

Original Article

Extremism Content in Social Media: A Model of Young Followers Extremism Behavior

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Abstract - Recently, a lot of attention has been paid to radicalization, which may lead to extremism, more specifically, the technological advances that bear the potential for easier communication and networking. Radicals, violent extremists, and terrorists can reach a wider audience due to their narratives and the technologies available, such as social media networks. They use such them to extremist ideology, promote radicalized views, and recruit new members worldwide, and young people are especially at risk. Researchers and policymakers are increasingly concerned with understanding the processes of extremism to be able to control youth violent extremism. Empirical studies have been conducted to address the topic of social media and violent extremism. However, most of the related studies focused on analyzing content on social media to detect extremism using AI and machine learning techniques narratives. Less attention has been given to understanding the extremism behavior of the extremists' followers in social media groups, pages, and forums. This research aims to propose a model of extremist behavior among the young followers of radicalism, extremism, or terrorism content in social media. By exploring extremist behavior in the context of social media and revisiting the related theories, an integrated model is proposed to identify the factors influencing young people's extremist behavior in the context of social media. The proposed model may promote a general understanding of the extremism behavior among young followers of radical content on social media platforms. It also may provide new insights for policymakers to create more effective counter-radicalization programs to protect young people from being dragged into extremism acts.

Keywords - Social Media, Extremism content, Young people, Behaviour, Radicalism, Counter-radicalization.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, extremism is a sensitive issue for a lot of nations around the world. It can be regarded as the process of misguiding an individual, resulting in committing terrorist acts. Terrorist activities performed by extremists have been boosted with internet and social media networks emergence. Individuals can readily express themselves easily using these platforms as they are free to use and do not go through a review process. Extremists make the most of social media characteristics, such as sharing opinions without needing to go through an editorial process, being anonymous, and reaching a wider audience.

This allows them to misguide others possessing limited knowledge (especially young adults) and conduct extremist acts. Over the past few years, the methods of propaganda and communication employed by extremist groups on social media have successfully enlisted thousands of individuals worldwide. As a result, the online spread of extremist ideologies has evolved into a significant global concern.[1, 2].

The lack of moderation on social media, along with the rapid circulation of messages, offers extremist groups the ability to disseminate extremist content online effectively. Extremists have the ability to reach out to individuals they identify as potential recruits for radicalization via social media, eliminating the need for face-to-face interactions [3]. More specifically, extremist groups primarily focus on the most vulnerable and active part of society – the young people [4].

According to ŠIŇANSKÁ, et al. [5], young people become an interesting target group for extremists. Due to the unstable situation in many Middle Eastern countries, more specifically starting in 2011, Young individuals face challenges such as financial difficulties, conflicts with parents, social exclusion, cultural humiliation, feelings of99 worthlessness, and more. This may push these people to follow extremist groups [6, 7]. In the context of social media, young people are more likely to follow the directions and beliefs of extremists [8, 9].



Young individuals who have experienced or perceive social exclusion from a particular group may find themselves enticed to join radicalized and extremist organizations. [10]. They may engage in more destructive activities, and they tend to have more violent behaviour [11]. Adams, et al. [12] and Borum [13] pointed out that young people who have experienced social exclusion easily may be invited and join a radicalized group.

In the Arab world, more specifically in Saudi Arabia, efforts have been made to prevent extremist ideologies from spreading to youth. Efforts like monitoring speeches in mosques, reforming Islamic textbooks, and modifying media content are implemented to curb the dissemination of radical activities. These measures aim to hinder extremist groups from propagating their radical ideologies and spreading extremist ideas through conventional means [9, 14]. Moreover, Saudi Arabia is making continuous efforts and introducing policies to mitigate radicalization. However, stopping it on a platform that allows free opinion sharing is very difficult, making the problem challenging. Extremists have effectively utilized social media platforms to propagate extremist ideologies and influence public opinion. Studies have been done to understand propaganda tactics used by radicals and extremists through social media platforms [5, 9, 15-19]. However, there is limited research that has provided evidentiary proof that such a link remains, and there is no data that highlights factors influencing young people's extremism behavior as potential recruits of extremist groups over social media networks [4, 19, 24, 25].

Although considerable research has been done on understanding extremism, yet limited research has been conducted on proposing frameworks for combating it [26]. Most of the available ones provide a fragmented approach instead of a unified framework solution. This study aims to understand the factors influencing young people's extremist behavior on social media by considering different theoretical perspectives, including social media context, social influence, and personality traits. A conceptual integrated model is proposed to identify the relationships among factors from these different contexts and the behavior of young followers of extremist content on social media. The research is divided into the following sections. The first section covers the theoretical background of the problem and the studies relevant to the problem highlighted. The second section covers the proposed model to address the problem highlighted. The next section provides a general discussion followed by a conclusion and recommendations for future research in the area.

2. Theoretical Background

The technology revolution, more specifically social media, has dramatically changed social interaction. In the present day, numerous young adults invest a significant amount of time on social media platforms [27].

Despite the advantages of social media, it serves as an avenue for exploitation by extremist groups. These groups utilize social media to disseminate extremist ideas and radical ideologies. As noted by Awan [28], the objective of extremist groups is to radicalize and propagate their propaganda and ideology among sympathizers worldwide, leveraging social media as a tool. Through these platforms, extremist groups can recruit members, endorse violence, and establish international communities [27]. Specifically, they target young people due to their increased online presence, making them more susceptible to encountering extremist content. Young individuals constitute the most vulnerable demographic, responding to extremist material in ways distinct from those of other age groups [29].

Regarding radicalization and extremism, several underlying factors have been identified, including depressive tendencies or suicidal thoughts [30], vulnerability [31], and feelings of injustice or humiliation [32]. Additionally, some authors emphasize the significance of identity and belonging [33-35]. The pursuit of identity is a crucial factor for young individuals who join extremist groups or youth gangs [36]. This phase is characterized by a need for excitement, experimentation with personal limits, and exposure to potentially perilous situations among young people. Consequently, they may engage in destructive behaviors such as crime, drug abuse, political extremism, or violence [11].

Several theories and models have been used to study the socio-psychological behavior of social media users in relation to extremism content, including Situational Action Theory (SAT), Social Identity Model, Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE model), Social Influence Model of Violent Extremism, Self-Categorization Theory, and Expectancy Violations Theory.

2.1. Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE model)

The SIDE model is widely used in disciplines such as human and social psychology and interaction/communication studies. This model covers the effects of anonymity when used on a group of people. The model was developed in response to the need to study how people on the internet can become nobodies, yet their actions can be uncivil, causing harm to society [37]. SIDE has two main dimensions: social identity and deindividuation.

Social identity refers to how individuals see themselves as members of society or a particular social group. Conversely, deindividuation suggests that individuals are more likely to exhibit unrestrained behaviors when they are part of a group [15, 19]. This model is among the few models that examine the effects of computer-aided communication on society. This model is widely regarded as robust in elucidating and comprehending how individuals behave in group situations [38].

According to Vilanova, et al. [39], SIDE stands out as the most promising framework for analyzing group behavior and explaining the uninhibited behaviors of individuals in the groups. Much research has been done using SIDE as lenses to understand online group behavior. A study by Mikal, et al. [40] showed that the internet represents a potential space where group identity can prominently emerge, as posited by the SIDE perspective. As a result, an opportunity exists to cultivate prosocial and positive identities online, in harmony with the mindset advocated by the SIDE model. Illustratively, various global hashtag movements have united into groups with a moral mission against socio-economic injustices [15].

2.2. Social Influence Model of Violent Extremism

When trying to understand the social influence of radical views on society, one needs to look at the capability of social media platforms to reach users globally. This is important as it helps to understand the users' perception when coming across such content. Moreover, one needs to cater to the different types of media types through which it is being spread, such as video, audio, text, images, etc.

These factors need to be looked into by understanding social media platforms better and how they can be used for such purposes [19, 41]. In this regard, the Social Influence Model of Violent Extremism (SIM-VE) aims to capture three types of influences usually found in such content. These include social, ideological, and behavioral realms. Understanding these can help us better understand the thinking process behind a person that compels him to join such a cause and engage in violent extremism [42, 43]. Moreover, these domains are interlinked, where the decisions and choices made by a person will also affect those near him [44]. According to Forgas and Williams [45], the SIM-VE model projects a person's social influence shaped by his influences in various domains (highlighted above). Stern [46] highlighted that there are different stages where a person may be exposed to committing such acts, which can be judged by looking into his person's history, the people he sits with, and the area where he lives. Moreover, these social influences affect a person's perception and behavior toward things. Thus, by seeing such content and due to the social influence, they start to accept it, changing their values and beliefs, and this results in committing violent acts that are socially and morally impermissible [44].

2.3. Personality Traits

Every person is unique as they have different hobbies, likes, and thinking processes. Moreover, every person may express themselves differently; some are introverted, while others may be extroverted. Thus, a person is said to have "personality traits," characteristics that define him and make him different from others [47]. This is also one of the ways to analyze people having different traits [48]. It was found Allport [49] to explain that people vary from each other according to the strength of their primary trait dimensions.

According to this theory, "Personality" is human behavior influenced by the amalgamation of psychophysiological patterns that shape a person's thought process, feelings, behavior, and interaction [50, 51]. The differences in people's personality traits can be used to create taxonomies to understand better a certain group of people with similar personality traits [52]. Different situations can be tested to see how people react to them, and one can find patterns that people have similar personality traits to be similar [53].

McCrae and Costa Jr [54] categorized personality traits into five different individual behaviors dimensions. These include agreeableness, neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience (intellect), and conscientiousness [55, 56]. These categories have been used successfully in judging a person's personality and, thus, his behavior towards different things [57]. Thus, the model has been validated as being capable of categorizing people based on their behavior by identifying their personality traits [58].

3. Conceptual Proposed Model

Based on SIM-VE, the traits belonging to an individual can be used as a factor when judging larger groups, which can be used to judge how the engagement will influence extremism in online social interactions [41]. Accordingly, we can propose a person's motivation behind it to help us understand why people participate in extremist content in virtual communities. Dholakia, et al. [59] emphasized that the community's ability to influence its members depends on the extent to which participation can fulfill these motives. Moreover, because information relating to personality traits is unavailable online, thus people who are usually engaging in online discussions are more likely to be misguided by such radical content and increase group identity [37]. While the individual traits information is not available, the group can be judged, which can help us understand that the group of people participating is likely to have these set of personality traits. However, some results suggest that individual factors are more important than group factors online, especially when dealing with troubling members of the group which [37, 60]. Therefore, personality traits are suggested to have an influence on young people's extremism behavior through social influence in the context of social media. Personality traits include characteristics belonging to an individual who can allow them to communicate with people regarding their interests and share their perceptions about them. People have different interests and personality traits, making two people react differently to the same people and things [47, 61]. With regard to the research topic, these individual traits can be used to predict human behavior when the individual is communicating online [62-65]. In addition, social identity allows for recognizing the individual traits that make him part of the group [59]. According to Ducof [41], the social feature of social media platforms that compels individuals to be an active part of the community by building their identity through participating is a major reason for their influence towards violent extremism.

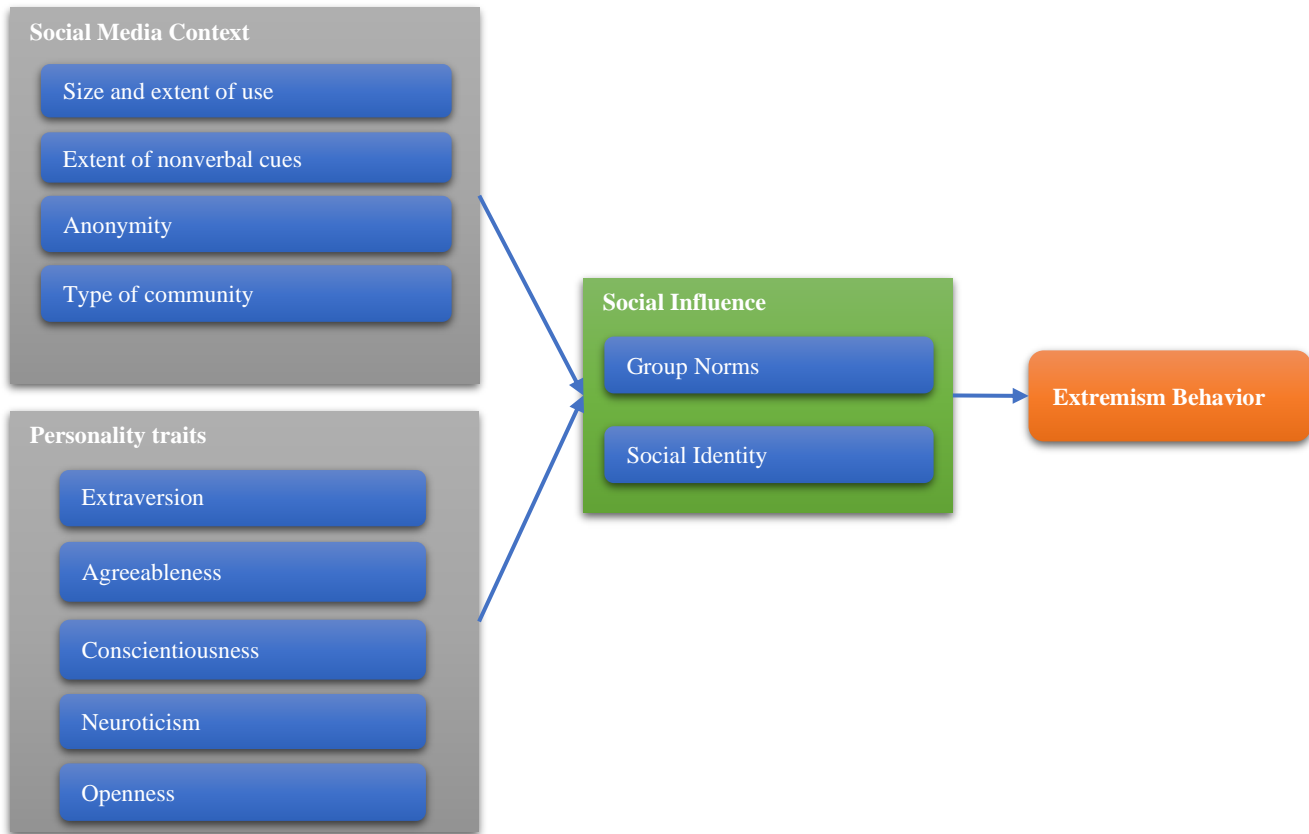


Fig. 1 The research proposed model

Thus, social media characteristics play a role in constituting the social influence that may predict young people's extremist behavior. These characteristics may include size and extent of use, extent of nonverbal cues, anonymity, and type of community [37]. Figure 1 illustrates the integrated proposed model based on social influence, personality traits, and social media platform characteristics to identify the factors influencing young people's extremism behavior.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Disseminating a culture of moderation and repudiating violence and extremism is an important role of governments and associated institutions. The government affirms protecting the youth against extremism and radical ideologies, more specifically in the electronic open space. Social media networks have become an important asset to these extremist groups to spread their radical ideologies, promote radicalized views, and recruit new members, more specifically young people, worldwide. The extremist behavior of young followers of social media ideological content needs to be controlled. Identifying the factors predicting this behavior is of high significance. This study proposed an integrated model of young extremism behavior in the context of social media. The proposed model considers the interpersonal perspectives of young followers of ideological contents, context characteristics

of social media platforms, and the problem domain of extremist behavior. Accordingly, the model was built based on three associated theories: the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects, the Social Influence Model of Violent Extremism, and personality traits. The characteristics of social media, such as size and extent of use, the presence of nonverbal cues, anonymity, and the type of community, along with individual traits like openness to others and ideas, interest in conversation, and receptiveness to perceptions, can potentially impact extremist behavior through the norms of the group and the social identity features of social influence. For future research, the measurements of the proposed model's constructs can be used to develop an instrument to empirically examine the impact of the identified factors of the extremism behavior of young followers of ideologies groups' accounts on social media platforms. This study enriches literature by providing an integrated model based on a solid theoretical foundation of three underpinning theories. In addition, it may enhance researchers' and policymakers' understanding of the factors that may influence young people following extremist content on social media. Furthermore, this study may provide recommendations for policymakers to implement repudiating violence and counter-radicalization programs based on the most critical factors affecting the extremism behavior of social media extremist content followers.

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