

Digital Identity, Youth Vulnerability and Online Extremism in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between Digital identity, vulnerability of youth and online extremism in Pakistan where the psychological, social, economic and technological factors are discussed that make young people more vulnerable to extremist messages in digital space. The qualitative research design was used, secondary data collection from peer-reviewed literature, policy reports, government publications and international organization documents. Thematic analysis was used to determine the central themes of online radicalization and assess the counter-extremism measures currently in place. The results show that a combination of identity crisis, social exclusion, financial insecurities, political grievance, low social bond, and algorithm-based digital ecosystem amplify the vulnerability of Pakistani youth towards extremist ideologies. The analysis also suggests that online radicalization is not a purely technological phenomenon, but is the product of the interplay between the individual vulnerability(s) and the wider structural situation. The study highlights the need to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to digital literacy, critical thinking, inclusive education, community engagement, mental health care provision, youth empowerment and policy co-ordination for effective prevention. The research takes a different approach by focusing on Pakistan's specific demographic and digital context and provides actionable recommendations for policy, teaching, civil society and technology players to help prevent violent extremism. The results highlight the importance of working preventatively and in a research-informed way, to build youth resilience and foster safe, inclusive and democratic digital environments.



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Introduction

Pakistan has one of the highest youth population ratios in the world, which has a high percentage of young people below the age of 30. At the same time, the country's communication landscape has been made up by the speedy improvement in internet availability and the usage of social media. Young people are central to digital platforms for learning, socializing, communicating their thoughts and forming their personal identities. These advances in technology have made a new era of educational, innovative and civic opportunities possible. At the same time, they've created fresh problems with regard to security and the dissemination of extremist stories via digital media (We Are Social & Data Reportal, 2025; Haque, 2014). The changing face of extremist recruitment has been brought about by online radicalization. Extremist groups are turning to social media, encrypted messaging apps and online communities to recruit weak individuals and spread their ideologies, in addition to their traditional physical structures. Recruitment of young people who are uncertain about their identities, excluded from society, and facing unemployment or disaffection with the political system is an appealing prospect for such recruiting tactics. Digital platforms offer extremist actors' opportunities to distort emotions, reaffirm grievances, and foster collective identity and a justification for violence (Alava et al., 2017; Harriman et al., 2020). The current body of scholarly work indicates that online radicalization can rarely be said to be a radicalization in-and-of-itself. Rather, they act as amplifiers of existing vulnerabilities based on economic distress, psychological insecurity, poor social integration and identity conflicts. Therefore, a socio-digital approach is needed to move beyond traditional security perspectives in understanding radicalization and to understand that there is an interplay between individual vulnerabilities and technological environment (Brown et al., 2021; Wolbers et al., 2023). This study explores the impact on youth identity formation of the digital environment and its role in extremist ideology among youth in Pakistan. It looks at the link

between engagement online and identity formation, socio-economic factors and extremist recruitment and what policies might be able to enhance resilience among youth. The study combines criminological theories and current studies on digital extremism and brings a new contribution to the vast knowledge on youth radicalization in the digital age.

Literature Review

Youth Radicalization in the Digital Age

Pupil-centered technology-driven radicalization. Technology-driven youth radicalization. State Department Staff anticipate that the process of radicalization will occur over a period of time, and the person who has been radicalized will eventually come to believe in the legitimacy of or support for violence. Radicalization does not happen all at once, but is the interaction of psychological, social, political, economic and technological factors. The digital world has changed this process through the ability of extremist groups to get in touch with vulnerable groups directly via social media, encrypted messaging apps, online forums and digital communities, according to contemporary scholarship. It's a very important issue in Pakistan, given its demographic profile. (Alava et al., 2017; Hashmi et al., 2022). The young population represents a significant part of the nation's population, and internet usage and social media have grown significantly over the last few years. A new generation of digital technologies has become a key part of education, communication, entertainment and political discourse. While they offer learning opportunities and opportunities to participate in democratic life, they also present young people with opportunities to be misinformed and manipulated by online networks and/or extremist propaganda. The online environment has been shown over and over again to be far from a root cause of extremism. They do not, however, serve as propagators that amplify vulnerabilities or act as links between vulnerable people and vulnerable groups who offer them belonging, recognition and ideology (Harriman et al., 2020; Wolbers et al., 2023).

Identity Formation and Youth Vulnerability

The developmental task of identity formation is one of the most important tasks in adolescence and early adulthood. Youth are constantly dealing with the negotiation and construction of their religious, cultural, national and social identity, while they work towards purpose and belonging in society. Violence and discrimination, unemployment and political unrest give greater scope to other narratives and ideas to become entrenched in people's lives. Social Identity Theory offers a valuable account for such a phenomenon, which is that people obtain self-esteem and social recognition from belonging to a group. These identity gaps can be filled by extremist groups, which offer clear identity and strong feelings of collective belonging in the absence of this in mainstream institutions. These stories often involve members as protectors of religion, justice or oppressed groups and justify extremist identities to vulnerable youth psychologically. The literature also highlights that there is no direct connection between identity crises and radicalization. Rather, they engage with structural inequalities and social frustrations that further make them receptive to extremist messaging. (Yusof et al., 2021; Merrilees et al., 2014).

Digital Media and Online Radicalization

Extremist recruitment methods have been changed by the fast-growing popularity of social media. Traditional recruitment relied on face-to-face interactions, while today's extremist groups seek to recruit prospective supporters by using digital communication technologies to identify, influence and recruit them. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, WhatsApp, TikTok and encrypted messaging apps allow for the spread of propaganda to be done rapidly and quickly, bypassing many geographical and institutional hurdles. Digital algorithms amplify this by suggesting similar media that the past user has engaged in, and boost echo chambers by continually feeding users the same increasingly polarized stories. Young users are at a vulnerable age as they spend a lot of time online and are

looking for information, relationships, and self-discovery. Often, extremist messages include elements of emotional appeals, religious symbolism, political grievances and misinformation to build convincing messages that seem authentic in online environments. As a result, repeated exposure can over time cause extreme attitudes to become normal, and result in less resistance to ideological manipulation. Critically, international studies have shown that the offline vulnerabilities that foster online radicalization often occur in conjunction with other vulnerabilities, including unemployment, social isolation, poor family support, educational inequality, and political dissatisfaction. Digital media thus exacerbate the risks present in the world, not generate them (Rosner, 2019; Stockhammer, 2025; Harriman et al., 2020).

Socio-economic Drivers of Radicalization

Many structural factors have been cited in the literature that make youth susceptible to radicalization to become a member of an extremist group. The frustration and sense of injustice experienced by young people is due to factors such as unemployment, educational disparities, political marginalization, social exclusion, corruption and limited economic opportunities. The regional inequality in Pakistan, the demographic pressure and inequity in education and employment are exacerbating these challenges. Conditions like these make it easier for narratives of extremes appealing to dignity, justice, purpose and social recognition to be more attractive. But many studies clearly show that feelings of injustice and exclusion can have a greater impact on radicalization than actual material poverty (Haque, 2014; Shahzadi, 2025). The relationship can be further explained by Strain Theory, which posits that people who are denied opportunities will seek other means to attain social significance or recognition. These frustrations are used by extremist groups to claim that such situations are a part of a greater political or religious agenda of oppression (Agnew, 2016; Haque, 2014; Lubis, 2025; Shahzadi, 2025).

Counter-Extremism Approaches

There is a growing body of research in the field of counter-extremism that has increasingly embraced prevention as a main approach over simply reacting to crises. The classical security-focused strategies of surveillance and law enforcement are still important to counteract immediate threats, but have not been effective in tackling the root causes of radicalization. New policy developments suggest holistic policy measures combining aspects of education, community engagement, digital literacy, family support, psychological resilience and youth empowerment (UNESCO, 2017; Shahzadi, 2025). Digital literacy initiatives help youth identify misinformation and extremist propaganda, and inclusive education systems promote critical thinking and democratic engagement. Community-based interventions with teachers and religious scholars, families, civil society groups and community and policy makers also promote resilience through positive identity alternatives and building social cohesion. Therefore, in the literature, a whole-of-society approach is recommended which is not based only on enforcement but on prevention, rehabilitation and the creation of digital resilience. (UNESCO, 2017; UNCCT/UNICRI, 2020; Sulaiman et al., 2023).

Research Gap

Though online radicalization has gained momentum with its own growing global momentum, there is limited empirical research on the issue in Pakistan. Previous research mainly focuses on ideological explanations or traditional security approaches, whilst giving comparatively less weight to the process of digital identity construction and young people's online activities and recruitment methods on online platforms. Moreover, there is very limited research that has examined the effectiveness of digital literacy programs, counter-narratives, or youth-focused prevention programs in the context of Pakistan (Hashmi et al., 2022; Tahirkheli, 2023). Such a lack of evidence is limiting the scope of policymakers' design efforts to develop more comprehensive interventions that can tackle the fast-changing

digital threats. The current study thus aims to fill the above-mentioned gap by studying the relationship between digital environments and youth identity formation, socioeconomic vulnerabilities and online extremist recruitment and by recommending ways of strengthening digital environments to prevent digital radicalization among youths in Pakistan in an evidence-based manner.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study used a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to explore the connection between Youth identity formation and digital environments and vulnerability to extremist ideologies in Pakistan. The research combines qualitative and quantitative evidence to offer a holistic view of the nature of online radicalization, which has a multidimensional aspect. Considering the nature of the study, capturing the complexity of the social process of radicalization, it was decided to use a qualitative approach for this research. Triangulation of multiple sources of evidence was possible in the mixed-methods design, and this helped to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Qualitative evidence was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that can explain how extreme narratives shape youth identity, and quantitative evidence provided a broader demographic and socio-economic context for Pakistan. (Johnson et al., 2007)

Data Sources

Both secondary and primary data sources were used for the study.

The secondary data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government reports, policy documents, documents from international organizations, credible media investigations and statistical databases related to youth, internet penetration, unemployment, education and violent extremism. These were the sources that provided the theoretical and contextual background of the research. The primary data were supplemented

with the secondary data from semi-structured interviews, structured questionnaires and survey responses. Special focus was laid on the insights gained from the interviews with officers from the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) Lahore Division about the trends of youth radicalization, recruitment process and institutional mechanisms to handle threats of extremism in particular (Bowen, 2009).

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to recruit individuals who have expertise and experience in the fields of extremism and counterterrorism. The method allowed respondents to be able to give informed opinions on digital radicalization and youth vulnerability. (Walker et al., 2021) The secondary evidence corpus consisted of some 30 academic and policy publications which were chosen based on three main criteria:

- Application for Pakistan or similar situations.
- Focusing on youth, digital Media and Radicalization.
- Academic and institutions' credibility.

These selection criteria guaranteed the selection of evidence that is up-to-date and methodologically sound.

Data Collection

Multiple complementary stages of data collection took place. The first step was to undertake a thorough search of the literature and policy documents on issues of youth identity, online extremism and digital media and counter-extremism. Secondly, demographic and socioeconomic data were gathered for public use to provide an understanding of the social and demographic landscape in which youth radicalization is likely to happen. Thirdly, relevant participants, through interviews and questionnaires, were engaged to get primary qualitative data. These interviews focused on institutional challenges and preventive measures, perceptions on recruitment practices, as well as the narratives of online extremist recruitment. The use of several sources of evidence added to the analyses, enhanced analytical depth and

minimized the constraint presented by using a single data source (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis process was used to analyse the collected data (qualitative evidence) to identify recurring themes across the evidence. There were several steps in the analysis:

- Understanding of the data that has been gathered.
- Coding meaningful statements initially.
- Development of a charter structure that relates all codes to a single theme.
- Making comparisons between themes in primary and secondary sources.
- Analysis and representation of results in terms of well-known criminological and sociological theories.

The themes of the major analyses were:

- Skills and abilities for community service.
- Digital media exposure.
- Social, economic or political disgruntlements.
- Extremist recruitment narratives.
- Counter-extremism interventions.
- The digital resilience and prevention.

It was not the intent of the quantitative indicators to be analyzed quantitatively in order to test statistical relationships, but to descriptively interpret the data and triangulate with the qualitative data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

Four complementary theoretical frameworks were used to aid in the interpretation of findings.

Social Identity Theory is a theory of social psychology that describes a person's sense of belonging from membership in a group, and his self-esteem. The more confused people are about their identity, the more likely they will be to buy into extremist messages which offer them some form of recognition and purpose. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Strain Theory suggests that the frustration that stems from blocked opportunities, unemployment, inequality and perceived injustice can lead to deviant or extremist avenues of action. (Agnew, 2016).

In contrast to the ideas of the **Social Learning Theory**, attitudes and behaviors are learned by observing and reinforcing. By repeatedly exposing the user to extremist content and online communities, digital platforms help to achieve this (Bandura, 1977).

According to **Hirschi's Social Bond Theory**, a low level of attachment to family, education and conventional institutions can lead to a decrease in the level of social control, which can increase susceptibility to radicalization (Hirschi, 1969). These theories can be combined into a multidimensional explanation of youth radicalization, incorporating the psychological, social, structural and technological explanations.

Ethical Considerations

The study has been conducted in accordance with ethical standards. Interviews and surveys were conducted with the free and informed consent of all respondents. The confidentiality of participants' names and the use of the data gathered for academic purposes were assured. All the information was anonymous when analyzed and reported. In addition, there was a proper reference to the secondary sources, to prevent plagiarism and assure academic integrity. (Tripathy, 2013).

The credibility of the Study

For methodological triangulation, primary data was collected through interviews and secondary data through literature, policy and statistical data, which were integrated to increase the reliability and credibility of the findings. Multiple evidence sources allowed cross-validation of themes that emerged and minimized the researcher's bias. The findings of this study were corroborated with the existing literature in order to validate the conclusions (Bowen, 2009; Ruggiano & Perry, 2019).

Results and Findings

Based on the findings, it is concluded that the radicalization of youth in Pakistan is a multidimensional phenomenon as it resulted from the convergence of challenges of identity, socio-economic issues, psychological vulnerabilities and the digital environment. Digital media, instead of being a driver of grievance, serve to reinforce ideas and ideology and to get vulnerable youth in contact with online extremist communities, thereby reinforcing these feelings of grievance. The analysis resulted in five themes.

Identity Crisis and the Search for Belonging

The fear of not knowing who they are significantly adds to youth vulnerability, one of the strongest themes that came out of the study. Adolescence and early adulthood are significant times of life in which people are looking for recognition, belonging and purpose. Social exclusion, discrimination, unemployment or political dismay highlight the vulnerabilities, which are increasingly being used by extremist groups to promote alternative identities, based on religious, ideological, or political narratives. The results indicate that extremist groups position themselves as communities that offer dignity and purpose and social acceptance. These stories are especially appealing to young people who feel marginalized or don't have the opportunities to have a meaningful voice in society. As a result, the recruitment by identity is a psychological approach and not just an ideological campaign (Yusof et al., 2021; Merrilees et al., 2014). This is further reflected in the results, which show that identity formation in the digital environments contributes to making this process happen faster. Communities online enable people to connect with others who share their beliefs and help reinforce their sense of commitment to their beliefs, while undermining ties to conventional social institutions. The results of this are in line with Social Identity Theory that addresses group memberships and their effects on attitudes and behaviors (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Digital Media as an Enabler of Radicalization

The analysis shows how social media has fundamentally changed the approaches to extremist recruitment. Digital platforms allow extremist groups to spread their messages quickly, anonymously, and to geographically spread audiences with little financial investment. The platforms identified by participants and literature reviewed as main platforms for the circulation of extremist narratives were Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, TikTok and encrypted messaging apps. Instead of just using direct recruitment, extremist actors use videos that have an emotional appeal, religious symbols, political grievances, conspiracy theories and misinformation to manipulate susceptible audiences (Rosner, 2019; Harriman et al., 2020). The recurring point is recommendation algorithms. Participants highlighted the fact that when users interact with extremist related content they will be constantly exposed to the same types of content by digital algorithm, resulting in an ideological echo chamber that will reinforce their beliefs and reduce their exposure to other viewpoints. Important to note, however, is that exposure to the internet is not enough to be a cause of violent extremism. Rather, digital environments magnify and do not cause psychological and social vulnerabilities, and thus exacerbate the radicalization process (Stockhammer, 2025; Wolbers et al., 2023).

Socio-economic and Political Grievances

The findings suggest that the structural inequalities have a large impact on the vulnerability of the youth. The frustration and perceived injustice of young people is created by high unemployment, disparity in education, poverty, political instability, corruption and limited opportunities of upward social mobility. The participants stressed that they are exploited by extremist groups that see violence as an acceptable solution to injustice and oppression. The study also shows, however, that poverty does not necessarily lead to extremism. Rather, the sense of discrimination and exclusion, and of lost opportunities, seems to have more impact than

the actual conditions of poverty (Lubis, 2025; Haque, 2014). Many participants expressed that the lack of a source of recognition and purpose is especially a problem with the unemployed and socially marginalized young people who are easily targeted by extremist ideas. This study confirms Strain Theory, which posits that thwarted opportunities lead towards alternative means to be accepted into society (Agnew, 2016).

Weak Social Bonds and Online Communities

Another significant conclusion is that there is a weakening of traditional social institutions. The participants noted that decreased family involvement, less involvement in the community and lower involvement in educational and recreational programs leads to reliance on online social networks. Digital communities are becoming a more important source of emotional and psychological fulfillment of belonging needs, as real-world relationships are deteriorating. The transition is being exploited by extreme groups who have established online spaces that offer both micro and macro support for people who conform with ideologies and punish those who deviate. The results show that those youths who have limited supervision, who are less attached to their parents' education and who have less involvement in the community spend significantly more time online and thus have greater exposure to extremist messages (Hirschi, 1969). These observations are consistent with Hirschi's Social Bond Theory which theorizes that a weak social bond (attachment, commitment, involvement and beliefs) leads to an increase in the possibility of engaging in deviant behavior and a decrease in informal social control. (Hirschi, 1969).

Counter-Extremism and Digital Resilience

The last theme emphasizes the need to focus on both proactive and reactive responses to counter-extremism. Throughout the discussions, it was repeatedly highlighted that the traditional approach of law enforcement to the issue of online radicalization is still needed but not enough to counter the underlying drivers of online radicalization. There are many key roles to play in preventing extremist recruitment, including

within educational institutions, families, religious communities, and civil society and digital platforms. Participants resoundingly agreed that the integration of digital literacy, media literacy (UNESCO, 2017; UNCCT/UNICRI, 2020), critical thinking and civic education in educational programs will help young people to better identify misinformation and extremist propaganda. The results also show that an integrated sense of national identity, more educational opportunities, better youth employment and more engagement in the community all contribute to mitigating vulnerability to violent recruitment by extremist groups. In general, the evidence indicates that a comprehensive prevention approach consisting of security measures, as well as education, psychological, social and technological interventions is recommended. An integrated approach can help tackle the symptoms and the root causes of digital radicalization in Pakistan (Sulaiman et al., 2023; Tahirkheli, 2023).

Discussion

This study's results indicate that there is no one single factor which can be blamed for youth radicalization in Pakistan. Rather, it comes out of the interplay between vulnerabilities related to identity, socioeconomic inequalities, psychological needs and digital communication technologies. This multi-dimensional view is in line with the current radicalization literature which suggests that violent radicalization is not only a result of ideological exposure but also a product of convergence of individual motivations and structural factors (Brown et al., 2021; Wolbers et al., 2023). One of the most important results is related to the process of identity formation. The study finds that the younger generation who are facing uncertainty about their social and religious or national identity are more likely to fall prey to extremist messages offering recognition, dignity and belonging. The results echo the Social Identity Theory (SIT) that states that people seek their self-esteem from group membership. In the absence of fulfilment of these psychological requirements by the mainstream institutions, the extremist groups are able to build up meaningful alternative identities that can empower. This discovery aligns

with earlier research conducted overseas which shows that ID crises are a key driver of the recruitment of extremists (Yusof et al., 2021; Merrilees et al., 2014). The study also shows the dramatic shift of the pathways to radicalization due to the use of digital media. Digital platforms are not replacing the traditional methods of recruitment but complementing those social networks with new methods of communication, which are more extensive, rapid and sophisticated. Extremist groups can strengthen their ideologies and marginalize users from other perspectives through the use of social media algorithms, personalized content suggestions and online communities. Digital surroundings thus act as "radicalization accelerators", and exacerbate already prevalent grievances without triggering extremist behavior. The results validate the growing evidence internationally that extremist organizations are beginning to use cyberspace strategically in ever-increasing numbers (Rosner, 2019; Stockhammer, 2025). An interesting finding of this study is the link between socioeconomic conditions and vulnerability. The analysis validates that a high level of unemployment, lack of educational parity, political disaffection and feeling of injustice are major factors in making people vulnerable to extremist messages. Also, the results indicate that material deprivation is not directly linked to radicalization. Rather, exclusion, discrimination and denied opportunities seem to be more significant in the subjective sense than in terms of economic conditions. This observation is very much in line with the Strain Theory and the Relative Deprivation Theory where the perception of injustice is more powerful in motivating deviant behavior than is poverty itself (Agnew, 2016; Lubis, 2025). The findings also validate Hirschi's Social Bond Theory as they found that family bonds that are less secure and participation in the community, as well as lowered educational engagement, are correlated with youths being more dependent on online communities. Extremist groups take advantage of this when the conventional social institutions are unable to give attachment and support, creating alternative social networks based on commitment to an ideology. This process is enhanced by the digital

environment which encourages ongoing contact between like-minded people, independent of geography (Hirschi, 1969). The study highlights the importance of a policy perspective in shaping the way online radicalization can be effectively reduced; a stance that encompasses both a proactive and reactive approach. While law enforcement can play a role in acting on threats, comprehensive interventions that tackle the social and psychological factors that contribute to extremism are needed to prevent it. Together with educational reform, digital literacy, thinking critically, youth employment and community engagement and building an inclusive identity are all important parts of counterextremism successful strategies (Shahzadi, 2025). The results are consistent with international Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) frameworks which call for a whole of society approach to CVE that combines security, education, technology and community resilience (UNESCO, 2017; UNCCT/UNICRI, 2020; Sulaiman et al., 2023). The study also adds specifically to the scholarship of Pakistan as it fills an important gap in the research on relationship between formation of Digital identity and youth radicalization. While the subject of terrorism and militancy and ideological movements has received extensive attention, there is comparatively little work on how the algorithms of social media influence, or how social media and online identity construction works on them. This study combines the qualitative approach with theoretical approaches and the primary insights of the institutions to bring a holistic view to the current landscape of radicalization in the digital environment of Pakistan that is evolving rapidly (Hashmi et al., 2022). Altogether, the conclusions indicate that there is a need to move away from counter-terrorism and towards proactive resilience measures for effective prevention. Youth identity building, inclusive citizenship, digital literacy and to increase educational and economic opportunities are all sustainable strategies to decrease vulnerability of Pakistani youths to extremist recruitment.

Conclusion

The present study focused on the association between the process of youth identity formation and digital media and vulnerability towards extremist ideologies in Pakistan. The results show online radicalization to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which is created through the interplay of psychological, social, economic, political and technological factors. Violent extremism does not directly occur on online platforms, but these platforms can exacerbate vulnerabilities that can make individuals more susceptible to violent extremist narratives, suggest ideologies to validate existing beliefs, and provide virtual communities that meet the needs of young people for identity, belonging and purpose. The study also shows that individuals feel a sense of identity crisis, discrimination, lack of employment, social differences, and political grievances are key factors that make them more vulnerable to extremism recruitment. These vulnerabilities are exploited by extreme groups in strategic ways and they build convincing narratives around notions of justice and religious obligation, dignity and collective identity. Therefore, radicalization cannot only be seen as a security issue, but as one of social processes shaped by structural inequality and the rapidly changing digital communication environment. The research adds to the ever-expanding pool of literature on radicalization in Pakistan, and combines the latest theories of radicalization with empirical findings on youth online behavior. It also fills an important gap in the research by putting forward digital identity formation and online social networks in the unique socio-political context of Pakistan. Overall, a coordinated effort, rather than a law enforcement-only solution, is needed to prevent online radicalization. Youth resilience is key to sustainable prevention, which relies on education, embracing of diversity, digital literacy, youth engagement in communities, and better socioeconomic opportunities. This multi-dimensional approach can help in lowering the vulnerability and heighten social cohesion and democratic engagement of the youth of Pakistan.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are made based on the results:

Make Digital Literacy a Part of Education

Media and critical thinking, and responsible digital citizenship, should be included in the curricula of educational institutions. It is important for students to learn to recognize misinformation, online manipulation, extremist propaganda and algorithmic bias.

Increase Young People's Sense of Identity and Social Inclusion

The Government institutions, educational institutions and civil society should build national identity, civic responsibility, intercultural dialogue and engagement and decrease identity based vulnerabilities.

Increase the Size of the Employment and Skill Development Schemes

Youth unemployment is of significant economic concern as a structural risk factor. Vocational education and training, entrepreneurship, internships and digital skills trainings should be strengthened and ramped up to enhance economic participation of youth.

Enhance Community-Based Prevention

Families, teachers, religious leaders, psychologists and community members must work together to identify vulnerable youth and create supportive environments where positive identity is fostered and social inclusion occurs for all youth (Shahzadi, 2025).

Enhance the Accountability of Online Platforms and Enhance Online Monitoring

There should be a collaboration between government and social media platforms to increase the capacity of the systems detecting extremist content and respect for human rights and freedom of expression.

Develop Evidence-Based Counter-Narratives

Anti-extremism efforts should go beyond censorship and create reliable, constructive,

online content that fosters peaceful resolution of conflict, tolerance and critical thinking, democratic principles.

Strengthen Multi-Agency Coordination

To prevent online radicalization, an integrated approach between different institutions and actors, including educational institutions, law enforcement, technology companies, civil society organizations and policymakers is needed.

Promote Future Research

Future research could involve comparative and longitudinal design to analyze the changing trends in digital radicalization among the youths of Pakistan and effectiveness of prevention programmes.

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