to harsh rhetoric, so hostility eventually seemed ordinary. What once shocked started feeling routine.

Echo Chambers and Homophily

⁸ Sahoo, *Countering Extremism*.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Sahoo, *Countering Extremism*.

¹¹ Ibid

People usually link up with those like themselves online. Algorithms boost this pattern, steering users toward familiar content. When young people follow figures - be it influencers or politicians - they often see only one perspective. Exposure to differing opinions drops when their feeds reflect just their own beliefs.

What held sway inside such enclosed spaces was a steady loop of shared beliefs. When information surfaced contradicting those views, it got dismissed - labeled deceit or disloyalty. According to Media Dependency Theory, influence grows stronger if few competing perspectives exist.¹³ Under these conditions, extreme interpretations gained legitimacy not through proof but by default, lacking rival accounts.¹²

Meme Politics and Symbolic Simplification

Memes were a successful platform for political communication. Humor and satire were used to simplify the complex realities of politics into emotionally engaging symbols¹⁴ While these were often comical, they were also highly ideological. They portrayed opponents as stupid, immoral, or dangerous, which subtly influenced public opinion.

Humor lowered critical defenses. Youth shared memes without realizing that they were political propaganda, but cumulatively, they served to reinforce stereotypes and dehumanizing images. Over time, symbolic simplification supplanted deliberative engagement, which promoted binary thinking.¹³

Influencer Authority

A bond formed between young viewers and online figures - vloggers, commentators, spiritual voices - without face-to-face contact. Trust grew through casual dialogue, an air of genuineness. These personalities felt close, familiar, more like guides than authorities.¹⁴

Guided by influencers, young people found politics framed through personal emotion rather than facts. Not experts, these figures gained trust by seeming real - like peers who understood their world. Because of this, traditional systems lost ground as digital voices grew louder. Reliance on social media deepened when official channels felt distant or unrelatable. Confidence shifted - not slowly, but steadily - from established bodies to those speaking directly from experience.

Political Actors and Strategic Narrative Engineering

From 2018 to 2022, digital tools took on greater significance in Pakistan's political landscape. Not limited to mere updates, online platforms shifted into central hubs for engagement. Instead of relying on traditional messaging, actors such as parties, faith-based organizations, and regional movements reshaped how they interacted - focusing less on policy detail. Emotion-driven posts gained prominence, shaped by what each network saw performed best across apps. Platform logic began steering strategy, quietly altering the nature of public discourse.¹⁵

¹²Cass Sunstein, *#Republic* (2018).

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Sahoo, *Countering Extremism*.

¹⁵ ibid

Digital teams emerged within major political parties, tasked with managing social media, quick public replies, because election timelines pushed such efforts faster. Instead of just criticizing rivals' policies, campaign strategies often cast adversaries as dishonest, disloyal, even unpatriotic.¹⁶ As a result, opposition voices appeared less trustworthy, while harsh language became usual in discourse. With each cycle, more followers amplified those messages online, though some crossed into organized harassment. These shifts took hold gradually, yet their impact grew harder to ignore over time.¹⁷

Faith-based communities turned to online platforms, drawing young people into movements presented as ethical imperatives. Through brief teachings, spreading clips, or heartfelt talks, digital content tied civic matters to spiritual duty. As religious and state concerns merged, public debate grew more charged. Treating policy choices as holy makes negotiation feel like betrayal, difference like threat.¹⁸

Fueled by outrage, hyper-nationalist circles amplified conspiracy narratives. Through digital platforms, ideas about outside manipulation or collapsing traditions raced across networks. Young people, facing job scarcity and global instability, found meaning in such claims. Blaming clear adversaries helped make sense of complex crises - offering relief through simplicity.

What mattered most was that such individuals rarely called for physical harm. Rather, they made rigid beliefs seem ordinary, even reasonable. By avoiding talk of force, extremist views found new strength in speech alone - drawing people in, holding their attention, shutting down dissent - all while staying within legal boundaries. It was persuasion shaped by conviction, not conflict.

Psychological Aspects of Digital Radicalization

Though structures shape how information spreads, understanding young people's shift toward extreme views demands attention to inner thought patterns. What stands out is how certain mental habits left adolescents open to subtle forms of online radicalization. These internal mechanisms - often unnoticed - played a quiet but powerful role in shaping their responses to digital messages.

Young people happen to be navigating identity development during these years. Because of this, messages promising connection and purpose often resonate deeply. Spaces on the internet gave feedback when engagement followed political posts. Approval through reactions or replies strengthened how they saw themselves politically. Feeling seen after sharing views online helped fix those beliefs more firmly.

Next came the way financial instability heightened personal frustration. Joblessness spread widely, while chances to move up socially shrank noticeably. Digital conversations pointing fingers at dishonest leaders, outsiders, or declining

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Inna B. Bovina, Boris G. Bovin, and Nikolay V. Dvoryanchikov, "Radicalization in the Digital Society: A Social Psychological Analysis," *RUDN Journal of Psychology and Pedagogics* 19, no. 2 (2022): 336–351.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

values offered emotional relief instead of clarity. Such talk turned intricate money problems into battles between good and evil.

Now consider how regular exposure to stimulating material might shape thinking patterns. Studies in brain function show that emotions like rage or dread sharpen focus while narrowing understanding. When young people repeatedly engage with content meant to provoke fury, their reactions grow sharper, their judgments simpler. These digital spaces thrive on such dynamics - content gaining traction often does so by sparking instant feelings.¹⁹

What made things worse was how much young people relied on digital platforms. Because they got their news and connection through screens, what they saw online often shaped their beliefs. With constant contact came a growing rigidity differences became harder to accept. Familiarity with certain views slowly narrowed openness to new ones.

Offline Effects of Online Extremism

Even without physical force, extremist views spread online can deeply affect life away from screens. From 2018 to 2022, divisions became more visible across Pakistan's schools, offices, and everyday meetups. Where politics fueled tension, communities found themselves pulling apart. Yet behind each argument was a digital current feeding real-world split.²⁰

What once began in meeting rooms now unfolded on screens. Student positions arrived at gatherings already set, molded by digital exchanges long before face-to-face talks started. Instead of questioning, many defended fixed views brought from viral posts. Gatherings shifted from discussion to clash, fuelled not by dialogue but repetition of sharpened claims. Actions in public spaces found their spark weeks earlier online, where stories spread faster than facts. Mood was set ahead of time - shaped less by policy, more by outrage shared overnight.

Harassment that begins online often spills into real life. Targeted attacks on reporters, campaigners, and researchers happen through coordinated digital abuse. Though physical harm may not occur, the pressure to stay quiet grows under persistent threats. Fear of damaged reputations or isolation pushes people to hold back opinions. Public conversation weakens when speakers withdraw. Democratic exchange suffers as a result.²¹

Still, questioning election integrity turned into a widespread digital trend. Accusations of fraud or deception traveled fast, often lacking proof. If young people grow up believing democracy is rigged by design, faith in systems fades. According to Media Dependency Theory, public confidence weakens once news outlets decide what counts as legitimate.

Still, non-violent extremism isn't just mild division. Over time, it reshapes

¹⁹ Inna B. Bovina, Boris G. Bovin, and Nikolay V. Dvoryanchikov, "Radicalization in the Digital Society: A Social Psychological Analysis," *RUDN Journal of Psychology and Pedagogics* 19, no. 2 (2022): 336–351.

²⁰ Nafees Hamid and Cristina Ariza, "Offline versus Online Radicalisation: Which Is the Bigger Threat," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology* (2022): 1–40.

²¹ *Ibid*

how people engage publicly. Tolerance tends to shrink when such views spread. Democratic norms weaken, often without drawing attention.

Pakistan Among Nations

Across nations, young people turning toward radical views online shows similar patterns beyond Pakistan's borders. Today's interconnected societies see digital platforms deepening divides along belief lines. Right-leaning movements in Europe and North America gain traction through viral posts just as left-oriented collectives do. Yet conditions within Pakistan shape this process differently. Distinct religious currents, political instability, and regional tensions feed into how extremism spreads among youth there.

To begin, moral arguments often carry added weight when religion and politics mix. Where faith shapes public life, disputes over policy can feel like threats to core beliefs this deepens how people emotionally respond. Because identity ties into both nationhood and spirituality, positions on issues become harder to shift. Moving outward, international friction feeds narratives that claim hidden forces are at work; young audiences find such stories compelling amid instability. Regional unrest and power struggles between states create openings for these ideas to spread. Another factor lies in age: much of Pakistan's population is young, which means online movements gain speed more easily through shared views among peers. Digital tools help energy build fast across networks where trust runs high.

Whereas debates in the West tend to revolve around topics like border control or public spending, online radicalization in Pakistan focuses instead on deeper questions - identity, faith, belief systems. Such intensity leaves little room for middle ground; it pulls discourse toward rigid positions where only one truth seems acceptable.

Still, certain patterns appear again and again. While algorithmic amplification shapes visibility, echo chambers reinforce beliefs - both thrive under comparable conditions worldwide. Influencers gain reach through systems built into platforms, no matter the region. So it goes in Pakistan: local nuances exist, yet the broader forces stem from how digital spaces are structured.

Policy Implications and Strategic Responses

A complex response fits best when dealing with nonviolent extremism. Pushing too hard with suppression risks deepening feelings of persecution, pushing individuals toward isolated online spaces. Over time, stronger outcomes come through fostering adaptability and inclusion instead.

Above all, programs that build digital skills cannot wait. Teaching youth to assess information with a sharp eye comes first - spotting when feelings are being pushed, noticing slanted algorithms matters. School lessons need media sense woven through them, never left on the edge. What counts is making it central.

Another approach needs clear counter-messages built on purpose. Fighting extremism isn't just about deleting harmful posts. It includes shaping new stories that support diversity and shared values. People from community groups, schools, teachers, and faith leaders can help shape those ideas. Ideas grow stronger when many

voices join.

A sure thing spreads differently when rules shape the flow. Watching how posts get pushed helps spot unfair boosts. Clearer methods behind what rises online make shifts easier to track. Big companies answer to profits, yet outside checks guide tougher choices. Oversight doesn't stop growth; it changes which paths stay open. What gets seen isn't neutral, so who decides matters more than ever.

Only then will things shift. Democracy works when rivals challenge each other, yet still respect the right of the other to exist. If parties keep claiming their foes are destroying the nation, trust crumbles. Leaders ignoring this duty weaken what holds self-rule together.

CONCLUSION

Young people in Pakistan changed how they get involved in politics from 2018 to 2022, shaped heavily by online spaces. While acts of physical violence might have dropped, harsh beliefs now spread more quietly across social networks. Instead of bombs or attacks, ideas grow sharper behind screens - fed by repeated opinions and strong feelings. These digital circles reinforce rigid mindsets, making views that shut others out seem ordinary over time.

A shaky foundation of faith in leaders, along with weak economies, pushed young people toward online spaces for answers and connection. Because they leaned so heavily on these channels, stories that tapped into feelings gained stronger hold. Platforms began shaping political moves as figures adapted their messages to fit digital rhythms. Patterns shaped by algorithms boosted support for certain voices, even as rivals faded. Truth gave way to how well ideas echoed inside connected pockets of belief.

Subtle currents of resistance often go unnoticed, though they reshape social bonds over time. Because trust erodes quietly, institutions lose balance and neighborhoods grow tense. Adjusting laws helps - still, mindsets hold equal weight. When perception shifts toward clarity, diverse perspectives find room to emerge while faith in common structures returns. Change grows where awareness deepens. With every post and reply, digital platforms could redefine public involvement in Pakistan's politics. Depending on whether they amplify hostility or encourage honest conversation, results may differ sharply. For younger citizens, consequences are tied closely to how collective principles hold up under pressure. Shaped less by code than by human decisions, discussions around justice, authority, and reform take root in everyday exchanges.

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