

## Navigating the Intersection of Social Media and Countering Violent Extremism in Pakistan

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### Abstract:

In the fight against extremism, social media is becoming crucial for shaping public opinion and promoting peace. Pakistan has a growing emphasis on building a counter-narrative to combat extremism. This study focuses on the potential and effectiveness of social media in promoting counter-narratives against extremism and combating radicalization in Pakistan. The research emphasizes the role of various actors, such as government institutions, journalists, and peacebuilders in? The data was collected through questionnaires from 120 journalists and peacebuilders across Pakistan. The results indicate that social media is a popular source of information but is considered unreliable and inaccessible to many regions and populations. The analysis of social media platforms emphasized the significance of reaching the appropriate audience through the appropriate platform. In conclusion, the study shows that social media has the potential to play a crucial role in countering extremism in Pakistan. However, both government and non-government organizations need to harness its power effectively. The study suggests that social media may not be sufficient in isolation and recommends a multi-faceted approach that utilizes the strengths of various media sources. Further research is required to explore ways to improve the use of social media for peacebuilding goals.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, combating violent extremism, social media, peacebuilding, countering radicalization, public opinion

### INTRODUCTION

The American-led global counterterrorism initiative launched in Afghanistan in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has had a similar impact on Pakistan as it has on Afghanistan in terms of poverty, economic hardship, political turmoil, social unrest, unemployment, extremism, sectarianism, and radicalization (Hanfi, 2021). Pakistan suffered tremendous material and human loss as a result of prolonged waves of terrorism that followed 9/11, especially when the US was still in Afghanistan. Pakistan ranks third among nations plagued by terrorism, after Iraq and

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Afghanistan, according to the Global Terrorism Index. The war on terror has resulted in significant human and economic loss for Pakistan, in which an estimated 66,000 Pakistanis have died in terrorist attacks. The Pakistani government calculates that between 2000 and 2010, the direct and indirect economic costs of terrorism totaled \$68 billion (Abbasi, 2013). According to the parliamentary secretary for commerce and investment, Pakistan has incurred a total of \$152 billion in economic losses since the start of the war on terror a couple of decades ago (Ahmed, 2021).

Since 9/11, a lot has been written about how modern technologies like the Internet and global communication networks support transnational terrorism, the dissemination of its ideology, and its recruitment efforts. Numerous claims have also been made regarding the role of the media, particularly new communication technologies, in encouraging the radicalization process or the adoption of extreme viewpoints that may result in terrorist violence (Stevens, & Neumann, 2009). The importance of communication in terrorism is widely acknowledged to the point where the term "strategic communication" has gained currency in government circles, think tanks, and academia (Corman, 2011). Particularly, the idea of "narrative" has been incorporated more and more into the research on the causes of terrorism and is now supported as a crucial component of counter-radicalization strategies (Ranstorp, 2010).

The media technology industry has grown significantly over the past 35 years, becoming a well-established and organized sector. Policymakers have used media technology as a tool to further their desired goals (Shabir, & Iqbal, 2011). Its relevance has recently grown as a result of its effective involvement in warfare. During the Gulf War of 1991, the Afghan War of 2001, and the Iraq War of 2003, American war strategists employed media as a crucial tool of their war policies (Shabir, & Iqbal, 2011). In Pakistan, media and communication networks are major contributors to the dissemination of extremist ideology (Khan, 2015). Hashmi (2015) asserts that some media outlets are significant influencers and have contributed significantly to the radicalization process. It covers topics in a way that forces viewers and readers to perceive radicals and extremists favourably and sympathetically.

Traditional media sources were the main sources of communication for the public before the internet and social media were widely used. According to several experts, like Peresin (2014) and Archetti (2015), the birth of modern terrorism, as practiced by organizations like al-Qaeda, was facilitated by the growth of mass media, which allowed radical organizations to use terrorism to reach a wide audience. They had no choice but to use the spectacle of terrorist acts to bring public attention to their cause (Peresin, 2014). Because of this, some people in the intellectual and political worlds believe that the mainstream media fuels the spread of terrorism and violent extremism.

Social media has had a huge impact on how conflicts are waged, planned, and resolved. Social media may be used to foster trust during peace talks, but it may also serve as a weapon for escalating hostilities by disseminating misinformation and false information. As a result, for peace talks to be successful, both physical conflicts and all types of information warfare must be avoided by the parties involved. To achieve the goal of national reconciliation, contemporary peace agreements should include provisions governing the control of social media information that might undermine the peace (Majcin, 2019).

In recent years, radicals have used social networking platforms to pursue violent extremist activities (Alam, 2015). The extremists use social media as a tool to recruit people to join their extremist organizations and missions, plan and carry out terrorist operations around the world, and attract people who are vulnerable to their messages over the internet (Stewart, 2017). Several countries, including the United States, Spain, Russia, and the United Kingdom, have discovered that the violent attacks they suffered were carried out by extremists who were radicalized through the use of the internet and social media (Kundnani, & Hayes, 2018). There is limited empirical research on effective ways to reduce this phenomenon, despite numerous reports on the use of the internet and social media for radicalization and violent extremism. This study examines the feasibility of using social media to counteract violent extremism in Pakistan.

### **Violent Extremism and Social Media**

Social media has become a significant driving force in the ongoing global political economy since the start of the twenty-first century. Social media has become a problem for governments globally despite its value as an unfiltered forum for public opinion after terrorist groups started using it to widely disseminate their messages and find new recruits for their ranks (Leetaru, 2018). The use of the Internet by violent extremists to disseminate information, raise money, find new recruits, and communicate with activists has grown significantly in recent years (Avis, 2016).

Terrorist groups use the internet in five different ways: to radicalize people by disseminating propaganda through easily accessible online posts, photos, videos, and magazines; to recruit people; to train them in terrorist tactics; to find more recruits; to raise money for their groups; and, finally, to conduct cyberattacks to hack accounts and commit identity theft to remain anonymous. Due to lack of awareness about religion, many fall into the extremists' trap when they use religious allusions to radicalize them (Hanfi, 2018).

Radical individuals and groups are increasingly adopting social media platforms like Facebook (Parent & Ellis, 2011). A number of state and non-state actors are employing tactics (propaganda, radicalization, and recruiting) that endanger societal cohesiveness, human rights, and the status of the world (Ferguson, 2016). Several experts point out that the internet is not a source of radicalization and is rarely a tool of radicalization (Bigo et al., 2014; Schmid, 2013; Conversi, 2012). However, it has significantly contributed to the spread of radical ideas, the development of a virtual ideological community, the collection of funding, the interaction of radicals with terrorist organizations, and the radicalization of those who are already at risk (Schmid, 2013; Parent & Ellis, 2011).

Extremist groups and movements have exploited various media tools, from print to digital, to mark territory, intimidate some audiences, connect with other (sympathetic) audiences, radicalize individuals, and spread propaganda (Aly et al., 2014). Research has shown that fake news and information on social media can play a role in violent extremism (Scrivens & Conway, 2019; Aly et al., 2014). The United Nations report "Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms" (2022) highlights the threat that disinformation and fake news pose to human rights and fundamental freedoms. The report notes that disinformation can be used to undermine democracy, fuel conflict and violence, and perpetuate human rights abuses (United Nations, 2022).

In Pakistan, social media is a relatively new phenomenon that has quickly garnered widespread acceptance. Its use as an alternative information medium is increasingly widespread due to open access to it and a tool for sharing of information, serving as a knowledge resource for the general public and offering a replacement for traditional communication (Leetaru, 2018). Militant groups such as Al Qaeda and its Pakistani affiliates have utilised growing internet penetration by using ICT platforms to connect local and global operations and solicit donations from the Pakistani diaspora and similar international groups (Hassan, 2018).

The internet and social media platforms were used by terrorist organizations to spread their ideologies and promote their agenda (Leetaru, 2018). They kept both hidden and public blogs, websites, e-lists, and accounts on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. Prior to being proscribed by the government, certain banned terrorist organizations actively disseminated their messages online (Weimann, 2006). The proliferation of groups like the TTP in urban regions of Punjab and Sindh and their recruitment of individuals from educational institutions and professional organizations demonstrated that online radicalization had evolved into an intricate and far-reaching phenomenon (Yusuf, 2016).

The growth of extremism in Pakistan is significantly influenced by social media. The country's population of internet users has grown, with 11 million new users in 2021 alone. The rise of groups like Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has demonstrated the power of social media to promote extremist ideologies. The TLP has used social media effectively to reach its audience and expand its political base since its first major protest in 2017. A significant contributor to the TLP's development has been the use of social media particularly YouTube and Twitter, which has allowed it to reach a growing number of domestic and international users. The affordability and accessibility of smartphones have made it easier for more people in Pakistan to access social media and be exposed to the TLP's message (Ahmed 2022).

### **Countering Violent Extremism through Social Media**

Counter-violent extremism and de-radicalization programmes are increasingly being acknowledged by academics and policymakers as more successful ways to combat extremism than solely militaristic ones (ElSai'd & Harrigan, 2013). Pakistan increased its focus on countering violent extremism after December 2014 attack. In response, the government launched a National Action Plan (NAP) in January 2015 with 20 points to address the issue, after a terrorist attack on Army Public school in Peshawar that left 149 people dead, including 132 schoolchildren, making it the second deadliest school massacre in the world ("Pakistan Taliban," 2014). The NAP includes policies to combat the use of the internet and social media for terrorism, ban the glorification of terrorists and terrorist groups in print and electronic media, and dismantle the terrorists' communication network (NACTA, 2015). The revised NAP in 2021 combined the 20 points into 14, with a focus on "Action Against Spread of Terrorism Through Media (Electronic, Print, and Social Media) Communication and Cyber Networks" (National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), 2021).

Pakistan's attempts to address violent extremism have been obstructed by a combination of factors, including limited governance capacity, political barriers, economic difficulties, and divisions between the civilian and military sectors. Despite implementing policies and reforms in areas such

as education, media, economic development, and security, the government has faced challenges due to competing national security priorities and ongoing economic and energy crises. Additionally, the government's approach has been reactive and lacks a clear, long-term strategy, resulting in difficulties mobilizing public support for counter-violent extremism campaigns (Mirahmadi et al., 2015).

Despite these challenges, the Pakistani internal security agency NACTA remains a key player in Pakistan's efforts to counter terrorism and extremism. The National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) is in charge of developing counterterrorism and counter extremism policies and plans. Additionally, it creates and evaluates action plans to combat terrorism and extremism. It is tasked with developing a counter-terrorism strategy that addresses short-, medium-, and long-term objectives, as well as action plans for their implementation. Threat assessments are created along with regular evaluations. It provides advice to the federal government on how to take prompt action to combat terrorism and extremism. NACTA is in charge of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating intelligence to the appropriate authorities about terrorist organizations and individuals in Pakistan (NACTA, 2023).

In 2014, the government issued its first integrated National Internal Security Policy, which recognized the importance of civilian government, the military, civil society, overseas Pakistanis, and the international community in CVE efforts (National Internal Security Policy, 2014). However, critics argue that the policy's implementation has been inadequate and lacks a comprehensive and coordinated approach. As a result, the burden has fallen largely on non-government organizations and civil society organizations to implement peacebuilding and CVE-related programming through various channels, such as organizing anti-terror campaigns, public rallies, and conferences; promoting peace and social cohesion through local media and community-based initiatives and conducting research and public awareness campaigns (Mirahmadi et al., 2015).

According to the report "Empowering Pakistan's Civil Society to Counter Global Violent Extremism", Pakistan's civil society has played a critical role in countering violent extremism in the absence of a sustained government-led strategy. Civil society organizations have been instrumental in organizing anti-terror campaigns, peace rallies, conferences, and sit-ins to mobilize the population against extremist groups. They have also established radio programmes and cultural associations to counter radical rhetoric and denounce attacks on innocent civilians and the destruction of Pakistan's cultural heritage. Additionally, faith-based organizations have eroded the credibility of militant groups by challenging their narratives within a culturally appropriate framework and issuing anti-terror fatwas in Urdu and local languages (Mirahmadi et al., 2015).

The battle against violent extremism is a complicated issue. There is a general agreement among academics and policymakers that soft approaches to addressing extremism can be more effective than hard ones. Concerns about how to prevent terrorists from using the Internet and how to use social media to combat violent extremism are growing (Khalid, 2023). Therefore, this research intended to conduct a survey of peacebuilders and journalists in Pakistan to explore their perspectives on the role of social media in combating violent extremism in the country. The research focuses on the role of various actors, such as the government, civil society, journalists, and peacebuilders, in using social media to build a counter-narrative and promote peace. This research contributes to the ongoing efforts to counter violent extremism in the region and provides valuable

insights into the potential of social media in this regard. Moreover, this study provides a basis for policymakers to gain a broader understanding of the intersection of social media and countering violent extremism and its implications for peacebuilding in Pakistan.

### **The Context of Positive and Negative Countering Violent Extremism Strategies**

There is not a single comprehensive strategy that can address every problem associated with how social media is used to propagate and even combat violent extremism. Social media, however, may play a crucial and delicate role in conveying the counter-narrative. Two approaches are being used to combat violent extremism on social media: positive and negative measures. Negative CVE strategies aim to censor, filter, remove, or block the content of extremist organizations. Positive CVE initiatives aim to counteract extremist propaganda and narratives by creating counter-content or counter-narratives (Davies et al., 2016).

Several academics have suggested that limiting terrorists' access to the internet and removing their social media presence is a way to combat the threat that they pose online. The continual proliferation of those accounts, groups, sites, and channels makes it impossible for the threat to be eliminated. Terrorist groups will create 100 new pages or groups in minutes if the government blocks fifty of them (Hanfi, 2018). The Pakistani government has used the same approach to tackle the rise of TLP on social media. While coverage of TLP protests has been banned on traditional media, the government's typical response to TLP protests has been to ban coverage on social media (Ahmed, 2022).

In April 2021, the far-right group TLP caused violent protests following the arrest of its leader, Saad Rizvi. The ensuing clashes resulted in the death of four police officers and hundreds of injuries. In response, Pakistan temporarily blocked access to several social media services, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and messaging apps WhatsApp and Telegram, across the country, in order to prevent TLP from using these platforms to incite further violence. The temporary ban was imposed due to the high presence of TLP activists on social media (Hashim, 2021; Welle, 2021).

The Pakistani military has adopted a different approach than the government's ineffective method of shutting down social media platforms. Instead, the military focuses on targeting "terrorist websites". The content of these sites includes information on the organization, political and ideological aims, news updates, and criticism of enemies. According to the National Internal Security Policy document, there were around 60 banned organizations in Pakistan, but some of them reappeared as they were hosted by madrassas supported by militant groups (Hassan, 2018).

Voice of America claimed in 2019 that dozens of banned militants, sectarian, terrorist, and anti-state organizations in Pakistan allegedly operate freely on social media, primarily Facebook, spewing hate speech without being questioned by law enforcement. According to a daily Dawn investigation, hundreds of sites, groups, and individual accounts belonging to 41 of the 64 extremist organizations that the government has blacklisted are available to social network users (Gul, 2017). Hanfi (2021) highlights the importance of analyzing social media content to effectively combat extremism. The traditional approach of government cyber security departments simply banning organizations and pages provided to them is not enough, as terrorists can easily create new accounts with slight variations in spelling.

Hassan (2018) argued that Pakistani authorities have placed a greater emphasis on issues of morality over the monitoring of websites of terrorist organizations and their sympathizers. Following a ruling by the Lahore High Court, the Ministry of Information and Technology shut down YouTube, Facebook, and 450 other websites in May 2010 due to the proliferation of militant content. This trend has continued over the years, with video sharing platform Tik Tok being shut down multiple times due to morality issues. In February 2023, Wikipedia was also blocked in Pakistan for hosting "blasphemous content", denying access to the country's population to the world's largest free knowledge repository (Zaccaro, 2023). However, the United Nations report on countering disinformation highlights the importance of protecting freedom of expression, ensuring access to information, and promoting media pluralism. The report argues that while it is important to address disinformation and harmful content online, regulating based on vague definitions and imposing disproportionate sanctions can have a negative impact on freedom of expression. The report emphasizes the need to avoid internet shutdowns and blocking of websites and outlets, as these measures can have significant consequences for individuals' ability to access information and express themselves freely (United Nations, 2022).

The war on terror is seen as a development in the conflict's spectrum and has been variously described as a new generation of warfare in which the opponent is a movement and an ideology rather than a country, leading to terms like ideological warfare and battle without borders. The phrase "5th generation warfare" refers to a relatively recent concept that describes a kind of warfare characterized by the employment of non-state actors, unconventional strategies, and the exploitation of social media and other communication technologies (Aladeen, 2023). It is an invisible war that includes cyberwarfare, information warfare, and economic conflict (Sumarno, & Risman, 2020). In order to counter the process of radicalization, it is necessary to understand the attraction of extremist groups, messages or narratives. Al-Qaeda and its followers use certain themes to indoctrinate young people into their violent ideology. Based on a better understanding of the ideology and the underlying concepts of radical narratives, efforts to counter violent extremism can be enhanced by more effectively targeting the counter-narrative message (Quiggin, 2010). Alternative and counter narratives are terms frequently used interchangeably to describe online and offline communication activities that directly or indirectly oppose extremist propaganda in a variety of forms (Thompson, 2011; Ashour, 2011).

In its ongoing battle against terrorism, Pakistan has come to understand the importance of countering violent extremism through effective counter-narratives. The spread of extremism has not only affected those who participate in terrorism but also those who sympathize with it. To address this, "*Paigham-e-Pakistan*," a comprehensive national counter-terrorism narrative, was developed through collaboration between the Higher Education Commission, the Council of Islamic Ideology, religious scholars, and leaders from different faiths. It aimed to counter extremist ideology and promote religious harmony through various activities, including media campaigns and conferences ("Govt unveils," 2018). The document contains the consensus of religious scholars from all sects of Islam and uses evidence from the Quran and Hadith to counter the ideology of violent extremism and terrorism (Makki, & Khan, 2021).

In order to combat extremism, in a number of countries, governments use algorithms to identify and block extremist content online by implementing advanced technologies like natural language

processing or text-mining approaches to detect online content that promotes extremist ideologies. Machine learning algorithms have emerged as promising tools for detecting and stopping extremist content. Governments are investing in the creation of advanced information technologies to identify and counter extremism through intelligent, large-scale analysis of online data (Fernandez et al., 2018). In addition, governments are relying on community support to fight extremism by implementing community engagement programmes (Gunaratna, 2011). This article also examines the effectiveness of social media in promoting the counter-narrative to extremism by government, non-government, and peacebuilding organizations.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study was descriptive in nature, aimed to explore the intersection of social media and counter violent extremism in Pakistan. The study aimed to gather in-depth knowledge and understanding of the perspectives of journalists and peacebuilders on the role of social media in CVE efforts in Pakistan. RAN (2016) highlights the importance of the credibility and trustworthiness of the messenger delivering the counter-narrative. He termed government and civil society leaders, communication and policy advisors, and journalists as credible messengers for building a counter narrative in society. The population of the survey was based on messengers of counter narratives suggested by RAN (2016). The sample was selected purposefully and consisted of 120 participants, including 50 journalists, 50 peacebuilders, and 10 participants each from the academia of journalism, media and mass communications, and peace and conflict studies. The regions of the respondents include Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, Islamabad Capital Territory, Sindh, Baluchistan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan. The chart below summarizes the distribution of participants by their profession.

Profession/category of respondent	Number of Participants
Journalists	50
Peace Builders-Civil Society- Government Officials	50
Academia Peace and Conflict Studies	10
Academia Media and Communication Studies	10

**Table 1:** Distribution of Participant's Professions

The journalists were selected from various electronic and print media houses from all over Pakistan and were chosen based on their professional background and association with the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) as journalist fellows. On the other hand, the peacebuilders were selected from government and non-government organizations working on countering violent extremism and peacebuilding, community leaders, civil society members, and religious leaders. These peacebuilders were chosen with the help of Peace Without Pakistan, a peacebuilding organization that conducts the Salamti fellowship and the Generation Change fellows at the United States Institute of Peace.

The data was collected through a survey questionnaire, which was administered to the participants, and the responses were analyzed using the statistical software Microsoft Excel. Results have been presented with the help of graphs and charts. In conducting this research, ethical considerations were taken into account to ensure the protection of the participants' rights and the validity of the data collected. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and their informed



consent was obtained before collecting data. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained, and their responses were kept anonymous.

**RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

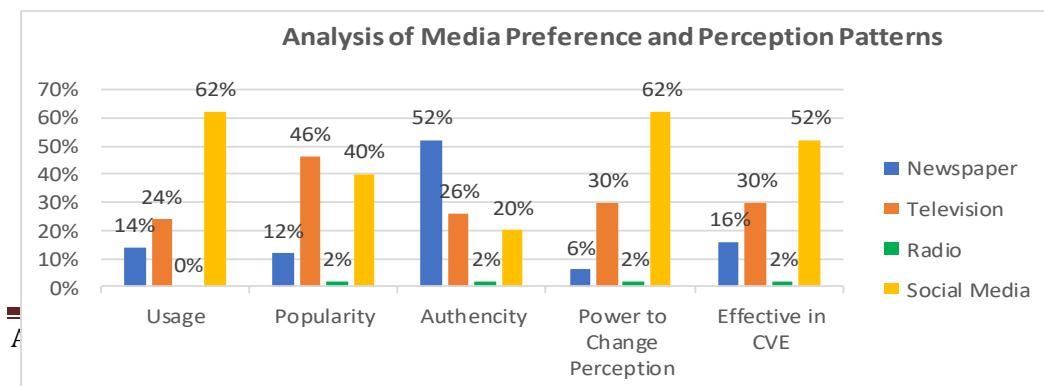
The role of social media in countering violent extremism has become increasingly important in today's world. Social media has emerged as a powerful tool in shaping public opinion and perceptions and promoting peace-sustaining initiatives. The results and analysis section presents the findings of the primary data collected through a survey questionnaire method from participants. The data is analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including graphs and tables, to provide an in-depth understanding of the research topic.

**Analysis of Media Preference and Perception Patterns**

This section aimed to investigate the usage patterns and perceptions of different forms of mass media and their role in keeping the public informed about current political affairs. Five survey questions were posed to the respondents to elicit their opinions on the most frequently used, popular, reliable, and effective forms of media. Participants were asked to choose from newspaper, television, radio, and social media categories. The analysis of the survey results provides valuable insights into the preferences and perceptions of the respondents regarding different forms of media and their role in shaping public opinion and promoting peace, tolerance, and understanding in society.

The findings of this study indicate that social media is the most widely used and efficient source of information among the respondents to keep themselves updated about the political situation. A significant proportion (62percent of the participants) acknowledged employing social media predominantly to stay informed about the political conditions prevailing in their country. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that a considerable fraction of respondents consider this platform unreliable. The study revealed that newspapers are viewed as the most reliable source of information, with 52percent of respondents indicating their trust in them. However, they are not as effective as TV or social media. Regarding popularity, 46percent of respondents consider television the most popular medium among the masses for collecting information about current affairs. TV is regarded as a reliable and effective information source, indicating that the respondents possess a considerable level of trust in traditional media sources like newspapers and television. According to Morales et al. (2012), in recent years, there has been a rapid increase in the penetration of new technologies, especially online social networks, among the global population. Despite the perception of online social networks as a purely social environment, it is worth noting that traditional media still holds significant influence within these networks.

Figure 1: Analysis of Media Preference and Perception Patterns



The findings of the study reveal that precisely 62percent of the respondents perceive social media as the most effective medium for influencing attitudes and public opinion. This highlights the critical role of social media in shaping the public's perspective and emphasizes the need for responsible media usage. Moreover, the results indicate that a considerable proportion (52percent of the respondents) have placed their trust in social media's potential to address issues related to violent extremism, indicating a possible shift in the way people consume information and the growing influence of social media in swaying public opinion.

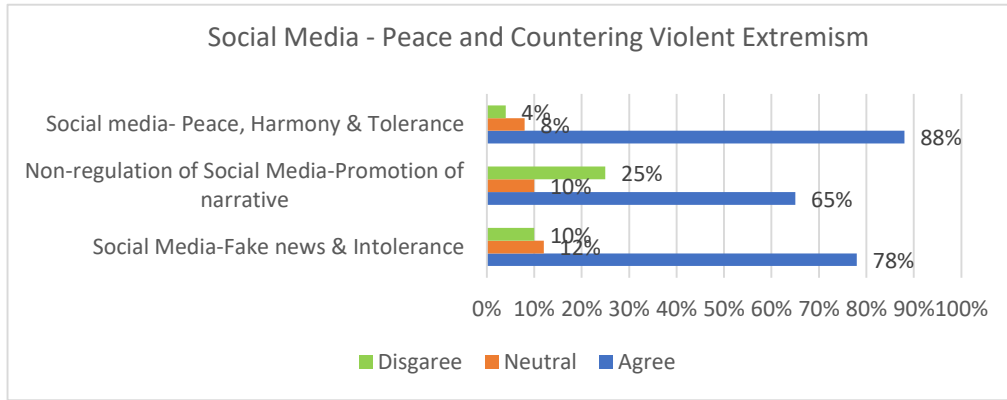
Nevertheless, the study also underlines the need to explore the potential of other mediums, such as TV, newspapers, and radio, in countering violent extremism. Evidence from the field, particularly from the Swat and Ex-FATA regions, reveals that radio has remained the most powerful medium for radicalization and conveying information to the masses. The findings emphasize the importance of social media in influencing public opinion. However, they also highlight the need to investigate other mediums, such as television, newspapers, and radio, and their potential to combat violent extremism. The study underscores the need for responsible media use and the importance of understanding changing media consumption patterns to promote peace, tolerance, and understanding in society.

### **Perceptions on Social Media's Role in Countering Violent Extremism and Peacebuilding**

Social media has recently become increasingly important in fostering peace and countering violent extremism. Extremist organisations and those advocating peace have both used social media to spread their messages because of its ability to significantly influence attitudes and behaviours. To better understand the impact of social media on society, respondents were asked about social media's role in extremism and countering violent extremism. The results provide valuable insights into the perceptions of social media's role in promoting peace, harmony, and tolerance in society and its potential to contribute to societal intolerance.

The findings show that 88percent of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that non-regulatory social media and the rapid spread of fake news have made society intolerant. According to Kuczabski (2022), the dissemination of disinformation through hate speech and fake news can have devastating consequences. This can include sparking widespread violence that often results in fatalities, displacement, and property damage. Furthermore, the spread of fake news and hate speech can contribute to a breakdown in societal harmony and rob communities of peace. Therefore, it is crucial to address the issue of fake news and disinformation and take steps to combat their harmful effects.

Additionally, 65percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the non-regulation of social media provides an opportunity for certain actors to promote their narratives. This result suggests a concern about the potential for spreading harmful or extremist ideologies and misinformation through social media platforms. While a significant minority of respondents does not hold this view, and believes that non-regulatory social media and the spread of fake news contribute to increased societal intolerance. According to a research (Shu et al., 2017; Jin et al., 2022), fake news and disinformation on social media have been found to play a role in violent extremism. The dissemination of disinformation through fake news can be a tool for manipulating public opinion and creating social attitudes (Kuczabski, 2022).



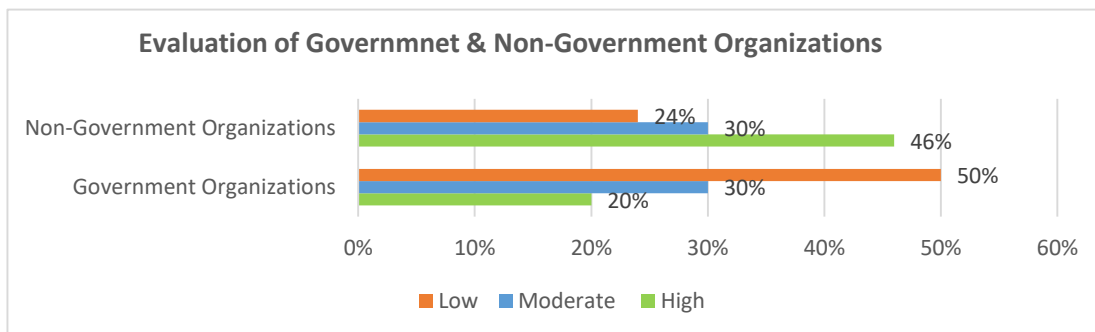
**Figure 2: Social Media - Peace and Countering Violent Extremism**

However, the majority (88percent of respondents) also believe that social media has the potential to play an important role in promoting peace, harmony, and tolerance in society. This result suggests a belief among the respondents that social media can play a positive role in fostering peace and countering violent extremism. The contrast between this result and the first two statements highlights the need for a nuanced approach to understanding social media's role in promoting peace, harmony, and tolerance.

**Social Media's Effectiveness in Building a Counter Narrative**

Recently, there has been an increasing focus on using social media to counter violent extremism and promote peace. Social media has the potential to reach a wide audience and can be an effective means of disseminating messages and building a counternarrative against extremist ideologies. However, the effectiveness of social media in this regard remains a debateable topic.

To evaluate the effectiveness of social media in building a counternarrative, the study asked participants to rate the effectiveness of government and non-government organisations in using social media on a scale of 1 to 5. The results show that participants rated the effectiveness of government and non-government organisations in using social media for this purpose as low to moderate. Specifically, only 20percent of participants rated the government's use of social media as "high," while 30 percent rated it as "moderate," and 50 percent rated it as "low." For non-government and civil socieity organisations, 46 percent of participants rated their use of social media as high, 30 percent rated it as moderate, and 24 percent rated it as low.



**Figure 3: Evaluation of Government & Non-Government Organizations**

The low to moderate scores for both governmental and non-governmental organizations highlight the challenges of utilizing social media to counter extremism. Representatives from both governmental and non-governmental organizations were contacted to gain insights into the challenges faced by these organizations. The representative of a non-governmental organization emphasized the difficulty of reaching the target audience through social media, especially given the platform's diversity and size. The representative also highlighted the challenges posed by social media algorithms that do not always promote content that challenges extremist ideologies. The representative of a government counterterrorism organization noted that crafting messages that resonate with the public is a significant challenge in building a counter narrative. A deep understanding of the issues that fuel extremist ideas and the cultural and social environment in which they proliferate is essential to developing an effective counter narrative. The representative also stressed the importance of communication tone and language in crafting messages that effectively challenge extremist ideologies.

The challenges highlighted by the respondents are in line with the research. Ashour (2010) suggests a comprehensive approach for developing and disseminating online counter narratives, which involves crafting tailored and compelling messages that resonate with the target audience, utilizing legitimate messengers with credibility, and strategically disseminating the messages through carefully selected media channels in a timely and effective manner. Overall, the low to moderate ratings for government and non-government organizations using social media to construct a counter narrative suggest that there is still room for improvement in how social media promotes peace and counter-extremism.

### **Social Media Platform Analysis**

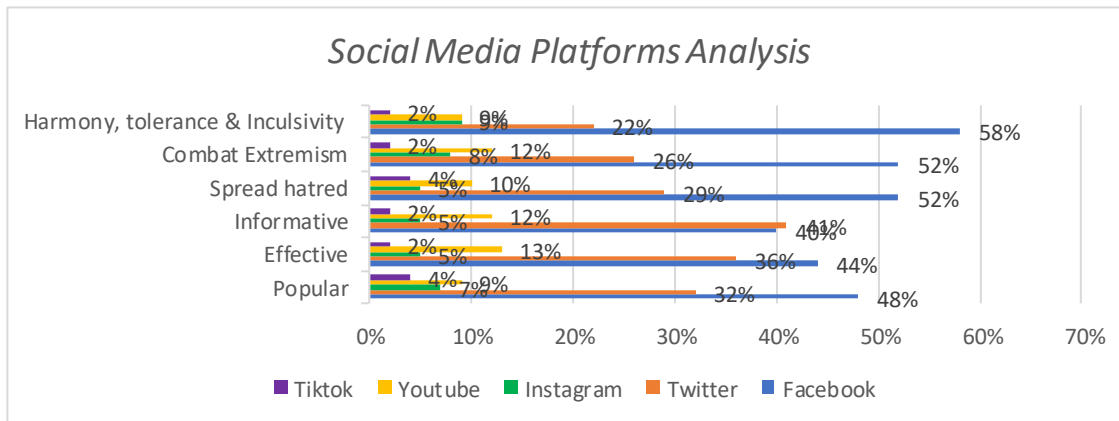
Social media platforms have become an important source of information, particularly among the younger generation. This study explores the role of different social media platforms in promoting peacebuilding efforts and countering extremism in Pakistan. The research questions include the most widely used social media platform, the most effective and informative platform, the most reliable source of information on national issues, the role of different platforms in spreading hate speech and incitement to violence, and the most suitable social media platform for countering extremism and promoting religious harmony, tolerance, and inclusivity. The participants were asked to select one option from a list of five popular social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. The survey result helps to understand the role of these social media platforms in peacebuilding efforts and countering extremism in Pakistan.

The results indicate that Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Pakistan, chosen by 51 percent of the participants, followed by Twitter (31 percent), Instagram (9 percent), and YouTube (9 percent). In terms of effectiveness and being informative on political issues, 44 percent of the participants named Facebook as the most effective platform, followed by Twitter with 36 percent. Instagram and YouTube received fewer votes, with only 5 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Both Facebook and Twitter were found to be the most up-to-date platforms for obtaining information on national issues, with 40 percent and 41 percent of participants choosing them, respectively. YouTube was the third most popular platform for obtaining information, with 12 percent of participants selecting it. These findings are in line with existing literature, as according to Billings et al. (2018), Facebook is the most widely used social media platform, with

more users than any other platform. It is also the fastest growing platform, with more users than Twitter and Instagram. Additionally, Facebook has been found to be better than other platforms at fostering camaraderie, entertainment, habitual use, and maintaining relationships.

The majority of participants (55 percent) believed Facebook to be an important contributor to the proliferation of hate speech and incitement to violence in society, with Twitter coming in second with 34 percent of participants. Regarding countering extremism in society, Facebook was considered the most suitable platform by 58 percent of the participants. Twitter and YouTube were also seen as potential platforms, with 20 percent and 11 percent of the participants endorsing their suitability, respectively. Instagram and TikTok were perceived to be less effective, with only 9 percent and 2 percent of the participants considering them viable options, respectively. Finally, the data demonstrate that Facebook was perceived as the most effective platform for promoting awareness on issues related to religious harmony, tolerance, and inclusivity, with 60 percent of the participants endorsing it. Twitter was also seen as a viable platform, with 22 percent of the participants choosing it as their preferred option.

The findings of this section demonstrate that Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Pakistan among Pakistani journalists and peacebuilders for current affairs, political, and security-related issues. Twitter and YouTube follow Facebook in popularity, whereas Instagram and TikTok are the least preferred platforms. Both Facebook and Twitter are considered to be the most effective and up-to-date sources of information on national issues. Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Pakistan due to its popularity and ease of use. A digital expert from a prominent news channel argued that Facebook's algorithm and targeting features make it an effective platform for disseminating information and reaching specific audiences.



**Figure 4:** Social Media Platforms Analysis

The majority of respondents perceive Facebook and Twitter as major contributors to the proliferation of hate speech and incitement to violence in society. A significant percentage of respondents attributed this to insufficient moderation on these platforms, which has allowed for the fast spread of extremist content and disinformation. With respect to countering extremism, the majority of participants consider Facebook to be the most suitable social media platform, followed by Twitter and YouTube, while Instagram and TikTok are perceived as less effective. Participants in

the survey presented a number of different reasons regarding the perceived suitability of social media platforms for the purpose of countering extremism. Respondents highlighted that Facebook's wider user base provides a greater audience for counter narrative building. Furthermore, real-time updates on Twitter and video content on YouTube were found helpful for propagating counter-narratives. Instagram and TikTok may have received lower scores because they are perceived as more entertainment-focused platforms rather than being suitable for serious issues like countering extremism. Additionally, Instagram's algorithm may prioritize visually pleasing content rather than informative or educational content, and TikTok's short-form video format may not lend itself well to serious content.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the fight against terrorism in Pakistan, there is a growing recognition of the need to focus on the softer side of counterterrorism and countering violent extremism, particularly through the use of an effective counter-narrative (Makki, & Khan, 2021). The results of the study indicate that social media is the preferred and most popular source of information for national and international news, despite being considered the least reliable. Additionally, the results suggest that a significant proportion of respondents view social media as a vital tool in the fight against violent extremism and believes that social media has the potential to play an important role in promoting peace, harmony, and tolerance in society. The findings are consistent with prior research by Naseem et al. (2017), which suggests that social media has the potential to be utilised as a tool for peacebuilding. It can serve as a platform for building trust during peace negotiations and as a space for peace education (Billings et al., 2018). However, it also has the potential to spread misinformation and propaganda, which may prolong the conflict (Naseem et al., 2017). These findings highlight the crucial role played by social media in shaping public opinion and underscore the need to ensure that the information disseminated on these platforms is accurate and reliable. The non-regulatory nature of social media and the spread of fake news have made society more intolerant, according to most participants. A significant percentage of respondents also believes that non-regulation of social media provides opportunities for certain actors to promote their narratives, including harmful or extremist ideologies. The Pakistani government has been struggling with the spread of extremist information through various online platforms. In 2019, Pakistan's information minister, Fawad Chaudhry, announced plans to regulate hate speech and fake accounts on social media. Chaudhry acknowledged the growing influence of informal media and emphasized the need to monitor social media to control hate speech ("Govt to launch," 2019). Investing in developing new software is preeminent in this regard as it can prevent the spread of extremist information while allowing the circulation of credible and accurate information is a more effective and sustainable solution. This approach involves the use of artificial intelligence (AI) algorithms that can recognize and filter out extremist content while preserving freedom of speech and the flow of accurate information. The United Nations also supports independent and transparent regulatory frameworks for social media platforms and encourages fact-checking and providing accurate information to counter false narratives (United Nations, 2022).

Newly developed data-mining algorithms are proving to be effective in identifying the specific attributes of various types of false information, which is then removed from the corresponding platforms (Tasnim et al., 2020). The development of artificially intelligent algorithms enhances the

human ability to detect fake news and provides a feasible way to deal with the chaos of fake news on the Internet (Yang, 2022).

Building a counter-narrative is a widely adopted approach in positive counter-violent extremism strategies. The study evaluates the effectiveness of using social media to create a counter narrative and promote peace by government and non-government organizations. The findings were mixed and received a low to moderate rating, with non-government organizations being perceived as more successful in using social media for peacebuilding than the government. These results emphasized the need for both government and non-government organizations to enhance their use of social media to advance peace and counteract violent extremism. The findings also highlight the challenges faced by peacebuilding organizations and represent a significant collaborative opportunity for government, non-government organizations and civil society organizations to collaborate for effectively countering violent extremism on social media. Governments may utilize nongovernment organizations' experience in developing and distributing counter narrative messages, while nongovernment organizations can benefit from government resources and networks. Together, they may create a more comprehensive strategy for countering violent extremism that addresses the fundamental causes of extremism and fosters societal cohesion. In order to establish and coordinate national counterterrorism policies and programmes, NACTA closely collaborates with a number of government organizations, including law enforcement and intelligence organizations. It also collaborates with civil society organizations to foster community resilience and raise public awareness of the risks of extremist ideologies (NACTA, 2023). According to Sebastian (2013), civil society can play a crucial role in countering violent extremism in Pakistan. This is because civil society organizations (CSOs) have the potential to bridge the gap between the government and the public as well as provide a platform for dialogue and engagement with marginalized communities. The use of social media by civil society organizations in countering violent extremism in Pakistan has been limited but is increasing.

The effectiveness of social media in preventing violent extremism, however, is a complex matter that needs greater investigation. Social media may be an effective tool for raising awareness and supporting alternative narratives, but it can also be used to disseminate violent extremist beliefs. According to Van Niekerk (2018), understanding the role that social media plays in today's conflicts is crucial since it is a potent instrument in fifth-generation warfare. Social media is being used as a powerful tool in hybrid warfare to disseminate misinformation and propaganda. Social media may act as a forum to foster confidence during peace discussions, but it can also be used to ignite conflict by disseminating misinformation and propaganda (Majcin, 2019). The study suggests that although social media is presently trusted as the most effective medium for addressing violent extremism-related issues, it may not be sufficient in isolation. A multi-faceted approach that utilizes the strengths of various media sources could be more effective in addressing this issue. This approach involves leveraging the unique advantages of each medium, such as social media's ability to reach a broad audience quickly and newspapers' capacity for in-depth analysis and investigative reporting. According to the United Nations (2022), combating disinformation requires a multi-stakeholder approach that involves governments, civil society, the media, and technology companies (United Nations, 2022). Therefore, by utilizing a combination of different media sources, it may be possible to achieve a more comprehensive and effective strategy for combating violent extremism.

## CONCLUSION

Countering violent extremism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires a strategic and nuanced approach. The consensus among academics and policymakers is that initiatives to counter violent extremism are more successful than confrontational approaches. The increasing use of social media by extremist groups is a cause of concern, and there is a need to develop effective strategies to tackle this issue. Social media's ability to provide a counter narrative to extremist ideologies is widely recognized as critical. Positive and negative measures are currently being implemented to challenge extremist narratives, but the challenges associated with using social media as a tool to counter extremism are multifaceted and require careful consideration. Both government and non-government organizations need to harness the power of social media to reach their target audience and design messages that resonate with the public. Crafting messages that resonate with the public and effectively challenge extremist ideologies requires a deep understanding of the issues and a nuanced communication strategy to build an effective counter narrative.

In Pakistan, attempts to curb extremism through censorship and blocking of social media sites have proven ineffective and harmful to society. A more effective solution is to analyze the content of extremist groups and develop counter narratives. The government should quickly identify and respond to extremist propaganda on the internet by using digital tools, social media platforms, and communication technologies to present targeted counter-narratives. Artificial intelligent algorithms can combat fake news and filter out extremist content, providing an effective alternative to blocking online platforms. Government organizations, academia, industry experts, and civil society organizations could collaborate to take measures to counter violent extremism. Investing in AI-based solutions for combating disinformation would place Pakistan at the forefront of the global fight against fake news and disinformation.

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Date of Publication	April 15, 2023
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