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Pakistan Social Media and Sectarian Violence: Roles and Responsibilities of the State and Consumers

Abstract

This study focusses on the issue of sectarian violence and spread of hate material on social media in Pakistan, which always remained vulnerable to sectarian violence due to its socio-religious demographics and sensitive social fabric. This research was conducted by applying mixed method. A survey (n=543) was conducted in the federal as well as all provincial capital cities of the country i.e. Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, Gilgit through purposive sampling. Interviews of 20 experts were also conducted. The survey data found that social media users do not know which terms and conditions they signed while opening their accounts on Facebook and Twitter etc. As many as 6.6% people take active part in sect-related discussions and 5.2% exchanged harsh words/abusive language in case of negative comment against their sect. A total 89% said that no government official or law enforcement agency ever contacted them in case of violations made by them on social media. Most of the social media users (21.2%) and a majority of media experts (structured interviews) believed that the government must implement existing laws, while 17.5% said there should be amendments to existing laws, 40% said an awareness campaign should be launched and 24% believed that there was a need to promote interfaith harmony in the country.

Keywords: Pakistan, Social Media, Sectarian Violence, Hate Debate, Responsibility

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1. Introduction and Background

Sectarian violence always remained a big threat in Pakistan due to its religious demographics. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2020), with a total population of over 200 million there are 96.28 percent Muslims, while other people comprise Hindus (1.6%) Christians (1.59%), Ahmadis (0.22%) and others 0.25%. A majority of Muslims in the country are Sunni, with Shi'a minority ranging 10-20 percent (Islam in Pakistan, 2000).

Out of total Sunni Muslims in Pakistan, over 15% are *Deobandi*, while some 60% are *Braelvi* school of thought, they are mostly in Punjab province. It is generally agreed that at least 60% of the total seminaries are run by *Deobandis*, and 25% by the *Braelvis*. (Islam in Pakistan, 2000).

The CIA World Fact Book and Middle East Institute recorded 20% Shia population in Pakistan. UNDP (2018) estimated 40 million Shias in the country out of total 200 million population of Pakistan. A majority Shia community lives in Gilgit-Baltistan, Kurram Agency where Parachinar is considered their stronghold. Also there is considerable population in all provincial capital cities of the country including Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta.

Although there is serious issue of media responsibility and implementation of media code of ethics in the Pakistani society, with the passage of time print media and electronic media have become quite responsible as regards to the sectarian and religious issues. There is a sense of social responsibility in media persons especially working in elite media. However, sectarian violence on social media is still a problem in the country.

According to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (2019), there are total 70 million Internet consumers in Pakistan, out of which 37 million use social networking websites including Facebook and Twitter (Technology Times, 2019). Out of these 70 million net users, 31 million use Facebook including 81% male and 19 % female - making FB the top most visited website in the country (Napoleon Cat, 2019). Facebook demographics in the country: 6.4 million Facebook users are male while 2.7 million are female and 70 per cent are aged 25 year or less. Since mostly youth (70%) are using social media and the government has so far remained unable to implement any social media code effectively, there is serious issue of irresponsibility with special reference to sectarian communication on social media.

Over 4,900 Pakistani citizens have been killed and around 9,500 injured in 3,000 incidents of sectarian violence between 1989 and 2014 in the country. A report of The News International (2014) showed that 525 Pakistanis had lost lives in 128 incidents of sectarian violence during 2013, as 509 people had died in 57 such incidents during 2010, as many as 507 people (in 173 incidents) were made to travel towards their eternal abodes during 2012 because of their religious beliefs and 441 citizens had succumbed to this mode of terrorism in 341 incidents during 2007, while around 160 Pakistanis had fallen victim to the monster of sectarianism in well over five dozen incidents in the year 2014 (Shah, 2014).

1.1. Objectives

The main objective of the study is to create knowledge on social media management solutions to avoid spread of sectarian violence and hate campaigns against other sects.

1.2. Research Questions

- Q1. What are the social media using habits of youth of various sects in Pakistan?
- Q2. Are social media consumers aware of the rules and regulations of the use of social media?
- Q3. What is the level of social responsibility of social media users?
- Q4. How social media users can be made responsible?
- Q5. How can the government control sectarian violence and promote tolerance level on social media?

2. Method

The mixed quantitative and qualitative research method of survey and interviews was applied to conduct this study. Survey was conducted in federal as well as provincial capitals cities of Pakistan comprising, Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta and Gilgit. A questionnaire based on 12 close-ended queries was filled from students in all above mentioned cities. A total 800 questionnaires were distributed however out of them 542 were returned. The survey was conducted with the help of field assistants. The objective of the survey was to know the level of the problem.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews of experts were conducted. The 20 experts were interviewed in following categories:

- **Journalists:** Editors, Online Editors, News Editors, Anchor persons, Reporters etc.
- **Social Media Experts:** People directly related to e-business including entrepreneurs, marketers, public relations officers, propagandists and bloggers.
- **Academicians:** Faculty members of mass communication and social studies.
- **Legal Experts:** Judges, lawyers and law academicians.
- **Government Functionaries:** Experts from the federal and provincial information ministries, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), Cyber Crime Wing of Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Press Law branch of the secretariat.
- **Religious Scholars:** Scholars of different sects especially those engaged in inter-faith harmony programs of the government and NGOs.

Six open-ended questions were asked from the media experts

2.1. Populations and Sampling

The survey data was gathered from federal capital as well as all five provincial capitals cities of the country. The survey was conducted through simple random sampling in universities of all six selected cities. The large public sector universities including Quaid-i-Azam University (Islamabad), University of the Punjab (Lahore), University of Karachi (Karachi), University of Peshawar (Peshawar), Quetta University (Quetta) and Korakoram University (Gilgit) were included in the research population. A total 800 questionnaires were distributed in all six cities out of which 542 were returned. Secondly, semi-structured interviews of 20 experts were also conducted.

N=543

ISB	LHR	KHI	PSH	QET	GB	TOTAL
100	100	100	82	80	81	543

2.2. Data Analysis

The data gathered from the survey was analyzed qualitatively through software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The Social Responsibility Theory of Hutchins Commission (1947) was the guiding source to conduct this study. According to the theory Media has to fulfill certain obligations in a democratic society with a sense to preserve its freedom.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

The results of the collected data of the survey from all six cities have been given in following tables and pie charts:

How do you react to a post or comment against your sect?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Defend	77	14.2	16.4	16.4
	Dislike	99	18.2	21.1	37.4
	Try to finish Debate	69	12.7	14.7	52.1
	Ignore	183	33.7	38.9	91.1
	Arguments against other Sect	27	5.0	5.7	96.8
	Other	15	2.8	3.2	100.0
	Total	470	86.6	100.0	
Missing	System	73	13.4		
	Total	543	100.0		

When asked about the response of post or comment against their sect, 33.7% said they ignored it, while 18.2% said they disliked it, 14.2% defended their sect, 12.7% try to finish the debate and 5% said that they gave arguments against other sects.

Have you ever exchanged harsh words with anyone on social media during sect-related discussion?

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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Valid	Never	187	34.4	36.9	36.9
	No	225	41.4	44.4	81.3
	To Some Extent	67	12.3	13.2	94.5
	Yes	20	3.7	3.9	98.4
	Yes Definitely	8	1.5	1.6	100.0
	Total	507	93.4	100.0	
Missing	System	36	6.6		
	Total	543	100.0		

When asked whether the respondents ever exchanged harsh words with anyone on social media, 41.4% choose 'No', 34.4% 'Never', 12.3% 'To some extent', 3.7% 'Yes' and 1.5% 'Yes Definitely'.

What steps should be taken to control sectarianism on social media?					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Implement Existing laws	115	21.2	22.1	22.1
	Amendments in Law	95	17.5	18.2	40.3
	Awareness Campaign	173	31.9	33.2	73.5
	promote Understandings	131	24.1	25.1	98.7
	Other	7	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	521	95.9	100.0	
Missing	System	22	4.1		
	Total	543	100.0		

The above table shows the response to suggestions on controlling sectarianism on social media, 31.9% said through awareness campaigns, 24.1% selected the promote understandings option, while 21.2% said by implementing existing laws and 17.2% said amendments should be made in existing laws.

The above table shows the correlation between awareness of social media code of conduct and educational background of respondents. As many as 234 respondents said that they 'to some extent' knew about the code of conduct, of which 100 were MA or higher, 80 BA, 6 Madrasa educated, whereas only 1 of the uneducated respondent selected this option. The second most selected option was 'Yes', selected by 144 respondents, 54 were MA or higher, 46 BA, 4 Madrasa educated and 2 uneducated. Whereas, 60 and 56 respondents said 'Never' and 'No' respectively.

Are you aware of social media code of conduct? * Sect Cross tabulation								
		Sect						
		Brailvi	Deobandi	Ahle Hadith	Ahle TAshee	Other	No Sect	Total
	Never	10	15	7	12	7	11	62
	No	9	11	1	13	5	14	53
	to some extent	20	54	21	45	14	80	234
	Yes	14	44	10	25	13	34	140
	yes Absolutely	7	6	1	10	4	2	30
Total		60	130	40	105	43	141	519

By sect out of 519 respondents, 234 respondents said they were somewhat aware of the social media code of conduct. However 115 said they were not aware about any code of conduct with 53 (No) and 62 (Never) in the set categories.

Do you participate in sectarian discussions on social media? * City Cross tabulation								
		City						
		Islamabad	Lahore	Karachi	Peshawar	Quetta	Gilgit	Other Total
Never		22	44	18	33	37	34	211

No	5	34	29	21	40	45	26	200
Sometime	5	16	5	7	13	25	14	85
Yes	1	2	4	3	3	7	1	21
Yes Definitely	0	1	1	0	1	2	2	7
Total	33	97	57	64	94	113	66	524

3.1. Qualitative Data Analysis

In the qualitative part of the study media experts including working journalists, social media experts, media academicians, legal experts, government functionaries and religious scholars were asked as many as 6 open-ended questions regarding the issue and its possible solutions. The media experts were asked queries in following categories:

How government can control sectarian violence on social media?

A majority of the media experts were of the view that sectarian violence can be controlled by proper legislation and implementation of the same in letter and the spirit. They believed that at the moment Pakistan electronic media regulatory authority and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority lacked the capacity to monitor and varied range of SNS and sectarian debate of discussion taking place on the social media. Once a mechanism will be evolved and properly implemented the issue can be curtailed or 1. controlled.

What methods are being adopted by other countries to tackle religious violence or hate contents on social media?

Although cyber laws, especially social media laws are vague everywhere in the world including the developed part of the world, the problem is comparative less intense there. They have made their people responsible, however problems still exist there. Their monitoring system is good especially in US, UK, Germany and other countries.

What is capacity of Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to control hate contents on social media?

As many as 70% of the media experts believed that at the moment no authority has the capacity to monitor and control social media contents fully, however PTA has a system to off any website in Pakistan like it did with Youtube. They suggested that for monitoring social media it was a need of the hour to build capacity by recruiting young IT professionals.

4. Conclusion

The study on “Pakistan Social Media and Sectarian Violence: Roles and Responsibilities of the state and consumers” was conducted through survey in six cities of Pakistan including Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta and Gilgit – federal and the provincial capital cities of the country. Also structured interviews were conducted. The data revealed that lack of proper legislation and implementation of existing laws on the social media were the main reason for hate debate and sectarian violence on social media.

The study found that the social media users do not know which terms and conditions they signed while opening their accounts on Facebook and Twitter etc. As many as 6.6% people take active part in cross sect discussions and 5.2% exchanged harsh words/abusive language in case of negative comment against their sect. A total 89% said that no government official ever contacted them in case of violations made by them on social media. Most of the social media users (21.2%) and a majority of media experts during structured interviews believed that the government must implement existing laws, 17.5% said there should be amendments to existing laws, 40% said an awareness campaign should be launched and 24 believed that there was a need to promote interfaith harmony in the country.

The study found that sectarian violence can be controlled by proper legislation and implementation of rule of law in letter and the spirit.

Furthermore, the research finding suggested that some chapters in the curriculum may be introduced and managers of madrassas of all sects may be taken onboard in this regards to promote sectarian harmony and peace in the country.

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