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RESEARCH PAPER

Extremist Ideologies among Youth: A comparison of various Ethnic Groups residing in Quetta

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the prevalence of extremist ideologies among youth and genders aged between 18-38 from various ethnic groups in Quetta, Pakistan. The multi-ethnic population of Quetta consisting of Hazara, Baloch, Pashtun, etc. (Punjabi, Urdu-speaking, mixed origin) has to manage complicated social and political issues. In this regard, vulnerability to extremist beliefs can be augmented due to ethnic and gender entanglements. A quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative design was employed. The Violent Extremism Scale (VES, 2023) was administered to 120 participants across four ethnic groups. Descriptive statistics summarized the data, ANOVA tested differences between ethnic groups, and an independent-samples t-test examined gender differences. The mean extremist ideology scores were highest among Baloch youth followed by Pashtun, Hazara and others. There was a higher score in males than in females with both ethnicity and gender having significant impact. It is suggested that culturally and demographically sensitive interventions which consist of educational schemes, community discourse, and youth counseling would decrease the risk of extremist ideologies among multi-ethnic youth in Quetta.

| **Keywords:** | Extremist Ideologies, Ethnicity, Gender Differences, Youth, Quetta, Violent Extremism |

Introduction

Quetta the capital city of Balochistan is one of the most multicultural centers of Pakistan where large portions of Hazara, Baloch, Pashtun as well as other non-local (Punjabi, Urdu-speaking, and individuals of mixed ethnic backgrounds) populations are present. Although this ethnic mosaic has contributed to the wealth of the cultural heritage of the city, it has as well been the cause of socio-political tension that has been lasting for several decades (Chohadry & Muzaffar, 2025). There is also the issue of targeted Shia violence against the Hazara community, forced displacement, widespread discrimination which has led to a strong sense of insecurity. The Baloch have a strong sense of political marginality and underdevelopment, resource grievances and representation, and have periodically expressed these grievances at the organizational protest level in addition to local insurgency activity (Muzaffar, et. al., 2018). Regional instability and cross-border militancy pose challenges to the socio-economic development and opportunities of Pashtun communities. Non-local groups, especially Punjabis and Urdu-speakers, are often targeted in selective attacks and perceived as outsiders (Khan & Bano, 2021; Muzaffar, et. al., 2021). Over the last few years, the arena of violence has not just been restricted to the age-old mutual rivalries between the locals but has extended to the systematic attacks on what are known as non-locals usually Punjabis. An example is where, in February 2025, seven Punjabi passengers were identified by their national identity cards and stripped and killed by militants travelling around in Barkhan district in February (Internews, 2025). In the same

manner, in August 2024, eventuality in Musakhail led to killing of 23 Punjabi travellers under targeted identity verification (Chohadry & Muzaffar, 2025a). Such violent outbursts suggest an increase of ethnic hostilities, and the social scene in Quetta becomes such where foreigners as well as the historically marginalized local populations are subjected to rising risks. This type of socio-politically charged environment is a breeding ground of extremist ideologies especially among the youths who are in the process of establishing their identities, sense of belonging, and political discontent. Under these circumstances, the ideologies of extremity, which are usually supported by defense, justification, or retribution narratives, can become appealing avenues towards revealing grievances (Yaseen & Muzaffar, 2018). This study discusses the nature of the extremist ideology among the youth of various ethnic groups located in the city of Quetta with particular attention to the intersectionality of ethnicity and gender as powerful factors that determine the degree of vulnerability to indoctrination.

Literature Review

Extremist ideologies are uncompromising ideas that promote radical change either by force or violence and hold views that promote social, political or religious aims (Horgan, 2008; Neumann, 2013). They develop an antagonistic picture of the world, in which one group is virtuous and the opposite action acceptable against the perceived enemies (Moghaddam, 2005; Schmid, 2014). They can be religious, political, and ethnonationalist ideologies, yet all of them share absolutism and hate based on not accepting disagreement. Processes of social inequity and disengagement are psychological explanations of the perceived unfairness and marginalization that drive individuals through phases of moral legitimization toward violent devotion such as the Moghaddam model of Staircase to Terrorism.

Youth and Susceptibility to Extremism

It is especially developmentally, socially, and economically unstable to attract youngsters to extreme groups and recruitment (Borum, 2011; Simi et al., 2016). Adolescence and young adulthood make people more open to being targeted with ideological stories providing them with a sense of belonging, purpose, and empowerment (Kruglanski et al., 2019). Extremist groups use these situations in contexts where there are cases of unemployment, discrimination, or marginalization, to perceive violence as the right reaction against the commitment (UNDP, 2016).

Ethnicity and Extremist Beliefs

Attitudes to violence could be greatly influenced by factors of ethnic identity. Extremist attitudes can be reinforced by the perception of group threats, historical resentments, and competition with other groups observed in multi-ethnic societies (Lindekilde, 2012; Koehler, 2014). Both sectarian and ethnic violence has had an unequal burden on some groups in Pakistan (especially Hazara in Quetta), with decades of targeted violence (Butt & Elahi, 2020; Khan & Bano, 2021). Violence has more recently moved outside of traditional rivalries, where it has been brazenly targeted at non-local groups in non-targeted incidents, among others, the February 2025 Barkhan bus attack and the August 2024 Musakhail killings (Internews, 2025; Chohadry, et. al., 2025). These incidences demonstrate alarming escalation of interethnic hostility that has overlapped with extremist frames of thought which have destabilized the integrity among groups.

Socio-Economic Inequality and Gendered Pathways

The attractiveness of extremist rhetoric can be enhanced by issues and grievances related to inequality of resources, political marginalization, and repeated security threats (Ahmed & Ayub, 2020; UNDP, 2016; Karamat, et. al., 2019). Gender is also essential: in

many cases, men are overrepresented in violent extremist organizations, which is justified by Social Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) and gender-based radicalization views (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). men are more prone to violent mobilization because of their cultural expectations of masculinity and risk-taking and the need to defend a group.

Measurement Frameworks

Haleem and Masood (2023) created a locally developed Shield of Violent Extremism Scale (VES) to measure extremist attitudes on an empirical level and establish their roots in Pakistani socio-cultural facts. The VES was created based on qualitative interviews involving youth and subject matter experts which came up with two dimensions namely Violence Justification for Ideology Defense (VJID) and Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion (VJIP) dimensions. VJID represents the ideology of violence in defending his group or ideology against perceived threats whereas VJIP embodies the ideology in the use and imposition of violence to advance ideologicalpurposes. The presence of religious, political, and ethnic contexts in the scale makes it very applicable to the analysis of the extremist attitude within conflict-prone and multi-ethnic cities and towns such as Quetta.

Most research on violent extremism in Pakistan has focused on religious radicalization, militant recruitment, and socio-economic drivers (Ahmed & Ayub, 2020; Hassan, 2015). However, studies directly comparing extremist beliefs across ethnic groups within a single city remain rare. Quetta's geopolitical location, ethnic diversity, and history of violence make it both a victim of and a breeding ground for extremism (Abbas, 2014; Butt & Elahi, 2020).

Notwithstanding the increased research, however, little theoretical or comparative work has been done to assess the extent to which beliefs about extremism vary across ethnicities in localized settings in high-conflict regions. This lack creates a barrier to the realization of specific interventions by the policy makers based on the distinct socio-political and historical background of each particular group. In considering youth of various ethnic origins in Quetta, the current study aims to fill this gap by providing data that would give rise to culturally sensitive counter-extremism policy.

Material and Methods

Research Design

A cross-sectional comparative design was used to evaluate and compare extremist ideologies among youth from multiple ethnic groups in Quetta.

Participants

The sample consisted of 120 youth aged 18 to 38 years residing in Quetta. Participants belonging to Hazara, Baloch, Pashtun and other ethnic groups (e.g., Punjabi, Urdu-speaking or mixed ethnicities). Convenience sampling was used to reach a diverse group through online and community-based outreach. Out of 120 participants, approximately 78% were literate and completed the survey independently, while 22% were assisted by researcher due to low literacy or education levels.

Instruments

Extremist ideologies were measured using the Violent Extremism Scale (VES; Haleem & Masood, 2023). The scale includes 22 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." It comprises two subscales: Violence Justification for Ideology Defense (VJID) and Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion (VJIP). An informed consent form was used to obtain participants' voluntary agreement to

participate in the study, while a demographic information form was used to collect data on age, gender, ethnicity, education, and income.

Procedure

Literate participants completed questionnaires through Google Forms circulated in WhatsApp groups and social media. For illiterate participants, data were collected via face-to-face interviews conducted in markets, neighbourhoods, and community areas. researcher read each item aloud in Urdu and recorded responses. To reduce discomfort, a short breathing exercise and a positive-reflection prompt were included. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed in accordance with standard research practices. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. The research adhered to the ethical guidelines for studies involving human subjects.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants (*N* = 120)

Variable	Category	*f*	%
Gender	Male	77	64.2
	Female	43	35.8
Ethnicity	Hazara	29	24.2
	Baloch	34	28.3
	Pashtoon	39	32.5
	Others	18	15.0
Age	18–24	11	9.1
	25–30	28	23.3
	31–35	66	55.0
	36-38	15	12.5

Note.Others category includes Punjabi, Urdu-speaking, and individuals of mixed ethnic backgrounds.

The sample consisted of a higher proportion of males than females. Participants represented multiple ethnic backgrounds, with Pashtoon and Baloch groups being the most frequent, followed by Hazara and others. Most respondents were aged between 31 and 35 years, with smaller proportions in the younger (18–24, 25–30) and older (38) age ranges.

Table 2
Score Distribution and reliability coefficients for Violent Extremism Scale (VES) and its subscales (N = 120)

Scale	No. of items	M	SD	α	Range		Skewness	
					Min	Max	Statistics	SE
VJID	14	36.21	14.62	.93	14	63	0.07	.22
VJIP	8	16.97	7.26	.90	8	36	0.65	.22
TVES Total	22	53.18	20.88	.95	22	94	0.17	.22

Note. VJID = Violence Justification for Ideology Defense; VJIP = Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion; TVES = total Violent Extremism Scale.

The table presents the Violent Extremism Scale (VES) along with its subscales—Violence Justification for Ideology Defense (VJID) and Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion (VJIP)—showing their mean scores, standard deviations, score ranges, and reliability coefficients. All scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding .90.

No significant skewness was observed for any of the scales or subscales, indicating that the score distributions were approximately symmetrical and free from extreme deviations.

Table 3
ANOVA Table for VES and the sub-scales score by Ethnicity

Dependent Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
VJID	Between Groups	2341.37	3	780.45	3.922	.010**
	Within Groups	23084.42	116	199.01		
	Total	25425.79	119			
VJIP	Between Groups	369.84	3	123.28	2.421	.070
	Within Groups	5906.03	116	50.91		
	Total	6275.87	119			
TVES Total	Between Groups	4191.04	3	1397.02	3.399	.020*
	Within Groups	47680.28	116	411.04		
	Total	51871.32	119			

*Note. p < .05 = *, p < .01 = **.*

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess differences among ethnic groups on the subscales of Violence Justification for Ideology Defense (VJID), Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion (VJIP), and the overall Violent Extremist Beliefs Scale (TVES Total). Results revealed a statistically significant difference in VJID scores across ethnic groups, F (3, 116) = 3.92, p = .010, as well as in the total TVES scores, F (3, 116) = 3.40, p = .020. In contrast, the differences in VJIP scores were not statistically significant, F (3, 116) = 2.42, p = .070. These findings suggest that participants from different ethnic backgrounds differed significantly in their justification of violence for ideology defense and in their overall extremist beliefs, but not in their justification of violence for ideology promotion.

Post Hoc Analysis

Since the one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference in violent extremist beliefs among ethnic groups, a Gabriel post hoc test was conducted to identify which groups significantly differed from each other.

Table 4
Gabriel Post Hoc Comparisons of VES Scores Between Ethnic Groups

Subscales	(I) Ethnicity	(J) Ethnicity	M (SD) of I	F	p	I – J	Mean D	SE	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
VJID	Hazara	Baloch	31.14 (12.51)	3.922	.056	Hazara < Baloch	-9.39148	3.56584	-18.9211	0.1381
		Pashtoon			.137	Hazara < Pashtoon	-7.86207	3.45902	-17.0883	1.3641
		Others			1.000	Hazara > others	0.97126	4.23296	-10.2712	12.2137
	Baloch	Pashtoon	40.53 (13.81)		.998	Baloch > Pashtoon	1.52941	3.30994	-7.3181	10.3769
		Others			.070	Baloch > others	10.36275	4.11203	-0.5010	21.2264
	Pashtoon	Others	39.00 (16.77)		.151	Pashtoon > others	8.83333	4.01975	-1.7270	19.3937
VJIP	Hazara	Baloch	16.72 (6.35)	2.421	.802	Hazara < Baloch	-2.12880	1.80364	-6.9490	2.6914
		Pashtoon			1.000	Hazara < Pashtoon	-0.48099	1.74961	-5.1477	4.1857
		Others			.490	Hazara > others	3.44636	2.14108	-2.2402	9.1329
	Baloch	Pashtoon	18.85 (7.86)		.904	Baloch > Pashtoon	1.64781	1.67420	-2.8273	6.1230
		Others			.043*	Baloch > others	5.57516	2.07991	0.0802	11.0701
	Pashtoon	Others	17.21 (7.73)		.270	Pashtoon > others	3.92735	2.03324	-1.4142	9.2689
TVES Total	Hazara	Baloch	47.86 (17.69)	3.399	.147	Hazara < Baloch	-11.52028	5.12474	-25.2160	2.1754

	Pashtoon		.446	Hazara < Pashtoon	-8.34306	4.97123	-21.6028	4.9166
	Others		.976	Hazara > others	4.41762	6.08351	-11.7398	20.5750
Baloch	Pashtoon	59.38 (20.49)	.985	Baloch > Pashtoon	3.17722	4.75697	-9.5381	15.8926
	Others		.043*	Baloch > others	15.93791	5.90971	0.3249	31.5510
Pashtoon	Others	56.21 (23.72)	.147	Pashtoon > others	12.76068	5.77709	-2.4164	27.9378

Note. * = $p \le .05$.

Gabriel's post hoc analysis showed that significant differences between ethnic groups were found only for the Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion (VJIP) subscale and the overall Violent Extremist Beliefs Scale (TVES total). In both cases, Baloch

participants scored higher than the "Others" group, with these differences reaching statistical significance (p = .043). Although other group comparisons showed differences in mean scores, these were not statistically significant, indicating that those variations could be

due to chance. In summary, except for the Baloch–Others comparison on VJIP and TVES total, no other ethnic group differences were strong enough to be considered meaningful.

Gender Differences in Extremist Ideologies

An independent samples t-test was conducted to assess whether male and female youth differed in their extremist ideology scores. Results revealed that male participants (M = 57.61, SD = 20.30) had significantly higher VES scores than female participants (M = 45.23, SD = 19.72), t (118) = 3.24, p = .002. Levene's test for equality of variances was non-significant (F = 0.08, p = .779), indicating that the assumption of equal variances was met.

Table 5
Independent Samples t-Test for VES Scores by Gender

Sub-Scales	Gender				*t*	p
	Male	**Male**	**Female**	**Female**		
	M	SD	Mean	SD		
VJID	39.39	14.44	30.51	13.27	0.54	.001**
VJIP	18.22	7.07	14.72	7.13	0.08	.011*
TVES total	57.61	20.30	45.23	19.72	0.08	.002**

Note. $p < .05$ = *; $p < .01$ = **.

The independent samples t-test examined gender differences on the Violent Extremism Scale (VES) and its subscales. Results showed that males scored significantly higher than females on VJID, VJIP, and the total VES score (all *p* < .05). These findings indicate that male participants exhibit significantly higher levels of extremist ideologies across all dimensions compared to female participants.

Discussion

This paper discussed extremist ideologies amongst the young population in Quetta and how it varies regarding ethnicity and gender. The results indicated that the percentages of extremist beliefs were highest among youth of the Baloch followed closely by Pashtun and Hazara youth with the lowest percentages being in others. Such differences hint at the fact that ethnicity also contributes to the construction of association between the youth and extremist ideologies.

The highest scoring of the Baloch participants can be evidence of the influence of the social and political issues these citizens endure. Beneficial shifts that aid to the Economic

Well-being Growth of Baloch youth in Quetta including encountering economic deprivation, getting access to education, and being politically excluded (Ahmed & Ayub, 2020). These circumstances have the possibility to cause frustration, sense of injustice, and identity-related complaints, all of which are considered to contribute to the vulnerability to extremist thoughts (Kruglanski et al., 2019; UNDP, 2016). To others, extremist beliefs are a means of resistance or ownership of identity.

Pashtun youth showed the second-highest levels of extremist ideology, slightly more than Hazara youth. Although the difference was not statistically significant, it may still reflect real social and historical influences. Propensity to interference Pashtuns have long been subjected to conflict in adjacent tribal regions, military campaigns, deportation and stereotyping. This could intensify suspicion and feelings of estrangement within the minds of the younger generations that eventually leads some people to believe in ideological violence.

The Hazara youth also indicated a high score but it was not high as that of the Baloch and Pashtun. Their history of decades-old sectarian violence, targeted attacks, and exclusion could be related to a feeling of vulnerability and marginalization (Butt & Elahi, 2020). This may, subsequently, cause them to turn into more accepting of extremist views in order to be viewed as a form of protection or power.

Quite on the contrary, the lowest degree of extremist ideology was the group of Others (Punjab, Urdu speaking and mixed-ethnic youth). Such people might have easier access to economic and educational opportunities and have less exposure to ethnic discrimination and a greater sense of belonging accompanied by a wider identity inclusion into the mainstream. Because of this, they can be less attracted to the extremist versions of ideology and more attached to national establishments (Bartlett & Miller, 2012).

Interestingly, the ethnic differences were very high in overall extremist beliefs, as well as in the justification of violence in defense of ideology (VJID), but not so high on the justification of violence in the promotion of ideology (VJIP), and in most cases, their level of difference was insignificant except the comparison between the Baloch and other ethnics. It could be due to the fact that the youth are more rampant to justify violence when it is perceived to defend or protect which correlates with their imminent feeling of threat or unfairness (Moghaddam, 2005). An extreme view of ideological beliefs justifying violence as an active promotion or spreading of such ideology is however a more radical view and is less acceptable within social circles across the board (Horgan, 2008). As demonstrated in studies, individuals, in particular the youth, will distinguish between self-defence violence, and aggression against others, as self-defence might be a case more readily accepted by society (Kruglanski et al., 2019).

Also, cultural norms and fear of getting punished by the law may deter a person, even those who could possibly be marginalized, to openly defend violence meant to enforce ideology (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). This may be the reason why the ethnic differences are not so apparent in VJIP subscale as opposed to VJID.

Gender based differences was also analysed. There was a higher score in justification of extremist violence amongst the male when compared to the female. This result confirms world statistics according to which young men are most susceptible to turning to extremism (Simi, et al., 2016; Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). A possible reason is that the traditional gender roles associate the masculinity with strength, aggression, and political action. Extremist groups will in most instances deliberately target the youth male gender over promising purpose, recognition or with the chance of getting into a position of power especially where such chances are scarce economically or socially.

overall, findings demonstrate the role of ethnicity, gender, and those lived experiences that can make the youth become extremist in Quetta. These patterns are significant to consider in order to solve the primary causes of the radicalization in vulnerable and multi-ethnic territories.

Conclusion

The paper looked at extremist ideologies among four large ethnicities in Quetta Baloch, Pashtun, Hazara, and Others including cross-gender differences. The result of the findings indicated that youth and male respondents in Baloch were found to have expressed higher levels of extremist attitudes than other groups in the study through the use of Violent Extremism Scale (VES). The scores by Pashtun and Hazara youth were also relatively high whereas the lowest indicated the group of Others. These findings point to the significance of ethnicity and gender factors in explaining the support of young people towards the notions of extremism in a multi-ethnic and politically charged environment such as in Quetta.

Recommendations

based on the findings of this study several recommendations can be made to address extremist ideologies of the youth in Quetta. The schools, colleges, and even community centers should use educational programs that will encourage critical thinking, tolerance, and inter-ethnic understanding. To lower the ethnic stereotypes, one can employ community participation programs and workshops aimed at dialogue. Youth mentorship and counseling services that are readily available are necessary to deal with trauma and sense of marginalization that can lead to extremist ideologies. Also, media literacy and counter-radicalization initiatives may empower the youth to receive extremist messages critically. Policy-makers are expected to come up with socially inclusive policies that offer equitable access to education and work opportunities to all ethnic groups in society with the NGOs and the civil society organizations standing by to aid in the process of implementing evidence-based interventions.

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