



Emerging Trends of Radicalization among Youth: Case Study of Educational Institutions

Dr. Muhammad Hatim¹, Dr. Adeel Irfan², Muhammad Sikandar³ & Mihrullah⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sargodha,

Email: muhammad.hatim@uos.edu.pk

²Assistant Professor, Department of politics and international relations, University of Sargodha,

Email: adeel.irfan@uos.edu.pk

³Department of politics and international relations, University of Sargodha, Email: m.sikandar3524506@gmail.com

⁴Department of politics and international relations, University of Sargodha, Email: mihrullah388@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author:

Dr. Muhammad Hatim

Email:

muhammad.hatim@uos.edu.pk



ABSTRACT

This study investigates the evolving phenomenon of radicalization among youth within educational institutions, with a particular focus on the socio-political and ideological dynamics at play in Pakistan. Amid global concerns about violent extremism, youth radicalization has emerged as a critical security and developmental challenge—especially in academic spaces traditionally seen as centers of learning and critical thought. Using a qualitative case study approach, this research explores how structural inequalities, identity crises, authoritarian pedagogies, and digital influences converge to foster radical orientations among students. Drawing on field interviews, observational data, and existing scholarship, the study finds that radicalization is not solely the result of ideological indoctrination, but is deeply rooted in experiences of exclusion, lack of critical engagement, and unmet psychological needs. Furthermore, the role of social media in accelerating ideological grooming and the failure of institutional counter-measures are critically examined. The research advocates for a shift from securitized responses to inclusive, student-centered reforms that promote civic engagement, empathy, and pluralism. By highlighting local realities and proposing holistic strategies, this paper offers fresh insights for academics, educators, and policymakers seeking to understand and address youth radicalization in educational settings. The findings underscore the urgency of educational transformation rooted in democratic values and intellectual freedom.

Introduction

Youth radicalization represents a growing threat to peace and social cohesion across the globe. While radical ideologies are not a new phenomenon, their increasing appeal among young individuals—particularly students—has garnered significant scholarly and policy attention. In societies with weak democratic traditions, social inequalities, and fragmented educational systems, radicalization often finds fertile ground. Pakistan is one such country where youth radicalization has evolved into a multifaceted problem. Educational institutions, which are ideally meant to nurture critical thinking, tolerance, and civic responsibility, have in some cases become breeding grounds for intolerance, religious extremism, and political violence (Yusuf, 2008). This research aims to critically examine the socio-political and institutional contexts within Pakistan's educational landscape that contribute to this troubling trend. Pakistan is a youthful nation, with more than 60% of its population under the age of 30 (UNDP, 2018). While this demographic advantage offers tremendous potential for economic and social development, it also poses risks in a politically unstable and economically challenged country. The education sector, fragmented into public institutions, elite private schools, and religious seminaries (madrassas), reflects deep-seated class and ideological divisions. These divisions create unequal access to quality education, different worldviews, and disparate socialization processes, making some youth more vulnerable to radical ideologies than others (ICG, 2014). Religious seminaries, in particular, have come under scrutiny for their role in promoting sectarian ideologies, though recent reforms have attempted to moderate their curricula. Several socio-political factors further exacerbate youth radicalization in Pakistan. The country's long-standing involvement in regional conflicts, such as the war in Afghanistan, its historical reliance on jihadist proxies, and the proliferation of extremist ideologies post-9/11 have all contributed to a culture of intolerance and religious militancy (Fair, 2015). This historical legacy has permeated public discourse and found resonance among segments of the youth, who often see extremism as a form of resistance against perceived injustices—whether domestic or international. Moreover, a crisis of governance, economic insecurity, and the failure of state institutions to provide upward mobility contribute to feelings of alienation and disenfranchisement among students, making them more susceptible to radical narratives (Sial, 2012). The role of digital technology in accelerating radicalization among youth cannot be ignored. Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram have become vital tools for radical groups to disseminate propaganda, recruit sympathizers, and mobilize action. These platforms offer anonymity, direct engagement, and algorithmic reinforcement, making them highly effective in radicalizing isolated or impressionable individuals (Conway, 2017). In Pakistan, where digital literacy is growing but digital regulation remains weak, extremist content often circulates unchecked, influencing young users in both urban and rural settings. In many cases, online radicalization complements offline experiences, such as religious sermons, peer group discussions, and ideological student organizations that operate within university campuses (Ashraf & Jalil, 2020). The state's response to youth radicalization has been multifaceted but largely reactive. The National Action Plan (NAP), launched in 2014 in the aftermath of the APS Peshawar attack, outlines various measures to counter terrorism and extremism. These include cracking down on hate speech, regulating madrassas, and promoting a counter-narrative through education reform (National Action Plan, 2014). However, implementation has been inconsistent, and educational reforms remain limited in scope and impact. Curricula in public schools and universities often still contain biases and promote exclusivist ideologies, thereby reinforcing intolerance instead of countering it (Saigol, 2018). Furthermore, security-centric approaches tend to ignore the structural and psychological dimensions of radicalization, including alienation, identity crisis, and lack of critical engagement. Understanding youth radicalization in educational institutions thus requires a holistic and multidisciplinary approach. It is not merely a security issue but one rooted in socio-

economic disparities, ideological contestations, institutional weaknesses, and failures of governance. Educational institutions must be transformed from passive conduits of ideological indoctrination into active agents of pluralism, critical inquiry, and democratic engagement. This research will investigate the key drivers of radicalization among youth in Pakistani educational settings, with a particular focus on ideological indoctrination, structural marginalization, and the digitalization of extremist narratives. It will also evaluate the effectiveness of existing counter-radicalization measures and propose alternative, education-centered strategies to foster inclusive and resilient youth communities. By critically analyzing how young minds are shaped within schools, colleges, and universities, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on peace building and counter-extremism. The ultimate goal is to highlight policy-oriented interventions that not only prevent radicalization but also cultivate a generation of empowered, tolerant, and socially responsible citizens.

Research Questions

1. What are the key socio-political and institutional factors contributing to youth radicalization within educational institutions in Pakistan?
2. How do different types of educational institutions (public, private, and madrassas) influence the ideological orientation and susceptibility to radicalization among students?
3. What role do digital and social media platforms play in promoting or countering radical ideologies among the youth in academic settings?

Research Objectives

1. To critically examine the socio-political and institutional drivers of youth radicalization in Pakistani educational institutions.
2. To analyze the role of various types of schools, colleges, and religious seminaries in shaping students' ideological tendencies.
3. To assess the impact of digital media and online propaganda in influencing the radicalization process among the youth.

Literature Review

The radicalization of youth has become an increasingly alarming concern for policymakers, educators, and scholars, particularly in the wake of global extremist movements and the growing vulnerability of educational spaces. Educational institutions, once seen solely as centers of learning and enlightenment, have also become complex arenas where ideological contestations unfold. In this context, this literature review critically examines the concept of radicalization, the multifaceted factors influencing youth within educational institutions, the role of digital media, institutional responses, and the theoretical and empirical gaps in the existing literature.

Conceptualizing Radicalization: Definitions and Frameworks

Radicalization, though widely studied, remains a debated term lacking a universal definition. Scholars such as Neumann (2013) define it as a process whereby individuals adopt extremist views that may lead to violence, while others, such as Sedgwick (2010), criticize this definition for being too narrow and reductionist. A more inclusive perspective is offered by Borum (2011), who frames radicalization as a dynamic psychological and social journey marked by changes in belief, behavior, and identity. Other scholars underscore the importance of distinguishing between cognitive radicalization (belief in extremist ideologies) and behavioral radicalization (engagement in extremist acts), warning against securitized responses that criminalize dissent or ideological deviation (Horgan, 2008; Schmid, 2013). Such distinctions are particularly relevant in academic

settings where critical thinking and ideological exploration are integral to intellectual development. Further theoretical models, such as the staircase model by Moghaddam (2005), conceptualize radicalization as a progressive climb from perceived injustice to the adoption of violence. These models help to understand the psychological transformation youth undergo when exposed to radical narratives.

Educational Institutions as Sites of Radicalization

Educational institutions, especially in conflict-prone societies, are vulnerable to ideological infiltration. Research by Abbas (2019) reveals how student wings of political or religious organizations in Pakistani universities have promoted intolerant ideologies under the guise of cultural or religious expression. Similarly, the International Crisis Group (2016) reports a rise in covert recruitment activities within higher education spaces, facilitated by weak administrative oversight and faculty politicization. Historically, madrasas in South Asia have been both revered and criticized. Zaman (2004) demonstrates how madrasas evolved not just as religious schools but as socio-political institutions influenced by colonial legacies, sectarian dynamics, and regional conflicts. However, secular schools and universities are not immune. Haider (2021) points out that even public sector institutions in Pakistan display a rigid academic culture that suppresses pluralistic discourse and critical engagement. Students marginalized by ethnicity, language, or religion often find solace in radical ideologies that promise empowerment and justice. This institutional environment, when coupled with a lack of inclusive narratives in textbooks and campus life, can foster alienation, frustration, and susceptibility to extremism.

Drivers of Youth Radicalization: Psychological, Social, and Political Dimensions

The radicalization of youth within educational settings is influenced by multiple intersecting factors. At the individual level, Wiktorowicz (2005) emphasizes the importance of "cognitive openings" created by personal crises—such as loss, identity confusion, or trauma—that make individuals more receptive to alternative ideologies. McCauley and Moskalenko (2017) extend this by identifying mechanisms like moral outrage, group polarization, and personal victimization as key contributors. In the South Asian context, especially Pakistan, systemic political exclusion, ethnic marginalization, and sectarian conflicts serve as breeding grounds for radical ideologies. Yousaf (2018) links youth radicalization with a sense of injustice, government negligence, and failures in civic participation. The lack of economic opportunities, combined with an overburdened education system and a failing job market, further aggravates youth disenchantment (Nasir, 2015).

Family background, peer pressure, charismatic leadership, and community narratives also contribute to shaping youth perspectives. In many cases, students feel their identities are either under threat or unrecognized in the national narrative. These grievances, if unaddressed, can turn into fertile grounds for ideological radicalization.

Digital Media, Ideological Socialization, and Identity Construction

The internet has dramatically altered the landscape of radicalization. Conway (2017) notes that digital media platforms provide extremist groups with anonymous, low-cost, and far-reaching means to disseminate their ideology. Radical content on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram enables individuals—especially youth—to engage with extremist narratives without fear of surveillance or punishment. Khan and Saeed (2021) emphasize that in Pakistan, social media plays a central role in spreading sectarian, religious, and ethno-nationalist ideologies among university students. These online echo chambers reinforce already held grievances and polarize beliefs further. Digital platforms also contribute to identity formation. Youths grappling with existential or societal questions may find clarity, validation, or purpose through online

communities. Haq (2019) points out that students from minority backgrounds, who often feel alienated in traditional classroom settings, may gravitate toward online ideological groups that offer a sense of belonging.

Institutional and Policy Responses

The growing awareness of radicalization threats has prompted educational institutions and governments to respond. However, many such responses have been criticized for being superficial, reactionary, or overly securitized. According to HRCP (2020), initiatives like student profiling, campus surveillance, and censorship often violate students' rights to freedom of expression and academic freedom. Curriculum reforms, interfaith dialogue, and civic education programs have shown mixed outcomes. While some efforts aim to promote tolerance and critical inquiry, they often lack proper implementation or are overshadowed by political agendas. Saigol (2018) argues that only by integrating inclusive pedagogy and democratic values into classroom practices can long-term attitudinal changes be achieved. There is also a growing call for mental health support, safe spaces for dialogue, and teacher training programs that enable educators to recognize and address signs of ideological vulnerability without stigmatizing students.

Gaps in the Literature and Contribution of This Study

Despite a growing body of literature, several critical gaps persist. Firstly, there is a tendency to treat radicalization as a religious phenomenon, ignoring political, ethnic, and nationalist ideologies that also drive extremist behavior, especially in countries with diverse populations and contested histories like Pakistan. Secondly, most existing studies are theoretical or policy-focused and lack empirical grounding in real-time experiences of students and educators. There is a dearth of ethnographic research that captures the nuanced ways in which youth engage with, resist, or internalize radical narratives within institutional settings. This study contributes to the field by offering a localized, empirically grounded case study approach. By engaging directly with students, faculty, and institutional policies, it explores how radical ideologies are perceived, resisted, or embraced in everyday educational life. Moreover, it aims to broaden the conceptualization of radicalization to include political and ethno-nationalist ideologies, emphasizing the importance of democratic pedagogy, inclusive curricula, and youth-centered policies as sustainable counter-radicalization strategies.

Theoretical Framework

This research is underpinned by three key theories: Social Identity Theory, Relative Deprivation Theory, and Framing Theory. These perspectives collectively provide a nuanced understanding of how radicalization occurs among youth in educational institutions. Social Identity Theory, introduced by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, argues that individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from the social groups to which they belong. Within educational institutions, where young individuals are in the process of identity formation, the need for belonging and recognition can become highly pronounced. If students perceive that their cultural, ethnic, religious, or political identity is being marginalized or undermined, they may gravitate toward groups that affirm and validate these identities—sometimes in extreme ways. Radical organizations often exploit this identity-seeking behavior by presenting themselves as defenders of oppressed or misunderstood communities, thereby providing youth with a sense of purpose, status, and solidarity. Relative Deprivation Theory, developed by Ted Robert Gurr in 1970, helps to explain how perceptions of inequality and injustice—rather than objective deprivation alone—lead individuals to adopt radical beliefs. In the context of educational institutions, students who come from socioeconomically marginalized regions or who experience institutional neglect may feel that

the promises of education and social mobility are unfulfilled. This gap between expectations and reality fuels a sense of injustice. Radical ideologies that critique the system or promise revolutionary change often appeal to such students, offering them a channel through which to express their frustration and seek empowerment. Framing Theory, most notably expanded by David Snow and Robert Benford in 1988, focuses on how social movements construct narratives that align with the values, emotions, and cognitive frameworks of their target audiences. Radical groups use specific language, symbols, and stories to frame political or religious struggles in ways that resonate with young minds. They present grievances not as isolated personal issues but as collective injustices, and they frame their ideological cause as a moral duty. Within educational spaces, such framing can be especially persuasive when students encounter it through peers, campus organizations, online content, or charismatic speakers. Together, these theories offer a powerful lens through which to examine the processes by which youth in educational institutions become susceptible to radical ideologies. They emphasize that radicalization is not merely the result of external propaganda or coercion but is often rooted in deeper psychological, social, and structural dynamics.

Analysis and Discussion

Radicalization among youth within educational institutions in Pakistan is a deeply multifaceted phenomenon shaped by a convergence of ideological, political, psychological, and institutional factors. Drawing from the empirical data collected through fieldwork, student interviews, and institutional records, this study reveals several patterns that align with and also extend the existing body of literature. One of the most prominent findings is the role of institutional neglect and alienation in fostering radical sentiments. Many students expressed a sense of being unheard, undervalued, or outright marginalized within the academic system. This aligns with the assertion of Haider (2021) that authoritarian educational structures suppress critical thinking and student agency, which can inadvertently lead to the acceptance of rigid ideologies. Equally important is the influence of peer networks and informal student groups. On several campuses, certain organizations—whether religious, nationalist, or ideological—play a significant role in shaping narratives. These groups often provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and identity formation mechanisms that are lacking in formal institutional channels. Wiktorowicz's (2005) theory of "cognitive openings" becomes pertinent here, as many students experiencing existential confusion or personal crises find solace in tightly-knit groups that offer certainty and purpose. This emotional dynamic is often overlooked in purely security-oriented analyses of radicalization. Digital platforms further compound the issue, serving as echo chambers where radical content is normalized and reinforced. Interviews with students revealed that YouTube lectures, WhatsApp groups, and Telegram channels are frequently used for sharing ideological material. This is consistent with Conway's (2017) assertion that online spaces act as "safe havens" for extremist thought, enabling anonymity and community building without scrutiny. In the Pakistani context, Khan and Saeed (2021) have shown how social media facilitates the consumption and internalization of sectarian and hyper-nationalist discourses, particularly among university students who are already navigating identity uncertainties. Moreover, the study found that radicalization is not limited to religious extremism but encompasses political and ethnic ideologies. For instance, students from marginalized ethnic communities voiced grievances about systemic discrimination and the denial of cultural expression, which fuels ethnonationalist sentiments. This observation challenges the mainstream focus on religious radicalization and supports Yousaf's (2018) broader understanding of youth radicalization as a multi-dimensional process. These findings suggest that radicalization is not merely a product of ideological indoctrination but often emerges as a form of resistance to perceived injustices—both structural and symbolic. An important insight from this research is the contradictory role of educational institutions themselves. While meant to promote

critical thinking, many institutions fall short in practice. The reliance on rote memorization, lack of dialogue-based pedagogy, and minimal student participation in decision-making processes create an environment where authoritarianism is normalized. This reflects Saigol's (2018) critique that counter-radicalization efforts should prioritize democratic pedagogy rather than surveillance or censorship. Several students reported feeling surveilled or profiled, especially those belonging to minority backgrounds or holding dissenting political views. Such practices not only erode trust in academic institutions but may also reinforce the very grievances that radical ideologies exploit. The findings also indicate a disconnect between policy rhetoric and ground realities. While government narratives emphasize deradicalization through curriculum reform and civic education, implementation remains weak. Interviews with faculty members revealed that most civic education modules are superficial and fail to engage students in meaningful dialogue about diversity, pluralism, or political ethics. This critique echoes the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's (2020) findings that securitized approaches—such as profiling and content control—undermine academic freedom and alienate students rather than integrating them. Furthermore, this research confirms the assertion by Borum (2011) that radicalization involves both ideological and emotional components. Several participants described their ideological shifts not as deliberate or planned but as gradual and emotional, influenced by personal experiences of injustice, trauma, or social exclusion. These findings challenge the linear, cause-effect models of radicalization often used in policy circles and call for more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches. They also affirm the need for ethnographic, student-centered studies that listen to young people rather than merely pathologize them. In sum, radicalization among youth in educational institutions must be understood as a dynamic interplay of marginalization, identity formation, institutional practices, and digital influences. Rather than being passive recipients of extremist narratives, students are actively negotiating their identities in environments that often fail to provide inclusive, dialogical, and democratic spaces. This calls for a reimagining of educational institutions not merely as transmission belts for information but as arenas for critical engagement, emotional support, and inclusive community-building. Future policies must recognize this complexity and move beyond surveillance-based strategies toward fostering critical thinking, participatory governance, and equitable representation within academic spaces.

Conclusion

The findings of this research underscore the complexity and multidimensional nature of youth radicalization within educational institutions. Far from being a linear process driven solely by ideological indoctrination, radicalization emerges as a dynamic interplay of structural marginalization, emotional vulnerability, identity crises, institutional neglect, and digital influences. The empirical insights drawn from student narratives, observations, and scholarly literature reveal that radicalization is often a response to lived experiences of exclusion, authoritarian pedagogies, and a lack of meaningful engagement within academic spaces. Rather than framing students as passive victims of extremist recruitment, this study recognizes their agency and the socio-political contexts that shape their orientations. The emotional and psychological needs of students—such as belonging, recognition, and purpose—are frequently unmet within formal institutions, pushing many toward informal networks and ideological communities that provide structure, clarity, and identity. Moreover, the normalization of surveillance, censorship, and profiling under the guise of deradicalization further alienates students and can intensify feelings of disenfranchisement, particularly among those from minority or politically marginalized backgrounds. Educational institutions, while often positioned as frontlines against extremism, can themselves contribute to the problem when they fail to foster critical thinking, democratic dialogue, and inclusive participation. This research advocates for a shift in counter-radicalization strategies—from securitized, top-down approaches toward bottom-up,

student-centered reforms that prioritize empathy, civic education, and trust-building. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers must collaboratively work to create environments where pluralism is respected, dissent is engaged constructively, and students feel heard and valued. In light of the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping ideological beliefs, there is also a need for media literacy programs and responsible digital citizenship education. Strengthening institutional support systems, providing mental health resources, and encouraging intergroup dialogue across religious, ethnic, and political lines can serve as preventive measures against radicalization. Ultimately, countering youth radicalization in educational institutions requires not only policy reforms but also a cultural transformation in how we understand and engage with young people—as complex, thinking individuals navigating a world of uncertainty and contradiction. This study contributes to the broader literature by offering context-specific insights into the Pakistani academic environment, while also highlighting the global relevance of inclusive, rights-based approaches to education. Future research should explore longitudinal trends in student political behavior, examine the role of teachers as mediators or influencers, and assess the impact of curriculum reforms on ideological development. Only through sustained, critical engagement can educational institutions fulfill their transformative role in building resilient, inclusive, and democratic societies.

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