



Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization (JITC)

Volume 11 Issue 1, Spring 2021

pISSN: 2075-0943, eISSN: 2520-0313

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc>

Issue DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.111>

Homepage: <https://journals.umt.edu.pk/index.php/JITC>

Journal QR Code:



Indexing



Article:

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Published:

Spring 2021

Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.111.25>

QR Code:



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Citation:

Abid, Abid Ali, Savera Shami, and Ayesha Ashfaq. "Facebook and hate speech: Analyzing relationship between consumers' attributes and Islamic sectarian content on social media in Pakistan." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 11, no. 1 (2021). 453-462.

[Crossref](https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.111.25)

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Publisher Information:

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Facebook and Hate Speech: Analyzing Relationship between Consumers' Attributes and Islamic Sectarian Content on Social Media in Pakistan

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Abstract

Religious extremism has been one of the major areas of concern for communication scholars throughout the world. In Pakistan, the form of sectarian division on the ideological occasion of Muharram has always been observed. As a result, a lot of hate speech has been used on social media by the followers of Shia and Sunni sects. This study not only aims to determine a relationship between the demographics of the users who post the hateful materials on the social media regarding any sect, it also aspires to investigate whether the socio-economic background, education or gender plays any role in determining the level of hate speech against any sect. For this purpose, while drawing upon the theory of Uses and Gratification, a sample of 100 users of Facebook were surveyed through a questionnaire developed on 5- point Likert scale. It was found that the people from different sects like to post and share the sectarian hate speech. The study found that there was a strong relationship in the level of religiosity and posting of hate speech, however, the more the tilt towards religious practices, the more users post hateful speech on Facebook pages, Furthermore, it was also found that the education level and socio- economic status also play important role in this arena; the better they live (more household income and more study), the lesser they post such hateful material.

Keywords: religious extremism, facebook, hate speech, *Shia, Sunni*

Introduction

Social Media is the most effective tool to communicate feelings, ideas and thoughts. The limitlessness of social media is its most efficient ability as social networking sites influence their users in a boundary-less sphere. The impact of social media is not just confined to the online arena; it is part of a much larger space of influence. Everyone has access and right to publish whatever he or she wants on social media. Owing to this freedom and lack of gate keeping, people do not hesitate to post hate speech even on social media. Hate speech on social networking sites has become one of the major areas of discussion for mass media scholars.¹

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¹Matthew Costello, and James Hawdon, "Who Are the Online Extremists Among Us? Socio-demographic Characteristics, Social Networking, and Online Experiences of Those who Produce

On social media, hate speech is not limited to a specific geography but it is being committed everywhere in the world. As Facebook is considered to be one of the most important social networking sites throughout the world with 2.45 Billion users.² With this huge audience, Facebook is also being used for spreading hate speech. As hate speech can be defined as, “inflammatory language, often insulting and derisive, that targets a group or an individual, and that may or may not include a call to violence.”³ Facebook authorities are also concerned about the robust increase in the cases of hate speech posting. Last year, Facebook announced to take down more posts containing hate speech from its platform than ever before. It has been quoted that Facebook has deleted more than 700 million posts containing hate speech by the end of 2019 that increased to 59% as compared to the beginning of 2019.⁴

In Pakistan, Hate Speech has often been observed in the form of sectarian division. Social media have also been used as tools to spread hate speech and sectarianism. It has also been observed that sectarianism increased with the evolution of social media and media technology. People on social media take shelter under the garb of freedom of expression, but they end up aggravating tensions and widening differences⁵. It has also been observed that a lot of hate speech has been used on social media by the both segments of Shias and Sunnis on the occasion of Muharram. Therefore, this study aims to discover a relationship between the demographics of the users posting hateful material regarding other sects on Facebook. In addition to this, the study aspires to find if the socio-economic background, education or religiosity plays any role in determining the level of hate speech and arousal of sectarian emotions among the different sects on Facebook.

1.1. Hypothesis

The hypotheses for the study are:

1. There is a relationship between the religiosity level and posts of Hate speech material among the Muslim users of Facebook.
2. More the level of education and household income, the less will be tendency among Facebook users to post hateful sectarian content on their Facebook content.

Online Hate Materials,” *Violence and Gender* 5, no. 1 (2018): 55-60. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2017.0048>

²H. Tankovska, “Number of Monthly Active Facebook Users Worldwide as of 4th Quarter 2020,” *Statista*. Last modified February 2, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

³Dedy Djamiluddin Malik, “New Media and Sectarianism in Indonesia,” In *International Conference on Media and Communication Studies ICOMACS 2018* (Atlantis Press, 2018), 308-310. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2991/icomacs-18.2018.75>

⁴Billy Perrigo, “Facebook Says It’s Removing More Hate Speech than Ever Before. But There’s a Catch,” *Time*, November 26, 2019, <https://time.com/5739688/facebook-hate-speech-languages/>

⁵“Pakistan’s Sectarian Mire and The Way Forward,” *Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS)*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.pakpips.com/article/book/pakistans-sectarian-mire-the-way-forward>

3. More the exposure to religious social media content on Facebook in Muharram, more are the Anti-sectarian feelings in consumers.

2. Literature Review

Social media is a platform that people use to express their feelings and opinions, make their relations and connections with people and get information related to different areas. Social media are playing vital role in impacting our economy, culture, lifestyle and our perception about world.⁶ After revolution of social media, this is more than absolute that social media is used for connecting people mostly. People tend to choose social media because of its ability to increase awareness regarding the movements of social, professional and personal contacts. Social Media can also play important role in construction social authority. By using social media organizations and individuals can introduce themselves as skillful in their fields.⁷

It is found that social media is very effective means of exercising freedom of speech and expressions.⁸ Social media has increased the possibilities and opportunities of communication, information spread and awareness worldwide. Social media is also cherished by the general public due the availability of the maximum freedom of expression. Social media networks mainly consist of content which is generated by users. Most of its users engage and communicate with complete freedom. Although it is a medium to express freely what its users want, but they must not be allowed to express any thought that threatens, offends or disgrace groups, based on color, race, national orientation, disability or religion.⁹ Social media bring out an important challenge. These systems provide space for discourses that are harmful to certain groups of people. The examples of the categories of hate target are race, behavior, sexual orientation, class, gender, ethnicity, disability and religion, etc.¹⁰ It means that it is easy to spread hate speech on social media as it provides inexpensive forum to exercise freedom of expression.

Social media is becoming the hub of hate speech. There are number of cases in which by using different social networking sites, people are spreading hatred for different

⁶Jacob Amedie, "The Impact of Social Media on Society," *Pop Culture Intersections* 176, no. 2 (March 2015):17.

⁷Trisha Dowerah Baruah, "Effectiveness of Social Media as a Tool of Communication and its Potential for Technology Enabled Connections: A Micro-Level Study," *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 2, no. 5 (2012): 1-10.

⁸Shishir Tiwari, and Gitanjali Ghosh, "Social media and Freedom of Speech and Expression: Challenges before the Indian Law," Available at SSRN 2892537 (2014).

⁹D. Guna Gracyal, and Deepa Viswam, "Freedom of Expression in Social Media: A political Perspective," *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary* 3, no. 1 (2018): 110-113.

¹⁰Mainack Mondal, Leandro Araújo Silva, and Fabrício Benevenuto, "A Measurement Study of Hate Speech in Social Media," In *Proceedings of the 28th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media* (2017): 85-94.

religions. They are also using this hatred to gain followers and to get fame.¹¹ Hate speech is a communication that has no meaning other than the expression of hatred for some group, especially in environment in which the communication is likely to provoke violence. It is also evident that Facebook is easily accessible platform for committing hate speech as it is the largest social networking site in the world and one of the most widely used forum.¹² Facebook has huge users throughout the World.¹³ As far as hate speech is concerned, Facebook is becoming hub of hate speech as it is mentioned above that Facebook has removed millions of posts that are based on hate speech²⁰¹⁹. Facebook has established an advanced system of detecting hate speech. As per Facebook authorities more and more of that hate speech (80%) is now being detected by automatic artificial intelligence.¹⁴

Hate speech is being practiced all over the world; even in Pakistan hate speech can be found in the form of sectarian division. Sectarian hate speech is as old as sectarianism is in Pakistan and the problem of sectarianism is not new to Pakistan or to the Indo-Pak subcontinent. The sectarianism in Pakistan did not arise at once rather it emerged into three phases: the first phase was from 1947 to 1977), the second phase was from 1977 to 1988 and the third phase was from 1988 to 2004.

The first phase remained quiet peaceful because beginning of this phase was restrained to the combined efforts of both sects, the Sunni and *Shi'a Ulama*, in projecting a constitution for Pakistan as per the Islamic teachings and then issue of Qadianis also kept them united. The second and third phase witnessed a rapid increase in the sectarian conflicts in terms of its occurrence, intensity and scope across the country. During this period, the key reasons behind sectarianism were Islamization by General Zia ul Haq, Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet Union Intervention in Afghanistan, Iran-Iraq war, emergence of sectarian organizations, religious madrasahs, etc.¹⁵ With the emergence of sectarianism, sectarian hate speech increased. First, it was started from word of mouth from mosques where different clerics express their opinion about different sects and then it being transferred through hateful material in the form of audio, video, images and printed material on social media to general public.¹⁶

¹¹Ahmed Al-Rawi, "The Online Response to the Qur'an-Burning Incidents," in *Political Islam and Global Media* (Routledge, 2016), 105-121.

¹²Natalie Alkiviadou, "Hate Speech on Social Media Networks: Towards a Regulatory Framework?," *Information and Communications Technology Law* 28, no. 1 (2019): 19-35. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600834.2018.1494417>

¹³Tankovska, "Number of Monthly Active Facebook Users Worldwide as of 4th Quarter 2020."

¹⁴Billy Perrigo, "Facebook Says It's Removing More Hate Speech than Ever Before. But There's a Catch," *Time*, November 26, 2019, <https://time.com/5739688/facebook-hate-speech-languages/>

¹⁵Moonis Ahmar, "Sectarian Conflicts in Pakistan," *Pakistan Vision* 9, no. 1 (2007): 1-19; Farmanullah, "Sectarianism in Pakistan: Causes and Remedies," *Researchgate* (2009): 42-83.

¹⁶Raza Ullah Shah, Kashif Saleem, and Azmat Ali Shah, "Hate Speech in Mosques versus Sectarian Violence in Pakistan: Causes and Recommendations," *The Dialogue* 16, no. 2 (2021): 99-

It is also observed in the case of blasphemy laws that a case is registered in police station then it is reported by electronic media and after that it spread like a fire on social media. It is the place where people started posting hate about the accused without any solid confirmation. That is the reason social media is used by extremist groups to create intolerance among people of Pakistan.¹⁷ It is also evident from the evolution of *Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan* (TLP) that these extremist groups are creating differences among different sects. This party gains a huge popularity after protesting in favor of blasphemy laws not only in streets but also on social media. But TLP expand the *Shia-Sunni* sectarian differences to intra-Sunni conflicts. By using media they motivated Barelvi *Sunni* youth to fight for their cause. They motivate them to spread hatred for other sects as they are superior from others.¹⁸ Apart from religious hatred, fake news culture is also increasing which is inducing hate speech. As it is observed from the findings that in general election of 2018, fake news and misinformation made a huge impact, especially the speculations around blasphemy law about negative role of N league create a huge difference in the voting trend.¹⁹ All the above studies are considering social media as the reason behind hate speech. But this research is finding about the usage of Facebook by Muslim users and its relationship with hate speech on sectarian ground. This study is also focusing on the background of users that are spreading hate speech to understand what needs they are gratifying by spreading hatred for opposite sects during specific events like *Muharram*.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study has been conducted under the light of uses and gratification theory. The theory was introduced by Elihu Katz and Jay Blumberg Popu. Uses and Gratification is audience centered approach and helps to understand that how individuals deliberately use media to fulfill specific needs and goals. Unlike the early theories, this theory particularly focuses on consumers of media content and labeled them as dynamic, sharp, and well informed about the media usage²⁰. Similar to this theory, this study also aimed to analyze how social media users are using this medium in prompting hate speech instead of focusing on influence and impact of media. The theory also suits this case because it is perfectly applied to uses of social media. Social media provide the most inexpensive forum to

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¹⁷Sanam Noor, "Social Media Challenges and Opportunities for Human Rights: A Case of Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan," (Master's thesis, UiT Norges Arktiske Universitet, 2016).

¹⁸Abdul Basit, "Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan: The Case of Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP)," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 21, no. 3 (2020): 374-389. doi:10.1080/21567689.2020.1812395.

¹⁹Azeema Cheema, Johann Chacko, and Shirin Gul, "Mobilising Mass Anxieties: Fake News and the Amplification of Socio-Political Conflict in Pakistan," *Fake News* (2019): 17.

²⁰Anabel Quan-Haase, and Alyson L. Young, "Uses and Gratifications of Social Media: A Comparison of Facebook and Instant Messaging," *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 30, no. 5 (2010): 350-361. doi: 10.1177/0270467610380009

communicate and people are so active and free to express their feelings and emotions²¹. This potential of social media and Facebook brings together an important challenge of hate speech which people commit on Facebook and other forums of social media. The study assumes that people commit hate speech on Facebook for their emotional gratification.

4. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions and fulfill the objectives of the research, survey method was employed, which is a quantitative research method. A total number of 100 respondents was selected through purposive sampling including 50 respondents from Sunni and 50 respondents from Shia community living in Lahore. As it is not easy to touch sectarian issues and people are sometimes reluctant to be involved in such type of studies, so the respondents were chosen with their consent and the questionnaire was designed very carefully. The questionnaire was developed on 5-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed in SPSS by applying Spearman correlation Eco efficiency test.

5. Findings and Interpretations

Table 1. The Religiosity level and Hate Speech Material by the Muslim Users on Facebook Correlations

		Religiosity	Hate speech posts
Spearman's Religiosity rho	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.404**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	100	100
Hate posting	SpeechCorrelation Coefficient	.404**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	100	100

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Table 1.1*

Table 1 represents that there is a significant relationship between the religiosity level and Hate speech material by the Muslim users on Facebook. Correlation between two variables of Level of religiosity and posting hate speech is significant at the 0.01 level. So, the results support the first hypothesis in the study.

Table 2 shows that more the level of education and household income, the less will be posting of hateful sectarian content by the Muslim users on Facebook. The correlation between variables, i.e., level of education and income and posting of hateful sectarian content by users is significant at the 0.01 level. Their relation is inversely proportional to each other. So, the results support the second hypothesis.

²¹ Thomas E. Ruggiero, "Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century," *Mass Communication and Society* 3, no. 1 (2000): 3-37. doi: https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0301_02

Table 2. The Level of Education and Household Income and Hateful Sectarian Content by Muslim Users on Facebook

Correlations			Status	Hate speech posting
Spearman's rho	Status	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.263**
		Sig.(2-tailed)	.	.008
		N	100	100
	Hate posting	speechCorrelation Coefficient	-.263**	1.000
		Sig.(2-tailed)	.008	.
		N	100	100

***. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Table 3. Religious Social Media Content on Facebook in Muharram and the Anti-Sectarian Feelings in Consumers

Correlations		Social Media	Anti-sectarian Feelings	
Spearman's rho	Social Media	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.221*	
		N	100	
	Anti-sectarian	Correlation Feelings	.221*	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.027	.
		N	100	100

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

Table 3 shows that more the use of religious social media content on Facebook in Muharram, the more are the anti-sectarian feelings in consumers. The correlation between variables of use of religious social media content and the anti-sectarian feelings in consumers is significant at the 0.05 level. So, our third hypothesis is also proved.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The survey results clearly represented that sectarianism by the Muslim Facebook users exist in Pakistan and specifically related to *Sunni* and *Shia*. Almost 44% respondents added that they never post religious sectarian content while 16% post on monthly basis and 17% on weekly basis .15% of respondents post religious sectarian content daily and 8% do this fortnightly. While checking the religiosity level, it was also asked if they offer prayer regularly. For this, 35% remained neutral but 65% agree that they do offer their prayers. While discussing their beliefs on their communication regarding real religious issues and their preference of abusive defense of sectarianism on Facebook, 91 % agreed and only 9% disagreed. Moreover, most of the respondents strongly agreed that the hateful content on

Facebook does increase in Muharram and people actively participate in hateful discussion related to their sects.

Therefore, this study concludes that people from both the sects: the Shia and the Sunni do participate in posting and sharing of sectarian hate speech. The study found that there was a strong relationship in the level of religiosity and posting of hate speech; the more the tilt towards religious practices, the more they post hateful speech on Facebook pages. Educational background, socio-economic status are also other variables.

The Limitations of the Study

Despite all the efforts the study has some limitations: apart of Sunni and Shia other sects should be included while discussing the Muslim Facebook users' tendency to spread hate speech against other sects. Media, peer group and social pressure must also be considered as important factors to pressurize people to post accordingly.

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