USE OF FACEBOOK AND TWITTER BY TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS TO RADICALIZE THE YOUTH: A CASE STUDY OF TTP, BLA AND ISIS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter, by terrorist organizations to target youth in Pakistan. Drawing on the social learning theory, this case study analyzes the ways in which terrorist organizations use social media to disseminate extremist propaganda, recruit new members, and plan attacks. The study finds that terrorist organizations in Pakistan use social media to exploit the vulnerability of youth, who are many users of these platforms, by creating fake profiles, sharing photos and videos of attacks, and using attractive women to lure young men into joining their groups. The study highlights the need for increased awareness and education among young people about the dangers of extremist propaganda and the role of social media in promoting it. It also underscores the importance of effective counter-narratives and interventions that can help to prevent the radicalization of youth and promote peaceful and tolerant values.

KEYWORDS: facebook, twitter, terrorist organizations

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the countries on the Indian subcontinent have a long history of serious socioeconomic and political problems, corruption, a weakened criminal justice system, unemployment, and repression of free speech, the region's growing radicalization is not surprising. Radicalism, religious extremism, and terrorism have become more of a problem in Pakistan since 9/11. With the phrase "Either you're with us or you're with terrorists," the United States declared war on terror and targeted Al-Qaeda (Bush, 2001). Pakistan decided to support the US in this conflict. Pakistan experienced a change from traditional to modern terrorism as a result of the rise in terrorism in Afghanistan. The terrorists begin utilizing the internet to spread their propaganda, obtain funding, and find and train new members. Additionally, the War on Terror has had a similar impact on Pakistan as it did on Afghanistan in terms of poverty, economic hardship, political unrest, social unrest, unemployment, extremism, and sectarianism (Hanfi, 2021). The government's failure to provide the bare necessities for living is a major source of the youth's frustration and discontent, and the internet has become a convenient forum for them to air their grievances. As the most popular social media site for connecting people, Facebook has also been acknowledged by terrorist groups as an appropriate channel for disseminating their technological know-how and narrative of extremism in private groups or pages. For instance, in an article titled "The Revile of Jihad in Bengal" published in November 2015, the Islamic State's online publication "Dabiq" provided a list of its upcoming planned attacks in Bangladesh.

The youth's frustration and discontent often stems from the governments' failure to provide the basic living conditions, and the internet has emerged as a convenient milieu for expressing their dissatisfaction. Facebook has proven to be the most used platform for connecting people, which also has been recognized by terrorist organizations as a suitable gateway for sharing their extremist narrative and technological knowhow in closed groups or pages. For example, in November 2015, the Islamic State online magazine '*Dabiq*' gave a list of its future planned attacks in Bangladesh in an article titled '*The Revile of Jihad in Bengal*'.

The youth in Pakistan are particularly vulnerable to the influence of terrorist organizations. According to a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), youth in Pakistan are susceptible to radicalization due to several factors, including unemployment, poverty, and a lack of education. The report highlights the role of social media in the radicalization of youth, with terrorist organizations using these platforms to spread their ideology and recruit new members. Another study by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) found that terrorist organizations in Pakistan use Facebook and Twitter to target the youth. The study found that these organizations use social media platforms to reach out to young

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people who may be vulnerable to their message. The study also found that these organizations use social media to create a sense of community among their followers.

A study by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) explored the impact of social media on the radicalization of Muslim youth in Pakistan. The study found that social media plays a significant role in the radicalization of youth in Pakistan. The study found that terrorist organizations use social media to create a sense of identity among their followers and to provide them with a sense of purpose.

Concerns about media censorship and surveillance have been raised as a result of the government's largely fragmented efforts to combat hate speech or radicalization. The Islamabad High Court has heard arguments against the government's internet laws regarding the potential for censorship and the restrictions on free speech, with journalists and activists raising the majority of the issues. As part of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Act 1996, the Citizen Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules 2020 and later the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content Rules 2020 were introduced.

Several studies have explored the use of Facebook and Twitter by terrorist organizations in Pakistan. According to a study by the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), Facebook and Twitter are two of the most popular social media platforms used by terrorist organizations in Pakistan. The study found that these organizations use these platforms to spread propaganda, recruit new members, and coordinate attacks.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social learning theory, developed by psychologist Albert Bandura, posits that individuals learn through observation, imitation, and modeling of behaviors and attitudes exhibited by others. According to this theory, individuals are more likely to adopt a behavior if they observe that the behavior is rewarded or if the behavior is exhibited by individuals they admire or respect.

In the context of the use of Facebook and Twitter by terrorist organizations in Pakistan, social learning theory can help us to understand how the online behavior of these groups can influence and shape the attitudes and behaviors of young individuals in Pakistan. Specifically, we can apply social learning theory to analyze the following factors:

2.1. OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING
Youth in Pakistan who are exposed to extremist content on Facebook and Twitter may observe the behavior of terrorist organizations, such as their messaging, tactics, and values. Through this observation, youth may internalize extremist beliefs and become more susceptible to recruitment by these groups.

2.2. REINFORCEMENT
Social learning theory posits that behavior is more likely to be repeated if it is rewarded or reinforced. In the context of terrorist organizations' use of social media, youth who engage with and share extremist content on Facebook and Twitter may receive positive reinforcement in the form of likes, shares, and comments. This positive reinforcement may further reinforce extremist attitudes and behaviors.

2.3. VICARIOUS REINFORCEMENT
Social learning theory also emphasizes the importance of vicarious reinforcement, which occurs when individuals observe the positive outcomes of another person's behavior. In the context of social media, youth who observe the success and impact of terrorist organizations' messaging and tactics may be more likely to adopt and promote these extremist behaviors.

2.4. MODELING
Social learning theory also suggests that individuals are more likely to adopt behaviors exhibited by individuals they admire or respect. In the context of social media, youth who follow and engage with social media accounts of terrorist organizations may be more likely to adopt extremist beliefs and behaviors if they perceive these groups as legitimate and respected authorities.

The Social Learning theory will use the above mentioned factors to highlight the issue that youth in Pakistan is an easy target for the militant outfits to radicalize. As youth are more energetic and passionate and are also 29% of the total population of Pakistan, hence it will be better if they will be used in a viable way by the Pakistani authorities (Tahir, 2021).

3. YOUTH IN PAKISTAN AS AN EASY TARGET

After 2012, Pakistan saw an increase in the number of Internet users. The successful adoption of 3G, 4G, and 5G networks as well as the reasonably priced broadband internet quickly increased the number of social media users in Pakistan. By leaving Canada, Switzerland, and Australia behind, Pakistan has already positioned itself among the top twenty nations with the highest percentage of internet users (Hanfi, 2021). The internet has provided numerous avenues for communication, entertainment, and learning. However, it has also allowed extremists to exploit vulnerable individuals susceptible to radicalization by facilitating their targeting, connection, and communication. All individuals, irrespective of their age, are susceptible to radicalization, with teenagers and young adults being particularly vulnerable due to entering new life phases, such as starting college or grappling with issues related to identity and a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, young people with technological skills can enhance the capabilities of terrorist organizations in the online domain. The extremist individuals possess the knowledge to exploit feelings of vulnerability and persuade individuals that they can offer a solution. Online social platforms and forums are populated with individuals seeking support to overcome a sense of isolation, loneliness, anxiety, or rejection. Extremists will analyze the content of posts, likes, shares, social media profiles, and friends' lists to identify potential targets. The radicalizer may initiate contact or pretend to be a sympathetic ear or friend. The aim of the radicalizer is to create a sense of social isolation, preventing others from challenging their narrative (Action Counters Terrorism).

Extremist groups in Pakistan seek to exploit the emotions of young people and extend their recruitment efforts through the internet. As there is lack of any organized awareness program by the government or academic institutions, the majority of young people are not aware of the risks of online radicalization. This creates an opportunity for terrorists to reach out to them without any direct contact.

Pakistan, with a large youthful population, could be a fertile ground for many extremist and terrorist recruitment. Several terrorist organizations have already taken advantage of the country's vulnerable situation. Al-Qaeda, TTP and ISIS are the primary beneficiaries. Despite language and cultural barriers, numerous Pakistani terrorist organizations, including Harkat al Jihad-e-Islami, Harkat al Mujahedeen, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Jaish-e-Mohammad, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) are working on radicalizing the youth in Pakistan.

Pakistan's population of 220 million, nuclear capabilities, proximity to Afghanistan, and poor economic conditions make it an attractive location for many terrorist organizations including ISIS. The exponential growth of ISIS cells in Pakistan over the past two years is an evidence to this. The Pakistani government has listed over 100 Islamist terrorist organizations, but despite its desire to prevent terrorist outfits from taking root, it is challenging for the Government of Pakistan to eradicate them under the existing conditions and the range of other Islamist groups already active in the country. The Pakistani Foreign Office has acknowledged this as a problem and revealed plans to establish a special cell at the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) to deal with extremist and militant outfits in Pakistan (Zahid, 2017).

4. WORKING OF SOCIAL MEDIA WING OF TTP

The social media wing of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has been working actively to promote the group's extremist ideology, recruit new members, and coordinate attacks (Johnson, 2019). Here are some ways of how the TTP's social media wing operates:

- Dissemination of Propaganda: The TTP's social media wing uses Facebook and Twitter to disseminate its propaganda, including photos, videos, and written statements. The group's social media accounts are often used to glorify the TTP's attacks and promote its ideology. The group's posts often promote violence in the name of 'Jihad' and justify terrorist attacks as a means of achieving its goals. Such messages can appeal to young people who are disillusioned with their current situation and are looking for a sense of purpose.

- Recruitment of New Members: The TTP's social media wing has been successful in recruiting new members through social media. The group use messages of rebellion and resistance to attract young people who feel marginalized or oppressed. In one example, TTP announced jobs for editing the videos and to write quarterly magazines. They announced their job via their Facebook page which has more than 270 likes in September (Tribune, 2012).

- Coordination of Attacks: The TTP's social media wing is also responsible for coordinating attacks. The group's social media accounts have been used to communicate with its members and provide them with instructions on how to carry out attacks.

- Using emotional appeals: The TTP's social media wing uses emotional appeals to radicalize young people. The group may use images of violence and suffering to elicit a strong emotional response and motivate young people to take action. For example, the group may use images of victims of drone strikes to justify its violent actions and appeal to young people's sense of justice.

- Creating echo chambers: The TTP's social media wing creates echo chambers on social media platforms to radicalize young people. By creating closed groups and pages, the group can control the information that its followers see and ensure that they only see content that supports its extremist ideology. This can make it difficult for young people to access alternative viewpoints and can reinforce their existing beliefs.

- Providing a sense of community: The TTP's social media wing provides a sense of community to young people who feel isolated or marginalized. The group's social media pages and groups offer a space for young people to connect with like-minded individuals and feel like they are part of something larger than themselves. This can make it easier for the TTP to radicalize young people and recruit them into its ranks.

The TTP use different messaging apps, such as Telegram and WhatsApp as well to communicate with its members and plan attacks. In online communications, the leadership of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has consistently promoted their narrative of the destruction of Pakistan as a success against the United States, their perceived enemy of Islam. TTP supporters and militants are celebrated with titles such as Ghazian (victors), Fedayeen (those who sacrifice themselves in the way of Allah), and Ibtal Ummat (hero of the nation). These designations are reinforced in propaganda videos that

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incorporate religious hymns to elevate TTP militants to a revered status in the struggle for implementing Islam in the region. The major part of their content is in Arabic religious hymns to instigate the Muslim sentiments, globally. After Arabic, the majority of the content is in Pashtu. It reveals that Pushto community in Pakistan is quiet vulnerable. The further evidence is that TTP has declared the North Wazirastan as hub of their training. It is pertinent to mention that Balochi Language is a recent trend observed in TTP videos. It is alarming for the government of Pakistan that TTP even has started establishing his footholds in Baluchistan as well (Rehman, 2019).

The TTP has also utilized the propaganda device of testimonial to advance their agenda. This technique involves using endorsements from well-known individuals or celebrities to persuade others to buy a product or support a campaign. The TTP has selectively used out-of-context statements, testimonials, and references from religious scholars and former state officials to show allegiance and validate their cause. The group has even named its operations after certain Islamic scholars to further reinforce their message. More recently, the TTP has expanded their use of testimonials beyond religious authorities to include mainstream media anchors, political leaders, and former state officials. In their propaganda videos, clips of media anchors criticizing the state for actions against Muslims and Pashtuns in Afghanistan and tribal districts have been presented as testimonials. These statements play a prominent role in radicalizing youth and directing them towards the extremist narrative (Tahir, 2021).

5. WORKING OF SOCIAL MEDIA WING OF BALOCH LIBERATION ARMY (BLA)

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) is a militant separatist group that is fighting for an independent Balochistan province in Pakistan. Like other militant groups, the BLA has been using social media to disseminate its message, recruit new members, and fundraise. The BLA's social media presence has played an important role in the group's propaganda campaign, allowing it to reach a wider audience and amplify its message.

The BLA's social media strategy is similar to that of other militant groups in Pakistan. The group uses Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms to post propaganda videos, statements, and news updates. The BLA's social media content typically focuses on issues related to Baloch nationalism, including alleged human rights abuses by the Pakistani government and military in Balochistan.

One of the key tactics used by the BLA on social media is to portray itself as a legitimate freedom-fighting organization. The group often posts images and videos of its fighters in military uniform and claims responsibility for attacks on Pakistani security forces. The BLA also uses social media to showcase its alleged successes, such as claiming responsibility for the killing of high-profile Pakistani military officers.

In addition to its propaganda campaign, the BLA's social media wing is also involved in fundraising. The group uses social media platforms to solicit donations from sympathizers around the world. According to reports, the BLA's social media fundraising efforts have been successful, with the group receiving donations from Baloch diaspora communities in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

The BLA's social media wing regularly updates its Twitter and Facebook pages with news, videos, and images related to the Balochistan independence movement. It has been working on mobilizing support for the cause among the Baloch diaspora and sympathizers worldwide.

In terms of the number of followers and engagement, the BLA social media wing has a significant online presence. As of March 12, 2023, the BLA Twitter account The Balochistan Post- English (@ TBPEnglish) had 548,000 followers, and the BLA Facebook page had over 66,000 followers. These numbers indicate a significant following and engagement with the BLA's social media content.

The BLA social media wing also utilizes hashtags to increase the visibility of its message. As of September 2021, the hashtag #FreeBalochistan had over 101,000 tweets on Twitter. The hashtag #Balochistan had over 222,000 tweets, and the hashtag #Baloch had over 142,000 tweets. These numbers demonstrate the popularity and reach of the BLA's social media message and its ability to engage with a large audience.

The BLA's social media presence has been a concern for Pakistani authorities, who have taken steps to counter the group's online propaganda. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) had blocked several websites and social media accounts affiliated with the BLA. The PTA stated that the BLA's social media presence was being used to spread "anti-state propaganda" and incite violence in Pakistan. But still they are using social media accounts by pseudo names.

6. WORKING OF SOCIAL MEDIA WING OF ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA (ISIS)

In the coming decade, social media is expected to become increasingly important as Internet usage expands. As of late 2016, the Middle East had an Internet penetration rate of 53 percent, while Africa and South Asia had rates of 29 percent and 27 percent, respectively. As technology becomes more accessible, it will be easier for jihadi groups to challenge state authority. In the 1990s, al-Qaeda failed in Somalia due in part to infrastructure issues and clan politics, but also because it was unable to effectively communicate instructions to its fighters or navigate the battlefield. Similarly, al-Qaeda branches in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 experienced communication difficulties with their fighters on the periphery, leading to territorial losses (United States Institute of Peace, 2016, 2017).

ISIS, a descendant of al-Qaeda, has a particularly urgent and aggressive interpretation of jihadism, and has been successful in using its propaganda arm, al-Hayat, to produce slick videos aimed at young people that resemble Hollywood action films and music videos. Funds for the group are often transferred through hawala networks, a common method in the region, and donations are accepted from sympathizers in Pakistan, including educated, middle-class professionals who previously supported al-Qaeda (Soufan Group, 2015). Women have also been found to be involved in supporting the group. For example well-educated women discovered in Lahore who reportedly left for Syria to fight alongside ISIS, was online radicalized (Cheema, 2015). While estimates vary, it is believed that a significant number of Pakistani nationals have travelled to Syria to fight for ISIS, with estimates ranging from 70 to 330 as of August 2015 (Pervaiz, 2016). In early 2016, a government official in Punjab estimated that fewer than 100 individuals had left Pakistan to join ISIS (Cheema, 2015).

Some of the ways are discussed below by which ISIS is easily radicalizing youth in Pakistan

- Firstly, these groups are providing young people with a sense of identity, akin to how urban gangs attract disaffected youth by offering them a sense of belonging and purpose. The message projected by foreign fighters shows a bond of camaraderie, high morale, and focused activity, which combines with a sense of understated heroism to draw in friends and boost the self-esteem of new recruits (Haq, 2014).
- Secondly, ISIS has a sophisticated propaganda machine, which employs social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to target its audience in a language that resonates with them. This includes exploiting popular hashtags to disseminate their message (Jethro, 2015). According to Yasir Qadhi, a Muslim cleric and professor at Rhodes College in Memphis, radicalization happens online in secret, rather than in mosques, where there is a communication gap between generations, and technology and social media sites that young people use daily are confusing and unfamiliar to parents (Reitman, 2015).
- Thirdly, they are using a sense of religious obligation, a persuasive approach to convince young people of Pakistan to join ISIS. The militants call on Muslims worldwide to protect and defend their fellow Muslims from attack.
- Fourthly, living with a number of restrictions, particularly for women, is another reason why youth can be drawn to ISIS. Women are often the most effective recruiters of other women, such as Umm Ubaydah, who herself migrated to Syria in 2014 and runs a blog that encourages other women to join the Islamic State, providing them with information on what to bring, how to dress, and how much money they will require (Zavadski, 2014).

The recruitment of teenage girls over the Internet by ISIS follows a grooming process similar to that used by online predators. Similar to a pedophile who builds trust with the victim over time, ISIS convinces vulnerable youth to keep their relationship a secret until they can persuade them to leave their families and join the extremist group (Blaker, 2015). Olsen acknowledges that ISIS now possesses the most sophisticated propaganda machine among all terrorist organizations (Yan, 2015). Through strategic targeting, the group selects those who are most susceptible to radicalization, including youth searching for meaning or purpose in their lives, those experiencing discrimination and inequality in their home countries, and those who feel alienated from society.

Youth between the ages of 15 to 25 are particularly vulnerable due to the ongoing development of their prefrontal cortex, the rational area of the brain that plays a crucial role in planning, decision-making, and social behavior (Taylor, 2020). Using modern social media tools, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as its online magazine and apps, ISIS spreads its propaganda, which aims to create camaraderie, good morale, and purposeful activity mixed with a sense of heroism, designed to attract and manipulate vulnerable youth. ISIS uses a transnational approach to recruitment, tailoring its propaganda to different languages and cultures. For example, in an attempt to recruit Americans, the group established a Twitter campaign called "Hashtag Jihadi," while video campaigns translated into multiple languages targeted youth from various cultures (Hamblet, 2017).

7. CONCLUSION

The research highlighted that terrorist organizations are utilizing the social media in five ways: spreading propaganda through posts, photographs, videos, and magazines, recruiting individuals, providing training for terrorist activities or recruiting others, raising funds for their organization, and carrying out cyber-attacks such as hacking accounts and identity theft to remain anonymous.

The research by applying Social Learning Theory concluded that youth in Pakistan are learning through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, strategies of terrorist organizations via social media and particularly through Facebook and Twitter. The exposure to extremist content on social media platforms are contribute to the formation of extremist beliefs and behaviors among vulnerable youth in Pakistan.

Controlling the escalation of radicalization is hindered by the fact that authorities still rely on traditional conflict resolution or de-radicalization methods. However, owed to the extreme level of radicalization, it is better to change the de-radicalization policies as well. New approaches and techniques are necessary to combat the threat posed by terrorist outfits. It is imperative to recognize and acknowledge socio-cultural differences and develop socio-culturally de radicalization approaches.

Current de-radicalization policies do not sufficiently address the importance of safe and protected cyber space. Banning the sites of terrorist organizations is not a viable solution. It is imperative to acknowledge that the utilization of forceful measures is it physical or virtual, against terrorists will result in further devastation. The rise of extremism in Pakistan is not solely attributable to unsafe and unprotected social media but also to the seeds of hatred. So, it is essential to immediately give proper attention to the use of social media to mitigate the influence of terrorist organizations.

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