

Communication Strategies to Counter Violent Extremism in Pakistan

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose - Violent extremism has disrupted the social harmony of many countries all over the globe. Pakistan has been marked as an extremist state, becoming one of Pakistan's biggest challenges. This study aims to look at the strategic communication on countering violent extremism in Pakistan. Violent extremism is likely to increase in the environment marked by a culture of inadequate governance, democratic deficits, corruption, impunity against illegal acts by the nation, violation of human rights, and lack of security.

Study Design/Methodology/Approach - An exploratory research approach has been applied. For this purpose, data has been collected through literature review and electronic databases to determine the communication strategies that may counter violent extremism in Pakistan. This is a policy paper that outlines the rise in violent extremism worldwide and how these challenges can be rectified by providing solutions.

Findings- This paper highlights the antecedents of violent extremism in Pakistan including poor and inadequate governance, lack of socio-economic opportunities, violation of human rights, lack of justice, and discrimination. The communication strategies that have been used to address violent extremism include target messaging, persuasive and power strategy, use of social media, intergovernmental communication, and education. These strategies may be applied to control violent extremism in Pakistan.

Practical Implications- Counter-violent extremism strategies have been gaining attention from policymakers and practitioners to overcome the challenges for the past few years. This research has highlighted the ways to counter violent extremism that may help policymakers to develop effective strategies and policies in the local context of Pakistan.

Originality/Novelty- This paper has synthesized a model that will help policymakers use strategic communications to counter violent extremism. It emphasized that strategic communication can be a vital element integrated into politics, and action can be taken to handle violent extremism and radicalization.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, human rights, Violent extremism, intergovernmental communication

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the world has been experiencing increased cases of violent extremism impacting thousands of people's lives (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). Violent extremism has disrupted the social harmony of many countries all over the globe, from Europe to the US and the Middle East to South Asia. Many countries are developing holistic approaches to address the challenges faced due to violent extremism. However, to understand the mechanism of violent extremism and efficiently address its threats, it is critical to look at the front-line states such as Pakistan (Mustaqeem et al. (2020). Pakistan is the 36th largest country worldwide with a large population (Ahmed and Shahzad, 2021). It has been marked as an extremist state, becoming one of Pakistan's biggest challenges. In addressing the challenges, Pakistan has been unsuccessful in dealing with such challenges even after incorporating counterinsurgency. Terrorist organizations operating from linked borders in Pakistan are also increasing further challenges for the government (Baloch et al., 2023).

Pakistan has been facing violent extremism for many years, leading to radicalization linked to religious extremists (Farwell, 2012). Since independence, Pakistan has been facing diverse conflicts regarding religion, ethnicity, and sectarianism, increasing violence. Pakistan has been influenced by religious radicalization and violent extremism funded by external countries, which have worsened the situation (Naseer and Shaheen, 2023). However, in recent years, violent extremism has increased dramatically due to Pakistan's association with the US to help in the war against Afghanistan. Thus countering violent extremism has become a global issue nowadays. Mustaqeem et al. (2020) stated that Pakistan must have a balanced process between communications and security and strategies to combat violent extremism and radicalization. On the other hand, Smith et al. (2019) stated that the government should adopt strategic communication strategies to counter violent extremism. Such programs will impact people's minds through the different religious talks, lectures, and engagements at the end of the community (Monaci, 2020). However, the government did not prioritize such activities in the past, leading to a lower success rate. Along with Pakistan, other countries are using strategic communication to bring tangible change to their country (Braddock, 2020b). Haugstvedt (2019) stated that the history of the extremists is centuries old, but it emerged in the case of Pakistan and other Islamic states after the US global war to combat terrorism in 2001. It includes different religious groups such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban, and Daesh, which aim to use the youth as a target and achieve their objectives by exploiting Islam.

Civil society and government have taken different measures to limit, prevent, and address the antecedents of violent extremism. The CVE measures provide the balance between the kinetic (hard) or non-kinetic (soft) sides of counterterrorism which are considered essential for counter-extremism and counter-terrorism efforts over time. The main objective of CVE is to prevent extremist beliefs and thoughts from taking hold over society. Several CVE measures have been initiated by the Government of Pakistan (Khan, Qasim, Wasif & Khan, 2023). Mustaqeem et al. (2020) argued that several insights would help counter the country's violent extremism, but there is still an under-researched topic in the Pakistani context. Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) has been gaining attention from policymakers and practitioners to overcome the challenges for the past few years. As the nature of terrorism changes over time, CVE has become the field of policy and practice (Ganesh & Bright, 2020). It aims to detect terrorist movements and make them vulnerable (Winter et al., 2020). The country also needs to focus on the more structural causes of violent extremism related to its efforts

to suppress ethnic and religious sub-nationalism and to construct religious nationalism (Basit, 2023). Thus, this research will provide several valuable insights into countering violent extremism by using strategic communication to tackle the situation.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Antecedents of Violent Extremism

Violent extremism is likely to increase in the environment marked by a culture of inadequate governance, democratic deficits, corruption, impunity against illegal acts by the nation, violation of human rights, and lack of security (Javaid and Chawla, 2021). According to Stephens et al. (2021), some recurrent drivers are common to different countries and regions, sometimes isolated, and sometimes combined with other factors leading to an increase in radicalization and violent extremism. The most common issues pinpointed include a lack of socio-economic opportunities for large numbers of citizens, exclusion, and discrimination, especially if the country is experiencing insecurity, e.g., resource depletion. Likewise, inadequate governance and violation of human rights have been recognized as contexts for violent extremists. With all these problems, Pakistan has faced the most significant challenges of violent extremism over several years, which has affected all course of life (Amit et al., 2021). The horrific attacks in Pakistan can be described as an uninterrupted order over the years. The killings are endorsed by extremist believers in opposition to other minority groups, like Christian, Shia, and Ahmadi groups, and even against themselves in the name of "Ghairat". These extremist groups believe that anyone with diverse religious influences is inferior and, as a result, is an easy target (Gill et al., 2021).

Pakistan was not intended as a theocracy, but in the name of Islam, the so-called Ulmah created an extremist mindset. The purpose of creating another country for the Muslims of the subcontinent was to enable them to secure their religious and national identity. Nevertheless, over time there was a transition to the traditional state of extremist mindset due to the political turmoil, socio-economic conditions, interference of military and economic factors, and power struggles by domestic religious and political groups (De Bruyn, 2021). There are several challenges faced by Pakistan including the lack of support, cultural and religious differences, low literacy rates, and lack of funds and evaluation which increase the extremism (Van, 2022).

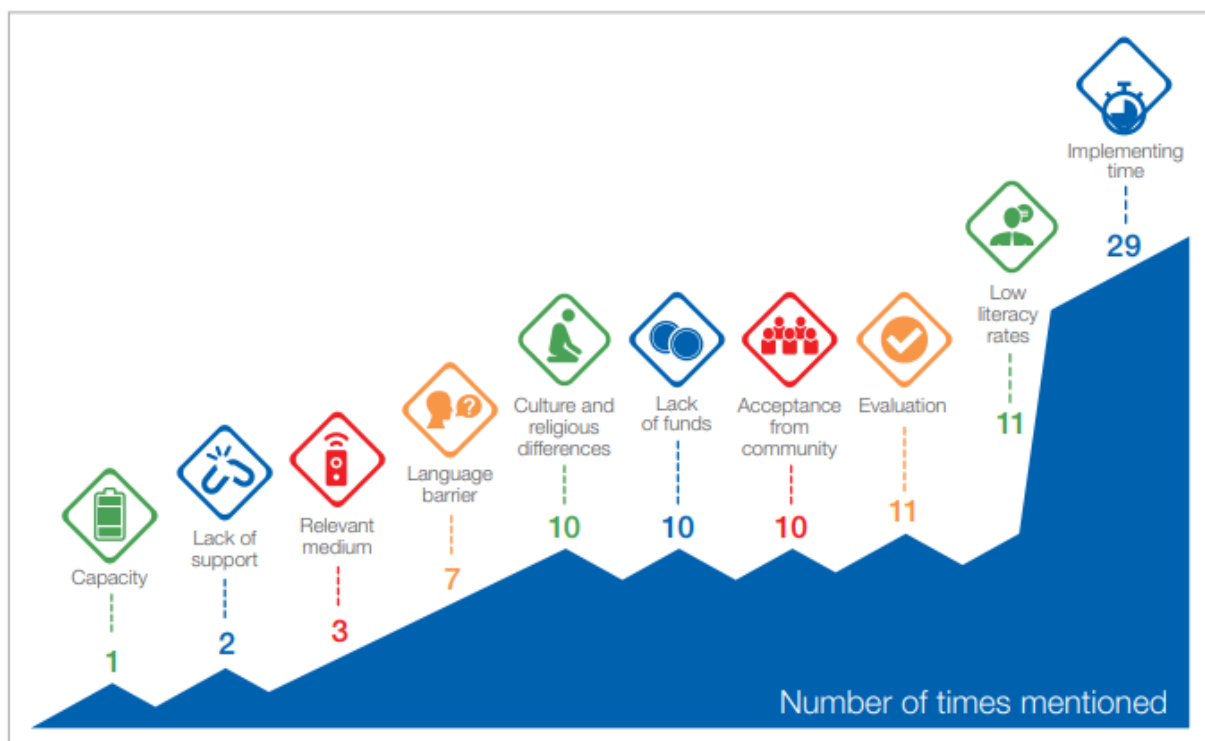
The major challenge for Pakistan's internal and external security is violent extremism. Because of the changing nature of conflicts, countering violent extremism and cyber radicalization has become a daunting task globally. In Pakistan, the role of social media is critical in helping militant groups spread hate and radical thoughts for propagating extremist ideologies. Pakistan has adopted measures to counter radicalization and cyber extremism. Violent extremism in Pakistan is because of terrorist organizations linked to hostile foreign agencies and consequently, Pakistan has to face significant social and economic losses (Suhaib & Adnan, 2020). Another important factor is multiculturalism which results in violent extremism. Different ethnic and cultural groups are living in Pakistan. Pakistan is the region from which many dangerous and well-known terrorist groups belong. These terrorist groups emerge due to different cultural and religious ideologies. In Pakistan, violent extremism has a complex structure because of the different religious ideologies of these terror groups. These groups include Neo-Jihadi, Religious Nationalist, Baloch Ethno-Nationalist, and Sectarian groups (Al-Qaida and Taliban). The Afghan war and the Kashmir dispute are the main causes of terrorist

activities. Pakistan has not developed any clear policy to fight against these groups. Whenever the government tried to fight back against these terrorist groups, they targeted the main leaders (Donnell, 2021).

In Pakistan, the antecedents of violent extremism and terrorism are deeply rooted in its socio-political system. These antecedents of violent extremism are diverse and ingrained in horizontal inequalities. These prevalent antecedents include political, economic, and governance-related factors that result in violent and terrorist activities. These factors add to the existing sense of alienation and lead to the deepening of grievances that result in the mobilization of (ethno-religious) identities. Furthermore, violent conflicts arise due to economic drivers as well as political drivers. Regional inequalities also cause violent extremism. The prevalent religious influence on the internal political environment of the country and increased ethnic diversity have complicated the situation (Makki & Akash, 2023). In several areas of Pakistan, religious diversity and ethnopolitical exclusion have broadened the scope for hatred, terrorist activities, and extremism. Political and economic inequalities fuel existing grievances among socially marginalized groups and escalate into mainstream violent conflict (Carter & Caton, 2022).

Figure 1

Challenges (Van, 2022)



2.2 | Use of Strategic Communication for Countering Violent Extremism

Saleh et al. (2021) argued that the government should develop different collaborative and participatory strategies by incorporating all stakeholders to prevent violent extremism. To protect against the threats of violent extremism, recruitment and boosting measures at the local community level should be offered for dialogue and early identification of dissatisfaction. In Pakistan, most radical violence is carried out by people who mistakenly practice religion for motivation and legitimacy. Hence, strategies must be developed for

Pakistan and all countries affected by the violence based on strong religious considerations (Lewis & Marsden, 2021). States face various challenges in combating violent and radical communication, including the extremists' narratives and multiple communication tools.

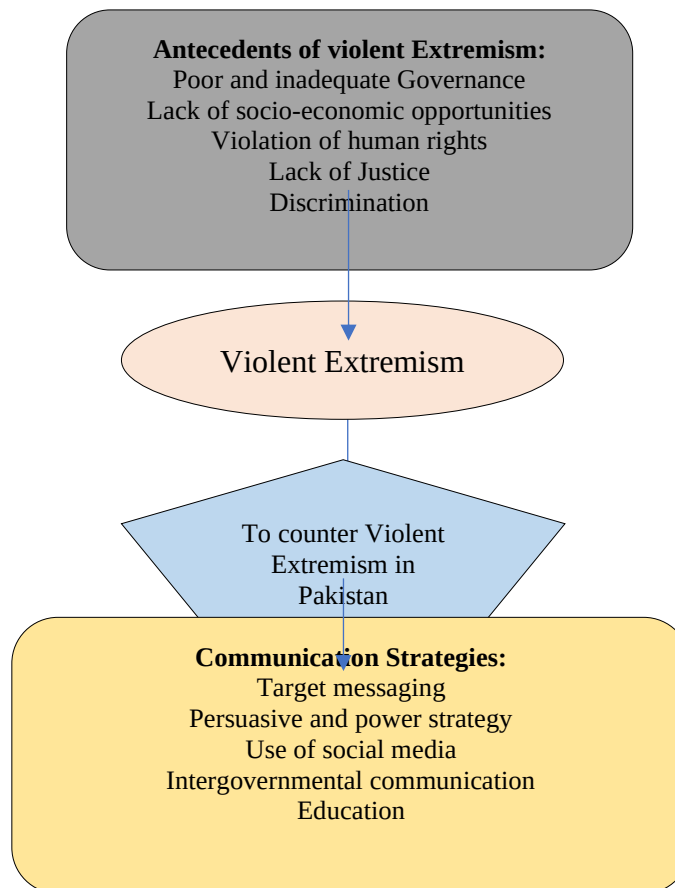
This current study seeks to shed light on how strategic communication can be used to reduce the impact of violent extremism (Richards & Wood, 2020). The main obstacle to designing a holistic anti-violent extremism program is defining its scope first (Scrivens & Conway, 2019). Therefore, this study argues for a good approach and support for combating violent extremism, focusing on mobilizing strategic communication. Strategic communication can be beneficial in combating violent extremism in the military context to give signals to the allies (Frischlich et al., 2018). Braddock (2020a) argues that the messages can be conveyed with the help of public diplomacy, democracy promotion, development policies, and other policies that favor the strategic account. Some of the research and analysis was conducted to counter radicalization with the help of precise messaging by using the preventive strategy of communication (Hardy, 2018). It states that there is a need for inter-agency coordination and to reduce the gap between political rhetoric and policies. In this way, strategic communication will act as a way to provide adequate policies and generate the intended reaction from the viewers.

Furthermore, the internet has become one of extremist groups' most essential communication centers. They are also brainwashing people with the help of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which negatively impact their mindsets (Richards & Wood, 2020). It has become imperative for the government to take the necessary steps to mitigate such challenges. The extremists use different communication strategies to radicalize, train, and recruit people under their influence. To end such propaganda, the government should take proper measures by using social media to prevent the misuse of the internet and social media by extremists. The government should introduce counter-terrorism strategies to investigate the channels and accounts spreading negativity (Scrivens & Conway, 2019).

Braddock (2020a) argued that education is one of the strongest pillars that the government should use as an initiative against extremist groups in the country. Different curricula and curriculum interventions should be introduced to enhance the youth's critical thinking. It will create awareness among young children regarding internet threats and prevent them from falling into the hands of extremist groups. However, Facebook and Twitter have become powerful platforms to combat violent extremism. Hence, extremists use the internet as one of the most widely used communication groups. The government should incorporate national-level strategies in countering violent extremism. Filatova and Bolgov (2018) stated that Facebook has worked on in-house strategies and protocols with different civil societies. It deals with the counter and anti-hate messages. It will also suspend the users who are creating such negativity. Other cultural industries are also working to overcome such challenges by using advertising, public relations, and media production to combat the negative content.

Figure 2

A proposed flowchart to counter violent extremism by using strategic communication.



3 | METHODOLOGY

We applied exploratory research methodology in this paper. For this purpose, data was collected from literature and electronic databases to determine the communication strategies that may counter violent extremism in Pakistan. Key terms included violent extremism, terrorism, counter-terrorism strategies, and strategic communication. This is a policy paper that outlines the rise in violent extremism worldwide and how these challenges can be rectified by providing solutions. Newspaper and research articles related to violent extremism were analyzed to review its antecedents and highlight the communication strategies that may help control terrorist activities. The researchers built logical arguments based on the literature review of newspaper articles and research articles. The main objective of this paper is to highlight the significance of strategic communication for countering violent extremism in Pakistan. A strategic communication model has been developed based on the literature review related to the antecedents of violent extremism and the use of strategic communication to counter violent extremism in Pakistan.

4 | FINDINGS

The most common issues highlighted include a lack of socio-economic opportunities for large numbers of citizens, exclusion, and discrimination, especially if the country is experiencing insecurity, e.g., resource depletion. Likewise, inadequate governance and violation of human rights have been recognized as contexts for violent extremists. With all these problems, Pakistan has faced the most significant challenges of violent

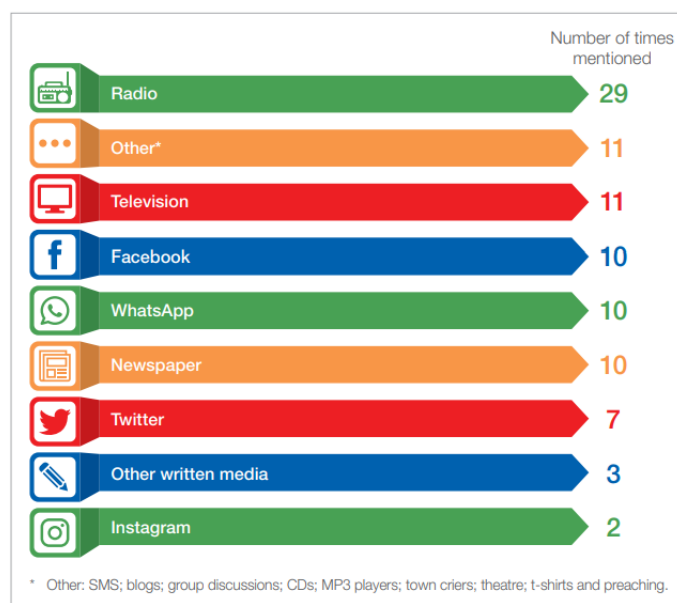
extremism over several years, which has affected all course of life. The government should develop different collaborative and participatory strategies by incorporating all stakeholders to prevent violent extremism. To protect against the threats of violent extremism, recruitment and boosting measures at the local community level should be offered for dialogue and early identification of dissatisfaction. In Pakistan, most radical violence is carried out by people who mistakenly practice religion for motivation and legitimacy. Hence, strategies must be developed for Pakistan and all countries affected by the violence based on strong religious considerations.

The flowchart has illustrated the strategic communication model to counter violent extremism in Pakistan. It has guided us from the latent stage of violent extremism to the outcome stage and how communication strategies such as social media, intergovernmental communication, and persuasive and power strategies can mitigate counter-violent extremism's effects. This model is the basis of a synopsis of how to deal with the violence prevailing in the country.

To strategically communicate to decrease violent extremism, using a persuasive strategy is a suitable intervention (Makki and Akash, 2022). It is used to connect to the opinions and values of the general public. The selected part of the information is presented to the public to communicate with them regarding the situation that is at stake. This way, the public will work together to mitigate its effect (Khan and Pratt, 2022). On the other hand, Bjola and Pamment's (2018) power strategy can also play a vital role in combating violent terrorism. It is considered a forcible technique as it will use its power to make compliance with the other groups, i.e., extremists. This strategy will be very effective when the extremists are resisting change.

Figure 3

Platform for Communicating (Van, 2022)



5 | DISCUSSION

After exploring this topic, it can be seen that there is a dire need to look for ways to counter violent extremism by using different new credible communication strategies rooted in the media. Other approaches

should be considered who compete and conquer to eliminate the propaganda of the extremists and terrorists, decreasing radicalization. Future research should also focus on how to counter terrorist extremism by using social media (Khan and Pratt, 2022). Thus, it is imperative to know the core of communication to use it for the country's benefit. It will enhance peace negotiations and conflict resolution (Ayanian et al., 2018). Furthermore, on the part of the government, they should make Pakistani legal frameworks that will protect the opinions, expression, and diversity of the people with the help of social media.

Holbrook (2020) stated that the government could adopt a multi-stakeholder approach. They can collaborate with the IT industry and other organizations. The Internet has several advantages which will lead to effective collaboration between governments and the IT industry. To work together, all stakeholders should have an open dialogue (Ingram, 2018). It will lead to a decrease in counterterrorism online. Thus, communication between all the stakeholders is the key to countering violent extremism.

Furthermore, Andrews (2020) argued that stakeholders must know their strengths and weaknesses to help them work together to ensure a practical multi-stakeholder approach. The government can play a crucial role by simply engaging with the IT industry to counter violent extremism online. This can be done on a voluntary or collaborative basis. The government can also assist stakeholders by providing them with different platforms to enhance collaboration. Such platforms are a way to foster a more inclusive process that can give rise to enhancing communication and reducing conflicts among stakeholders (Atamuradova & Zeiger, 2021).

Therefore, it is essential to look for new communication strategies to mitigate the violent extremism in Pakistan. It requires cooperation for the success of the operations. There needs to be a carefully planned counter-violent extremism program that will increase overall communication (Royo-Vela & McBee, 2020). It will increase information sharing so the military can perform better by targeting the extremists. The government can also monitor the radicalization occurring in the country. It will lead to the mitigation of extremist groups like TTP. Another step to reduce the violent extremism in the country was the introduction of the National Assemble Plan when the Army Public School was attacked on December 16th, 2014 (Gielen, 2019). Twenty major points aimed to define the government's strategy to counter violent extremism. They will not tolerate militancy and look for ways to end their strategic communication ties with social media. There was research done by Van (2022) who stated that there are different platforms for communication and countering violent terrorism including radio, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, newspapers, and Twitter.

To mitigate the country's violent extremism, the government-led strategy should promote a 'whole—society' approach. This approach will enhance collaboration between all the stakeholders. To reduce violent extremism, other national strategies should be incorporated. A policy framework is required to ensure that there is coordination among online and offline promoting critical thinking, digital learning, and educational initiatives to reduce violent extremism and terrorism.

6 | CONCLUSION

Violent extremism has significantly spoiled Pakistan's overall image, and being a front-line state, Pakistan is facing many challenges. Thus, there is a need to mitigate such challenges. Barbe et al. (2018) stated that effective communication is a two-way practice. The conveyed messages will require timely and quick responses and feedback from all the channels. More counter-violent extremism should be developed by the

government and implemented with the main focus on counter-messaging propaganda on the part of the extremists. The extremists also use different social media platforms to brainwash the public. These strategies will help in interfering, manipulating, and disrupting the narrative of extremism.

Limitations

This research only focuses on strategic communication strategies to counter violent extremism in Pakistan. Other approaches should be considered who compete and conquer to eliminate the propaganda of the extremists and terrorists, decreasing radicalization.

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