

Socio-Cultural Capital and Community Resilience: Perception of University Students about Violent Extremism in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The importance of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has been a topic of recent interest for the global community. Pakistan is no exception to this trend. In recent years, university students have often been targets of extremist violence propaganda. This study aimed to explore perception of university students about violent extremism and the role of socio-cultural capital and community resilience in CVE. Quantitative research design was used to survey students belonging to various public and private universities in three major cities of Pakistan: Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Peshawar. Due to the COVID-19 lockdown and closure of universities, the online survey technique was used by posting the survey on social media; using personal contacts; and emails. The 'Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism' (BRAVE) scale was used to assess the students' perceptions and behaviour towards violent extremism. 480 students participated in the study over a two-month period. The findings demonstrated a significant role of socio-cultural capital in propagating as well as resisting violent beliefs and behaviour. The study concluded that culture, ethnic background, support from family and community, contribute to strengthening resilience against violent extremism among university students. It is recommended that Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) should promote tolerance and peace through a more human rights-centric curriculum and education about different cultures as well as unbiased teaching practices to promote peaceful ways for resolving conflicts when they arise.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Resilience, Socio-cultural Capital, Violent Behaviour, Beliefs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For the last few decades, Pakistan has been experiencing a growing influence of ideologies that promote aggressive nationalism, populism, and xenophobia, particularly amongst the youth. This has resulted in a sharp rise of far-right extremism which is challenging the welfare and civil freedom of people across the country.

Violent extremism is an affront to the principles of the United Nations (UN), embodied in universal human rights and fundamental freedoms. ‘Violent extremism’ is often used by specific groups and individuals for whom religion is the primary reference point. However, there are others who use political or ethnic reasons for violent extremism as well. It is a threat that has no borders, highlighting the vulnerability of all societies to the challenges of intolerance, hatred, and fear. There is no single cause for the rise of violent extremism nor is there a single trajectory that leads someone to extremist violence (UN 2017).

The history of violent extremism in Pakistan started with the ‘War on Terror’ in 2001 and the country’s alliance with the United States. Rapid growth of *madrassahs* (religious seminaries) was observed during this time which became a major source of violent extremism in the country. An emphasis of research on *madrassahs* led to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) projects concerning *madrassah* reforms and education funded by foreign aid programmes. The dilemma is that these educational programmes overlook the drivers of violent extremism in mainstream contemporary education, i.e., universities. Several national dynamics also play a crucial role in promoting violent extremism, especially among university students. These mainly have ethnic dimensions or are based on ethnic rivalries (Ahmed and Jafri 2020).

Considering the need to explore factors behind the growth of violent extremism in Pakistan, this research focused on two major parts - the role of social connections between students concerning social bonding and social bridging that can diminish the risk of violent extremism; and the role of social connections between students and educational institutions or governing bodies (termed social linking).

The present study was developed following the ‘Contemporary Resilience Theory’ by using the BRAVE scale, a standardised tool to explore the perception of individuals, in this case, university students, and resilience against violent extremism. Sections Two and Three offer a brief literature review, significance, and methodology of the study, while Section Four presents the study data, findings, and discussion. The final section offers brief recommendations and concluding thoughts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Violent Extremism

According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), violent extremism is defined as: ‘Attitude that encourages, endorses, justifies or supports the commission of a violent criminal act to achieve political, ideological, religious, social and economic goals’ (IACP 2014).

Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, the term ‘violent extremism’ has not been defined in any one particular way which often makes it difficult to conduct research and policy dialogue on the subject. In fact, studying violent extremism can be an overwhelming task for even the most professional of scholars. The multifaceted nature of this topic means that one must consider how a variety of factors, including individual, family, community, national and transnational, come together to create conditions that may facilitate or legitimise violence to achieve change within society (Ungar 2021). Furthermore, international narratives and policies, dominant since 9/11, provoked Islamist-based violent extremism across the world. Newer forms of violence, like right-wing terrorism, continue to emerge, further complicating what governments can do, along with civil society groups, to prevent this from continuing to spread unchecked through radicalisation processes among vulnerable populations (Ibid.). Earlier works like Fair (2015) also saw violent extremism as a complex and growing problem.

Sundaram (2014) highlighted the role of international policy focusing on building resilience through discourse, policy, and research for effectively managing violent extremism. To be resilient, it is important that one can withstand any violent extremist ideology and also challenge those who espouse them. The best way for a person or community to do this might change depending on the situation they are in, but what is likely to remain constant is their ability to endure these ideologies as well as counter them when possible (Ungar 2021). In this regard, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been helping countries deliver education programmes to help build learners’ resilience against violent extremism and mitigate the drivers of this phenomenon.¹

2.2 Individual Resilience to Violent Extremism

Individual resilience to violent extremism can take many different forms, but it is generally agreed that these individual coping strategies and capacities are developed within a context of interaction with the environment. The prevention/resistance context of resilience towards violent extremism focuses on individual and community level features.

¹ Within the framework of Global Citizenship Education, which supports UNESCO Executive Board Decision 197 EX/Decision 46: ‘UNESCO’s role in promoting education as a tool to prevent violent extremism’ (UNESCO 2015).

Individual resilience researchers have focused on classifying individual level communal and psychological resilience that may aid as proactive factors relative to violent extremism. These proactive factors include empathy (Aly et al., 2014), self-control /self-regulation (Lösel et al., 2018), self-esteem and assertiveness (Christiaens et al., 2018) and inter-cultural tolerance of diversity (Ellis and Abdi 2017).

According to the European Commission-funded Bounce Programme, resilience is based on seven elements: handling diverging situations while aiming to increase critical thinking; empathy and tolerance; self-knowledge; knowing and understanding others; social skills; an open view; self-confidence and making choices and following those. The definition of individual resilience to violent extremism is less about adopting specific skills than it is about identifying at-risk individuals who can build their internal resources through familial support or participation in activities that provide meaning (Christiaens et al., 2018).

Socio-cultural interventions represent a strategy for violence prevention at the societal level. Socio-cultural norms are central to how collective memberships shape behaviour, and thus, represent a potential opportunity for violence prevention. Approaches that seek to rebuild social relations and bridge identity divides are increasingly being applied to provide non-kinetic responses to address the persistent threats and challenges of violent extremism around the globe, especially in fragile states. However, there has been no measure to date that explicitly deals with hypothesised links between socio-cultural capital and violent extremist behaviour among students as indicators of stronger or weaker resilience to violent extremism (Aly et al., 2014).

Different associations, working within society, shape the behaviour and attitude of individuals about certain phenomena. Cultural continuity plays a major role in resilience and extremism among students. One's willingness to stop or taking a stand against something bad happening in the community depends on his/her socialisation, norms, cultural values, and traits because parents, neighbours, relatives, close friends, and parenting style influence the behaviour of a child, and these are known as 'factors of social capital' (Atran 2015).

2.3 Community Resilience to Violent Extremism

Community resilience to violent extremism is driven by the perception of similarity to others (Ellis and Abdi 2017). This refers to four components of resilience, including understanding radicalisation to violence; interdependency between individuals and their collective social system; building collective resilience through planning and programming by the government; and the problematic tendency to attribute violent extremism ideologies and behaviour towards communal identity structures (Ungar 2021).

Governments, politicians, and the youth themselves are working to discourage young people from engaging in extremism, especially violent extremism. In March 2015, the EU

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Ministers of Education issued the ‘Paris Declaration on Education’ on fundamental values of tolerance, non-discrimination, and inclusion. It stressed that education and cooperation across the EU Member States should ensure human dignity, independence, democracy, equality, and respect for human rights (Fair 2015). Children and youth can acquire social, civic, and intercultural skills, as well as active citizenship through the promotion of democratic values and fundamental rights. Educated youth play an important role in building conscious and cognitive capacity for CVE. The Declaration stressed on literature advocating the need for educational interventions to promote tolerance through civic education (Ibid.).

2.4 Social Capital to Resilience Models

Researchers and scholars are making continuous efforts to develop comprehensive community resilience through convenient policy tools. Policies concerning CVE have centred on the association between social capital and resilience. The social capital dimension involves safe community spaces for youth, shared problem-solving, investment for community-building activities like mentoring programmes, civic dialogues, and community policy discussions, etc. (Lösel et al., 2018). The nexus of social capital and resilience to violent extremism is a complex, multi-site and behavioural matrix comprised of diverse systematic influences, resources, capacities, networks, and vulnerabilities (Ellis and Abdi 2017). The term ‘social capital’ alludes to those supplies of social trust, standards, and systems that individuals can attract to take care of day-to-day affairs. It is utilised to investigate the ideas of both social cohesion and solidarity among people (Lösel et al., 2018). According to Ungar (2021), ‘social capital’ refers to a network of people, neighbours, community peers, and families which invest in children and construct the individual both positively and negatively by supporting them in their activities.

2.5 Violent Extremism Behaviour among University Students in Pakistan

Pakistan has diverse threats impacting its culture, economy, and politics. The fundamental problem concerns the decaying moral foundations of the country’s culture, while poverty, security, and energy shortages are frequently listed as key issues. Extremism has corrupted collective societal conscience in many ways and has fuelled mass resentment and division. This is not only a cause of domestic extremism, but also a form of intolerance towards the ‘other’ (Ahmed and Jafri 2020).

2.6 Significance of the Study

Approaches that seek to rebuild social relations and bridge identity divides are increasingly being applied to provide non-kinetic responses to address the persistent threats and challenges of violent extremism around the globe, especially in fragile states. However, there has been no measure to date that explicitly deals with hypothesised links

between socio-cultural capital and violent extremist behaviour among students as indicators of stronger or weaker resilience to violent extremism, as pointed out earlier. The absence of a standardised measure addressing these domains in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan currently limits the efforts of communities (universities) to develop effective and meaningful youth-focused policies and programmes.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section deals with the material and methods used in this study.

3.1 Research Design

Survey-based quantitative research design was used to conduct this research in which an online survey was conducted of university students from various universities in three major cities of Pakistan: Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Peshawar. Two months (September-October) were allocated to conduct the survey during which 480 students filled the survey. Survey design was considered useful because it is helpful in gauging opinions, beliefs and trends relating to social matters (Gay 2018).

3.2 Research Instrument

The research project used a validated and standardised ‘five-factor, 14-item measure, Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE-14) scale for identifying and understanding young people’s resilience to violent extremism at the community level’ (Brisson et al., 2017, p. 3). The scale is well-tested and used in research conducted in Australia. The permission to use the scale was also taken via email. The measure was based on two precursor studies, one in Australia, ‘Harnessing Resilience Capital in Culturally Diverse Communities to Counter Violent Extremism 2013-14’; and one in Canada, ‘Barriers to Violent Radicalization: Understanding Pathways to Resilience among Canadian Youth, Kanishka Project, 2014-15’ (Ibid.). Both studies aimed to shift focus away from a central concern with community-level vulnerabilities to violent extremist radicalisation and concentrate instead on what resources and capacities helped people, especially youth, to resist narratives of and social network influence toward violent extremism.

BRAVE consists of a brief number of statement items that are responded to using a 5-point scale to obtain an overall measure of an individual’s resilience to violent extremism. It also provides scores across ‘5 domains important to resilience to violent extremism: 1) cultural identity and connectedness; 2) bridging capital; 3) linking capital; 4) violence-related behaviour; 5) violence-related beliefs. Each factor is represented in different items in the scale as cultural identity and connectedness (1, 3, 5); bridging capital (7, 10, 11); linking capital (6, 13, 14); violence-related behaviour (9, 12); violence-related beliefs (2, 4, 8)’ (Ibid.)

3.3 Sampling Frame

A sampling frame is a specific list of a small unit of things in populace from which a researcher selects a sample of the targeted populace. It contains everything one wants to know and needs to consider (Särndal et al., 2003). A perfect framework listed separately each element of the population by excluding extraneous variables because it required efforts and review to make it error-free. It can also be known as the arrangements of the source materials from which the sample is drawn (Etikan et al., 2016).

A survey is defined as any systematic attempt to collect data from respondents with face-to-face interaction, telephonic interviews, and/or mail questionnaires. An online survey was conducted with university students in the age range of 18-20 years in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, and Peshawar. The emphasis on young people was vindicated by evidence (Thomas 2012; Urdal 2006) that young people aged 18-30 represent a large number of those groups of people who support or engage in violent extremism both at the institutional and community levels. Due to COVID-19 lockdown scenario, online survey was conducted, especially with the help of social media tools from respondents residing in remote locations at their convenience. The study used convenience sampling (also known as haphazard sampling or accidental sampling) to collect the data from the respondents. This technique can be used in both qualitative and quantitative research design because it is easy, affordable and researchers get the availability of the respondents easily (Leiner 2014).

4. DATA, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results are based on primary data collection and analysed by calculating frequencies and percentages. This section presents analysis about the demographic, socioeconomic variable of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents

Gender	<i>f</i>	%
Males	171	35.6
Females	309	64.4
Age		
18-23	316	65.8
24-29	136	28.3
Above 30	28	6.4
Education		
BS	308	64.2
Masters	87	18.1
MPhil	72	15.0
PhD	13	2.7

Source: Study data.

Table 1 shows the representation of males and females in the study. 35.6% of respondents were males and 64.4% were females. Furthermore, it gives the demographic information of respondents. The entries show that most of the respondents' ages were between 18 and 23 years, 28.3% belonged to the age group of 24 to 29; whereas only 6.4% of respondents were above 30 years of age. The table also shows that 64.2% of respondents were students of BS level, 18.1% were studying at the Masters level, and 15.0% were MPhil, while 2.7% respondents were studying at the PhD level.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Socio-Cultural Capital and Violent Extremism

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	14.00	70.00	46.9937	7.82760
Cultural Identity	3.00	15.00	11.7771	2.67016
Bridging Capital	3.00	15.00	10.3333	2.64641
Linking Capital	3.00	15.00	10.3146	2.45098
Violent Behaviour	2.00	10.00	7.5125	2.03412
Violent Beliefs	3.00	15.00	7.0562	3.07372

Source: Study data.

The mean minimum and maximum values showing the occurrence of five aspects of socio-cultural capital and violent extremism was measured through cultural identity (Mean 46.99); bridging capital (Mean 11.77); linking capital (Mean 10.33); violent behaviour (7.51); and violent beliefs (7.05). The mean values for the five factors depicted the socio-cultural capital important to understand resilience towards violent behaviour and violent beliefs.

Table 3: Gender Differences in Socio-Cultural Capital and Violent Extremism

	Male		Female		<i>t</i>	P
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Cultural Identity	11.15	2.94	12.11	2.44	-3.833	.000
Bridging Capital	10.5	2.83	10.2298	2.53718	1.153	.250
Linking Capital	10.2982	2.68743	10.3236	2.31430	-.109	.914
Violent Behaviour	7.3918	2.02738	7.5793	2.03804	-.967	.334
Violent Beliefs	7.8772	3.31700	6.6019	2.83533	4.437	.000

Source: Study data.

The study looked at five dimensions: first, ‘cultural identity’ which showed the mean value of males at 11.15 and 12.1 for females. The *t* value at a significant level of .000 was -3.833 and indicated that there was no significant difference between male and female perceptions regarding ‘cultural identity’. The second was ‘bridging capital’ which showed that the mean value of males was 10.5 and the mean value of females was 10.2298. The *t* value at the level of .250 was 1.153 which indicated that there was a significant difference between males and females regarding ‘bridging capital’. The third was ‘linking capital’ which showed that the mean value of males was 10.2982 and the mean value of females was 10.3236. The *t* value at a significant level of .914 was -.109 which indicated that there was no significant difference between male and female views regarding ‘linking capital.’ Fourth was ‘violent behaviour’ which showed that the mean value of males was 7.3918 and the mean value of females was 7.793. The *t* value at a significant level of .334 was -.967 which indicated that there was no significant difference between male and female opinions regarding ‘violent behaviour.’ Fifth was ‘violent beliefs’ which showed that the mean value of males was 7.8772 and the mean value of females was 7.5793. The *t* value at a significant level of .000 was 4.427 which indicated that there was a significant difference between male and female opinions regarding ‘violent beliefs.’

Table 4: Correlation of Socio-Cultural Capital and Violent Extremism

	Cultural Identity	Bridging Capital	Linking Capital	Violent Behaviour	Violent Beliefs
Cultural Identity		.318**	.338**	.387**	-.055
		.000	.000	.000	.230
Bridging Capital	.318**	1	.410**	.505**	-.007
	.000		.000	.000	.880
Linking Capital	.338**	.410**	1	.353**	.107*
	.000	.000		.000	.019
Violent Behaviour	.387**	.505**	.353**	1	-.036
	.000	.000	.000		.436
Violent Beliefs	-.055	-.007	.107*	-.036	1
	.230	.880	.019	.436	

Source: Study data.

Table 4 shows socio-cultural capital, measured through cultural identity, bridging capital, and linking capital, significantly correlates with violent behaviour. It reflects that cultural identity and social capital play an important and significant role in building resilience towards violent extremism among youth, particularly university students.

Clauss et al., (2006) also showed strong correlation between cultural identities with higher resilience as well. The results of the study illustrated gender differences in cultural identity and violent beliefs that females were more sensitive toward cultural identity, whereas males had higher violent beliefs. Females also had positive perception towards their cultural identity. Peucker et al., (2016) also highlighted that young females had a positive attitude towards cultural and ethnic identities leading to cultural flexibility and resilience against violent extremism.

Social capital and cultural identities play a major role in shaping the behaviour and attitudes of individuals about events and becoming resilient (Atran 2015). He further mentioned that one's willingness to stop or stand up against something bad depended on socialisation, cultural values, ethnicity, and traits in which parents, relatives, and close friends were involved.

After the 18th Constitutional Amendment, education was devolved to the provinces in Pakistan. A huge responsibility lies on the shoulders of provincial policymakers to keep society united through education and regulate private educational bodies as well as *madrasahs*.

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Violent extremist attitudes, that lead to acute events, can be prevented through individual resilience and a social-ecological approach. An exclusive curriculum on coping strategies based on the EC's Bounce Training Programme can be devised and made mandatory at the university level. This will help students become resilient against violent radicalisation (Christiaens et al., 2018).

5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Multisystem Resilience

Violent extremism is an unpredictable phenomenon. A singular construct of 'adversity' is not enough when considering how resilience emerges and can be mobilised. Multiple, co-occurring adversities need to be addressed if the complex nature of building resistance against violent extremism is to advance both conceptually and empirically.

5.2. Reforming the Education System

Reforming the education system in Pakistan is recommended. Curriculum and textbooks from school level to higher education include polarising content and lack human rights and civic education. The curriculum and social system need to be reformed to boost civic sense, tolerance and inculcate human-friendly attitudes for CVE.

Using the BRAVE Scale, the study found that culture, ethnic background, strong social support by the family and community, have significant contribution towards inculcating resilient behaviour against extremism among university students. Cultural identity and socio-cultural capital play a significant role in students' behaviour and beliefs when it comes to violence and extremism. Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) should, therefore, play their role in deterring extremist behaviour among youth by promoting tolerance and peace through human rights-based curriculum and unbiased teaching practices.

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