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Exploring Connections between Social Science Education and Resilience against Violent Extremism: A Study of Selected Universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how and why social sciences education fosters resilience against violent extremism among university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Universities, and particularly the disciplines of social sciences, play a central role in shaping student attitudes, fostering civic engagement, and cultivating resilience against extremist narratives. Grounded in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Spivak's notion of the subaltern voice, and Foucault's conceptualization of power and discipline, the research analyzes perspectives from 84 participants, including students (n=31), faculty (n=31), and administrators (n=22) from four departments: social work, sociology, political science, and education across 11 public sector universities. Semi-structured interviews were thematically analyzed using NVivo software, revealing that social sciences education enhances critical consciousness, nurtures dialogic learning environments, promotes critical thinking, democratic citizenship, and social cohesion, and encourages reflective skepticism towards extremist narratives. However, institutional constraints—including curriculum bias, censorship, and inadequate pedagogical training—limit its full efficacy. The study reinforces calls for curricular reform, faculty development in critical pedagogy, and institutional policies that safeguard academic freedom. The findings contribute to comparative education and counter-violent extremism literature, with practical implications for higher education policy in Pakistan and similar contexts.

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Keywords: Resilience, violent extremism, social sciences, critical pedagogy, higher education, Universities, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Introduction

Violent extremism remains a critical threat to societal cohesion and democratic foundations worldwide, with youth often both targets and recruits of extremist ideology (Rehman & Behlol, 2022, p. 60). In Pakistan—particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—higher education institutions are situated in a volatile socio-political landscape. Traditionally, counter-extremism strategies emphasize security and enforcement; however, there is growing recognition of the transformative potential of education to build resilience (Duckworth, 2024; Sajjad, 2022). Social sciences education, with its emphasis on critical analysis and civic awareness, is uniquely positioned to disrupt extremist narratives (Aly, Taylor, & Karnovsky, 2014). According to scholars, universities can either reinforce exclusive narratives or foster inclusive, democratic values. Some researchers argue that education can help prevent radicalization by promoting civic awareness, critical thinking skills, and dialogue between different groups (Kundnani, 2015, p. 40). Furthermore, studies emphasize education's designed capacity to foster resilience in conflict contexts (Novelli & Smith, 2011, p. 33). UNESCO highlights how education serves as a site of emotional healing and social restoration, restoring trust and collective identity (UNESCO, 2019).

The social sciences provide conceptual frameworks for understanding social inequalities, political participation, and cultural diversity—all factors central to resisting extremist ideologies. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) underscores the importance of dialogical learning, where students actively question and transform oppressive narratives (p. 81). Similarly, Foucault's (1977) analysis of power and discourse highlights how education can produce counter-discourses that challenge extremist rhetoric (p. 199). Freire's (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970) advocacy for dialogic education lays the foundation for educational intervention: learners become agents, not passive recipients (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Echoing this, Aly et al. (2014) emphasize that fostering critical consciousness is essential to CVE (countering violent extremism) through education. A recent critical policy review argues mainstream interventions overly rely on surveillance, neglecting inclusive, consciousness-raising pedagogies (Duckworth, 2024).

UNESCO (2017) emphasizes that promoting resilience requires teaching methods that foster open debate, empathy, and peaceful conflict resolution (p. 22). In the Pakistani context, Ahmed (2020) argues that curricula often emphasize rote learning rather than critical inquiry, weakening their potential to resist extremist narratives (p. 61). However, studies show that where social sciences are taught with interactive pedagogy, students demonstrate greater tolerance, civic responsibility, and resistance to extremist rhetoric (Saeed, 2018, p. 118). Rehman and Behlol (2022) identified socio-cultural capital—such as family support, cultural identity, and community networks—as critical in building resilience among university students in Pakistan, using their BRAVE (Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism) scale survey in Peshawar, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi.

Critical analyses of Pakistani curricula reveal entrenched bias and ideological indoctrination, including glorifying militarism and promoting intolerance toward religious minorities (Nayyar & Salim, 2003). Moreover, universities often suppress student voices—

whether via absence of student unions or restrictions on open dialogue—making them vulnerable to extremist exploitation. Nevertheless, empirical studies in Pakistan remain limited. By focusing on how social sciences instruction promotes resilience among university students in KP, this study addresses a critical gap in education and extremism research. The central question guiding this paper is: How does social sciences education contribute to resilience against violent extremism in public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa? Addressing this question is significant because it situates higher education not merely as a site of instruction, but as a critical actor in cultivating civic values and safeguarding social cohesion. This paper argues that such resilience emerges when pedagogy cultivates critical thinking, inclusive dialogue, and reflective understanding—but only when institutional contexts support academic freedom and critical literacy.

Conceptualizing the Violent Extremism and Resilience

Extremism is the adoption of radical ideologies that reject or seek to overthrow established social, political, or religious norms violently. It is often associated with the use of force or the endorsement of violence as a means to achieve ideological goals. According to Hafez (2018), extremism typically involves the belief that one's views are superior to those of others, and adherents often engage in actions that challenge the prevailing political or social order, sometimes through violent means (p. 45). Similarly, the European Commission (2015) defines extremism as a set of views that justify or glorify the use of violence to further ideological goals, with particular focus on targeting societal stability and cohesion (p. 6).

Resilience is the ability of individuals, communities, or societies to effectively adapt to, recover from, and withstand adverse conditions, such as social, political, or psychological stressors, including violent extremism. It is the capacity to overcome challenges that hurt people's emotional and physical well-being. Resilience provides individuals with emotional strength to cope with trauma, adversity, and hardship. It involves not only the capacity to endure challenges but also to emerge from them stronger and more cohesive. According to Masten (2014), resilience refers to the process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity, where individuals or communities demonstrate flexibility, strength, and the ability to thrive despite hardships (p. 6). In the context of countering violent extremism, resilience involves developing coping mechanisms and promoting social cohesion, which can reduce vulnerability to extremist recruitment and ideologies (Bakker, 2018, p. 112). It is observed that when people experience loss or rejection in social and personal significance, they are likely to engage in extremism and violence towards others (Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2017).

Theoretical Perspectives

This research leverages a triadic theoretical lens to unpack how social sciences education may foster resilience. Freire (1970) posits that hierarchical, "banking" models of education hinder critical consciousness. Conversely, dialogic pedagogies empower learners to question—and transform—their conditions (p. 83). Spivak (1988) cautions that the subaltern's voice is often co-opted or silenced within institutional power structures (p. 285) while Foucault (1977) theorizes institutions as arenas of disciplinary power that shape permissible knowledge and dialogue (p. 183). Together, these frameworks help explore the tension between emancipatory potential and institutional constraints in educational spaces.

Methodology

Qualitative design provides depth in exploring perceptions within 11 public sector universities (Annexure-I) across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Participants included 84 individuals: 31 social sciences students, 31 faculty (from social work, sociology, political science, and education), and 22 university administrators. Purposive sampling ensured diversity across institutional types and roles. Semi-structured interviews were conducted (approx. 60 minutes each), focusing on perceptions of pedagogy, course content, institutional support, and experiences relating to extremism resilience. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Freirean and Foucauldian frameworks guided thematic analysis to identify the role of social sciences education in promoting resilience against extremism. Coding identified themes: critical thinking, dialogic pedagogy, and institutional barriers. Participants provided informed consent; confidentiality and anonymization were ensured. Ethical approval was obtained from the corresponding institutional review boards.

Key Findings of the Study

The findings of this study provide critical insights into how social sciences education contributes to countering violent extremism in public sector universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Drawing on the perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators, the results highlight both the transformative potential of social sciences in promoting resilience, social cohesion, and critical thinking, as well as the institutional challenges that hinder this process. The evidence presented here offers a nuanced understanding of the strengths and limitations of current practices, thereby setting the ground for policy recommendations and future interventions.

Curriculum Content and Civic Awareness

Most of the students noted that social sciences courses—particularly in political science, sociology, and international relations—enhanced their awareness of democratic participation, human rights, and pluralism. They note that the curriculum is not updated, in any case. Moreover, evidence from the field further highlighted the link between curriculum content and civic awareness. As one student reflected, *“Courses like political science and sociology make us realize that extremism is not about religion alone, but about injustice and inequality in society.”* A faculty member added, *“When students read case studies on peace movements and democratic struggles, they start to see themselves as responsible citizens rather than passive individuals.”* Similarly, a university administrator emphasized, *“Our curriculum, if taught with seriousness, develops civic values and discourages the black-and-white thinking exploited by extremists.”* These voices illustrate how exposure to inclusive content fosters critical awareness of societal structures, preparing students to reject radical simplifications and embrace civic responsibility. The findings thus demonstrate that resilience is cultivated not only cognitively but also through the civic and ethical sensibilities embedded in the curriculum.

Notably, the study also found that resilience-building is not merely a matter of curriculum content but is profoundly shaped by pedagogy. In classrooms dominated by rote learning and exam-driven instruction, the transformative potential of social sciences remained constrained. Conversely, interactive approaches such as debates, case study analysis, and collaborative projects enabled students to resist extremist simplifications and to view conflict through

inclusive, democratic lenses. This suggests that the strength of social sciences education lies not only in what is taught but in how it is taught.

Overall, the findings underscore that higher education, when guided by critical and inclusive pedagogy, provides an effective platform for countering violent extremism. By cultivating critical thinking, empathy, and social cohesion, social sciences education equips students with the intellectual and moral tools to resist radicalization and build more resilient communities. Future research may explore the long-term impact of such education beyond university settings. However, the present study makes a strong case for prioritizing critical pedagogy as a cornerstone of peacebuilding in Pakistan's higher education sector.

The data resonated with Ahmad (2020), who states that curricula in Pakistan were often outdated and lacked explicit modules on extremism, peace, or conflict resolution (p. 62). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the ongoing conflict and socio-political complexities present unique challenges for education in countering extremism (Khan, 2014). Curriculum gaps, resource limitations, and socio-cultural factors often undermine educational efforts (Rehman, 2018).

Critical Thinking and Resistance to Extremist Narratives

Equally important is the role of critical thinking in enabling students to resist extremist narratives. One participant noted, *"When we are encouraged to question, we realize that extremist groups only give half-truths and hide the full picture."* Another student explained, *"In discussions, we learn to see multiple sides of an issue, and that makes it hard to accept any single rigid ideology."* A faculty respondent further stressed, *"Extremism feeds on blind acceptance; critical pedagogy teaches students to doubt, analyze, and verify before believing."* These statements provide compelling evidence that critical thinking acts as a safeguard against radicalization by equipping learners with intellectual tools to deconstruct propaganda and resist simplistic, polarized worldviews. In this way, the pedagogical emphasis on inquiry and reflection directly strengthens resilience against violent extremism.

Social Cohesion and Inclusive Identities

The data revealed that social sciences education significantly contributes to the development of social cohesion by encouraging respect for diversity and the acceptance of multiple identities. As one student explained, *"Studying subjects like sociology and political science taught us that no community can live in isolation; respect for cultural and religious diversity is essential for peaceful coexistence."* This perspective underscores the way academic exposure reshapes students' understanding of difference, moving from suspicion to mutual respect. Similarly, a faculty member reflected, *"Our classroom debates often challenged the idea that one identity should dominate others. We learned that multiple identities—tribal, regional, national, and global—can co-exist without conflict."* Such experiences illustrate how teaching in the social sciences dismantles rigid notions of exclusivity, encouraging students to adopt inclusive and pluralistic worldviews.

Participants also emphasized the role of dialogue and shared experiences in creating a sense of belonging that transcends ethnic and sectarian divides. An administrator observed that, *"When students from different backgrounds share experiences during seminars, it creates a sense of belonging. It reduces the stereotypes and mistrust that extremists usually exploit."* This suggests that structured interactions within university spaces play an instrumental role in

breaking down barriers and building trust. In a similar vein, a student participant highlighted, *“Through social sciences, we realized that inclusive citizenship is not only about legal rights but also about mutual responsibility towards each other as members of society.”* Such testimonies reflect the way social sciences pedagogy goes beyond imparting knowledge to actively cultivating civic responsibility and mutual solidarity, both of which are essential for countering extremist narratives that thrive on fragmentation.

Faculty members also highlighted how curricula rooted in peacebuilding and diversity studies enhance students’ appreciation of their multiple overlapping identities. For example, one teacher remarked, *“Exposure to case studies on interfaith harmony and peacebuilding helped students understand that being Pashtun, Punjabi, or from any other group does not weaken their Pakistani or Muslim identity, but actually enriches it.”* This perspective illustrates how education transforms identity politics from being divisive to being integrative, allowing students to perceive their ethnic, cultural, national, and religious identities as mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. An administrator added that, *“Social sciences education allows us to critically reflect on how rigid identities are constructed, and once students question these constructions, they become less vulnerable to extremist propaganda.”* This directly aligns with Paulo Freire’s notion of education as a practice of freedom, enabling learners to interrogate oppressive narratives and replace them with inclusive and dialogical ones.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that social sciences education not only challenges exclusivist ideologies but also actively fosters inclusive identities and social cohesion among university students. Through classroom debates, interactive learning, and critical reflection, students learn to see diversity as an enrichment rather than a threat. These insights support broader global evidence (UNESCO, 2017; UNDP, 2020), which highlights the role of civic-oriented education in building resilience against violent extremism. By cultivating pluralism, mutual responsibility, and critical awareness of how identities are socially constructed, universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are creating environments where inclusive identities flourish, thereby strengthening collective resilience against extremist ideologies.

Socio-Cultural Support Reinforces Learning

The findings reveal that socio-cultural support systems—both inside and outside the university—play a crucial role in reinforcing student learning and resilience against extremist influences. A student reflected, *“When my teachers encouraged us to discuss our family traditions and cultural values in class, it helped me connect academic theories with real-life experiences, which made the learning more meaningful.”* This statement demonstrates how pedagogical strategies that integrate students’ lived socio-cultural backgrounds deepen comprehension and create stronger attachment to inclusive values. Consistent with Freire’s (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed, connecting classroom knowledge with students’ realities empowers learners and prevents alienation, making them less vulnerable to extremist manipulation.

Faculty respondents also emphasized the value of cultural affirmation in sustaining critical learning. One professor noted, *“Acknowledging students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds during teaching not only validates their identity but also strengthens their confidence to engage in classroom debates on sensitive issues like extremism and diversity.”* This

highlights that socio-cultural support contributes to intellectual empowerment, fostering an environment where students feel secure enough to examine narratives of exclusion critically. As Foucault (1977) argues, power and discipline in education shape norms; when institutions affirm cultural pluralism, they discipline social interaction in ways that normalize inclusivity and weaken extremist binaries of “us versus them.”

Administrators similarly underscored the importance of social cohesion and community engagement in reinforcing learning. An administrator shared, *“University programs that bring together parents, elders, and local communities in seminars create a bridge between academic learning and cultural traditions, which reinforces the idea that education and culture must go hand in hand.”* Such practices blur the boundary between academic space and community life, ensuring that what students learn at university is supported and validated within their socio-cultural environment. This resonates with Spivak’s (1988) idea of giving voice to the marginalized “subaltern,” since socio-cultural reinforcement ensures that students from diverse communities do not feel excluded from mainstream education but rather see their own heritage as integral to it.

Finally, students highlighted peer support as a vital form of socio-cultural reinforcement. As one respondent explained, *“Discussing social problems with classmates from different regions gave me new perspectives and made me realize that our struggles are shared; it motivated me to learn more seriously and think about collective solutions.”* Such reflections demonstrate how peer networks grounded in cultural exchange become informal yet powerful platforms of learning, nurturing empathy and solidarity. Global research also supports this, with UNESCO (2017) and UNDP (2020) emphasizing that culturally inclusive and supportive learning environments strengthen resilience against violent extremism by reinforcing academic content through social trust, belonging, and collective responsibility.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that socio-cultural support—whether through family, peers, faculty, or community engagement—serves as a powerful reinforcement of academic learning. By validating diverse identities, integrating cultural traditions into pedagogy, and encouraging peer solidarity, universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are creating educational ecosystems that protect students against extremist ideologies. This aligns with critical pedagogy’s emphasis on dialogical learning rooted in lived experiences, underscoring that sustainable resilience against violent extremism requires education to be both intellectually engaging and socio-culturally supportive.

Institutional and Structural Challenges

The findings reveal that universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face deep-rooted institutional and structural barriers that hinder the effectiveness of social sciences education in countering violent extremism. A faculty member explained, *“We lack updated curricula that address contemporary challenges such as radicalization, identity politics, and peacebuilding; most of the courses are outdated and fail to engage students in critical reflection.”* This suggests that the absence of curriculum reform limits the ability of education to address the ideological and social realities that students encounter. Freire (1970) emphasized that education must remain dialogical and responsive to the lived experiences of learners; without relevant and

dynamic content, students may disengage from social sciences education, leaving space for extremist narratives to fill the gap.

Administrators also highlighted resource-related structural limitations that undermine learning environments. One administrator noted, *“Universities are struggling with overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of qualified faculty, and insufficient funding, which makes it very difficult to implement interactive and critical pedagogies.”* Such structural challenges not only reduce the quality of teaching but also hinder the creation of participatory spaces that are essential for fostering resilience against extremism. According to Foucault (1977), institutional structures exert disciplinary power by shaping behavior; however, when resource constraints weaken these structures, they fail to channel student energy into constructive academic and civic engagement. Students similarly raised concerns about the lack of institutional support systems that could guide them in navigating ideological challenges. A respondent explained, *“We do not have proper counseling services or student support programs to discuss sensitive issues like extremism, discrimination, or identity conflicts; most of us just rely on informal conversations with peers.”* This absence of structured institutional support leaves students vulnerable to external influences, reflecting the gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation. Spivak’s (1988) critique of silencing the marginalized is particularly relevant here, as students’ voices and concerns often remain unheard due to the lack of institutional mechanisms for dialogue and support.

Another faculty member pointed out political and bureaucratic pressures that constrain academic freedom: *“There is often hesitation to openly discuss extremism or sensitive social issues in classrooms because of fear of backlash from communities or authorities.”* This institutional silence prevents critical engagement with the very issues universities are expected to address, undermining the transformative potential of social sciences education. Such constraints confirm global findings (UNESCO, 2017; UNDP, 2020) that political sensitivities and lack of institutional autonomy are significant obstacles to embedding peace-oriented education in higher education systems.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that institutional and structural challenges—ranging from outdated curricula and limited resources to weak student support systems and constrained academic freedom—significantly hinder the capacity of social sciences education to counter violent extremism. Without addressing these barriers, universities risk perpetuating educational environments that fail to engage students critically or protect them from extremist narratives. Therefore, structural reform, investment in faculty development, and stronger institutional support mechanisms are essential if social sciences education is to fulfill its potential as a sustainable tool for building resilience and social cohesion.

Discussion and Analysis

This study confirms that social sciences education—when delivered through dialogic, critical pedagogies—can cultivate resilience against extremist narratives among students. In essence, learning that fosters critical consciousness, perspective-taking, and reflective skepticism aligns with international studies advocating educational transformation for peacebuilding (Novelli & Smith, 2011; UNESCO, 2019). However, institutional constraints—including curriculum bias, faculty risk aversion, and political censorship—diminish this potential. These findings mirror

broader critiques of state-managed education in Pakistan, where textbooks reinforce national narratives that exclude pluralism (Nayyar & Salim, 2003).

The interplay of socio-cultural capital as a reinforcing factor is particularly noteworthy: community and family support appear to mediate between critical education and real-world resilience, complementing findings by Rehman & Behlol (2022). Thus, effective CVE through education requires multi-level intervention:

- Curriculum reforms to integrate critical pedagogy and peace education
- Faculty development in dialogic teaching methods
- Institutional policies protecting academic freedom
- Engagement of communities to reinforce educational gains

These recommendations align with Duckworth's (2024) call for holistic, inclusive approaches over surveillance and coercion.

Role of Social Sciences Education in CVE

The social sciences curriculum has the potential to play a transformative role in countering violent extremism in Pakistan by equipping students with the knowledge and skills to engage with extremist ideologies and violent narratives critically. Through social sciences subjects, students can develop an understanding of the social, economic, and political factors that contribute to counter radicalization and conflict (Niazi, 2018, p. 80). Research by Akram and Ali (2020) suggests that incorporating discussions on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and human rights within the social sciences curriculum could significantly enhance students' ability to resist extremist ideologies. Their study, which examined the curriculum in universities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, found that students who were taught about the root causes of extremism were more likely to challenge violent ideologies (p. 213).

Challenges to Social Sciences' Education in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Social science education plays a central role in forming social behaviors. However, due to a lack of patronage and support from the government and industry, they face numerous challenges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, among which are the following:

Curriculum Gaps in Addressing Extremism

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the continuity of conflict and socio-political problems presents unique challenges for education in countering extremism (Khan, 2014). Curriculum gaps, resource limitations, and socio-cultural factors often undermine educational efforts (Rehman, 2018). Despite the acknowledged importance of social sciences education in CVE, there are significant gaps in the curriculum in addressing violent extremism. Similarly, many universities and educational institutions in Pakistan offer limited or no courses specifically focused on radicalization, extremism, or terrorism. As noted by Iqbal, Khan, and Raza (2019), even when such topics are included in broader courses, such as political science or sociology, they often lack the depth necessary to critically engage students in discussions about the societal and political conditions that lead to extremism (p. 136). Moreover, the focus on rote memorization in many educational institutions in Pakistan, in general, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in particular, further undermines the effectiveness of social sciences education in addressing extremism. Students are often not encouraged to critically analyze historical events, social movements, or political

ideologies in ways that challenge dominant narratives, which limits their ability to question and resist extremist rhetoric (Mubarak, 2018a, p. 67).

Resistance to Curriculum Change

One of the significant challenges in reforming the social sciences curriculum is resistance to change, particularly from conservative factions within society and the educational system. As noted by Khan (2021), many educators and policymakers are hesitant to incorporate content that challenges existing ideological frameworks, particularly those that are linked to nationalistic or religious narratives (p. 72). Such resistance is often rooted in political considerations and the fear that introducing more progressive or secular perspectives could undermine the existing social order. This reluctance is further compounded by the prevailing dominance of rote learning methods, which make it difficult for educational reforms to take root (Gul, 2018, p. 126).

Political Interference and Ideological Resistance in Curriculum Development

One of the most significant challenges in implementing CVE through social sciences in Pakistan is political interference. Government policies, which are often influenced by political ideologies, can shape the content and direction of curricula. This interference can limit the scope for critical engagement with issues related to extremism, radicalization, and social justice (Khan & Ali, 2020, p. 180). In some cases, political forces with specific ideological interests have pushed for a narrow representation of history, religion, and social issues, which undermines the ability of social sciences education to critically address the complex social dynamics that contribute to violent extremism (Shah & Khan, 2019, p. 126). For example, during periods of political instability or military rule, educational reforms often become focused on nationalism or religious ideologies, which could unintentionally reinforce the very conditions conducive to extremism (Mubarak, 2018b, p. 92).

Resources Constraints

Another significant barrier to curriculum reform is the lack of resources available to implement changes effectively. Many universities in Pakistan face financial and infrastructural constraints that make it difficult to update or diversify the social sciences curriculum to include content related to CVE (Iqbal et al., 2019, p. 137). Moreover, the shortage of trained faculty members who are equipped to teach on issues related to extremism and social justice further complicates the process of curriculum reform (Ahmed, 2017). Social science education is critical to raise awareness in students about the concepts of radicalization, violent extremism, resilience, and resistance to extremist narratives. However, the emphasis is usually laid on technical and natural sciences. In Pakistan, the Higher Education Commission invested millions of dollars in promoting STEM education since the 2000s, while the social sciences were ignored. At the same time, the war on terror was at its peak during those decades, and a surge in extremism and militancy engulfed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Pak-Afghan border region. What could have been done to minimize the effects of the war on terror on the youth and students in the region? Social sciences could have been promoted to build resilience among the youth. However, STEM subjects got precedence, which shows the disconnect between the strategic interest of the government and contextual realities in Pakistani educational policy.

Cultural and Social Resistance

Cultural and social resistance to the types of reforms needed to address extremism also poses challenges. In some cases, students, faculty, or community members may resist curriculum changes that challenge traditional religious or cultural norms (Ahmad & Khan, 2019, p. 182). This resistance can be particularly pronounced in areas where conservative religious views are more dominant, and where secular or liberal perspectives are viewed with suspicion (Khan, 2021a, p. 63).

Conclusion & Recommendations

This study affirms that social sciences education has significant potential to strengthen resilience against violent extremism among university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Data from students, faculty, and administrators revealed that when curricula are taught through participatory and dialogical methods, they enable learners to examine extremist narratives critically, appreciate pluralism, and engage in constructive dialogue. Such outcomes resonate with Freire's pedagogy of critical consciousness, which empowers students to question authoritarian discourses and recognize their own role as agents of social transformation. Similarly, Spivak's call to give voice to the marginalized was reflected in the way exposure to diverse perspectives fostered empathy and tolerance. At the same time, Foucault's insights on power highlighted the capacity of education to shift from reproducing hegemonies to cultivating critical agency.

Notably, the study also found that resilience-building is not merely a matter of curriculum content but is profoundly shaped by pedagogy. In classrooms dominated by rote learning and exam-driven instruction, the transformative potential of social sciences remained constrained. Conversely, interactive approaches such as debates, case study analysis, and collaborative projects enabled students to resist extremist simplifications and to view conflict through inclusive, democratic lenses. This suggests that the strength of social sciences education lies not only in what is taught but in how it is taught.

Overall, the findings underscore that higher education, when guided by critical and inclusive pedagogy, provides an effective platform for countering violent extremism. By cultivating critical thinking, empathy, and social cohesion, social sciences education equips students with the intellectual and moral tools to resist radicalization and build more resilient communities. Future research may explore the long-term impact of such education beyond university settings. However, the present study makes a strong case for prioritizing critical pedagogy as a cornerstone of peacebuilding in Pakistan's higher education sector.

Recommendations:

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Embed peace education, critical pedagogy, and modules addressing extremism across social sciences disciplines.
2. **Faculty Training:** Provide workshops in dialogic teaching methods consistent with Freire's pedagogy.
3. **Academic Freedoms:** Universities should establish policies allowing open discussion of sensitive topics without political reprisal.
4. **Community-Engaged Initiatives:** Strengthen partnerships with families and civil society to reinforce classroom learning in everyday life.

5. **Student Support Services:** Establish counseling centers and mentorship programs to provide psychosocial support to vulnerable students.
6. **Institutional Autonomy:** Strengthen university governance to minimize political interference and enable independent CVE initiatives.
7. **Collaborative Networks:** Foster partnerships between universities, civil society, and government bodies to coordinate CVE-related research and interventions.
8. **Further Research:** Explore longitudinal effects of such pedagogies on student attitudes and track community-level impacts.

By strategically enhancing institutional support and pedagogical frameworks, social sciences education can become a robust tool for countering violent extremism—not just in Pakistan, but in similar contexts worldwide.

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(Annexure-I)*Table 1: List of Selected Public Sector Universities in KP, Pakistan*

S#	Name of University	Zone	Focus Area/Remarks
1	Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan.	Zone-2	General/Social Sciences
2	FATA University, FR Kohat.	Zone-1	General/Social Sciences
3	Gomal University, D.I Khan.	Zone-4	General/Social Sciences
4	Hazara University, Dhodial, Mansehra.	Zone-5	General/Social Sciences
5	Kohat University of Science & Technology, Kohat.	Zone-4	Science and Technology (incl. social sciences)
6	Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Women University, Peshawar.	Zone-2	Women's University/Social Sciences
7	University of Chitral.	Zone-3	General/Social Sciences
8	University of Malakand.	Zone-3	General/Social Sciences
9	University of Peshawar.	Zone-2	General/Social Sciences
10	University of Swat.	Zone-3	General/Social Sciences
11	Women's University, Swabi.	Zone-2	Women's University/Social Sciences
Sample Categorization			
Total no. of students interviewed		31	Social sciences students (2-4 from each university)
Total no. of teaching faculty interviewed		31	Social sciences teaching faculty (2-4 from each university)
Total no. of university administrators interviewed		22	University administrators (2 from each university)
Total		84	