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Living in Digital Spiral of Silence: A Case Study of Young Pashtuns

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Abstract

Social Media is being used throughout the world to voice opinions that are usually not acceptable in a society that ultimately leads to social change. However, in a religiously conservative society like Pakistan, this scenario is entirely different, people are not only openly condemned, threatened but are also killed for voicing their opinions when it comes to highly controversial and sensitive religious issues. This study focuses on the university-going youth of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan – the province which is most affected by such measures. Researchers applied quantitative methods in the form of a survey questionnaire and qualitative method in the form of in-depth interviews to study if young Pashtuns feel confident in voicing their opinions on social media or they remain silent for the fear of not just isolation or being rebuked but for the life-threatening part of it. The findings conclude that the young Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are living in a Digital Spiral of Silence due to fear of isolation and physical harm.

Key Words: *Spiral of Silence, Digital Spiral of Silence, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Young Pashtuns, Online Extremism, Violence, Social Media, Freedom of Expression.*

Introduction

Social media is an alternate medium of expression, where the users can share, participate, and generate unlimited information and build social networks. Social media is thoroughly integrated into the fabric of life by providing a platform for the dissemination of information in all the possible forms of communication i.e., text, audio, and video. Due to the unprecedented effects of social media usage on young adults, it is now considered as a third parent (Dave & Dave, 2011). Although social media proved itself to be capable of providing opportunism, intellectual thinking, awareness, entertainment, and education, its negative effects on youth are still questionable (Putra, 2016). Social media provides a readily available platform for communication, discussion, and opinion sharing, however, in particular

contexts, it becomes rather a problem when the expressed opinion is not liked by a majority of the population thus pushing the users to a '*Digital Spiral of Silence*'.

In the Mardan district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, on the 13th of April 2017, news spread in Abdul Wali Khan University that Mashal Khan, a 23-year-old student of the journalism department, had posted blasphemous material on Facebook. Tens of students and some university staff members marched towards the boys' hostel inside the university (Rana, 2017). They found Mashal trying to hide from the charged mob in his hostel room. The mob dragged him out in the open, beat him, stamped him, shot him, and let him bleed to death. The mob not satisfied with his killing further attacked his already dead body, hit him with a belt, pelt his body with stones, and burnt it as well. During the investigation, no such evidence of posting blasphemous content on social media was found against Mashal Khan and his killing was ruled to have been a premeditated murder (Hyat, 2018).

As interviewee No 3, who is one of the accused and is now serving life imprisonment in Mardan jail, initially tried to defend his actions that it was Mashal Khan's mistake to speak out on such sensitive issues, but later he requested the court that he was not involved in his murder. Similarly, all the faculty members including Mashal Khan's teacher stated that although he was a curious person he was a true believer and a Muslim. After investigation, the court did not find any blasphemous content posted by him and thus, his accused were given life imprisonment (F. J. A. a. S. Tariq, 2019).

Apart from Mashal Khan's case, there are several other cases reported in KPK, in which social media users were harmed and even killed over their alleged posted material on social media which was against the customs and traditions of the society. A platform that is intrinsically designed to democratize free speech becomes the exact opposite and even a tool for oppression and condemnation in cases where expressed opinion is not aligned with the popular opinion, thus, creating a fear among the social media users and pushing them to a spiral of silence in this digital age. Due to threats from external factors educated youth of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is afraid to openly discuss, and express their opinion on political and religious issues. As in the current case study, asking questions about religion and university staff is life-threatening. The findings can reveal discourses behind the threats due to which the young Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are living in a spiral of silence.

Objectives

- To study and understand the freedom of expression exercised by the educated youth of KPK on social media.
- To study the consequences of breaking the spiral of silence in KPK on sensitive religious issues.

Literature Review

New media includes all the social media forums and new genres to make effective and impactful communication (Valente, 2010). The modern era is the era of technological advancement (Ch, Mahmood, & Rasool, 2015) Apart from influencing all spheres of life social media is influencing the student's academics and learning. Most of the students use social media for improving academic performance. (Balakrishnan & Gan, 2016) The rise of social media technologies makes learning easy for students. In today's society social media has become an important part of everyone life, particularly among the youth, who are heavy social media users, using social media for more than four hours a day (Lau, 2017) social media is also affecting student's grade and overall performance in the educational institutions. Apart from education and entertainment social media nowadays is also used as a tool for bringing important issues to

the people you want to see through hashtags on Twitter or Facebook posts and pages. (Nepal, Paris, & Georgeakopoulos, 2015).

Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, (2003) Find that almost fifty percent of the online media contain violence, racism, and hatred-related content that is affecting the youth (Siddiq, 2017) due to online extremism thousands of innocent lives have been lost to religion-based violence across the country. Similarly, Adnan Abdul Qadir, a student of UET Peshawar was killed by the activist of Islami Jamiat Talaba for playing music inside his hostel room. Later the accused was released by the court (Dawn, 2010) and an engineering student of Islamia College Peshawar was killed for talking to his female cousin (tribune, 2013).

Noor (2016) Found that social media is spreading religious extremism, and promoting hate speech in Pakistan. In some cases, social media become more problematic for the users such as in the case of the Kohistan video scandal in 2011, where four girls and a boy were killed after a video of their private celebration leaked on social media (Shahid, Kauser, & Zulqarnain, 2011). Likewise in July 2016, a social media celebrity Qandeel Baloch was killed by his brother in Multan, Pakistan (Hussain & Umer, 2019).

Similarly, (Tripathi, 2017) concluded that due to social media the boundaries between the real and reel become quite thin. The youth find themselves in a violent virtual space that has negatively influence their life. (Abro, Fateh, & Saeed, 2017) Pakistan is facing violence and extremism due to failures of institutions (Suleman, 2018) stated that extremism and terrorism disrupted social values and hampered economic growth in Pakistan.

Kunkle (2012) Conclude that social media is creating problems for security agencies in the complex world of extremist ideology. Terrorists are using Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter for recruiting, inspiring, and propagandas (Davydov, 2015) we need to identify the root cause of extremism in the students, and going beyond the traditional ways, the educational institutions need to play role in the prevention of extremism. (Blaker, 2015) Social media is widely used by terrorists. They post violent videos and attract youth for extremism and violence through propaganda. (Cragin, Bradley, Robinson, & Steinberg, 2015) highlight that violent behavior emerges in multiple stages among youth. Family plays a more significant role than friends in shaping attitudes towards nonviolence.(M. M. Tariq, 2011) stated that although terrorists use the name of Islam, in reality, Islam is the religion of peace and strictly denies violence. (Ghosh, Chan, Manuel, & Dilimulati, 2017) Concluded that extremism and violence is a global issue and it can be controlled through quality education. (Afzal, Iqbal, & Inayay, 2012) Pakistan is facing extremism, terrorism, and violence, which is worsening day by day. To completely eradicate this problem of extremism on religious and political issues Pakistan needs to adopt multiple steps including, allowing people to ask questions about their rights, implementation of laws that guarantee freedom of speech, educational reforms, and strengthening democratic institutions.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed the spiral of silence theory proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1970. It aims to understand that people become silent due to fear of isolation or separation. If people perceive that majority of the people share the same opinion, they may be willing to speak but if they perceive that their opinion holds opposite views to the majority, then they will keep silent. Noelle-Neumann stated that people do not speak on controversial issues and cease the expression of their views because of the fear of isolation. While they speak when they believe that their opinions are dominant or popular (Malaspina, 2014), people go into a spiral of silence when they are not supported by others, due to fear of rejection or

fear of isolation. This theory is used as a theoretical framework to highlight the problems faced by young Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa while voicing their opinion on social media.

The youth may use social media platforms for highlighting their general and political issues. However, due to intolerance in society, rejection of views, and physical harm they are living in the digital spiral of silence. Before the emergence of other digital platforms, FM radio played an important role in providing education, awareness, information, and entertainment. There were many popular and interactive music programs where the listeners were allowed to call during the show and play their favorite songs by requesting the DJs. But as reported by (Khan, 2021) the women of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were not allowed to call in the FM radio program and request for playing specific songs. They were instructed that those women who call to radio program will be fined Rs.10,000 per call. These kinds of punishments and threats create fear in the youth particularly women and lead to a digital spiral of silence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Research Questions

1. What were the actual factors behind the Mashal Khan incident?
2. What is the perception of students about the Mashal Khan case?
3. Are the young and educated Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa living in a spiral of silence?

Methods

This study utilized quantitative methodology via-a-via survey methods and qualitative methodology vis-a-via in-depth interviews to explore the consequences faced by young Pashtuns by raising voices on the social media platform. For this research, the population is the educated university-going youth (ranging from 15 to 29 years) living in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The researchers chose two universities from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the data collection i.e. Abdul Wail Khan University, Mardan, and Peshawar University, Peshawar. The researchers chose Peshawar University, one of the oldest places of higher education in the province, because Peshawar is the Capital city of KPK, and students from all the districts of KPK study here, hence, its student body is a good mix of students coming from all the different ethnical and geographical backgrounds. The Mardan University is selected for the collection of data because the Mashal Khan incident happened in the premises of this very university. Initially, the researchers decided to collect data from 400 respondents and distributed 250 questionnaires to each university. However, the response rate was slow. A large number of respondents refused to fill the questionnaire due to topic sensitivity while many respondents submitted half-filled questionnaires and did not provide complete information therefore the researchers filtered out data from only 200 respondents through a systematic random sampling technique which is then further analyzed through statistical tests using SPSS Software.

Secondly, during the analysis of the questionnaire, we have observed that the respondents did not answer those questions in which they were asked to share views about Mahsal Khan incident, and the reasons for his brutal death. Therefore, we decided to conduct in-depth interviews and particularly target those students who were present in the university on the day of the incident.

Although the majority of the respondents were reluctant to comment on the Mashal Khan incident due to fear of harm, however after being assured that their names will not be disclosed or used anywhere, a few agreed to talk. Thus, we succeeded to interview a total of 20 respondents. These in-depth interviews were analyzed using NVIVO software.

Results

This section of the paper presents the results of the study. The results are presented in the form of tables.

Table 1: Demographics of the respondents:

		Frequency	Percent
1.	**Gender**		
	Male	140	70.0
	Female	60	30.0
1.	**Age**		
	17 to 19 Years	47	23
	20 to 22 Years	135	67
	23 to 25 Years	17	8
1.	**How often you visit your Facebook account in the past week?**		
	Several times a day	98	49.0
	Once a day	52	26.0
	Every few days	18	9.0
	Once a week	11	5.5

Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents, 70% are male due to male dominancy, the Pashtun traditions and customs did not allow females to talk with unknown males, and therefore only 30% of the respondents are female.

Table 2: Social media and isolation

		Frequency	Percent	Mean
1.	**I worry about being isolated if I disagree with people**			
	Strongly Agree	64	32.0	
	Agree	64	32.0	
	Neutral	39	19.5	2.2424
	Disagree	20	10.0	
	Strongly Disagree	11	5.5	
2.	**I do not tell people what I think when the issue is controversial**			
	Strongly Agree	46	23.0	
	Agree	80	40.0	
	Neutral	50	25.0	2.2714
	Disagree	19	9.5	
	Strongly Disagree	4	2.0	
3.	**I like avoiding arguments.**			
	Strongly Agree	58	29.0	
	Agree	68	34.0	2.2677
	Neutral	40	20.0	
	Disagree	25	12.5	
	Strongly Disagree	7	3.5	

4. I try to avoid getting into arguments on social media.			
Strongly Agree	72	36.0	
Agree	69	34.5	
Neutral	31	15.5	2.1015
Disagree	14	7.0	
Strongly Disagree	11	5.5	
5. There have been many times when I thought people around me were being wrong but I did not tell them so.			
Strongly Agree	45	22.5	
Agree	100	50.0	
Neutral	27	13.5	2.1753
Disagree	14	7.0	
Strongly Disagree	8	4.0	
6. When I disagree with others, rather than argue I would agree with them.			
Strongly Agree	38	19.0	
Agree	63	31.5	2.5678
Neutral	56	28.0	
Disagree	31	15.5	
Strongly Disagree	11	5.5	

Table 2 shows that more than 50 % of the respondents feel isolated and around 70 % of respondents agreed that we avoid arguments on social media especially when the issue is controversial. More than 70 % stated that most of the time we know that something is wrong but we have no courage to challenge their views.

Table 3: Consequences of using social media

1. Arguing over controversial issues may bring harm to me.	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Mean**
Strongly Agree	60	30.0	
Agree	59	29.5	
Neutral	54	27.0	2.2475
Disagree	20	10.0	
Strongly Disagree	5	2.5	
2. I post political messages on my Facebook very carefully.			
Strongly Agree	71	35.5	
Agree	58	29.0	
Neutral	32	16.0	2.2741
Disagree	15	7.5	
Strongly Disagree	21	10.5	
3. While posting messages, I feel the pressure of an outcome (alternate: reaction?).			
Strongly Agree	51	25.5	
Agree	71	35.5	
Neutral	38	19.0	2.4221

Disagree	20	10.0	
Strongly Disagree	19	9.5	
4. It is difficult for me to post my opinion if I think others may not agree with it.			
Strongly Agree	29	14.5	
Agree	65	32.5	
Neutral	39	19.5	2.8342
Disagree	42	21.0	
Strongly Disagree	24	12.0	
5. It is safer to keep quiet than publicly express an opinion that you know most people do not like.			
Strongly Agree	51	25.5	
Agree	99	49.5	
Neutral	21	10.5	2.1276
Disagree	20	10.0	
Strongly Disagree	5	2.5	
6. I am afraid to be harmed if I share something against someone.			
Strongly Agree	41	20.5	
Agree	83	41.5	
Neutral	34	17.0	2.3990
Disagree	34	17.0	
Strongly Disagree	6	3.0	
7. I usually avoid discussing sensitive issues on Facebook			
Strongly Agree	99	49.5	
Agree	60	30.0	
Neutral	12	6.0	1.89
Disagree	13	6.5	
Strongly Disagree	13	6.5	

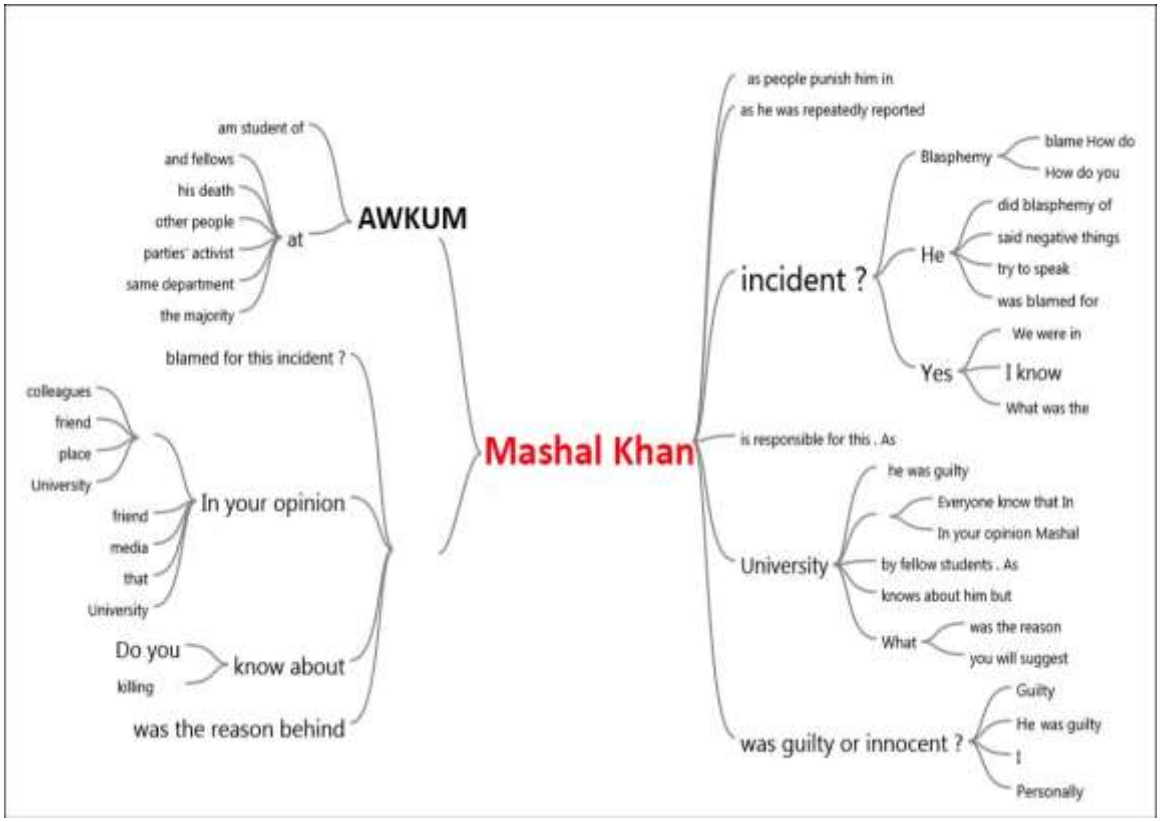
Table 3 shows that 50% of respondents agree that discussing controversial issues and confronting the opinion of the majority is harmful. They also stated that they are facing the pressure of strong political groups. While 74 % of the respondents stated that it is safer to keep quiet than challenging the majority.

Results of the in-depth interview

For in-depth interviews, researchers requested students and staff of Abdul Wali Khan University. The majority of the respondents refused to talk due to the sensitivity of the topic, and they were afraid to be harmed. After completion of the interviews, all the answers were sorted and findings were managed through NVivo software.

The in-depth interviews revealed that Mashal Khan used to talk about sensitive issues verbally and online through the social networking website Facebook. Talking to a reporter of *Khyber News* he highlighted some administration issues of the Abdul Wali Khan University. He stated that some faculty members are working on double positions to get double salaries due to which we are facing a faculty shortage problem. Meanwhile, he shared some religious content on his Facebook account which was disliked by his friends

and they shared it with others. He was also inquired by university fellows in the university about his views on religious issues. He denied it and stated that his Facebook account was hacked and the content does not belong to him. Meanwhile, he made another Facebook account and shared a post that my previous account is hacked and do not link its content with me. As highlighted by respondents during interviews that it had become a routine practice for Mashall Khan that he frequently used social media for sharing and expressing his opinion and highlighting political & religious issues and when people started to confront him over that, due to fear every time Mashal Khan stated, that it was not me, my social media account was hacked and used by someone else.



During interviews, the respondents stated that the administration was also not happy with him and the administration supported the mob due to which some faculty members are now in Jail. The majority of the respondents at Abdul Wali Khan University (almost 85% to 90%) still hold the view that Mashal Khan did blasphemy of the Prophet (PBUH) and his companion and therefore, a mob killed him for his act. While (10 % to 15%) said that blasphemy was not proved and he was killed on doubt.

While some respondents revealed that Mashal Khan highlighted some issues through an interview regarding the administration of Abdul Wali Khan University. therefore, he was killed. However, all the respondents disagree with the brutal way he was killed by the mob at the university premises. They reveal that no one should be allowed to kill someone and necessary action needs to be taken against all those who were found guilty in a court of law.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide support to the idea that young Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are living in a spiral of silence. The results highlighted that there is a significant relationship between digital media usage and fear of isolation. However, the tendency of harm may increase when the issue is highly controversial as in the case of blasphemy. The youth of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is living in isolation and they are avoiding arguments through social media. Data revealed that they have no courage to face the consequences by challenging the popular views of the majority. They feel helpless and afraid to be harmed, by those who are in power and the majority. Around 74 % of the respondents stated that it is better to keep quiet than to use social media for arguments and confrontations.

The main reasons behind the spiral of silence in the young Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are fear of isolation, rejection, physical harm, and avoiding confrontation with the majority. As found through in-depth interviews, the respondents revealed that the reasons behind Mashal Khan's killing by an angry mob were his confrontational stance and openly expressed arguments on sensitive issues. The majority of the respondents agreed that he was killed due to sharing controversial issues on Facebook. Although Mashal khan claimed that his Facebook account was hacked and used by someone else, he was blamed for blasphemy and killed by the mob. In-depth interviews with the respondents also conclude that Mashal Khan had no support in the university premises and around 70% of the respondents claimed that he was guilty. Similarly as in the case of the Kohistan video scandal, where four girls and a boy were killed after a video of their private celebration leaked on social media (Shahid et al., 2011), in 2011 and Qandeel Baloch was killed by his brother in Multan, due to her using social media (Hussain & Umer, 2019). As find by (Tripathi, 2017) the youth find themselves in a violent and unsafe space and living in a spiral of silence.

Recommendations

Social media along with information and entertainment provide many other opportunities such as entertainment, information, criticizing the wrongdoings, and highlighting political and general issues. But along with many opportunities, social media has become a problem for the youth due to controversies and arguments. As understood by this study, social media needs to be used with a certain subjectivity to the socio-culture atmosphere. This study recommends that youth should be educated not only about their rights and values like freedom of expression but also about respecting the feelings and opinions of others. Asking questions is the right of every individual and no one should be allowed to harm or take the lives of others. There are laws enforcing agencies and courts of law for investigation and punishment for wrongdoings. Secondly, in case of such sensitive incidents, universities need to act proactively and should immediately take up the issues at the right forums such as the university disciplinary committees, faculty members, police, and courts of law - instead of sitting back and allowing for such drastic outcomes the likes of which were witnessed by the entire world in the Mashal Khan case where a young boy lost his life and that too in such tragic way.

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