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Social Media as Mirror and Mediator: Analysing Intra-Faith Dynamics among Youth in Peshawar, Pakistan within an Islamic Framework

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Abstract

The paper investigates social media functions as both a reflective medium and a modifying intermediary for Muslim youth interfaith interactions in Peshawar, Pakistan, by studying Islamic moral principles and digital religious traditions. The investigation centers on how online platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, convey faith interpretations while navigating sectarian divides to shape digital religious identities among the urban Pakistani population. This analysis explores Islamic principles of *adab al-ikhtilaf* (etiquette of disagreement), *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and *ummah* (community) to examine how social media both facilitates Islamic pluralism and exacerbates inter-Muslim polarities through algorithmic promotion, alongside symbolic separation practices and doctrinal conflicts. Digital spaces show opposing trends by allowing religious devotion and inter-sectarian unity to coexist with fragmented ideologies and practices of *takfir* and performative religious acts. Internet platforms demonstrate their ability to transform doctrinal contests while reshaping religious leadership structures through dual operation systems. The study applies digital Islam theory and mediated sectarianism to explore knowledge shifts and faith-based ethics in youth interfaith communication within South Asia's digital public spheres.

Keywords: Social Media, Intra-Faith Dynamics, Islamic Ethics, Youth, Digital Religion, Sectarianism, Digital Islam, Pakistan, *Adab al-Ikhtilaf*, Online Piety

1. Introduction

The modern digital environment has transformed how religious identities evolve because they now receive their definition through online spaces where schemes and debates occur. The influence of social media on how people perceive members of different faiths receives substantial scholarly analysis (Campbell 2012; Cheong et al. 2012), yet studies about its impact on religious interactions within Muslim communities remain scarce. Digital platforms have become vital spaces in Pakistan to reshape theological arguments while modifying religious limitations and expressions

of devotion because the country possesses marked religious sectarian divisions, which remain politically crucial.

The research targets Peshawar which exists where the tribal traditional framework meets the youth digital era, and shows strong inertness of religious factions. Various social media platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube, created new possibilities for Muslim youths to encounter multiple Islamic views while they can show their religious affiliations and participate in religious discussions. The digital religious communications lead to multiple tensions between users, which include the artificial practice of religious devotion and exclusive interpretation approaches, and digital religious policing actions that reflect wider social tensions between groups (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Howard 2011).

Research on this phenomenon depends on combining theories related to digital media and Islamic ethical principles while examining youth religious culture. The article interprets social media as an interface that presents both a reflective quality that displays existing religious communities along with a transformative power that shapes religious connections in new ways. The research examines youth practices of managing sectarian variation on the internet through Islamic ethical concepts of *adab al-ikhtilaf* (etiquette of disagreement) and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to establish *ummah* (transnational Muslim community) which allows both dynamic reproduction of existing divisions as well as occasional progress towards shared spirituality (Sardar 2008; Kamali 2010).

The research adds information to ongoing academic discussions about religious authority modifications and communal transformation during algorithmic culture times. The research positions Pakistani Muslim youth's digital activities in the increasing field of "Digital Islam" studies that investigates Islamic values and principles through technological mediation (Bunt 2018, Mandaville 2007). Through investigation, the study reveals the positive and dangerous aspects of digital religious practice within vulnerable religious structures, which emphasizes the critical need for faith-based digital literacy to develop unity between Muslim groups.

2. Research Question

How do social media platforms operate as mirrors and mediators of intra-faith relations among youth in Peshawar, Pakistan? In what ways do Islamic values and interpretive frameworks influence their digital expressions of faith and sectarian engagement?

3. Literature Review

Religious studies adopt digital media as an expanding research topic that explores its effects on Muslim societies whose religious identity shapes their social and political environment. According to Campbell (2013) and Mandaville (2007), the digital environment transforms traditional religious engagement beyond replication to generate innovative methods of interpretation and authority while fostering new ways of interaction. The study of digital information networks becomes crucial in Pakistan and other South Asian countries because religion governs public discourse throughout society while existing within ongoing inter-confessional debates (Rais 2021).

The digital transformation of religious communication throughout Pakistan enabled widespread distribution of Islamic content across Facebook and YouTube, and WhatsApp platforms that facilitate varied sectarian viewpoints to debate and transform each other. The author emphasizes that these digital platforms function as venues where religious authority experiences both

democratic expansion together with theological fragmentation among the youth population (Iqbal, 2022). Algorithms on social media platforms can boost sectarian content, according to Dabbagh and Ahmad (2021), which subsequently strengthens pre-existing divisions between opposing factions.

Research into interfaith contacts with digital media exists in abundance, but studies about faith-based interactions within religious groups are sparse, particularly for Muslim youth operating in an environment of dispersed religious understanding. Researchers make a fundamental difference between interfaith and intra-faith discourse since intra-faith interpretive disagreements exist within religious traditions with deep emotional and doctrinal dynamics (Lewis 2020). The online religious behavior of Muslims needs evaluation through the classical Islamic jurisprudential concept of *adab al-ikhtilaf* (etiquette of disagreement). The historical Islamic approach toward opinion diversity through structured ethical norms has drawn attention from Al-Faruqi (1982) alongside Kamali (2008) because modern digital environments challenge these customs.

Research attempts to uncover new approaches to reinterpreting classical concepts through Internet platforms. In new media environments, religious identity transforms into a public contest while performing publicly through the concept of "objectification of Muslim consciousness," according to Eickelman and Anderson (2003). According to El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009), young people in digital spaces develop innovative expressions of piety as a result of re-envisioning Islamic values into fragmented forms. Digital practices in Peshawar are used as a communication medium that both conflicts with and sustains mainstream social borders in a city marked by diverse ethnic communities and religious conservatism (Khan and Rehman 2019).

This study enhances current research by discussing the role of social media in showing existing religious divisions while enabling alternative faith connections through an Islamic epistemology and digital media framework. According to Asad's (2003) discursive tradition framework, the study presents how Muslims maintain and damage Islamic ethical standards during digital public exchange. The research supports Bunt's (2018) findings about "Muslims" through showing how online religiosity presents diverse expressions that stem from local populations and cultural histories, and generational preferences.

4. Theoretical Framework

In order to critically analyze the influence of social media on intra-faith relations among Muslim youth in Peshawar, this research takes a framework that is grounded in Islamic ethical and theological discourse, as well as digital religion studies. Instead of viewing intra-faith interactions from only socio-political or technological perspectives, this framework prioritizes the normative religious principles that guide Muslim behavior in issues of disagreement, pluralism, and communal solidarity.

One of the key ideas underlying this research is *adab al-ikhtilāf*, or the "etiquette of disagreement." Intellectual humility, respect for others, and courtesy in responding to differences in doctrine within the *ummah* are what classical Islamic thinkers like *Al-Shāfi'ī* and *Al-Ghazālī* emphasized (Sardar 2008; Kamali 2010). *Adab al-ikhtilāf* is not about erasing differences but about governing differences through ethical encounter. In the online world, this maxim acts as a check to the likes of sectarian trolling, *takfīr* (excommunication), and online shaming, which oftentimes appear in young discourse spaces such as Facebook and TikTok.

Supporting this is the concept of *ijtihad*, the exercise of autonomous judgment in applying Islamic law and ethics. Although once exclusively practiced by trained experts (*mujtahidūn*), the social

media diffusion of religious education has caused an unofficial and contested revival of lay *ijtihad*, especially among young people who consume varied theological matter online (Bunt 2018; Mandaville 2007). This challenges issues of epistemic authority and the blurring boundaries of orthodoxy in the digital world.

The wider idea of *ummah*, the global Muslim community of believers, also forms the foundation for this research. The Qur'anic idea of a unified yet diverse Muslim world (Qur'an 49:13) provides a religious foundation for inter-sect interactions and mutual appreciation. Yet in reality, the concept of the *ummah* is frequently stretched by doctrinal gatekeeping, sectarian exclusivism, and identity fragmentation, tensions which are visibly intensified in virtual environments where young people both consume and create religious content (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Howard 2011).

Collectively, these Islamic teachings constitute a normative discourse from which intra-faith uses of social media can be explained, not only as a technologically mediated reality, but also as a matter of theological and moral bargaining. By applying Islamic epistemologies to critical accounts of digital mediation, the research advances towards more sophisticated analyses of how religiosity is remade, problematized, and sometimes recreated within algorithmic realms.

This approach also draws on the emergent discipline of Digital Islam, which explores how Islamic ethics, beliefs, and authority intersect in digital space. Researchers like Campbell (2012) and Cheong et al. (2012) have underlined how digital media mediate religious expression, while Bunt (2018) attends specifically to how Islamic discourses are reconceived by digital publics. In this context, the current research places Islamic ethical traditions not as fixed but as dynamically reinterpreted through digital practice, particularly among youth attempting to form religious identities in the face of competing sectarian narratives.

4.1. Social Media as a Mirror of Religious Identity

Online spaces have come to act as mirrors wherein young Muslims reflect and enact religious identity. In the case of young people in Peshawar, social media sites are not just modes of communication; they also function as symbolic spaces wherein beliefs, affiliations, and religious dispositions are constantly expressed, challenged, and reconfirmed. These sites provide visibility to religio-cultural values while at the same time consolidating group boundaries and communal aesthetic sensibilities.

Social media's mirroring effect can be seen in the manner in which young people appropriate religious content, visual symbols, language use, and digital rituals. For instance, profile bios with Qur'anic quotes, sect-specific academics, or religious emojis are markers of identity that position individuals within particular intra-faith imaginaries. TikTok clips re-reciting religious sermons, WhatsApp status quotes of famous scholars, or Instagram stories of religious gatherings all illustrate how teenage users build online identities that are closely linked to offline religious commitments (Bunt 2018; Campbell 2013).

Here, religious identity is simultaneously a private conviction and a public performance, formed by algorithmic visibility and audience feedback. Youths choose, edit, and broadcast content which appeals to their sectarian or theological orientation, be it Sunni (Barelvi or Deobandi), Shia, or *Ahl-e-Hadith*, sometimes copying existing religious discourses while refracting them through individual tastes or social ambitions. As Sardar (2008) points out, such discourses are not ideologically innocent; they are connected to deeper conflicts over religious authority, authenticity, and belonging.

In addition, the deployment of digital media as a space for reflection promotes intra-group

cohesion while, on occasion, reaffirming sectarian divisions. Younger users tend to find solace in echo chambers where their convictions are reinforced by others who share the same opinions. This shared affirmation reinforces a sense of collective religious identity and nurtures a digital *ummah*, even though that *ummah* is contained within strict sectarian boundaries (Howard 2011; Mandaville 2007).

Significantly, these constructions of identity are not passive representations but active performances shaped by peer validation, online aesthetics, and socio-religious expectations. As young people produce content, for example, sharing Friday *khutbah* summaries, *du'ā'* readings, or theological musings, they present themselves as religiously literate performers in a wider digital environment. These social media practices demonstrate how social media sites reflect not just current religious identities but also construct them through repeated feedback loops and symbolic validation.

But this imitation is not simple. The combination of Islamic values with international digital norms produces a hybridized version of religious practice that is simultaneously traditional and modern. While some young people seek to maintain orthodoxy, others negotiate on social media the meaning of being a "practicing" Muslim in the contemporary era, passing religious identity through transnational tastes, i.e., influencer culture or social activism (Cheong et al. 2012; Eickelman and Anderson 2003).

Therefore, social media is both a mirror and a medium: a reflective surface for inherited identities and a shaping force for new ones. Grasping this dual nature is important for understanding how digital spaces are affecting intra-faith dynamics among Muslim youth in urban centers such as Peshawar.

4.2. Social Media as a Mediator in Intra-Faith Dynamics

In the modern urban environments of Peshawar, social media websites are not just passive stores of religious information; they are also mediators of intra-faith discussion that influence how religious diversity within Islam is approached, challenged, and even reconciled by young people. Online platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp, increasingly function as sites where interpretive arguments concerning *fiqh* (Islamic law), ritual practice, and religious authority play out in real-time for broad and diverse audiences.

This mediation is through organized dialogues, casual remarks, and popular religious content that allow youth to engage with others beyond their sectarian traditions. On the one hand, such spaces offer a scope for cross-sectarian learning, in which *Deobandi*, *Barelvi*, *Shia*, and *Ahl-e-Hadith* opinions can be set against one another or harmonized in an arena for open-ended dialogue. Scriptural reasoning, theological critique, or lived experience are common in online forums and video commentaries and provide users with resources to grasp intra-faith pluralism in the larger Islamic tradition (Eickelman and Anderson 2003; Campbell 2012).

Most of the users are positive about the positive role of social media as a force for intra-faith tolerance and civic values, especially when contextualized within Islamic values like *adab al-ikhtilāf* (ethics of disagreement) and *shūrā* (consultation). These norms of ethical conduct, derived from classical Islamic moral philosophy, provide how online debates can be engaged in with respect for each other even in theological disagreement (El Fadl 2001; Bunt 2018). Sect-harmonizing youth-led sites and podcasts have become popular, employing scriptural interpretation and online storytelling to support common values such as justice (*'adl*), mercy (*rahma*), and societal harmony (*ummah*).

But the mediating function of social media is both ambivalent and conditional. Engagement-promoting algorithms can inadvertently reinforce polarizing content, especially if religious arguments become performative or polemical. Cases of sectarian trolling, the sharing of decontextualized hadith, or misrepresentations of theological stances can solidify identities and incite conflict, most notably in echo chambers where oppositional views are caricatured or muted (Howard 2011; Cheong et al. 2012). Here, the dialogical potential of social media is devalued by digital aggression, anonymity, and theological absolutism.

Furthermore, the lack of institutional gatekeepers, like well-known scholars or institutions, on most platforms makes it possible for both constructive diversity and unverified interpretations to exist side by side. As much as such democratization of knowledge can be liberating, it also invites epistemological fragmentation, particularly for young people who have no foundational education in Islamic sciences. Authority of content tends to be decided by popularity, production quality, or social influence instead of theological rigor or authenticity (Mandaville 2007; Sardar 2008).

Overall, social media is an active mediator in intra-faith relations, able to create dialogue as well as division. Its influence depends not just on the material posted but on the ethical norms, digital literacies, and theological intentions of users. For Muslim youth in Peshawar, it means balancing inherited religious subjectivities with digital pluralism, a challenge that mirrors larger changes in the way that Islam is lived, debated, and negotiated in the digital world.

4.3. Influence on Religious Tolerance and Interfaith Harmony

In the contemporary age of the Internet, social networking sites not only act as reflective surfaces for private religious identity but also as sites of bridge-making towards interfaith understanding. Developing research indicates that educated young people, particularly those with digital and critical literacies, are becoming more actively involved in the use of such spaces to build on constructive conversation transcending sectarian as well as interfaith lines. This marks an extension of how religion gets mediated, consumed, and debated within technologically linked societies.

Empirical research in different sociocultural settings proves that social media use is positively linked with increased religious tolerance, especially when users engage with plural religious content in non-confrontational settings (Campbell and Tsuria 2021; Cheong et al. 2012). For Peshawar youth, where intra-faith diversity meets minority religious presences, social media provides unparalleled exposure to alternative worldviews. They are exposed to pluralistic understandings of Islam and comparative religious ethics through religious podcasts, interfaith panels, user-generated stories, and academic livestreams.

These platforms also have a pedagogical role. *Maqāṣid al-sharī'a* (objectives of Islamic law), *adab al-ikhtilāf* (etiquette of disagreement), and *ta'āruf* (mutual acquaintance) pages and influencers often highlight shared values like peace, justice, and dignity. This Islamic ethical culture strengthens civic models of coexistence, turning virtual spaces into potential fields of interfaith harmony instead of conflict (El Fadl 2001; Bunt 2018).

Notably, the extent of digital literacy has a significant impact on the quality of interfaith dialogue. Educated consumers are better able to authenticate sources, recognize misinformation, and communicate respectfully, thus resisting sectarian or xenophobic disinformation. Further, university students and young professionals tend to act as micro-mediators among their social groups, forwarding tolerant interpretations, opposing hate speech, and circulating inclusive content (Howard 2011; Mandaville 2007).

But the digital space remains double-edged. The same platforms that enable interfaith understanding can also be employed to promote sectarianism, disinformation, and religiously coded hate speech, particularly when exploited by political or ideological actors. This emphasizes the importance of critical digital literacy education, particularly based on Islamic ethical values that encourage *ihsān* (excellence), *hikmah* (wisdom), and *ṣabr* (patience) in speech and engagement.

Overall, social media furthers interfaith unity among young people by widening access to multicultural viewpoints, ethical discussion, and empowerment of young people to construct inclusive narratives. However, its potential for good relies on wider social, educational, and theological infrastructures that underwrite digital ethics and civic life in a Muslim context.

4.4. Impact on Religious Practices and Values

With the age of digital connectivity, social media are redefining how youth engage with religious culture and values, both as potential opportunities for a more profound engagement with the sacred and as difficulties presented by encounters with diverse viewpoints. Youth throughout Peshawar, Pakistan, as young people everywhere, are coming increasingly to rely upon social media to orient themselves around religion, seeking religious content that most resonates with their viewpoint while being simultaneously exposed to diverse alternatives challenging established conceptions.

On the one hand, online platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook present youth with avenues of reinforcing their religion. Through constant exposure to Islamic teachings, online religious debates, and inspirational content, the majority of the youth report that their religious identity is strengthened. Scholar sermons, recitations of the *Qur'ān*, and internet supplications ensure ritual continuity and motivate youths to perform daily religious activities like prayer, fasting, and remembering Allah (Bunt 2018). Virtual platforms such as forums and religious blogs also provide young Muslims with opportunities to interact with like-minded people, further establishing their belonging among their religious communities (Campbell and Tsuria 2021).

But exposure to a variety of religious content on the internet can also result in confusion and rethinking of religious beliefs. Decentralization of religious authority through social media implies that youth are exposed not just to mainstream interpretations of Islam but also to alternative perspectives that are perhaps less orthodox. For example, gender role content, religious practice content, and even theological stance content may be contradictory, creating ambivalence or uncertainty on the part of youth about their practices. The availability of radical or unverified content may amplify such confusion, even eroding the firmness of one's faith (Cheong et al. 2012; El Fadl 2001).

Additionally, the algorithmic nature of social media implies that young people are frequently presented with content that supports prevailing beliefs, which can restrict possibilities for positive interaction with alternative ideas. Algorithms shape religious content to be consistent with users' past experiences, and in doing so, may create echo chambers that limit exposure to more complex or alternative interpretations (Roy 2004). This feature of social media sites may unwittingly promote sectarianism or a more limited interpretation of Islamic practices.

However, the proactive participation of youth in managing their religious online spaces speaks to their agency in navigating digital religious spaces. Youth choose to engage with online content that reinforces their spiritual development and ignore content that can lead to confusion or conflict. This selective strategy allows them to balance traditional faith with modern-day digital influences, and hybrid religious identities are formed by combining traditional practices with new

interpretations (Mandaville 2007; Lövheim and Campbell 2020).

In summary, social media has a multi-faceted role in constructing religious values and practices. To some young people, it is a means of spiritual enrichment and strengthening their bond with Islam, whereas to others, it raises questions and undermines deeply held religious beliefs. The complexity of online engagement highlights the importance of cautious and critical movement through these spaces, especially for young Muslims in environments such as Peshawar, where sectarian divisions and conventional religious practices are more entrenched (Bunt 2018).

4.5. Role of Education and Digital Literacy

The point of intersection between education and digital literacy is particularly important in influencing how young people interact with religious content on social media sites. Research indicates that increased education and digital literacy levels are positively related to critical analysis of religious information and constructive interaction with religious communities online. Well-educated youth are generally better equipped to sort through the large volumes of religious information on the internet, separating sound sources from disinformation or extremist ideologies.

Among the most important aspects of digital literacy is the ability to question and analyze content and thus counter misrepresentations of religious teachings, from extremist sources or other religions. For example such studies show that those with higher levels of education are more able to recognize biases and manipulative strategy behind the content online, especially in religious content (Campbell and Tsuria 2021). These people are more inclined to critically analyze religious content and decide on its suitability to their own beliefs and to other people's views of what Islamic thinking is supposed to be (Mandaville 2007). Digital literacy or the ability to use and responsibly use digital tools and platforms, is equally key in countering extremist ideologies. They can better spot and reject violent, hateful or radical content because these youths know the digital area well. They are more prone to interact and converse with different opinions which means more interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance. On the other hand, people who are less digitally literate may be more prone to manipulative or extremist propaganda because they may not have the skills to critically evaluate the information they encounter online (Bunt 2018; Cheong et al. 2012). The education role includes not only formal academic instruction, but also informal learning spaces where young people develop digital competences (20: media literacy workshops, religious workshops, peer facilitated discussions). Schools should be able to supply the students with the tools to learn responsible practice with respect to ethical behavior online and promote a sound and balanced relationship between the digital and the religious. Such an integrated approach in education makes young people more capable of participating in a positive religious debate and protecting them from getting affected by extremist ideologies (Roy 2004).

Digital literacy also makes online religious spaces inclusive, because educated young people are more likely to engage with other religious communities. They can play a large role in fostering a culture of tolerance and respect by virtue of their capacity to critically engage in religious conversations, be it within Islam or the wider field of cross faith debate. For this reason, education and digital literacy have important roles to play in helping young people engage with religious content online in ways that promote spiritual development and social cohesion (Lövheim and Campbell 2020).

Conclusion

This exploration has done an in depth study of the meaning and role played by social media in intra faith relations among youth in Peshawar, Pakistan in Islamic context. These media are having a large effect on how young people experience their religion, the formation of religious practices and the interaction with different interpretations of Islam by looking at the way in which social media functions as a mirror and mediator of religious identity. Young people can use social media to share their own beliefs, as well as interact with other people who share similar beliefs, but there is also exposure to a variety of religious content which could either confirm or refute what they already believe. Several key observations are noted in the research: social media has the reflective quality which permits the youth to converse and whitewash their religious identity which resultantly results in more religious solidarity.

However, the mediatory role of social media, where deliberation, debate, and dialogue about religious faith are conducted, means that it will likely induce tolerance and mutual understanding or nurture sectarianism and polarized politics based on the quality of dialogue. In addition, the study emphasizes that education and digital literacy are both essential in helping young people better comprehend these complex digital spaces so that they can be equipped with the means to critically analyze religious content and engage in constructive, respectful online discourse. Also, the impact on religious practice is a contradiction, while some young adults experience a strengthening of their faith through online engagement, others may be left disoriented or distanced from traditional practice because they have seen alternative explanations. This means that there has to be an even approach by which religious content is viewed and understood online.

5. Implications for Future Research and Practice

This research's outcomes suggest several directions for future research. Firstly, longitudinal research is needed to examine the path of online religious activity over time and its long-term impact on faith development. Researchers should explore further how young people from diverse socio-cultural and sectarian contexts utilize online religious content and whether this activity generates intra-faith unity or enhances fragmentation. Comparative studies in different regions, particularly in the broader South Asian region, may further illuminate the impact of online platforms on religious identity among young people in multi-cultural contexts.

In practical terms, it can be seen that educational interventions have to be given in imparting youth with digital literacy skills which allow them to critically consume religious content online. Islamic schools have to incorporate media literacy programs within their curriculum with an emphasis on the moral usage of social media and a more inclusive and tolerant perspective of Islam. Additionally, social media platforms themselves can assist in content moderation to limit the spread of extremist ideologies and enable constructive dialogue. In this regard, policymakers and online media companies must collaborate to create digital spaces that enable interfaith and intra-faith dialogue in a manner that upholds values of peace, tolerance, and respect for each other.

Ultimately, the intersection of Islamic studies, education, and digital literacy leads to both challenges and possibilities for shaping young people's religious identities and practices in a digital age. We can improve the public good of religion and lessen the pathologies of cyber religious material by fostering an environment that allows youth to utilise social media platforms responsibly.

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