Negative Affect Mediates Perceived Marginalization and Violent Extremism among Students with Diverse Ethnic Backgrounds

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Abstract

This study examined different ethnic groups of Pakistani students. The general hypothesis was that marginalized would lead to greater negative affect that in turn would lead to beliefs about violent extremism. The sample consisted of 168 female and 158 male university students ($N = 326$) that belonged to Punjabi ($n = 50$), Sindhi ($n = 36$), Pushtun ($n = 41$), Baluchi ($n = 37$), Kashmiri ($n = 33$), Muhajir ($n = 36$), Saraiki ($n = 42$), and Gilgiti ($n = 52$) ethnicities and age ranged in between 18 to 35 ($M = 23.37$, $SD = 3.02$) years. Scales used in this study included Perceived Societal Marginalization (PSM, Bollwerk et al., 2021) Negative Affect Scale, from Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS, Watson et al., 1998), and Violent Extremism Scale (VES, Haleem & Masood, 2023). A mediation model analysis confirmed our general hypothesis that perceived marginalization indeed influenced stronger beliefs about violent extremism (direct effect) and this marginalization affected violent extremist beliefs through NA (indirect effect). All three measures were positively related to each other; and men scored significantly higher on all these measures than women. In the light of the findings, it is discussed that how in-group out-group marginalization affects negative emotions and affects violent extremism in young university students with diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Keywords: perceived societal marginalization, negative affectivity, violent extremism, youth, university students, ethnicity, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushtun, Baluchi, Kashmiri, Muhajir, Saraiki, Gilgiti.

Violent extremism is recognized as a major security concern (Alava et al., 2017; Siegel et al., 2019) growing around the world (Borum, 2011; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018) and Pakistan (Ahmed & Jafri, 2020; Khan, 2015). Extremism is based on "beliefs and actions of people who support or use violence to achieve ideological, religious or political goals and violent extremism includes terrorism and other forms of politically motivated violence (UNESCO, 2017)." In contemporary research, ideological violent extremism has received fair bit of attention (Sageman, 2014) but more so for terrorist groups and organizations (Lombardi et al., 2014) and less so for individuals and lesser so for youth (De Waele & Pauwels, 2014). Violent extremism in youth (15-30 years) is usually caused by radical views indoctrinated in earlier years (Sageman, 2008).

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Whether religious, ethnic, or politically driven, extremist views and ideologies challenge contemporary societies. To negotiate extremism, governments use deadly force rather than reconciliation engaging communities with sociopolitical solutions that can reduce grievance, anger, and a sense of injustice that legitimizes terrorism in the first place (Briggs et al., 2006). Many governments argue they need to use force against extremism to keep national security (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017; Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018) to control violent extremism (Briggs et al., 2006; Lombardi et al., 2014). But applying force results in reaction from many younger people who use extreme violence as a way to get their rights (Ngari & Reva, 2017). Researchers (Agnew, 2006; Haleem et al., 2023; Lombardi et al., 2014) recognize youth groups that are disempowered (for example by governments) or exploited by other extremist groups (Lombardi et al. 2014; Pauwels et al., 2020) are susceptible to developing extremist beliefs, such people do lie on the extreme end of the bell curve (Dalgaard-Neilsen, 2010).

There is no single trajectory that can predict the youth's vulnerability toward radicalization (Bhui et al., 2014) and factors like marginalization (Pauwels & Schils, 2016) religious or ethnic discrimination, and racism (Agnew, 2017), and negative life experiences (Simi et al., 2016), poverty and prejudice (Bhui et al., 2014) affect radicalization. Studies have highlighted factors like exposure to violence, feeling of injustice, relative deprivation, perceived marginalization, and

perceived discrimination (Freilich et al., 2015; Pauwels & Schils, 2016; Piazza, 2012; Simi et al., 2016) lead individuals to develop violent extremist attitudes. Furthermore, people who are socially isolated are more prone to involve in violent extremism (Losel et al., 2018). Studies show loneliness predicts pro-violence views, desire to involve in violent activities, and justify violence (Vergani et al., 2020). Attraction to radical groups is frequently observed in lonely people; these groups promise a sense of belongingness in exchange for justifying and using violence (Doosje et al., 2016).

Strain theory proposes, violent extremism results when individuals experience collective strain for example, perceived marginalization, vicarious trauma, and injustice to the identified group (Agnew, 2010; De Waele, & Pauwels, 2014; Nivette et al., 2017) that holds ethnic, religious, or a social ideology (Piazza, 2012). The theory explains attitudes towards extremism and coping behaviors are mechanisms toward unpleasant life experiences, conditions, and treatment (Agnew, 2006). Studies have further indicated that collective strain like perceived marginalization indirectly induces violent extremism through negative emotions (Agnew, 2002; Huesmann et al., 2017). However, there are individual differences, according to Harper (2018), some segments of the population subscribe to radical ideologies more than others.

Historical observations note, countries with youthful age structures, at least 60% of the workforce under thirty engage in greater number of wars than more evenly distributed age demographics (McGilloway et al., 2015). Transition from adolescence to early adulthood is crucial time when radicalization and violent extremist beliefs can emerge (Jahnke et al., 2020; Schils & Verhage, 2017), largely, because personal and social identity is developing, during this time people are more receptive to societal ways (Freilich & LaFree, 2015) for example, they are sensitive to injustice (McMurtry & Curling, 2008), which can fuel violence, delinquency and antisocial behaviors (Haleem & Masood, 2022; Jahnke et al., 2020; Schils & Verhage, 2017). People who join terrorist organizations are around 16 to 28 years; where 80 percent are males, 20 percent females (also see Dastgir, 2019); most of them come from poor backgrounds, however, some are wealthy; most are illiterate or less educated, few are college and university graduates (Decker & Pyrooz, 2011). As said above, younger individuals (Bhui et al., 2014) are more vulnerable (García & Marks, 2017) and are prone to seeking refuge with extreme ideologies and groups that purport to give their followers significance (Kruglanski et al., 2014) that is why a large number of extremist groups from Pakistan, Bangladesh, North India, Afghanistan and Siri Lanka have emerged strongly associated with ethnicity and religion.

Since September 9/11, 2001, a number of young people in Pakistan have been exposed to perpetual effects of violent extremism because Pakistan-US war on terror (Ahmed & Jafri, 2020) took place in their neighborhoods, this has led to fastest growing number (60%) of young individuals under the age of 30 become part of terrorism. International war against terror has severely impacted Pakistan, with economic, political and social losses straining the country's fabric and infrastructure (Fayyaz, 2020, Sabir, 2007). Notable cases where ordinary youth got involved in violent extremism include mob lynching of Mashal Khan, a student at the university of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2017 (Ahmed & Jafri, 2020), and involvement of a medical student, Sadia Aziz, who volunteered to manage a sleeper cell for Al-Qaeda (Sahoutara, 2019).

Research on violent extremism in Pakistan has primarily focused on risk factors related to ideology, religion, law enforcement, armed conflict, sectarianism, poor governance, political instability, provincial grievances, economic disparity, and illiteracy (Feyyaz, 2013; Winthrop & Graff, 2010); however, other factors like contextual, geopolitical, and regional backgrounds (Zaidi, 2011) and psychological factors have received little attention (Abdullah & Saeed, 2016), or perceived marginalization. The following study focuses on these two factors and looks at groups of young university students from different regions of Pakistan and measure their perceived marginalization, negative affect and beliefs about violent extremism.

Hypotheses
1. Perceived marginalization (a composite of economic, political and cultural marginalization, see PSM below) would positively associate with negative affect and violent extremism; and negative affect would positively relate to violent extremism.
2. Men will express greater perceived marginalization, negative affect, and violent extremism than women.

Method

A cross-sectional study was conducted to examine the relation between perceived marginalization, negative affect, and violent extremism in students by using a convenient sampling technique.

Sample

A convenient sample of 158 male and 168 female ($N = 326$) students from public and private universities was used in this study. The age ranged between 18-35 ($M = 23.37$, $SD = 3.02$) years and belonged to various ethnic backgrounds that included Punjabis ($n = 50$), Sindhis ($n = 36$), Pashtuns ($n = 41$), Baluchis ($n = 37$), Kashmiris ($n = 33$), Muhajirs ($n = 36$), Saraiki ($n = 42$) and Gilgitis ($n = 51$), with about equal number of males and females in these groups.

Measures

Perceived Societal Marginalization (PSM) Scale

Developed by Bollwerk et al. (2021) PSM measures perceptions of being unappreciated, unimportant and depowered by society in which the individual lives. People think they have little value and are poorly appraised by their own social groups in domains of economy (e.g., *The work of people like me is not valued enough by society*), culture (e.g., *The cultural interests of people like me are given too little consideration in society*), and politics (e.g., *Most politicians do not care what people like me think*)." Bollwerk et al. (2021) describe PSM consists of 15 items (no item reversed scored) with three subscales economic (or perceived economic marginalization, 5 items), culture (or perceived cultural marginalization, 5 items), and political (or perceived political marginalization, 5 items). Each item is measured on a 6-point Likert scale with response categories that range from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly Agree*). Composite scores for PSM range from 15-90, where higher numbers represent greater perceived marginalization. In this study the composite score of PSM was used. Internal consistency of PSM is

excellent (α = .95) followed by its social domains, economy (α = .91), culture (α = .88) and politics (α = .95) based on two studies carried out by the authors (Bollwerk et al., 2021, 2024).

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS)

Developed by Watson et al. (1998) PANAS reliably measures daily affect, divided into two emotional dimensions, positive (happy, joyful, excited, energetic, and enthusiastic etc.) and negative (sad, blue, downhearted, nervous, and jittery etc.). Each dimension or subscale consists of 10-items where the participants were asked to indicate "to what extent they felt each of the emotions on that day (Mroczek et al., 2015), on a 5-point Likert scale that range from 1 (*Not at All*) to 5 (*Very Much*). When summed across the 10 items they yield scores ranging from 10 to 50 for (NA) and positive affect (PA), where higher scores represented greater affect. The PANAS scales have acceptably high internal consistencies, with alphas ranging from .84 to .90 (Van Steenbergen et al., 2021; Watson et al., 1988). For this study only NA scores were taken and used in the mediation model (see below).

Violent Extremism Scale (VES)

Developed by Haleem and Masood (2023), VES measures violent extremist beliefs in general public. This scale was standardized on a group of university students from Pakistan and since the sample of this study was like the sample on which VES was developed this match insured the model, we were testing to work effectively. The VES contains items that measure beliefs that support violence that have radical, ideological, religious, and political underpinnings. For example, it contains items like, *If someone insults (blasphemes) my religion I will endorse killing him/her*, or *There is no harm in resorting to violence to promote your political ideology*. There are 22 items (no item reversed scored) in VES and consists of two subscales *Violence Justification for Ideology Defense* (VJID, 14 items) and *Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion* (VJIP, 8 items). Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale with response categories ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Composite scores for VES range from 22-110 (VJID: 14-70, VJIP: 8-40). High scores on VES indicate greater beliefs or perceptions about violent extremism. The scale and subscales have adequate to good internal consistencies, VES (α = .88) was higher than VJID (α = .87) and VJIP (α = .76) with a high convergent validity (r = .84) with Moral Disengagement Scale (Bandura et al., 1996) reported by the authors (Haleem & Masood, 2021).

Procedure

For data collection all participants were asked to complete PSM, PANAS, VES and a brief demographic sheet. The study received ethical approval from the National Institute of Psychology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, which was followed by sampling participants after their consent was taken. They were briefed about their personal information and data would be kept confidential and anonymous. All participants were briefed that they can quit the study at any point without penalty and were thanked for their participation. Statistical analysis included descriptive, correlational and mediational (Model 4) analyses (Hayes, 2013) carried out on SPSS version 28.0 (IBM Corp, 2021).

Results

Table 1 shows internal consistencies of scales and subscales were adequate to good (Cronbach's alphas = .73-.88). Negative emotions or NA and PSM positively and significantly ($p < .01$) correlated (r = .38), and so did NA with VES (r = .31), and its subscales VJID (r = .33) and VJIP (r = .23). Similarly, PSM positively and significantly ($p < .01$) correlated with VES (r = .32), and its subscales VJID (r = .37) and VJIP (r = .22). It was no wonder to find that VES correlated very strongly and significantly ($p < .01$) with its subscales VJID (r = .93) and VJIP (r = .90); correlation (r = .69) between VJID and VJIP was slightly less but significant ($p < .01$) nevertheless (see Table 1 below). This supported our first hypothesis.

Table 1

Inter-correlation among Scales and Subscales (N = 326)

	Scale or Subscale	*M*	*SD*	α	PSM	NA	VES	VJID	VJIP
1	PSM	47.27	13.71	.88	-	.38**	.32**	.37**	.22**
2	NA	28.25	7.74	.77		-	.31**	.33**	.23**
3	VES	69.71	11.59	.86			-	.93**	.90**
4	VJID	40.63	7.03	.83				-	.69**
5	VJIP	29.09	5.57	.73					-

Note. PSM = Perceived Societal Marginalization, Eco = Economic, Cult = Cultural, Pol = Political, NA = Negative Affect, VES = Violent Extremism Scale; VJID = Violence Justification for Ideology Defense; VJIP = Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion
**$p < .01$

Table 2
Comparison of Men (n = 158) and Women (n = 168) Measured on Scales and Subscales

Scale or Subscale	Men M(SD)	Women M(SD)	d
PSM	48.88(13.57)	45.76(13.70) [*]	.23
NA	29.74(7.50)	27.15(7.79) [**]	.33
VES	71.60(11.22)	67.10(11.70) [**]	.39
VJID	41.76(6.71)	39.56(7.18) [**]	.31
VJIP	29.82(5.83)	28.39(5.23) [*]	.25

Note. PSM = Perceived Societal Marginalization, NA = Negative Affect, VES = Violent Extremism Scale; VJID = Violence Justification for Ideology Defense; VJIP = Violence Justification for Ideology Promotion, d = Cohen's d [*]$p < .05$, [**]$p < .01$

Table 2 presents a comparison between men and women across scales and subscales and shows that men significantly ($p < .05$) scored higher than women on perceived marginalization, NA, violent extremism, violence justification for ideology defense, and violence justification for ideology promotion. In other words, men perceived themselves as more marginalized, had greater NA, and expressed greater beliefs about violent extremism than women, thus supporting second hypothesis. And though these differences were significant across gender, one should be mindful, mean composite ratings by women on scales and subscales were high as well, only about 9% (4.8-8.7% range) less than men.

Mediation Effect

Mediation analysis revealed a significant direct effect ($\beta = .20$, 95% CI [.11, .29]) of perceived marginalization on violent extremism, and a significant effect of negative emotions on violent extremism ($\beta = .33$, 95% CI [.16, .49]). Furthermore, negative emotions significantly mediated between perceived marginalization and violent extremism ($\beta = .08$, 95% CI [.03, .14]) confirmed by Sobel test ($z = 3.48$, $p < .001$). The total effect perceived marginalization including negative affect on violent extremism was also significant ($\beta = .27$, 95% CI [.19, .36]) see Figure 1.

Figure 1.
The Direct and Indirect Effect of Perceived Marginalization on Violent Extremism Mediated by Negative Affect.
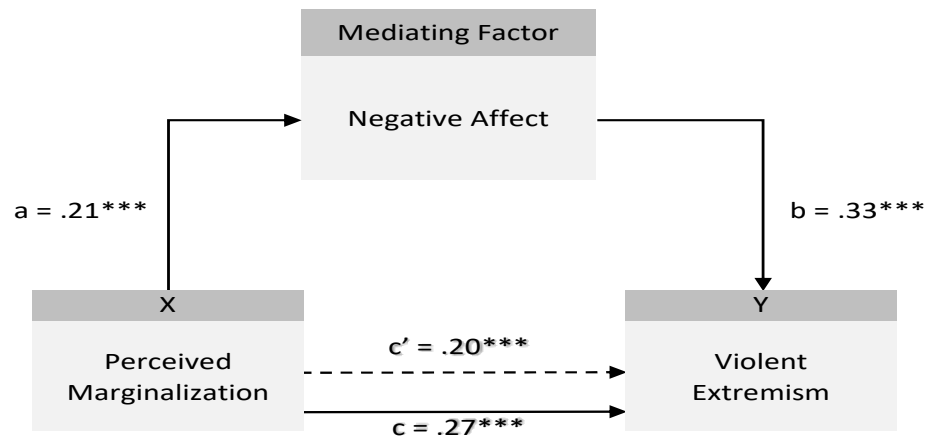
Note. Direct effect (unmediated) c' = c-ab
          Indirect effect (mediated) c − c' = ab
          Total Effect (X on Y) c = c'+ ab.
          ***$p < .001$

Discussion

The study found significant positive relationships between perceived marginalization and negative affect, perceived marginalization and violent extremism, and negative affect and violent extremism among university students belonging to various ethnic groups. Research suggests, marginalization leads to grievances, which in turn makes them violent (Bhui et al., 2014). Discrimination and marginalization lead to loneliness, isolation, detachment, exclusion from in-groups, and estranged from society in general. Such estrangement is a leading cause for many to seek solace in various radical ideologies which promise to restore their inclusivity and provide resolve (Agnew, 2002; De Waele et al., 2014; Kruglanski et al., 2014) for their negative emotions.

Perceived marginalization had a significant direct effect on violent extremism and an indirect effect on violent extremism through negative affect thus supporting hypothesis 1. The result is well aligned with existing research (Agnew, 2002; Jensen et al., 2018). The result implies greater marginalization not only directly affected violent extremism it did so indirectly through negative affect as well. As said above, studies have shown young individuals who feel marginalized, isolated, detached and estranged from society are susceptible to violent extremism (De Waele & Pauwels, 2014; Nivette et al., 2017) by subscribing to radical ideologies that promise to restore social cohesion for their followers (Kruglanski et al., 2014) and avenge those that ostracized them.

Young men on mean differences scored higher on perceived marginalization, negative affect and violent extremism to women. Previous research (Garcia et al., 2020) has shown, men feel more marginalized than women, especially if it was social or political in nature. Men also felt greater negative affect compared to women, which contradicts other studies (for example, Babin et al., 2013) that suggest, women tend to be more negative about their life events than men. We cannot explain why this happened in our sample; nevertheless we think that overall negative emotions in women were high with about 6.4% below the men. Clearly, men believed in violent extremism more than women, a result that is supported by enormous data in this area both in international and local literature (Coker et al., 2002; Dastgir, 2019).

Conclusion

The general conclusion of this study is, perceived societal marginalization predicts violent extremism directly, and indirectly through negative affect. This result aligns with many psychological and many sociological studies (not referenced in the paper) that have confirmed similar hypotheses in samples that were not from Pakistan. Marginalization can radicalize youth for violent actions. The question is whether this radicalization moderates, marginalization-negative affect relationship or negative affect-violent extremism relationship? A question that awaits confirmation in future studies.

Limitations and Suggestions

Some limitations of the study include, socially desirable responses usually observed in self-report scales. The responses of participants were also subject to available heuristics gathered from social and other media, not necessarily based on personal viewpoints. People can subscribe to or believe in extreme violence in restoring group cohesion, but when it comes to taking part in violence few are ready to participate. Cross-sectional design is at the mercy of a selected sample, especially if it is a convenient sample, studies differ in results from one sample to another. We propose a better way to study these constructs would be to carry out a longitudinal study, where the sample does not change (except attrition) and change in perception about marginalization, negative feelings and beliefs about violent extremism could be assessed. This study contributes to literature on violent extremism, its potent factors marginalization and negative emotions, which could be helpful in designing social experiments where policy makers could use to reduce violence in society. The study can also be useful for developing interventions that could help vulnerable young people who may be susceptible to violent extremism.

Implications

The study offers important insights into psycho-social factors leading to the adoption of violent extremist beliefs among university students. This study contributes in the literature by highlighting the role of perceived marginalization for extreme belief systems in a multi-ethnic context. Findings highlight the need for intervention programs that focus not only on ideological de-radicalization but also on reducing the perceived social and economic inequalities among ethnic groups.

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