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ONLINE DISCUSSION PLATFORMS AND THE SYNTHESIS OF MODERN ISLAMIC THOUGHT: A CASE STUDY OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Digital discussion forums have emerged as powerful mediums of determining religious discourses and sense among Pakistani Muslims. These platforms are becoming the mediators of discussions on contemporary Islamic thought and interpretive authority as the digital engagement grows. This study explores the ways in which online discussion forums support or reject the synthesis of contemporary Islamic thought and how they shape the formation of beliefs and identities amongst Pakistani Muslims. The study uses the thematic analysis method coupled with the Critical Discourses Analysis developed by Fairclough with a qualitative design. The sources of data were the public social media threads, the religious forums, and the digital discussion groups, and data were analyzed in textual, discursive and sociocultural aspects. The results show that, online spaces democratize the process of religious interpretation but also polarize ideologically which is reflected in the formation of the changing identity representations and in the renegotiation of power relations within Pakistani Muslims. Digital platforms have a great impact on the Islamic discourse in Pakistan, making it more pluralistic and enforcing the divisions in the modern religious thinking.

1. INTRODUCTION

The speed of the development of digital communication has altered the way people find, argue, and negotiate religious knowledge within the modern Muslim communities. Online discussion forums have become an important arena of rearticulation of Islamic ideas, interpretive power, and routinized religious practices in Pakistan where Islamic thinking is still at the center of the life of many people. The growing popularity of solutions like Facebook groups, YouTube comment sections, Twitter threads, and Reddit forums has increased possibilities of popular people intervening in religious discussions, and laypersons as well as scholars actively influence the developing discourses. According to scholars, online communication has restructured communicative power and decentralized the way religious meaning is produced (Anderson, 2015; Campbell, 2013), so the internet communication is now a key element of the contemporary Islamic discourse.

According to the existing literature, digital media provide new opportunities to reinterpret and pluralism of the intellect in Muslim societies. Studies show that through online platforms, a democratization of knowledge about religious knowledge occurs, and users can interact with several interpretive traditions at the same time (Bunt, 2018; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). As Muslim Pakistanis turn more to the Internet to find their religious advice, discourses about modernity, reform, gender, and identity gain a new shape, under the impact of the global and local socioreligious processes. These

changes can be explained through the argument that is made by Mandaville (2014), as the digital globalization alters the identities of Muslims by allowing them to negotiate between the hybrid modes of belonging that can be based upon global and national religious discourses.

Meanwhile, researchers warn that the digital media also strengthens ideological polarization and supports the traditional hierarchies within religions. Research indicates that online discourse tends to be filled with struggles based on interpretative legitimacy with the emphasis on the tone and direction of discussion (Hirschkind, 2012; Petersen, 2012). These discussions overlap in Pakistan with traditional sectarian practices, political conflicts, and the politics of Islamic authenticity, along with producing dynamic relations of authority, resistance, and identity formation. The studies also indicate that the internet could replicate the power bases that already exist in a space, despite providing the possibility of a discussion (Turner, 2007; Hoover, 2016), which means that it is necessary to examine how the power balance is negotiated in the Pakistani online context. In addition, the literature explains that the implications of online religious discourse on identity formation are far-reaching. Digital platforms do not only spread theological ideas, but also define moral subjectivities and ways of social belonging (Lewis, 2015; Leurs, 2015). To Pakistani Muslims, online communications represent new forms of expressing personal religiosity, bargaining communal values and building public identities in the context of more mediated settings. The interaction among discourse, technology and identity are consistent with CADA views where their views focus on language and representation is a reproduction of social power and ideological structures (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006).

Although the topic of digital Islam is becoming more and more widely studied, there is scant research on the subject that specifically investigates the impact of Pakistani online platforms in the process of synthesizing modern Islamic thought, which refers to the process of reinterpretation, negotiation, and integration of religious ideas in a dynamic sociocultural environment. Similarly, little research is done to understand the influence of such discursive spaces on the construction of beliefs and identity of Pakistani Muslims in their daily interactions. This study fills these gaps by performing a CDA-informed thematic analysis of online discourses to become aware of how digital spaces either help or hinder interpretative synthesis and how they influence the changing manifestations of Muslim identity.

1.1 Research Objectives:

To identify how the online discussion platforms favor or disfavor the synthesis of modern Islamic thought in Pakistan.

To explore the ways in which online discussion platforms impact the construction of beliefs and identity of Pakistani Muslims.

.2 Research Questions:

How do online discussion platforms favor or disfavor the synthesis of modern Islamic thought in Pakistan?

In what ways online discussion platforms impact the construction of beliefs and identity of Pakistani Muslims?

Literature Review

The fast development of digital communication technologies has dramatically influenced the way of how religious beliefs, interpretations, and identities are negotiated in the modern Muslim societies. There is a consensus among the scholars that online platforms are emerging new religious public spaces in which traditional and modern discourses come into contact, clash, and develop (Anderson, 2015; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). In Pakistan, the country where there are various religious orientations and the institutional authority structures are strong, these digital discourses have a special important role in creating the contemporary Islamic thought. This literature review is a synthesis of studies on digital religion, authority, identity, and discourse to situate how online discussion space can have an impact on interpretive practices and belief-making among Pakistani Muslims.

2.1 Online Community Platforms as a Religious Space

Digital media theorize the online platform as communicative spaces, where debates, redefinitions, and story conflicts relating to religion occur (Campbell, 2013; Hoover, 2016). Researchers also suggest that social media facilitates the process of

vernacular religion where ordinary contributors to the media take to the streets to express religious meanings publicly without institutional frameworks (Howard, 2011). Such areas promote pluralism and encourage ideological confrontations at the same time (Bunt, 2018; Turner, 2021). The internet has emerged as an important stage of bargaining the limits between tradition and modernity to the Muslim society (Bano, 2018; Mandaville, 2014).

South Asian contexts Digital spaces enable younger and more educated Muslims to engage with religious texts critically, engage in discourse that would orient to reforms, and was able to challenge inherited interpretations (Rafi, 2020; Hussain, 2022). However, according to scholars, digital religious discourse equally recreates conservative discourses and supports dogmatism, especially in closed or homogenous virtual circles (Zemmels & Rosenberg, 2021; Lynch, 2019). This dual can be considered as making online spaces a potent location of progressive and restrictive discursive processes.

2.2 Islamic Thinking, Interpretation and Digital Mediation

Studies of Islamic interpretive practices underline the digital environment enriching the voice of interpretation by availing non-traditional actors to religious texts and the academic discourse (Larsson, 2019; Jones, 2015). According to the scholars, the online discussions promote a contextual, historically informed, and ijtihad-based point of view, which promotes adaptation of religion to the contemporary socio-political realities (Rahman, 2020; Al-Jenaibi, 2016). Nevertheless, using digital platforms, literalist and hyper-conservative readings are also spreading, which are frequently promoted by algorithmic visibility (Saeed, 2022; Hamid, 2020). Such debates often become polarized into dichotomies of real Islam and modern innovations as they become the victims of ideological fights, as theorized by the critical discourse theorist (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2006). As a result, online platforms turn into controversial arenas with clashing views of Islamic modernity.

2.3 Authority and Knowledge Legitimacy Online in the Religion

The redefinition of religious authority through the influence of digital media has been a subject of a significant amount of research. Classical power, which had traditionally been concentrated in the hands of ulema, is also being challenged by online-savvy Muslims who express personal understandings through online platforms (Bunt, 2018; Ahmed, 2018). The change is consistent with the general pattern in the de-institutionalization of power among the religious communities in the world (Cheong et.al., 2011). Research also indicates that power does not merely lose its force, but is renegotiated at the digital plane (Campbell, 2013; Lynch, 2019). The conservative actor tries to regain power by citing texts, making doctrinal appeals, and the gatekeeping practice (Al-Rawi, 2017). At the same time, reformist users oppose them by pointing to interpretive plurality and academic dispute (Hassan, 2020; Rane, 2019).

The other significant way of creating forms of hybridity of legitimacy in Pakistan is through the digital authority of televangelism, popular preachers, and social-media-based religious influencers (Ahmed & Zahoor, 2022; Jamil, 2020). This intermingling forms intricate epistemic spaces where contemporary and traditional narratives abound.

2.4 Minority and Majority Online Identity Construction Among Muslims

The research of identity focuses on the idea that digital space creates a space of the multidimensional practice of Muslimness under the effects of globalization, local practices, and platform cultures (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Leurs & Omer, 2021). Researchers have recorded the way in which online communication forms identity by making moral judgments, belonging to groups and discursive enclosures (Richardson, 2007; Page, 2012). This is because digital anonymity enables experimentation of religious identity, allowing doubtful and reformist beliefs and mixed identities (Bräunlein, 2020; Zeng & Li, 2022). On the other hand, visible networks like Facebook make conformity and traditional identity performances stronger (Hjarvard, 2016; Molyneux & Lewis, 2019). Among Pakistani Muslims, these processes are overlapping with socio-political pressures, generational differences, and religious demands.

2.5 Pakistan Situation: Digital Religion and Discursive Politics

There are fast social media adoption, high-religious institutions, and an active online discussion in the digital environment of Pakistan (Rafi, 2020; Hussain, 2022). According to the studies, younger Pakistanis often discuss reformist, consider other academic views and criticize the clerical authority (Jamil, 2020; Khan & Chaudhry, 2021). However, moral policing, religious nationalism, and conservative mobilization can also be done through digital platforms (Ahmed & Zahoor, 2022; Saeed, 2022). These outcomes indicate that the online space in Pakistan is a polarized space unlike any other with an extreme level of uniqueness with regards to the analysis of how Islamic thought is synthesized, challenged and renegotiated.

Whereas the literature is full of studies that investigate the topics of digital religion, authority, and identity, there have been few studies that focus on understanding the impact of online discussion platforms in Pakistan on the synthesis of the contemporary Islamic thought. In addition, there is one restricted literature that has combined CDA and thematic analysis to examine ideological contestation in Pakistani digital discourse. This study fills these gaps by offering a multidimensional analysis of discourses, identity and authority through various platforms.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This research design was qualitative in nature to investigate the influence of the online discussion sites on the synthesis of the contemporary Islamic notions and the identity formation of the Pakistani Muslims. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate to investigate ideological meanings, the discursive practices, and interpretative processes that are embedded in naturally occurring texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since the study revolves around the use of language, construction of beliefs, and ideological negotiations, the overall methodological approach adopted by the study in particular was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA allows the researcher to explore the nature of discourse construction of social realities, reproduction of power relations and ideological contestation (Fairclough, 1995). Besides CDA, the research employed aspects of digital ethnography to find out contextual information regarding platform dynamics, interactions between participants and community norms. Digital ethnography is becoming more popular in online religion and identity research because it enables the researcher to comprehend the impact of digital space on meaning-making (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017).

3.2 Sources of Data and Method of Sampling

Online discussion groups on facebook (religious groups), twitter (discussion threads), reddit (discussion forums) and publicly available online Islamic discussion boards were used to gather the data in Pakistan. These platforms have been chosen due to the fact that they are different ideological communities and have frequent discussions on Islamic thought. The purposive sampling approach was employed to find discussion threads that had to be directly related to the contemporary interpretation of Islam, the construction of the religious authority, and identity. The discourse-based qualitative studies should use purposive sampling since the researcher can intentionally choose information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). Almost 300-500 personal posts and comments in 1520 threads were collected, so there was a variety of perspectives, cultures of platforms, and discursive practices.

Only publicly available material was used in order to comply with ethics. No personal messages, forums which were locked, or which were personal, were accessed.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered according to the principles of digital ethnography, i.e., the naturalistic interaction was recorded without the interference of a researcher. Screenshots and text extraction tools were used to archive threads. The datasets contained a set of context (posting date, type of platform, pattern of interaction, visual elements, e.g., a meme, infographics). The transcription process eliminated identifiable information, including usernames, profile pictures, and locations, to ensure that the participants would remain anonymous and follow the ethical standards of conducting internet research (Markham and Buchanan, 2012).

3.4 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis and CDA

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and it was done according to the six step approach to familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition and reporting provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). It was possible to identify recurrent patterns in linguistic and ideological points of presentation through thematic analysis. After themes were developed, the themes were discussed in terms of three components of CDA suggested by Fairclough (1995):

Textual Analysis: Nominal items of vocabulary, usage of pronouns, metaphors, evaluative language and epistemic indicators.

Discursive Practice Analysis: The discursive practice analysis demonstrates that the aging population is a complex phenomenon. Inquired into how posts were created, shared, authenticated, or challenged by means of intertextuality, references of power, platform capabilities, and patterns of interaction.

Sociocultural Practice Analysis: In this cultural analysis, the socioconcepts I examined include: social isolation, dictatorialism, and patriarchy. This is in line with the socio-cognitive approach of reproducing the ideology that is put forth by van Dijk (2006).

Related digital discussion to sociocultural frameworks, such as religious authoritarianism in Pakistan, education, youth identity processes, and Islamic reform movements around the world. Such a two-tier approach enabled the concurrent interpretation of the way in which digital spaces impact religious thinking and identity.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The research complied with the accepted ethical guidelines of internet based research. The public posts were considered as publicly available texts, the identifiers of participants were eliminated and no face-to-face communication with respondents was realized (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Only websites that allow academic examination of the contents of the public were used.

Data Analysis

Theme 1: Compromising Modernity and Tradition in Islamic Discourses

Another common post in this theme involved contrasting modern, liberal or Western Islamic interpretations with authentic, traditional and true Islam. This reform-oriented lexis of reform-oriented and progress-oriented words like reinterpretation, contextual reading, ijtihad, and evolving jurisprudence was used by the reform oriented, whereas conservative voices stressed the concept of unchanged, final and fixed, and complete. The dichotomy created by the lexical opposition creates a binary where modernity is viewed as adaptive and needed, and where tradition is depicted as something sacred and to be changed. Metaphors were also central. The discourse of modernist explained the Islamic thought as a flowing river with the time and the traditionalist users presented the image of Islam as a fortress which should be safeguarded. The use of pronouns by conservative members such as we, us, real Muslims established collective identities, which made the modernist interpretations to appear outsiders or deviants. On the other hand, the usage of inclusive pronouns by modernist commentators (our generation, today Muslims) was used to expand the concept of Islamic identity to the modern times.

The encounters exhibited the repetitive tendencies of discursive polarization. Classicalists increased power through the appeal to classical thinkers, the Quran and the Hadith with established interpretations, frequently campaigning on formulaic sentences like, According to all the major thinkers... or Islam plainly says... This intertextuality was trying to repair meaning, to bar reinterpretation. These traditional discourses were interrupted by the modernist participants through references to the counter-authorities, the contemporary scholars, the contextual tafsir, the minority views of jurist and the historical development of fiqh. They employed discursive techniques of questioning, reframing and problematization, i.e. Who decides authenticity? I encourage reasoning at Islam; Blind literalism has harmed Muslim progress.Also platform structures influenced discourse flow. Upvoting patterns and retweet patterns increased arguments by modernists and youth in both Reddit and Twitter, and it reinforced conservative and status-quo arguments in

Facebook groups with older people. These interactions demonstrate that platform affordances define the creation and distribution of certain forms of ideological orientations.

The tensions are symptomatic of the broader sociocultural conflicts in Pakistan between conservatism within the framework of religious seminaries and a new urbanized educated generation in search of a compromise between Islamic tradition and world modernity. The dialogue reflects the national conversations about the curriculum changes, gender roles, laws against blasphemy and the position of the religious power in the civic life. Online disputes are not just fights between individual people, but a series of ideological bargains as to the direction that Islamic identity in Pakistan might take in the future. This theme implies that online spaces make it easy and impossible to synthesize modern Islamic thinking as they offer places of ideological contest instead of constructive discourse.

Theme 2: Authority, Legitimacy and Contestation of religious knowledge

The debate in this theme is who has a right to interpret Islam. Others used by conservative users included marks of legitimacy like qualified scholars, ulema and fatwa authorities. They used the authoritative language (must, forbidden, impermissible) as the indicator of non-negotiability. The reformist voices used terminology that stressed on democratization of knowledge- personal understanding, critical thinking and individual reasoning. Honorifics applied to classical scholars (Honorifics) were priorities that contributed to the maintenance of respect towards the scholars, the modernist discourse tended to apply neutral terms in the description of scholars (academics, religious thinkers), pointing to a change of ideological paradigms of vertical to horizontal knowledge structures. The labels of accusatory; liberal qadiyani agenda, mullah mentality, internet scholar were used as discursive instruments to undermine the legitimacy of other epistemologies.

Interdiscursivity was achieved by citing religious texts. Conservative users imprinted the verses of Quran and hadith as texts that could not be changed or modified and seldom put them in an explanatory context as self evident evidence. Modernist users also integrated classical sources with historical background, modern scholarship or sociological evidence proving to be hybrid discursive practices. There was an emergence of a pattern of gatekeeping in which conservative commentators would often tell others to ask a scholar, refer to muftis or avoid using logic in religion and claim professional monopoly in the interpretation of religion. Modernist actors disputed this gate keeping by pointing to the discrepancies within the scholarly communities or by pointing out that early Muslim societies engaged in ijtihad and intellectual pluralism. The authority construction was influenced by platform-specific practices. Popular preachers had their followers who dominated the comment boards and policed dissent on YouTube, which is a personality-based religious authority. Conversely, the Reddit debates were more contested, with the possibility of the regular users breaking down the conventional hierarchies.

This theme reflects the changing religious authority environment in Pakistan, in which mass media preachers, YouTube scholars, madrasa ulema and Western-trained Islamic scholars live alongside other Muslims, whose views on religious legitimacy disagree. Online spaces break the traditional hierarchies, as they give interpretative authority to the digitally literate young people. The opposition between democratized knowledge and institutional authority determines the development or stagnation of the Islamic thought. This climate directly determines the creation of contemporary Islamic thought: fragmentation of power preconditions the innovations and at the same time contributes to the increased opposition of conservative players.

Theme 3: Identity Construction, Politics of belonging

The evaluative adjectives were abundant in the discourse referring to the identity (true Muslim, misguided, liberal extremist, westernized, enlightened). Conservative commentators employed exclusionary identity markers, which placed proponents of a modern understanding as being less Muslim or beyond the fold of orthodoxy. Modernist critics responded with an inclusive pronouncement of the Islamic religion as being diverse, pluralistic and universal. Stories tended to be based on moral oppositions: halal/haram, pure/impure,

authentic/corrupted. Such words usage displays efforts to regulate ideological lines and create moral conformity. There were a lot of posts that could be characterized by the use of autobiographical narratives contents: As a Pakistani Muslim growing up, to confirm the personal identity claims and enhance the credibility of the arguments.

The interaction patterns were used to co-construct identity. In-group coherence was constructed by the users with whom particular camps (progressive, conservative, Sufi-leaning, secular-leaning) were identified by and to which solidarity markers (brother, sister, our ummah) were added. Discussions also got heated very often and identity became an instrument of attack; comments like You follow Western agendas orYou represent extremist thinking served as discursive delegitimization techniques. The identity narratives were reinforced using visual discursive resources (memes, photos of researchers, infographics, etc.). Memes that were ridiculing of rigorous interpretations were popular on Twitter, but on Facebook religious communities, the conservative visual content (text slabs in black and white, quotes of scholars, etc.) was the most popular. The platform culture, once again, influenced identity discourse: the anonymity of Reddit resulted in therapies and confessions of religious identity being more open and honest, whereas social visibility of Facebook led to more reserved and conformity-oriented manifestations of identity.

Online conversations of identity struggles are indicative of wider national issues regarding what it means to be a Pakistani Muslim in the globalized world. Youths have to deal with various influences of identity, such as religious education, the impact of the Western world, exposure to the digital world, and these clashes are reflected in online communication. The rivalry of inclusive and exclusive identity formation means that the online spaces do not only influence the construction of individual belief systems but also influence the construction of collective understanding of Muslimness in Pakistan. This theme directly answers the research question as it demonstrates how identity is negotiated, challenged and reconstructed in the digital environments all the time.

Collectively, these themes indicate that online discussion platforms in Pakistan are vibrant forums wherein the Islamic thought is challenged, re-negotiated and re-written. The interaction between the linguistic options, discursive practices and the sociocultural influences demonstrate that both digital spaces enable and hinder the production of contemporary Islamic ideas. They open space to critical inquiry and pluralistic involvement and also increase polarization, ideological gatekeeping and identity policing.

Findings and Discussion

The question and answer online programming through the Pakistani digital platforms showed that there are three main dynamics that precondition the production of the modern Islamic thought and the Muslim identity. Such results illustrate that online spaces both assist and hinder interpretive reform in line with larger academic discussions of digital religion, power and discourse. The following discussion corresponds the findings with the existing research and theoretical perspectives.

The initial conclusion draws attention to the problem of lasting tension between the traditionalist and modernist attitudes to the interpretation of Islam. The binary linguistic frameworks, which were used by Internet users most often, became the attempts to make the specific ideological standpoint legitimate and included the following terms: modern vs. traditional, rational vs. literal, contextual vs. fixed. This ideological polarization of discourse indicates Fairclough (1995) assertion that language is also a battleground of ideology in which there is a construction of competing social realities. The results correspond well with the research on the process of the digital mediation of Islamic authority. According to Anderson (2015), the internet has caused the diversification of voices of interpretation, where new actors have the opportunity to disrupt the old structures of authority. Contextual readings of scripture, with frequent reference to contemporary scholars and global Islamic reform movements, were being advanced by younger, digitally literate participants in the Pakistani context. On the other hand, the conservative members used the classical academic agreement and religious stability as a means of preserving interpretative stability, which closely resembled the opposition to religious changes that Bunt (2018) described in online Muslim forums. The

conflict between these takeovers or positions shows how digital spaces transform the religious discourse instead of being mere reflections of offline trends. According to Bano (2018), contemporary Muslim societies are marked by the constant opposition between traditional inheritance and modern rationalism, and the Internet forums aggravate the situation by providing an easily available platform of reasoning and identity performance. The current results confirm this statement and prove that online environments contribute to the development of hybrid types of Islamic reasoning and also strengthen ideological lines.

The second important finding is about negotiation of authority and epistemic legitimacy. Modernist users combined contextual interpretation and social-scientific explanation with textual evidence and appeals to scholarly consensus, as traditionalist participants used these methods to form authority by citing classical texts, and making appeals to scholarly consensus. This indicates the socio-cognitive view by van Dijk (2006) that ideologies define the person(s) who is considered as a valid knower of discourse. The online discussions of this nature often encompassed the discursive gatekeeping where the conservative users established the qualitative ulema as the only reliable interpreters of Islam. This trend is consistent with the results of Eickelman and Anderson (2003), who believe that digital technologies do not kill but disrupt religious hierarchical authority. In the same way, Campbell (2013) observes that, in digital religion, there is constant bargaining of power as users go through various sources of interpretation. Modernist participants on the other hand stressed on interpretive autonomy and intellectual pluralism frequently doubting the infallibility of institutional authority. These practices are echoed by the work of Rafi (2020) who examined the discourse of Pakistani social media and found that the digital space gives lay Muslims the ability to interfere with the religious discourse of elites. The current results can verify that power on the internet is moving, disputed, and constantly rebuilt in the process of interaction. This challenge sustains and complicates the construction of contemporary Islamic thought: it increases interpretative diversity at the same time producing conflict and fragmentation of ideologies.

The third observation shows that online forums are focal points of creating, negotiating, and challenging Muslim identity. The linguistic techniques employed by the participants such as evaluatory labels, positioning pronouns, moral dichotomies, helped participants to create the boundary between the true Muslims and those who were considered misled or over-liberated. The interactions are indicative of the fact by Richardson (2007) that identity is created by means of discursive inclusion and exclusion. Simultaneously, the modernist users enhanced pluralistic and highly adaptable concept of Muslim identity, which meets the findings of Mandaville (2014), who claims that globalization tempts Muslims to revise the religious identity outside the strict categories. This led to the development of hybrid representations of identity in Pakistani online spaces as a merger of the traditional beliefs and the contemporary socio-political issues. The aspect of anonymity also played a major role. In line with Fox and Ralston (2016), the current results suggest that anonymity or semi-anonymous setting (e.g., Reddit) allows doubtful expressions, self-introspection, and nonconformist identities to be shared, which could be suppressed in real-life situations. In their turn, those platforms that have a high social presence (e.g., Facebook) supported identity conformity, a tendency that has been also observed in other digital ethnographic research of Muslim communities (Bräunlein, 2020). In general, identity formation on the internet became a process that was dynamic and even controversial whereby users bargain on a belonging, authenticity, and religious validity. These identity struggles have a direct effect on the way the contemporary Islamic thinking is oriented, contested, and digested by Pakistani Muslims.

Conclusion

The research study discussed the role of online discussion forums in Pakistan in synthesizing contemporary Islamic thought and how the forums construct identities and beliefs of Pakistani Muslims. With thematic analysis combined with three elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study showed that online spaces become multi-faceted arenas of ideology on the move where religious meanings are generated, negotiated and contested. All the findings lead to the conclusion that online

platforms provide a possibility of studying the diversity of meanings through interpretations and a discourse oriented at reform, but also increase polarization, strengthen traditional gatekeeping, and complicate finding a mutual position on the current Islamic thought.

The initial significant finding is that of the ongoing bargaining of modernity and tradition in online religious discussions. It was found that a distinctly dichotomous discourse was at play where a modernist view stressed on contextual arguments and changeability and conservative sides insisted on classical jurisprudence and pre-determined meanings. These tensions of discourse validate the argument by Fairclough (1995) that language reproduces and constructs power relations in society, and they exemplify the finding by Bunt (2018): that digital spaces increase ideological fragmentation of Muslim publics. This strain in the Pakistani context reflects a wider sociopolitical discussion on issues of education, legal reformation and religious power, which shows that online spaces cannot exist outside of the offline conditions, which define the religious life.

The study also finds that power and validity are the main controversial frontiers in the digital Islamic discourse. Internet discussion revealed that the traditionalist participants are utilizing considerably the help of religious scholars, textual literalism, and doctrinal assurance to dominate epistemically; modernist users are opposing these orders with the pluralistic logic and interpretive freedoms. These results can be used to argue with Anderson (2015) that the internet is breaking traditional norms of authority because ordinary users have unprecedented access to knowledge and instruments of interpretation. Nevertheless, they also support Campbell (2013) argument that the traditional authority is not obliterated but it is renegotiated in digital spheres. In this way, the online spaces in Pakistan democratize and strengthen the authority of religion, and a hybrid space is created where various actors struggle to gain interpretive power. The third conclusion is associated with the Muslim identity construction. The results indicate that identity on the internet is not merely defined by theological standpoints but also moral decisions, belongingness and authenticity performances. The users were also part of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, a position consistent with the argument by Richardson (2007) that identity is discursively created with boundaries of us and them. The identity contestation was intensified by the online environment especially anonymity and culture of a platform, which substantiates the claim of Mandaville (2014) that globalization promotes the hybrid and fluid manifestation of Muslim identity. This hybridity is reflected in the development of youth based narratives that intertwine the traditional values with the contemporary social and intellectual issues in Pakistan.

Generally, the study finds that the internet based discussion groups have high transformative potential to the Islamic thinking within Pakistan. They allow reinterpretation, they create a discussion and open up access to a variety of opinions, which is consistent with current global trends in digital religion (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003). However, they also recreate ideological polarization and identity struggles, indicating that digital interaction cannot ensure a comprehensive summary of contemporary Islamic philosophy. Rather, the key to transforming the situation is to take note of the socio-cultural complexities, power dynamics, and identity politics that dominate religious discourse online and offline.

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