

The Digitalization of Islam on YouTube and Pakistani Youth: Religious Identity, Belief, and Tolerance in a Digital Age

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Abstract

This research study explores how Islamic content on YouTube influences the religious beliefs and practices, religious identity, and religious tolerance levels among Pakistani youth. Using Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Social Learning Theory (SLT), this study investigates how engagement with online religious content on YouTube from some scholars and organizations influences on motivations and behavioural responses of undergraduate students from age 20-26. Based on focus group discussions, the findings revealed dual trend, while some youth demonstrate stronger faith, discipline in practicing Islam, and religious tolerance, others develop signs of exclusion attitudes and rigid interpretation of Islam labelled as extremism, perceived in relation to lack of empathy, rigidity, and accusative tone but not as violence. Core themes include shaping of digital religious identities, peer influence, algorithmic exposure to Islamic content, and skepticism towards celebrity scholars and organizations on YouTube. The study highlights key implications for religious educators, media regulators, and policymakers and contributes to understand digital religion in South Asia.

Keywords: YouTube, Islamic content, Pakistani youth, religious identity, religious beliefs and practices, UGT, SLT

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era of digital communications, the dissemination of information has changed worldwide. The technological progress is the core player of social change (Lewis, 2014). The advancements in technology have enabled social transformations and a new form of preaching has emerged in the late 20th century (Meuleman, 2011). Most of the religions worldwide are relying on the digital media to spread their religious ideology and educate their followers to correct their practices. This digital age has brought new ways to share, communicate and consume religious content (Zaid et al., 2022). Digital media is a potential tool for the dissemination of Islamic teachings, and it has been highly emphasized for preaching Islam (Ishak & Solihin, 2012). For Islamic preachers in Pakistan, youth has become a main audience as their awareness, understanding, and orthopraxy is crucial for the fate of the entire nation. In Pakistan, this trend has also been seen on the digital platforms as they're highly accessible for the public, especially, youth. Young people are preferably using digital media to access religious guidance and religious information (Yahya, Fajari, & Mahmudah, 2021). Among all digital platforms, YouTube has the most popularity in terms of attracting the huge audience (Arthurs, Drakopoulou, & Gandini, 2018). In Pakistan, it has taken the first place with highest numbers of active users. In early 2025, 55.9 million YouTube users were reported, which are equal to 23% of the total Pakistani population (Kemp, 2025). Therefore, YouTube as a main platform, has been included in this research study.

It has become the powerful platform in shaping personal values, public opinions, and cultural norms, especially among youth. In Pakistan where every one out of three individuals are in age group 15 to 29 (Najam, 2024). YouTube is a source of not only entertainment but also education, ideological influence, and religious learning. Islamic scholars are using YouTube to produce informative videos to engage and attract their audience as this platform helps in retaining the user generated content (Welbourne & Grant, 2016). This growing trend of digitalization of Islam on YouTube through official channels of religious preachers and scholars, specifically, promoting the Islamic ideology is creating a virtual environment for youth where they are constantly exposed to religious content in the informal and unregulated ways. These scholars or sources who have their YouTube channels are Youth Club, Tariq Jameel, Tariq Masood, Engineer Muhammad Ali Mirza, Ilyas Qadri, Zakir Naik, Samar Abbas, Mufti Hanif Qureshi. Nevertheless, there is a little scholarly engagement with how the Islamic content on digital platforms, particularly, YouTube has affected the attitude, identity, social behaviour, and beliefs of youth in Pakistan. This study aims at investigating whether YouTube Islamic content is leading to spiritual development or contributing religious and ideological biases among youth or not.

Significance of the Study

The present research study is significant in several ways. As youth is the backbone of Pakistan's future, it is crucial to understand the influence of digital technologies on their ideological and religious development for psychological and educational purposes. This study contributes to the field of digital Islam and media studies by investigating how the religious narratives are created, disseminated, and consumed online. The findings of this study can impart digital content regulators and educators about the influence of digital religious content and help promote or craft balanced and valuable content. This research study also contributes to calling interdisciplinary strategies by combining religious and media studies, and behavioural science and develop a framework that promote pluralistic and informed digital religiosity. Also, it highlights that youth are active agents

who can navigate easily with a rapidly changing online religious landscape. Moreover, this research study can help distinguish between radicalizing material and constructive religious content.

Scope of the Study

This research study has taken YouTube as the primary digital platform for investigation focusing on the urban and semi-urban population which are active users of YouTube. The individuals belonged to undergraduate students at Pakistani universities showing high engagement with the online content. The religious content under study comprises the official channels of Islamic scholars and Islamic organizations, famous among Pakistani youth i.e., Youth Club, Tariq Jameel, Tariq Masood, Engineer Muhammad Ali Mirza, Ilyas Qadri, Zakir Naik, Samar Abbas, Mufti Hanif Qureshi. The areas of influence are changes in the religious beliefs and practices, identity formation, social attitudes and behaviours like religious tolerance and extremism and preference of online religious means over traditional sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Usage among Youth

This research study investigates the influence of Islamization of YouTube on religious beliefs and practices, identity formation, social attitudes and behaviours like tolerance and empathy, and religious content consumption behaviour of youth as religious preachers are providing them, the individualized religious awareness by forming a new form of digital Islam, so based on this, various works of different researchers and academicians has been included. The surge of internet has given a convenient platform for the followers of any religion and make them able to incorporate this in their everyday life (Finnemann, 2011; Hjarvard, 2008). Like, 25% of North Americans used internet in 2001 for religious means (Larsen, 2013), and the percentage rate has increased till 64% within the time span of three years (Al-Rawi, 2017). By using cross-sectional mix methods study design including survey and focus group (13-18 years), Plaisime et al. (2020) found that social media is popular among youth as 94.6% of teens use social media. The social media platforms have a real influence on social lives of Muslims as they tend to build a virtual religious community among the Muslim majority countries (Fathurokhmah & Si, 2019). With the secondary review of literature within the years of Covid-19 pandemic, Huda and Nur (2021) concluded that the millennials have accessing social media platforms as useful tool for information and misuse it. So, the culture of social media usage can only be supported in Islam if it is being utilized to enhance scientific knowledge and abilities.

Role of Social Media in Islamic Preaching

According to Fairuzi and Sulistya Ayu (2020), the da'wah through social media has two aspects of portraying Islam, a friendly Islam and an Islam based on aggressiveness which have different influences on the followers. Through online observations and thematic analysis, Adel and Numan (2023) found that with the emergence of modern technology, the seeking fatwas online is popular among urban populace in Pakistan as they use various social networks for this purpose. Moreover, it is more common among women than men due to the protection of their identities. Likewise, Weng (2018) examined the Islamic preaching through social media i.e., Facebook and Instagram

in two Southeast Asian Muslim countries, Malaysia and Indonesia. The study was more focus on the religious feelings and ideas and some semiotics related to the platforms. By conducting a systematic review of literature, Nabila (2023) concluded that in this digital age the religious preaching can be done effectively through various social media platforms and Pakistani scholars are using it to access to wider audiences. The study further recommends scholar to modernize their contributions towards Islam and use technology to actively connect with the Pakistani users.

Frissen et al. (2017) explored a theme related to Islam on Instagram which is directly related to “Muslims’ religious practices and beliefs which has shown 27.9%. By performing the qualitative case study method to analyse religious content of four social media influencers of gulf region, Zaid et al. (2022) found that these influencers can be new religious leaders in the Muslim digital culture as they play significant role as a source of religious content and fulfill the requirement of traditional leaders. Also, these influencers are innovative as they know how to make religious content relevant, appealing, and relatable to young Muslims. Based on the secondary review of previous literature and existing statistics, Ibahrine (2020) suggested that the understanding of the relationship of Islam and digital platforms reveals the wide cultural shifts within the traditionally vague societies. Further, argued that the digital technologies have driven people to practice Islam effectively.

YouTube as a source of Islamic Preaching

YouTube, among all social media or digital platforms, can be handled quite at ease. It has become an emerging source of religious learning along with education and ideological influence. The participants of Islamic organizations are being encouraged to spread the shorts of Islamic programs, Islamic practices, and activities as YouTube facilitates their users to communicate their idea through a less technical way in an uncensored environment (Theobald, 2009). By using mix-method approach, Hazim and Musdholifah (2021) examined the spread of religion in Hungary through social media. The study found that YouTube is the most popular source of Islamic experiences and information for the Muslims living in the country. Islamic preachers and organizations create YouTube Channels to share their own religious content with their followers and connect with them through comments. As the visual content appeals the audience more, so Islamic scholars come on their YouTube channels to answer the questions of their followers, guide them, and educate them religiously and perform themselves to teach the methods of ablution, etc. It is possible for the Islamic preachers because YouTube, as a digital platform, performs as a video editor by providing all types of video editing features where users can edit and create their videos easily (Mercer, 2011). The Islamic use of social media platforms, especially YouTube, has been assessed in previous studies (Al-Rawi, 2017), but it’s relation to Muslims, in particular, youth’s religious practices and beliefs has not addressed. Another feature of playlist building of video series on YouTube (Saurabh & Gautam, 2019) has helped organizing Islamic scholars and Islamic organizations the number of videos on several different topics separately.

This feature enhances the viewership as it’s easier for users to find their relevant religious content, thus, aid in the learning process. YouTube, after Facebook and Instagram, is the famous source of Islamic content and a great religious information for local Muslims (Al-Zaman, 2022). The extensive study on the use of YouTube as a religious platform has been conducted by Al-Rawi (2017). The Middle Eastern Islamic Countries’ study reveals the various aspects of religious extremism and cybercrimes but did not discuss about the influence on religious identity, religious

practices and beliefs, and tolerance and extremism. In the light of the literature, there is a research gap of finding the influence of Islamic scholars, preaching through the digital platform, especially, YouTube on Muslim youth in Pakistan. There are certain Islamic scholars and Islamic organizations, famous among Pakistani youth, especially using YouTube to convey their messages to public. Therefore, this research study will be based on the influence of digitalization of Islam through YouTube from these religious scholars and organizations on the religious beliefs and practices, identity formation, social attitudes and religious behaviours like religious tolerance and extremism and preference of online religious means over traditional sources.

Theoretical Framework

To study the motivations behind the use of YouTube for religious content consumption among youth and its influence on the religious practices and beliefs of youth along with their behavior like religious tolerance, two theories are employed in this research: Uses and Gratification theory (UGT) and Social Learning Theory (SLT). UGT was coined by Katz and Blumler in early 1940s to explain the uptake of media to fulfill the needs. There are two assumptions related to this theory: a) audience have a goal orientation while selecting a certain type of media, b) active integration and interpretation of media content in people's lives make them achieve their desired gratifications (Rubin & Feeney, 1986). This theory is based primarily on the user-centered approach which explains why people use certain types of media, why they need it, and what gratifications they get from it. In the context of this research study, UGT explains why Pakistani youth use YouTube for religious content and what are their gratifications behind it. In this study, these gratifications can be religious education to change their religious practices and beliefs and identity formation for social belonging. The application of this theory develops the understanding of what are the motivations of user-centred consumption of religious content on YouTube and how it influences the religious preferences and engagement of Pakistani youth. This theory aligns with the following research questions to investigate the motivations behind usage of YouTube for religious content:

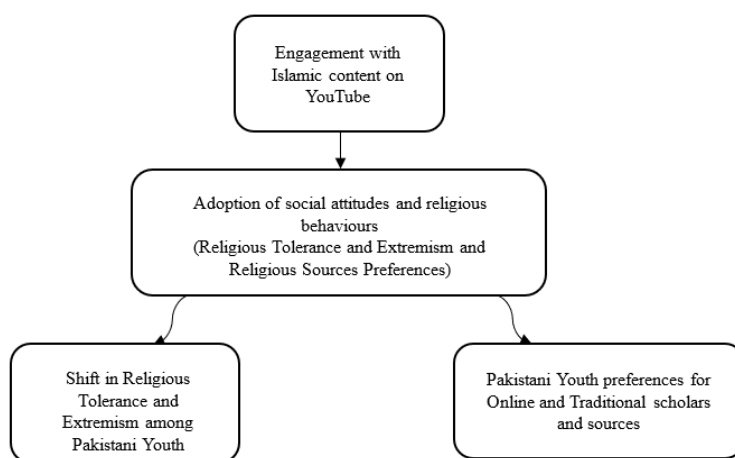


Fig 1. Conceptual Model 1

- How much Pakistani Youth engage with YouTube Islamic Content?
- How does engagement with YouTube Islamic Content Influence Youth's religious practices and beliefs in Pakistan?

- How does frequent engagement with YouTube Islamic Content Influence Youth's religious identity in Pakistan?

Social Learning Theory (SLT) is coined by Albert Bandura in 1977 to explain the learning behaviour of an individual in a certain setting. This theory emphasizes the importance of observation, modelling, and imitation of attitudes, behaviours, and emotions of other people especially when observed behaviour is seen to be reinforced (McLeod, 2025). In the context of this study, SLT explains the understanding of influence of Islamic content on YouTube on Pakistani youth. In this study, the digital platform like YouTube plays a crucial role in the observational leaning of youth. They tend to adapt the social attitudes and religious behaviours of the content creators. Moreover, it suggests that religious and social norms and knowledge transmits through the media exposure and penetrates to shift the values such as religious tolerance and extremism. This theory aligns with the following research questions to investigate the adoption of certain behaviours behind usage of YouTube for religious content:

- How frequent engagement with YouTube Islamic Content brings an observable shift in social attitude and religious behaviour (religious tolerance & extremism) in Pakistani Youth?
- How much Pakistani Youth prefer online Islamic scholars or sources over traditional Islamic scholars or sources?

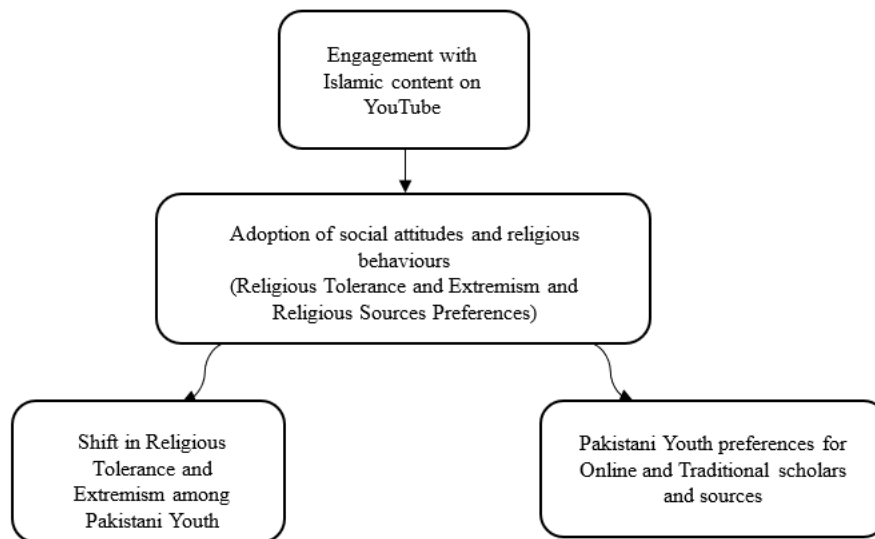


Fig 2. Conceptual Model 2

Within the context of social media usage, i.e., YouTube for Islamic content reception, an invisible guide named as algorithmic influence works to decide what users will see next and it grabs users' attention based on the engagement metrics. Therefore, it shapes the users' exposure to certain themes, ideologies, and tones. Within the frameworks of UGT and SLT, algorithmic influence acts as invisible moderator that guides the gratifications to be sought and behaviours to be modelled,

complicating the assumptions of these theories of user motivations agency and processes of organic learning among users.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research study employs formal approach of qualitative research design as it is a type of an exploratory study which explores the influence of Islamic content on YouTube on the religious beliefs and practices, identity formation, social attitudes and religious behaviours like religious tolerance and extremism, and preferences of online religious means over traditional sources of youth of Pakistan.

Sampling

For selecting the participants of this research study, purposive sampling technique, specifically, judgmental sampling technique is used to make the required sample size. The selection criteria of participants in the sample are based on their socio-economic background, must belong to urban or semi-urban areas of Karachi as youth belonging to such areas are well educated and well-aware for what Islamic scholar or sources they must search on YouTube and who they should consult for their queries. So, their engagement with the religious content on YouTube is the basic criterion for this research study. The participants must be undergraduate students, selected on their regular engagement with YouTube Islamic content, belonging to any Pakistani university. However, for this research study, only students from two different campuses of a private university in Karachi became a part of study due to limited time and resources. Both male and female included in the sample size.

Data Collection Method

To collect the data for this exploratory type of research study, focus group is employed. There are a total of three homogenous groups of six participants each, each participant will be included through a purposive sampling technique, which makes it eighteen participants in total. Three different sessions have been conducted each with six members. The allocated time duration for each focus group session was 60 minutes. The sessions were audio recorded. For analysis, the recordings were transcribed and translated manually.

Procedure

To conduct these focus group sessions, the principal investigator employed a research moderator for session 1 and session 3, however, conducted session 2 by acting as a moderator herself. Before the start of each session, the principal investigator distributed the Informed Consent Form for Participants and Participants Information Sheet and explained to the participants how to fill in these forms. The moderator opened the session with a note and signed the informed consent document with the participants. The participant information sheet has two open-ended research questions which needed to be answered in the written form on the sheet. The moderator then started asking the questions from the list of predetermined, semi-structured questions and open-ended questions, based on the research questions of this study. The session was originally conducting in

the English language, however, by taking account of the ease of participants to ensure comfort and expression, the session was then conducted in Urdu language. Each question was extension of research questions of the study, where participants had freedom to answer and discuss the questions asked thoroughly.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, thematic analysis by using MAXQDA24, has been performed on manually translated transcriptions from the three sessions of focus group. Through MAXQDA24, the codes were formed with different colors and then converted into themes. The percentages were generated manually afterwards for an explanation of the findings. Moreover, the generated themes have the answers to the research questions of this study about the influence of Islamic content of YouTube on the youth belonging to undergraduate study level. The data determines the religious beliefs and practices, identity formation, social attitudes and religious behaviours like religious tolerance and extremism, the content consumption and preferences about sources of Islamic content.

Ethical Considerations

This research study will ensure the implementation of ethical considerations while conducting the focus group sessions. Before starting the session, a well-prepared informed consent in the form of a written document has been signed by the participants. This informed consent clearly stated the purpose of the research, the role of participants in it, and right to confidentiality and withdraw rules at any time of the research process. Before the session, the participants were given time to read and understand the consent form before signing it. The data collected is anonymized for the protection of identifiable information of participants. During the sessions, the participants were allotted a number from 1 to 6 as they were called with their numbers instead of their names to ensure anonymity.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

The socio-demographic characteristics of all 18 participants, undergraduate students belong to age 20-26 with 10 Males and 8 Females living in urban and semi-urban areas.

Table 1

Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographics	Groups
Age	20-26
Gender	Male: 10 Female: 8
Education	Undergraduate Level
Area of residence	Urban and Semi-Urban

RQ1 and RQ5 were added to the Participation Information Sheet as open-ended questions. All 18 participants from three focus groups were required to answer these two questions in written form. Table 2 gives the answers to both research questions.

Table 2

Answers to Research Question 1 and Research Question 2

RQ: How frequently you get engaged with YouTube Islamic Content?	RQ: Do you prefer online Islamic scholars or sources over traditional Islamic scholars or sources? Why?
Twice a week	Online Islamic Scholars if they are relevant and talking from Hadith or Quran and Sunnah as it is a digital era.
Rarely	Online sources or scholars.
Rarely	Online sources or scholars.
Very rarely	Traditional sources are much preferred but online is a feasibility for those who do not have access.
Often	Traditional Islamic scholars who teach according to Quran.
Often	Online sources or scholars but one should not totally depends on it blindly.
An hour a week	Online Islamic scholars as they're easy to access.
4-5 hours in a week	Online Islamic scholars because we get a lot of knowledge while scrolling.
Sometimes	Online Islamic scholars because we get knowledge through mobile.
Daily	Traditional Islamic scholars because I think you can understand better, and you can learn on one go without confusion because on YouTube very scholar have different opinion.
Twice or more times a month	Traditional Islamic scholars because I think I feel more connected that way.
Rarely	Online Islamic scholars because traditional sometimes get too focused on our social issues.
Rarely	Traditional Islamic scholars because I don't believe in the legitimacy of online scholars as they talk more about gaining views than real Islam.
Sometimes	Online Islamic scholar or any other sources because it helps you to connect with your religion and these are very informative.
Sometimes	Online Islamic scholar with authentic sources. I believe in them when they give an example or relate the thing with any sort of hadith from Sahih Bukhari or Sahih Muslim.
Most of the time	Online Islamic scholars because they give authentic research.
Most of the time	Both, because anyone of them can be beneficial for any certain person.
Sometimes	Online scholar because for every query I can access online media.

The frequency analysis of RQ1 reveals that 6 participants (36%) of the total 18 participants engage with YouTube Islamic content very rarely, daily, an hour a week, 4-5 hours a week, twice a week, or twice or more times a month. While 8 participants (44%) of the total 18 participants engage with YouTube Islamic content rarely or sometimes. Moreover, 4 participants (22%) of the total 18 participants engage with YouTube Islamic content often or most of the time. Table 3 represents the frequency analysis of RQ1.

Table 3

Frequency Analysis of Research Question 1

RQ: How frequently you get engaged with YouTube Islamic Content?		
Participants Answers	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Very rarely	1	6%
Rarely	4	22%
Sometimes	4	22%
Often	2	11%
Most of the time	2	11%
Daily	1	6%
An hour a week	1	6%
4-5 hours a week	1	6%
Twice a week	1	6%
Twice or more times a month	1	6%

The frequency analysis of RQ2, see table 4, reveals that 12 participants (67%) out of total 18 participants prefer online sources or scholars as it is a digital era and these sources or scholars are easily accessible. Moreover, traditional scholars are too focused on social issues and online scholars do authentic research. While 5 participants (28%) out of total 18 participants prefer traditional scholars or sources even though they all do watch YouTube Islamic content except for 2 participants. The participants added that traditional scholars or sources are authentic as one cannot believe in the legitimacy of online sources, they connect more with traditional scholars or sources, and they can learn better in one go without any confusion. Moreover, 1 participant (6%) of the total 18 participants prefer both online and traditional sources or scholars as they can both be beneficial.

Table 4

Frequency Analysis of Research Question 2

RQ: Do you prefer online Islamic scholars or sources over traditional Islamic scholars or sources? Why?		
Participants Answers	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Online sources or scholars	12	67%
Traditional sources or scholars	5	28%
Both online and traditional sources or scholars.	1	6%

The audio recorded data from all three focus group sessions was transcribed and translated manually and then these files from focus groups were imported in MAXQDA24 software for generating codes and themes from all three files. The generated codes and themes were converted into a frequency table and then added percentage manually for better explanation of the themes. Table 5 represents the thematic findings of this research study.

Table 5

Thematic Analysis of all three Focus Groups

Codes	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
Balance between extreme and tolerant	Extremist Vs Tolerant	7	39%
Depends on Person's type		5	28%
Illiteracy		7	39%

Imposing Islam on others	Increased Religious Extremism	1	6%
Increased Criticism on Islam		2	11%
Youth is becoming Extremist		9	50%
Factors behind Religious Extremism		5	28%
Friends and Family talk about my interest in Islam	Youth's Religious Identity	15	83%
Change in Habits		9	50%
Change in Perception of Islam		10	56%
Becoming a Confident Person		2	11%
Inspired me to question myself		2	11%
Gain a Religious Identity		4	22%
Religion is Personal		4	22%
Expression depends on the person		10	55%
Expression is necessary		8	44%
Strong Religious Standing		2	11%
Change in Appearance		4	22%
Disciplined in Practicing Islam		7	39%
Abandoned a Practice for Islam		3	17%
Clarity in Islamic Concepts		3	17%
Stronger Beliefs		2	11%
Increased Islamic Interest	Youth's Religious Practices and Beliefs	8	44%
Increased Fear of God		1	6%
Stereotypes have broken		1	6%
Stronger Faith		4	22%
Patient in Practicing Islam		4	22%
Punctual in Practicing Islam		3	17%
Being Critical to some Islamic Practices		3	17%
Motivation to live		1	6%
Stopped following blindly		4	22%
Expression has changed		1	6%
Expressing but not imposing		1	6%
Youth is becoming Liberal		2	11%

Youth is becoming Tolerant	Increased Religious Tolerance	11	61%
Acceptance towards other Religions/Sects		29	80%
Additional Codes			
Effective Content on YouTube		7	39%
Verifiable Content on YouTube		1	6%
Knowledge gaining through YouTube		7	39%
No effect of YouTube Islamic Content		6	33%
No change in Individuals/Society		6	33%
Query solver content for Youth		7	39%
Youth Relatable Content		2	11%

The themes generated from the thematic analysis of all three focus groups are Extremist Vs Tolerant, Increased Religious Extremism, Youth's Religious Identity, Youth's Religious Practices and Beliefs, and Increased Religious Tolerance, which are combined under the following three major themes according to the research questions of this study:

- Influence on Youth's religious practices and beliefs through YouTube's engagement
- Influence on Youth's religious identity through YouTube's engagement
- Observable shift in social attitude and religious behavior (religious tolerance & extremism) through YouTube's engagement

Influence on Youth's religious practices and beliefs through YouTube's engagement

The theme generated through thematic analysis “Youth's Religious Practices and Beliefs” comes under this main theme. All 18 participants have expressed their opinions openly about the influence on their practices and beliefs. The analysis shows the influence in the practices through being disciplined in practicing Islam (39%), abandoned certain practices in the name of Islam (17%), being patient in practicing Islam (22%), being punctual in practicing Islam (17%), and being critical to certain Islamic practices performed by people (17%). 12% participants have said that their expression about Islam in front of others have change and now they're not imposing Islam but expressing it peacefully. While the participants have given their opinion about influence on the beliefs as the data shows stronger beliefs (11%), stronger faith (22%), clarity in Islamic concepts (17%), increased Islamic interest (44%), increased fear of God (6%). Moreover, 22% have stopped following scholars or sources blindly, 6% have broken their stereotypes in this phase, and 6% have gained motivation to live and stand tall.

Influence on Youth's religious identity through YouTube's engagement

The theme “Youth's Religious Identity” comes under this main theme. 15 out of 18 participants (83%) have expressed that their friends and family talks about their interest in Islam, 50% has changed their habits of the way they offer prayer or behave in front of others while 22% have changed their appearance of the way they dress. 56% has felt the change in their perception of

Islam while 44% have said the expression of their religious standing is necessary in front of others but 55% said it depends upon the kind of person to whom you're expressing that how well you can express. 11% have strong religious standing, 11% are becoming confident and another 11% are being inspired to start questioning themselves. 22% have gained the religious identity influenced by the YouTube Islamic content while 22% believes that religion is quite a person thing.

Observable shift in social attitude and religious behavior (religious tolerance & extremism) through YouTube's engagement

The themes generated through thematic analysis "Extremist Vs Tolerant", "Increased Religious Extremism", and "Increased Religious Tolerance" comes under this main theme. The 80% youth belonging to age group 20-26 (undergraduate students) among the 18 participants of three focus groups have expressed the acceptance towards other sects and religions. 61% have expressed that youth is becoming tolerant and 11% said that Youth is becoming liberal. While the other 50% said that Youth is becoming extremist. 28% have expressed that there are several factors behind being extremist such as lack of exposure, surroundings, and lack of authentic awareness. 39% have said that illiteracy is the major factor behind extremist behavior. 6% said that Islam is being imposed on others which indicates an increase in extremism while 11% have opinion that there is an increased criticism on Islam which shows the extremist behavior. 39% said there is still a balance between extreme and tolerant youth while 28% said that it depends on the person's type, personality, or upbringing that he/she can become extremist or tolerant.

Discussion

The thematic analysis of this study has revealed various codes and ultimately the major themes to sum up the findings. The analysis shows the various impacts of YouTube Islamic content on youth, mainly undergraduate students by highlight some potential positive and concerning outcomes. The data shows a significant role of YouTube Islamic content in shaping the behaviour of youth towards the personal faith and religious diversity. One of the most prominent and significant trends was observed in the theme "Increased Religious Tolerance", which indicated through the codes "Acceptance towards other sects and religions" and "Youth is becoming tolerant. This indicates that the Islamic content spreading through YouTube is leading to the acceptance among youth regarding various religions and the coexistence of multiple sects and preventing rigidity and sectarianism. These findings reflects with the research of Bunt (2018); Campbell (2012) which address that religious engagement on digital platforms can give way to pluralism and mitigate the biases associated with sectarianism. Exposure to the religious content on online platforms in Pakistan tends to create acceptance and empathy towards the religious minorities (Idrees & Noor, 2025). Another major theme is "Youth's Religious Identity", which is evident from the codes such as "friends and family talks about their interest in Islam" and "Change in perception of Islam". These findings suggests that the Islamic content on YouTube promotes the inter-personal and intra-personal religious dialogues as Cheong et al. (2012) suggested that social media is becoming a core platform to ensure the religious interactions and engagement among peers. Also, the research conducted by Akhter, Ahmad and Zubairi (2025) argues that youth living in urban areas of Pakistan discuss religion through online peer interactions which largely shape their spiritual and religious worldview. The further data reveals the online Islamic content engagement influencing the "Youth's Religious Identity" and "Youth's Religious Practices and Belief" through codes such as

“change in habit, disciplined in practicing Islam”, and “Stronger faith”, which shows the religious behaviours and identification of deeper faith within. A research conducted by Lewis (2015) suggested that the online Islamic content strengthen and construct the religious identities of Muslims in the modern world. Bilal (2024) asserted that Islamic Scholars on YouTube like Mufti Tariq Masood and Junaid Jamshed have influenced youth in adopting the religious behaviour and habits like punctuality in prayers, modesty in dressing, and preventing themselves from un-Islamic practices. Additionally, the analysis also highlights the potential divergent impacts which comes under the theme “Observable shift in social attitude and religious behavior (religious tolerance & extremism) through YouTube’s engagement” such as “Youth is becoming Extremist” and “Imposing Islam on others”, which indicates that the engagement of youth with online religious content leads to rigid interpretations of religion. This aligns with the study conducted by Zelkina (2011) about the amplification of algorithms of extreme content on YouTube. South Asian scholars like Abbas (2019) have shown concern that online platforms if left unregulated can increase rigid ideology and amplify sectarianism among youth especially when there’s a lack of media literacy. Lastly, there are some additional codes generated during the thematic analysis which is “No change in Individuals/Society” highlighting that the transformation through online Islamic content is not universal and it totally depends on the prior religious standing and individual knowledge. Campbell and Bellar (2022) have coined a term “religious digital fluency” where engagement with online religious content varies with the digital literacy of individuals. Moreover, (Biberman, Gul, & Ocakli, 2016) found in their study that the engagement of youth with online Islamic content in Pakistan varies according to their class and educational background along with their prior religious orientations. The perception related to the theme Increased Religious Tolerance partially broadens the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) by indicating that users not only seek and consume religious content for personal gratifications but also for the ideological appeasement and social unity, this outcome does not align with the classic framework of UGT. The theme Youth's Religious Identity reinforces the assumptions of Social Learning Theory (SLT), which states that modelled observation plays a crucial role in shaping the behavior and identity of an individual, where online religious scholars and organizations are taken as models. This goes parallel with social integrative needs of UGT (Bandura, 2008) and also with SLT of Bandura (2008), which mentions that the identity and behaviour of an individual are shaped according to the observation, experiencing behaviours of others, and modelling. However, the process of this influence has appeared complicated in terms of SLT as users have a bidirectional relationship with the online religious content as they have been seen critically conversing the religious ideas with others. These findings related to themes Youth’s Religious Identity and Youth’s Religious Practices and Belief posit the UGT’s importance on the active behavior of audience where youth (undergraduate students) are actively engaging with online religious content to have practical guidance and religious reinforcement. This suggests the normative dimension of UGT which has been often neglected as it talks about moral and behavioural regulation. The outcome of theme Observable shift in social attitude and religious behavior (religious tolerance & extremism) through YouTube’s engagement challenges SLT which posits that the selfless behavioural modelling tends to create a positive behavioural outcome. In contrary, the analysis shows that the model (religious scholars and religious organizations) and youth’s exposure to such online religious content leads to the spiritual hardening and moral ignorance. The findings of theme No change in Individuals/Society indicates the contextual limitation of both UGT and SLT where analysis shows that the prior religious beliefs, media literacy, and cognitive standing mediates how the religious content will be received as mere exposure does not ensure the impact, which is overlooked in both

UGT and SLT theories. This analysis challenges both theories by considering the underlining individual's prior standing on their religious and digital literacy. In other words, media cannot ensure media effect, which is critically emphasized in the media effects theories (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). Moreover, in context of this study, the application of UGT on YouTube Islamic content shows some limitations as youth seek ideological and moral assurance along with knowledge as well while probably encountered with the content gratifying their exclusion and judgement. Similarly, SLT face new challenges on algorithmic-driven platform like YouTube which gives visibility and reinforcement to selective and most seen religious figures to influence the behaviours, extending the scope of modelling past personal decision to YouTube's algorithm influenced exposure. The findings of this study suggests that the Islamic content on YouTube produced by religious scholars and organizations promotes, in general, religious tolerance, religious identity, and align youth's religious practices and beliefs but it also fosters extremism in cases where media literacy is not ensured which requires potential content regulation strategies. According to this analysis, this extremism isn't through violence but through dualistic representation of religion, rigid attitude while being religious, and accusative tones. Participants of this research have shown discomfort with the religious scholars who normalize exclusion and peers who suppress open dialogue and forced their opinions. The kind of extremism discussed by youth (undergraduate students) is linked to behaviour and tone rather than violence. It also includes the impact of scholars' rhetoric, algorithms that support such emotionally charged content, and hyped comment sections. Besides that, it can arise from the social circles through how it is shared or enforced. Ultimately such extremism on online spaces discourages polarity, empathy, and nuance among youth. In this way, these findings become a challenge for traditional media theories as it shows that youth can feel isolated rather than gratified by certain online Islamic content, and learning can be accomplished by platform design, emotion, and tone rather than by models.

CONCLUSION

This research study underscores the evolving and complex role of YouTube Islamic content in shaping the religious tendencies of youth in Pakistan. Most of the participants engage with online Islamic content to understand their religion deeply, to make their religious identity strong, and to adopt a tolerant way of living but others report the exposure to the rigid religious views which is perceived as extreme. The findings shows that while YouTube can enhance the religious growth and levels of tolerance, it can also develop rigid views, especially when critical thinking is absent. Such patterns indicate the socio-religious tensions in Pakistan where polarization of Islam, sectarianism, and huge gap created by traditional religious authorities can be seen. The findings have certain implications for religious educators, media regulators, and policymakers. Religious educators need to enter on online spaces with empathetic tone, theological sound content, and inclusivity in their messages. Media regulators have a challenge to create content moderation policies which can prevent algorithms' amplification without curbing freedom of expression. Policymakers should take initiative for youth's digital media literacy with critical and cultural evaluation of online religious content. It is a collective responsibility of education, media, and governing bodies to ensure this landscape supports spiritual growth, social cohesion, and ideological strength.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

This research study has a few limitations which can be fulfilled in future research and considered as the research gap. Due to less time duration of this research study, the focus group comprises of 6 members only. It can be 8-10 for the better generalizability of the research results. Though, this research study has employed purposive sampling technique but due to time constraints students from only two campuses of Iqra University were included in the research which reduces the diversity of the focus group members. For future research, different private and public sector universities can be a part of sampling to have a diverse opinion. Also, comparative analysis of two social media platforms e.g., YouTube vs. TikTok can be explored for sectarian affiliation and gendered experiences of online religious content. Lastly, while choosing the focus group members, be very cautious of choosing the members from same peer group as the participants from such peer groups feel restricted in sharing their true opinion due to fear of judgement.

Competing Interests

The authors declared no known competing interests.

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