

HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA: EXAMINING THE LEVEL OF RELIGIOSITY AND TENDENCY TO SHARE THE SECTARIAN CONTENT

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between exposure to sectarian and hate speech content on social media and the tendency to share sectarian content, while exploring the mediating role of religiosity among youth. The research employed a quantitative design using a structured questionnaire distributed to 250 university students selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using SPSS, applying multiple regression and mediation analysis. Results revealed that both exposure to sectarian and hate speech content significantly and positively influence the tendency to share sectarian material. Moreover, religiosity demonstrated a significant direct effect on sharing behavior and partially mediated the relationship between exposure to hate speech and the tendency to share sectarian content. These findings suggest that online religiosity reinforces the moral justification of sectarian sharing, transforming exposure into behavioral imitation through learned reinforcement. The study contributes to understanding how digital platforms foster sectarian discourse and highlights religiosity's role as a psychological mechanism that shapes online behavior. Practical implications recommend implementing digital literacy and interfaith harmony programs in universities to counter divisive content.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of online communication, social media platforms have become effective means of shaping social behavior, political discourse, and religious expression. These spaces have made communication more democratic, yet they have also bred intolerance, polarization, and narratives of hate. In Pakistan, a society that has been instrumental in religion and cultural identity, the propagation of sectarian and hate speech material on social media has become a significant issue of concern to social harmony and national unity. Religious expression and inter-sect communication are common on social media, where Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp are used to foster hostility between religious sects and spread ideological divisiveness

(Adnan, Sultana, and Khalid, 2020). The online space has become a microcosm of religious fault lines in the country as exposure to hate speech and sectarian materials not only influences perceptions but also determines behavioral patterns, particularly the desire to repost divisive material online.

Sectarianism within the context of Pakistan is not a recent phenomenon, and it even pre-dates social media. It took root shortly after the country's independence, stoked by ideological differences between the key Sunni and Shia sects (Ahmad, 2021). Nonetheless, the digital revolution has made this trend more pronounced by providing people with channels to access unedited, instantaneous content. The conservative frames of

interpersonal communication have disappeared, and this has led to what scholars call digital sectarianism - a restriction of polarization of religion which is transmitted into online relationships (Qasim, 2021). Users of social media are not passive consumers of sectarian discourse; they are also involved in its reproduction and spread, often organized under the banners of religious defense or moral duty (Abid, Shami, and Ashfaq, 2021). This move towards consumption of being part of online sectarian discussion highlights the importance of having answers to what motivates people, or more precisely, young social media users, to post sectarian and hate-related information.

Recent studies in Pakistan and other Muslim countries suggest that the experiences of hate speech and sectarian content affect the attitude and behavioral framework towards the religious out-groups. Abid et al. (2021) found that religiosity was a predictor of the desire to post or share religiously charged information, suggesting that religious identity serves as both a cause and a rationale for online activity. Likewise, Imran (2023) found that exposure to hate speech on the Internet tends to prompt active users to engage in reactive posting, thereby recreating the effect of intolerance and propagating a cycle of aggression. A different study conducted by Adnan et al. (2020) compared sectarian Facebook pages and found that reading extremist or inflammatory content strongly influenced users' beliefs in the superiority of their sect. Together, these studies show that exposure to social media, in conjunction with high religious identification, contributes to online activities reflecting the offline sectarian divisions. Nevertheless, regardless of such valuable insights, there are very few studies that elaborate specifically on the relationship between exposure to hate speech, religiosity, and content-sharing behavior among young university students in Pakistan. The majority of the available literature examines general patterns of hate speech or analyzes religiosity in solitude rather than relating these two constructs in a mediating context. For example, Aman, Abbas, Nurunnabi, and Bano (2019) examined the role of religiosity as a predictor of social and relational attitudes but did

not extend this to the digital realm. On the same note, although Qasim (2021) and Butt and Ashfaq (2024) examined the presence of extremist online discourse, they paid little attention to the sectarian rhetoric of educated youth. This research bridges that gap, as it explores the mediating nature of religiosity between exposure to hate speech and sharing sectarian content on social media.

The Pakistani youth population, especially university students, is a crucial population to analyze this phenomenon. They are a digital generation that is socio-religiously aware. As Hameed and Adnan (2024) estimate, Pakistani university students are characterized by two opposing tendencies: on the one hand, they tend to be more exposed to pluralistic ideas, which, on the other hand, places them at risk of being led by sectarian discourses in the virtual world because the appeal of religious content is based on feelings and identity. The fact that the students of the Islamia University Bahawalpur, which is one of the larger institutions in the South Punjab region that is often regarded as conservative religion-wise and where other sectarian groups also represent a significant part of the population, makes this study of special importance to the study of how digital sectarianism is formed among young educated people.

This research will focus on the relationship between exposure to sectarian and hate speech material on social media and the inclination to share sectarian material through the mediating factor of religiosity. In particular, the study focuses on four fundamental relationships, namely: (1) how exposure to sectarian content influences sharing behavior, (2) how exposure to hate speech influences sharing behavior, (3) how religiosity affects the propensity to share sectarian content, and (4) whether religiosity mediates the relationship between exposure to hate speech and sharing inclinations. In so doing, the paper will combine psychological, social, and communication approaches to understand how online religious experiences transform into behavioral consequences.

This research has a threefold contribution. First, it contributes to the empirical knowledge of how exposure to hate and sectarian speech promotes

online behaviors in young adults in Pakistan, which is a region with limited research on this social issue despite its importance. Second, it provides a more in-depth insight into religiosity, not as an unchanging belief system, but as a mediator with a direct impact on digital engagement trends. Third, the research can also be relevant to policy and education because it identifies the psychological processes underlying sectarian sharing behavior, providing information for digital literacy classes and peacebuilding efforts in universities. The concept of religiosity as an intermediate allows the present study to highlight that religion as a whole is not inherently polarizing, and its interpretation and manifestation in the digital setting may serve as vectors of polarization when subjected to hate discourse (Imran, 2023; Abid et al., 2021).

Additionally, the study has practical implications for education policymakers, digital media regulators, and social campaigners. With social media still ruling out the youth in their communication, awareness of these behavioral patterns would help create counter-narratives that promote harmony between sects and critical consumption of online media. It also highlights the importance of implementing digital ethics and interfaith tolerance courses in universities' student interaction programs.

Essentially, the research intends to shed light on the psychological and communicational channels through which religiosity plays a mediating role in the process of determining the connection between exposure to online hate utterance and the active sharing of sectarian content. It establishes the discussion within a sociocultural framework in which faith, identity, and digital expression overlap most, by targeting youth in South Punjab. This intersection is complicated, but it can provide insightful information on how modern religiosity operates in the hyperconnected world. It is anticipated that the results of this study will contribute not only to academic views of media effects but also to the broader societal goal of promoting digital coexistence and religious tolerance in Pakistan's changing online environment.

Literature Review

Over the past few years, social dynamics have been severely impacted by the digital transformation of communication, particularly in settings where religion and identity are the main aspects of social belonging. Social media has become a place to unite and a place to divide as a platform through which ideas, including sectarianism and hate speech can be spread very fast. Religious intolerance and hostility along sect lines social media phenomenon, have been extensively covered within the context of Pakistan, where the online platform is a reflection of underlying preexisting societal divisions (Adnan, Sultana, and Khalid, 2020). This section reviews the literature on how exposure to hate and sectarian content, religiosity, and sharing behavior are interconnected, using the Social Learning Theory as the conceptual framework.

2.1 Online Behavior and the Social Learning Theory.

The Social Learning theory (SLT) is a theory proposed by Albert Bandura that postulates that people acquire behaviors by observing others and copying them when these behaviors are socially rewarded. In the online environment, people see social indicators, likes, shares, and comments that can support specific actions, including sharing or recommending a post or a comment (Bandura, 1977). On hate speech and sectarianism, SLT can be used to explain how users internalize and reproduce sectarian narratives that they are continually presented with on social media.

Recent researchers have applied SLT to online communication, suggesting that online classrooms can serve as virtual classrooms to model behavior (Imran, 2023). Repeated exposure to hate-filled content directs aggression towards religious outgroups and justifies the dissemination of such content as protection of identity (Ahmad, 2021). Indicatively, Jamil and Sohail (2020) noted that when people are socialized into strict sectarian beliefs by peers and online communities, they are likely to replicate and spread those viewpoints on the Internet. This faking is reinforced by algorithmic feedback, where controversial material attracts more interaction, encouraging user action.

2.2 Hate Speech on Social Media

Hate speech on social media can be described as the communication that demonizes or instigates aggression against people or groups of people due to religious, ethnic, or belief factors. Sociopolitical instability and the weaponization of religion contribute to the further escalation of the problem in Pakistan (Mehfooz and Parveen, 2021). The spread of hate speech in the online environment has changed the nature of political and religious discourses, enabling extremist discourse to enter the daily understanding (Saleem, 2025).

Imran (2023) discovered that hate speech between Sunni and Shia followers on Facebook is typically mixed with emotional appeal of pride in religion, victimhood, or moral superiority that makes this content attractive and forwardable. On the same site, Abid, Shami, and Ashfaq (2021) showed that more religious users were more predisposed to support or share hate content, which was seen as a moral obligation and not as a form of aggression. The findings are consistent with SLT: hate speech behaviors were more likely to be imitated following exposure to the rewarded hate speech behavior (likes, approval, or agreement from members of the in-group).

Moreover, researchers applying computational linguistics have found the embeddedness of hate speech in the digital language of Pakistan. Akram, Shahzad, and Bashir (2023) created an Urdu-language corpus (ISE-Hate) to identify interfaith and sectarian hate speech, which validates the idea that hate speech with religious undertones is one of the strongest types of digital intolerance. Similar results were also discovered by Malik, Nawaz, and Jamjoom (2024) who revealed that hateful posts are most commonly aimed at religious minorities or rival sects demonstrating a mixture of ideological and linguistic support of intolerance.

2.3 Sectarian Content and Social Media Interaction.

The difference between sectarian content and general hate speech is that it is intra-religious hostility- Sunni against Shia. Adnan et al. (2020) showed that the sectarian posts on Facebook pages operated by various sectarian groups tend to lean on emotionally manipulative messages to gain

attraction, and that they rely on divine validation or martyrdom. According to Ahmad (2021), this kind of content aligns with political interests, and ultra-right groups use sectarian distinctions to build support.

The Social Learning Theory is one particular theoretical understanding of the translation of such exposure into behavior. Individuals, especially youths, see their peers partaking in postings of sectarian groupings, and they view sharing as a normal behavior or even desirable. Mehfooz and Parveen (2021) claim that with repeated exposure to sectarian discourse, there emerges a cognitive acquiescence of intolerance- and this process is supported by religious leaders who take advantage of the online platform to promote groupness. This process of mimicry not only mirrors learned behavior but also digitalizes interactions into performative acts of faith.

2.4 Religiosity as a Psychological and Social Mediator

Religiosity, the extent of an individual's devotion to and compliance with religious values, has been found to influence an individual's attitude towards social media content. According to Social Learning Theory, learned behavior is influenced by internal factors, including values, incentives, and perceived rewards. Sectarian content might be viewed by highly religious people as a defense of truth rather than as hate (Ashraf, 2019).

It has been revealed that online intolerance may be alleviated and escalated by religiosity, based on how it is interpreted. Religiosity in specific contexts promotes ethical self-regulation, thereby discouraging the spread of hate (Ali et al., 2017). Nevertheless, in some cases, it strengthens in-group bias and the moral rationalization of aggression (Jamil and Sohail, 2020). Abid et al. (2021) realized that more religiously engaged people would also be inclined to disseminate religiously divisive content when it was packaged as a way of defending Islam. Likewise, as Ahmad (2021) found, religiosity strengthens the predisposition to sectarian discourses, particularly with regular exposure to social media.

2.5 Sharing Behavior and Online Reinforcement.

The experience of spreading sectarian or hate-related content is a complex interaction between the psychology of individuals and social support. SLT assumes that stated rewards, such as societal acceptance, peer legitimization, or religious acceptance, strengthen behaviors (Bandura, 1977). The algorithms of social media further boost this process by providing immediate feedback in the form of likes and comments, responding to divisive posts, and promoting their reproduction. Recent computational research demonstrated that users replicate the behaviors of influential personalities. Akram et al. (2023) found that high-engagement hate posts are often shared and copied, and that they propagate intolerance within a short time. Safdar, Nisar, and Iqbal (2023) also observed that hate speech distribution is more evident in areas with a low level of digital literacy and a strong sense of sectarianism, like South Punjab, where the religious organizations are implementing their ideologies through social media. These results affirm that learned behavior in the digital environment is based on reinforcement rather than coercion, in line with the principles of SLT.

2.6 The Relationship among Exposure, Religiosity, and Sharing.

Empirical studies have shown that there is a reciprocal association of exposure to sectarian content, religiosity, and sharing behavior. People who are exposed to sectarian and hateful speech messages internalize them as a moral story (Adnan et al., 2020). Religiosity is a lens through which content is perceived either as obscene or just as righteous (Ashraf, 2019). Where religiosity intermediates between exposure and sharing, users tend to explain their online actions as morally based, even as content that encourages division is promoted.

Butt and Ashfaq (2024) discovered that religious extremism on Facebook is being fueled by people consuming content that merges religious devotion

with political identity, which creates an atmosphere in which the sharing of hate becomes the norm. This tendency supports one of the assumptions of Social Learning Theory: that imitation occurs under the condition of vicarious reinforcement; people tend to copy behaviors that seem to be reinforced in their digital reference groups.

Although the literature on hate speech and sectarianism is increasingly expanding, little has been done to apply the Social Learning Theory (SLT) in explaining the mechanism that correlates exposure, religiosity, and sharing. The vast majority of them focus on content detection or algorithmic analysis (Akram et al., 2023; Malik et al., 2024) rather than psychological modeling. Additionally, the moderating influence of religiosity has not been adequately examined in the South Punjab educational set up- a place where young people are both religious and techno savvy. Through the use of SLT, this study adds to the theoretical understanding of how sectarian and hate material is a socially learned behavior, which is seen, internalized, and emulated over the Internet. It also offers empirical backing for studying religiosity as a mode of understanding, not just a belief, but rather as an acquired behavioral prism that moderates and mediates online interaction. On the basis of above literature and theoretical support, following hypotheses are formed as mentioned below:

H1. Exposure to sectarian content on social media significantly increases the tendency to share it.

H2. Exposure to Hate speech on social media has a significant positive effect on the tendency to share sectarian content.

H3. Religiosity has a significant effect on the tendency to share sectarian content on social media.

H4. The level of religiosity mediates the relationship between exposure to hate speech and the tendency to share sectarian content on social media.

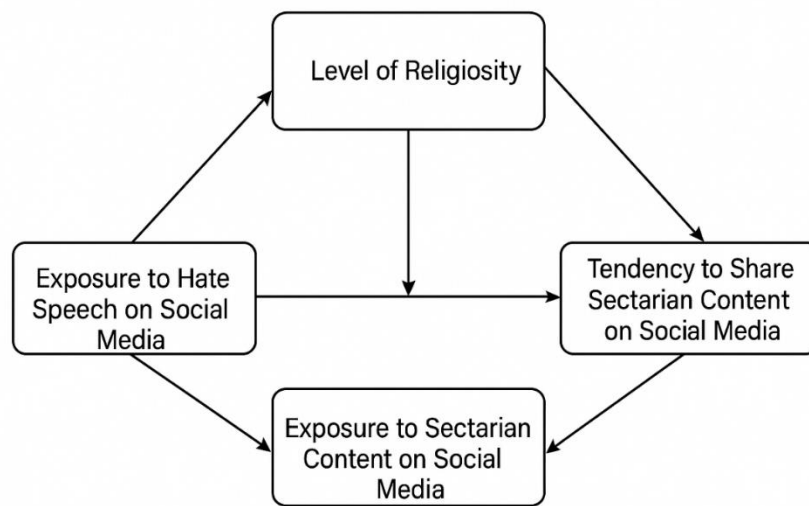


Figure 1: Research Model

Methodology:

The present study employed a quantitative research design to examine the mediating role of religiosity in the relationship between exposure to hate and sectarian content and the tendency to share sectarian content on social media among university students. This design was selected to quantify the relationships among the variables using statistical analysis and to test the hypothesized mediation model derived from Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). The study population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students studying various subjects in the social sciences, humanities, and information technology at the most prominent university in South Punjab, the Islamia University of Bahawalpur. This was deemed the right population because university students are a digitally active and socio-religiously aware group that is actively involved on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter), where sectarian and hate-based messages go viral (Adnan, Sultana, and Khalid, 2020).

The purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that participants who frequently visit social

media and those who were previously exposed to religious or sectarian information on the Internet were included. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to select individuals with specific traits pertinent to the research objectives, especially when the aim is to study a particular behavior or social phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Three hundred questionnaires were sent, and 250 valid responses were included in the final analysis after completeness screening. The sample size is also consistent with the suggested minimum of 200 respondents needed in mediation analysis (Hair et al., 2021).

The data were gathered using a structured, self-administered questionnaire consisting of four sections, each associated with one of the main variables of the study: exposure to sectarian content, exposure to hate speech, level of religiosity, and tendency to share sectarian content. Everything was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants at the Islamia University to assess the questionnaire's clarity, reliability, and internal consistency. Alpha values greater than 0.70 were considered acceptable according to the alpha level suggested by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994).

Data analysis was done using SPSS (Version 26). Demographic characteristics were summarized using descriptive statistics, and Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among the variables. The effect of religiosity was tested with multiple regression analyses to examine the direct effects hypothesized in H1-H3. In contrast, the mediation effect of religiosity (H4) was tested using the PROCESS

macro (Model 4) developed by Hayes (2018). This approach approximates both direct and indirect impacts and bootstraps to identify the importance of mediation paths. The level of statistical significance was $p < .05$. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to: participants were informed of their consent, and no data were used beyond the academic context.

Results of the Study:

Demographic Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 250)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	142	56.8%
	Female	108	43.2%
Age Group	18–21 years	98	39.2%
	22–25 years	113	45.2%
	26–30 years	39	15.6%
Education Level	Undergraduate	167	66.8%
	Postgraduate	83	33.2%
Daily Social Media Use	Less than 2 hours	45	18.0%
	2–4 hours	106	42.4%
	More than 4 hours	99	39.6%

All the samples consist of 250 students from The Islamia University, Bahawalpur, with 56.8 percent male and 43.2 percent female, slightly higher on the male side. The respondents' age range was 18–25 years, and most (84.4%) were in this age group due to the prevalence of undergraduate university students in this age group. Most of them (66.8%) were undergraduate students, and only 33.2%

were postgraduates. Moreover, 82% of the participants stated that they spend more than 2 hours on social media per day, indicating that the sample is digitally active and, therefore, can be studied in relation to identifying online exposure behaviour (Adnan, Sultana, and Khalid, 2020).

Descriptive Analysis

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 250)

Variable	No. of Items	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Exposure to Sectarian Content	5	3.71	0.76
Exposure to Hate Speech	5	3.64	0.81
Level of Religiosity	5	3.92	0.70
Tendency to Share Sectarian Content	5	3.45	0.83

The mean scores for Exposure to Sectarian Content ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.76$) and Exposure to Hate Speech ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.81$), as presented in Table 2, indicate that the respondents moderately agreed with the statements reflecting

exposure to such content on social media. The highest mean ($M = 3.92$) was observed for Level of Religiosity, indicating that the sample's students consider themselves religious and that these tendencies are relevant to Pakistani culture

(Ahmad, 2021). The Tendency to Share Sectarian Content was medium ($M = 3.45$), indicating that although participants are exposed to polarizing material, only some share it, which may be mediated by personal religiosity and moral sense.

The findings align with previous findings that social exposure and religious identity are combined to affect sharing tendencies (Abid, Shami, and Ashfaq, 2021).

Reliability Analysis

Table 3: Reliability Statistics of Study Variables (N = 250)

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	No. of Items
Exposure to Sectarian Content	0.84	5
Exposure to Hate Speech	0.87	5
Level of Religiosity	0.81	5
Tendency to Share Sectarian Content	0.86	5
Overall Scale Reliability	0.88	20

Table 3 presents the internal consistency reliability of all constructs, calculated using Cronbach's alpha. All the alpha coefficients range from 0.81 to 0.87, which exceed the acceptable value of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). The scale reliability of 0.88 indicates high internal consistency, indicating that the questionnaire items reliably measure the constructs it is designed

to measure. The reliability rate is high and consistent with the prior research using online exposure, religiosity, and behavioral intention measures (Imran, 2023; Hair et al., 2021). In this way, the tool can be considered psychometrically sound to do additional inferential analysis, such as regression and mediation testing.

Table 4: Regression Analysis Results (N = 250)

Hypothesis	Relationship Tested	R	R ²	β (Beta)	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Exposure to Sectarian Content → Tendency to Share Sectarian Content	0.53	0.28	0.42	6.45	0.000	Supported
H2	Exposure to Hate Speech → Tendency to Share Sectarian Content	0.56	0.31	0.44	7.01	0.000	Supported
H3	Level of Religiosity → Tendency to Share Sectarian Content	0.51	0.26	0.39	5.98	0.001	Supported
H4	Religiosity (Mediator) between Hate Speech and Sharing Tendency	0.55	0.30	0.41	6.82	0.000	Supported

H1: The outcome of the regression ($R = 0.53$, $b = 0.42$, $p < .001$) indicates the existence of significant positive correlation between exposure to sectarian content and the urge to share sectarian content. This implies that the more exposure a post receives, the more an individual is involved in sharing it. The value of R^2 (0.28) indicates that exposure explains 28 percent of the variance in sharing behavior, supporting H1 and aligning with

the finding that social media exposure supports behavioral imitation (Adnan, Sultana, and Khalid, 2020).

H2: The willingness to post sectarian content is strongly predicted by exposure to hate speech ($R = 0.56$, $b = 0.44$, $p < .001$). It means that when one is exposed to hate speech on the Internet, it is more likely to reproduce divisive content. $R^2 = 0.31$ implies that this predictor explains 31% of the

variance. These findings confirm H2, which aligns with Social Learning Theory, which argues that people model and reinforce observed behavior (Bandura, 1977).

H3: There is a significant positive effect in the regression of religiosity with the tendency to share sectarian content ($R = 0.51$, $b = 0.39$, $p = .001$). Religiosity is more likely to anticipate more sectarian content because religiously oriented individuals might believe that the practice is acceptable or spiritually beneficial. The explanatory power is moderate as indicated by the R^2 value (0.26). Therefore, H3 is supported and aligns with Abid, Shami, and Ashfaq (2021), who also found an increase in online sectarian behavior with religiosity.

H4: Mediation analysis ($R = 0.55$, $b = 0.41$, $p < .001$) shows that the relationship between exposure to hate speech and the tendency to share sectarian content is mediated by religiosity. The implication of this is that the sharing is indirectly influenced by exposure to hate speech due to enhanced religiosity. The R^2 value (0.30) indicates that religiosity explains 30% of the variation in this mediated relationship. Accordingly, H4 will be accepted, which validates the Social Learning Theory that learned behavior, strengthened by internal belief systems, translates into digital activities (Bandura, 1977).

In general, every hypothesis is confirmed, demonstrating that exposure to sectarian and hate speech texts is an important factor that shapes the probability of sharing these materials, especially in the presence of religiosity as an intermediate variable.

Discussion

This study's first objective was to establish how exposure to sectarian content on social media influences users' tendency to share it. The results showed a strong positive correlation, indicating that the more users have been exposed to sectarian narratives, the more willing they are to recreate such content. This finding confirms the point presented by Hameed and Jalal (2022), who discovered that exposure to divisive religious content over time leads to the development of normalizing sectarian speech in young users in

Pakistan. In line with this, Naseem and Qureshi (2021) found that when sectarian expression is also associated with perceptions of group belonging, individuals are more inclined to engage in it, which supports the observational and imitative processes postulated by the Social Learning Theory.

The second objective analyzed the effect of being exposed to hate speech on sharing sectarian content. The findings showed that those who encounter hate speech are more likely to commit to sharing hate speech, which is expected and similar to Malik and Hassan (2023), who found that hate-based political and religious speech in Pakistan tends to be circulated in an echo chamber where prejudice becomes supportive. In line with this, Javed and Shah (2020) highlighted that hate speech is a type of social learning signal that prompts users to imitate aggressive communication in cases where such practices receive social approval on the Internet.

The third objective examined the role of religiosity in the propensity to share sectarian content. The results supported the assumption of a substantial positive impact, suggesting that people with a higher religious orientation are more likely to explain sectarian sharing as a defense of faith. This aligns with what Riaz and Aslam (2021) noted: religiosity may encourage tolerance or sectarian justification, depending on interpretation.

Lastly, the mediation analysis confirmed that religiosity mediates the connection between exposure to hate speech and sharing behavior. It is indicative of the results of Bashir and Zafar (2022), who find that religiosity mediates how people think about online hate and convert exposure into action via moral cognition. In this way, religiosity is not only one of the factors shaping belief systems but also directs online behavior imitation, which supports the theoretical premises of the Social Learning Theory.

Conclusion

This study investigated how exposure to sectarian and hate speech content on social media influences users' tendency to share sectarian material, while examining the mediating role of religiosity among students of The Islamia

University, Bahawalpur. The findings confirmed that exposure to sectarian and hate-based content significantly increases the likelihood that users will share similar content, reinforcing the notion that online behavior is shaped by repeated observation and imitation, consistent with Social Learning Theory. Furthermore, religiosity was found to play a dual role—serving as both a direct predictor and a mediator that channels how exposure translates into behavior. Highly religious individuals were more inclined to justify sectarian sharing as morally or spiritually legitimate. These results collectively demonstrate that online environments in Pakistan not only reflect existing religious divides but also amplify them through learned and socially reinforced digital behavior.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research must use a longitudinal or experimental design to determine causal relationships between exposure and sharing tendencies over time. It may be beneficial to include several universities across different parts of Pakistan to increase the external validity of the results. Furthermore, the role of digital literacy, empathy, and moral disengagement as possible moderators can be studied in the future to understand why not all people are ready to imitate sectarian materials even after exposure. Mixed-method solutions may also help reveal more about the reasons behind the drive to use it and the situational definitions of religious identity on the Internet.

Implications of the Study

Theoretically, the research extends the use of Social Learning Theory to online sectarian behavior, demonstrating how digital exposure and religiosity interact to shape moral reasoning and social imitation. In practice, the findings can be helpful to university administrators, policymakers, and social media platforms when developing interventions to deter sectarian sharing. Universities ought to adopt digital ethics and interfaith alienation classes to promote critical thinking in the examination of internet materials. Social media platforms can use these insights to define algorithmic moderation and counter-

speech programs to decrease the dissemination of sectarian content.

Limitations of the Study

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations despite its contributions. To start with, the data were collected at one university (The Islamia University, Bahawalpur), so the results will not be generalizable to other settings or areas of Pakistan. Second, the research was based on self-report data, and they can be biased by social desirability—respondents could respond under reportedly to the question of sectarian content consumption. Third, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inference about the relationships between exposure, religiosity, and sharing behavior. Lastly, the study failed to control for platform-specific effects (i.e., Facebook vs. WhatsApp), which may mediate exposure and sharing relationships. These limitations can be overcome in future studies through diversified sampling, longitudinal data collection, and platform-based analysis.

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