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BRIDGING HOSTILITY AND ACTION: THE SOCIAL NETWORK PATHWAY TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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Abstract

This study looked at how dehumanization and criminal attitudes affect people's support for political violence. It also examined how social networks make this connection stronger. Data were collected from prisoners, drug addicts, and students to gather a range of viewpoints. The results showed that dehumanization was the strongest factor leading people to support political violence. Criminal attitudes also played an important role. Social networks made these effects stronger by acting like a bridge, turning hostile beliefs into stronger support for violent actions. These findings agree with theories such as Bandura's (1999) idea of moral disengagement and McCauley and Moskalenko's (2011) pyramid model of radicalization. This means that political violence is influenced not only by ideology but also by psychological and social factors. The study suggests that prevention efforts should focus on reducing dehumanization by promoting empathy, changing criminal attitudes, and breaking violent social networks both online and offline. Although the study has some limitations, like depending on self-reports and using a cross-sectional design, it still provides important knowledge about how personal beliefs and social influences combine to increase support for political violence.

INTRODUCTION

Political violence means using force on purpose to reach political goals. In today's world, it has become an important issue for researchers. This type of violence can happen in many ways, such as terrorism, riots, armed groups fighting against the government, killing political leaders, or violent protests. Political violence is harmful because it destroys peace and safety in society. It also makes people lose trust in their governments and weakens democracy (Schmid, 2011). Many people think political violence happens only because of extremist beliefs or social problems like poverty and injustice. However, psychologists have found that the way people think and the social groups they join also play a big role. Not everyone in the same situation chooses violence, which shows that personal thinking and social influence matter. That is why it is important to study both the psychological reasons and the role of social networks to create better ways of preventing and controlling political violence.

One important psychological factor that leads to political violence is dehumanization. Dehumanization means not recognizing the full humanity of other people and seeing them as lacking important human qualities such as kindness, rational thinking, or moral value (Haslam, 2006). When people are viewed in this way, it becomes easier to justify violence against them. Kelman (1973) explained that

dehumanization removes the moral barriers that normally stop people from hurting others, making acts of aggression seem acceptable. In politics, leaders and groups often use dehumanizing words—such as calling their opponents "vermin," "animals," or "enemies of humanity"—to make violence appear reasonable (Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, & Castaño, 2011).

Dehumanization is also linked with moral disengagement, which is the mental process people use to excuse or rationalize harmful behavior by believing that the victims do not deserve moral concern (Bandura, 1999). Research shows that people who dehumanize others are more likely to support violence, including war, torture, and other forms of political aggression (Rai, Valdesolo, & Graham, 2017). In this way, dehumanization reduces empathy and turns feelings of hostility into support for violent action.

Another important psychological factor linked to political violence is a criminal attitude. Criminal attitudes are beliefs that excuse or justify breaking the law and using violence (Walters, 2015). These attitudes are usually studied in criminology, but they are also strongly connected with extremist ideas that praise fighting against governments and see violence as a fair way to express political goals. Agnew (2014) explained that people with strong criminal attitudes are more likely to believe that violence is a proper solution to problems or injustices. When criminal attitudes are combined with dehumanization, they form a strong base for supporting political violence. Dehumanization removes empathy for the victims, while criminal attitudes make violence seem like a normal or acceptable choice. Together, they weaken both moral rules and legal boundaries, making violent actions not only possible but also appear necessary to those who hold such views.

Although hostile beliefs are important, they usually do not turn into violent actions unless they are supported by social networks. Social networks serve as the connection between ideology (beliefs) and real behavior because they provide approval, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Offline networks—such as gangs, extremist groups, or prison organizations—play a strong role in keeping radical beliefs alive. The National Institute of Justice (2017) found that people who become radical through close offline networks often build strong personal relationships that make extremist ideas more powerful and, at the same time, weaken their connections with normal society. Interestingly, studies also show that people in very large extremist groups may be less likely to act violently themselves, because tasks and roles are shared among many members. In contrast, those who belong to small or isolated groups are more likely to commit violent acts, since they do not have the moderating influence of a larger structure (Borum, 2011).

In today's digital world, online social networks have greatly increased the speed and spread of radicalization. Through social media, extremist groups can easily reach people all over the world, sharing propaganda, recruiting members, and staying connected on a large scale (Weimann, 2016). For example, groups like ISIS have successfully used platforms such as Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube to influence and radicalize people in different countries. In addition, social media platforms that use algorithms—like TikTok and YouTube—can create what is called algorithmic radicalization. This happens when the platform's recommendation systems continuously show users more extreme content, trapping them in echo chambers where their beliefs are reinforced (O'Callaghan et al., 2015). Scholars describe social media as a "polarisation engine" because it increases anger, division, and hostility among people. This process speeds up the path toward extremism and makes political violence more likely (The Guardian, 2024).

It is important to note that online and offline networks often work together. Social media may be the first place where people see extremist ideas, but these ideas are often strengthened by offline connections such as family, friends, or peers who agree with and support the ideology (National Institute of Justice, 2017). This combination shows that political violence is not just the result of personal beliefs or online propaganda. Instead, it grows from the interaction between psychological factors (like hostile thinking) and social influences (such as supportive groups).

When combined, dehumanization, criminal attitudes, and social networks explain how people become politically violent. Dehumanization reduces empathy by making opponents less human, criminal attitudes normalize violence, and social networks (online and offline) reinforce violent conduct. This combined view reveals that political violence prevention requires more than altering mindsets. Social circumstances that justify violence must also be addressed. Social networks link dehumanization, criminal attitudes, and political violence, as this study shows.

Early studies on aberrant behavior helped explain political violence. In 1957, Sykes and Matza introduced "techniques of neutralization," which explain how people justify illegal acts. They may deny committing harm, blame others, or say authorities are unfair. These arguments showed how violence may become acceptable, which was essential for the study of criminal attitudes.

Kelman (1973) added dehumanization to this notion in the 1970s. He explained that moral standards against injuring others no longer apply when victims are dehumanized. This proved that war crimes and genocide can be explained by politics and psychological processes that influence victim perceptions. Based on Kelman's arguments, Bandura (1999) proposed moral disengagement, which explains how people lose their morality when they wish to perpetrate violence. He claimed that people rationalize harmful behaviors by dehumanizing victims, blaming them, or sharing responsibility to avoid guilt.

Researchers applied similar psychological principles to terrorism during the same period. Horgan (2005) investigated terrorism psychology and found that radicalization occurs gradually. However, personal grievances (such as feelings of injustice or dissatisfaction), social bonds, and ideas that justify violence shape it gradually. Haslam (2006) divided dehumanization into two categories in the 2000s. First is animalistic dehumanization, which denies politeness and rationality. Second is mechanistic dehumanization, which treats individuals like machinery. This distinction clarified how different forms of dehumanization can cause aggression.

Borum (2011) also noted social networks' involvement in radicalization. He argued that extremist groups provide social support, a common identity, and acceptance, which motivate violent action. Giner-Sorolla, Leidner, and Castaño (2011) examined demonization, which involves identifying opponents as harmful or evil. These findings justified violence and made perpetrators feel morally justified. Schmid (2011) also suggested that political violence must be understood through psychological and social factors that impact human conduct.

Criminologists related antisocial thinking to extremism at this time. Walters (2015) found that criminal thinkers are more likely to breach the law because they advocate crime. According to Agnew's (2014) General Strain Theory, people may develop criminal views that justify violence when they confront unfairness or pressure. Prison research supported this. Criminal attitudes can enhance the risk of radicalization, as Silke (2014) discovered that convicts with criminal mindsets were more likely to join extremist groups in prison.

With the digital age, scholars have focused more on online radicalization. O'Callaghan et al. (2015) discovered that YouTube recommendation systems steered consumers toward more extreme content. This created echo chambers where extreme views were repeated without counterargument. Weimann (2016) showed that terrorist groups like ISIS used Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube to attract followers and propagate propaganda. This research showed that online networks accelerated and propagated radicalization more than before.

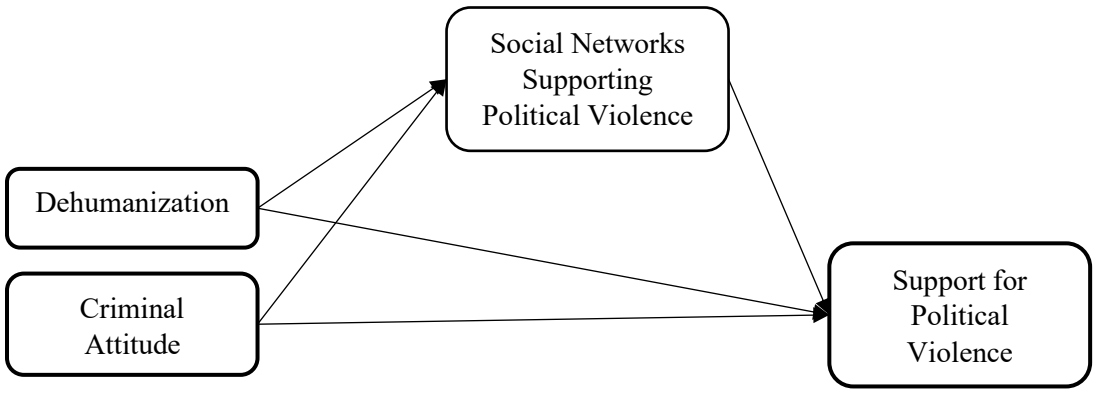
Research has continued to show how dehumanization plays a key role in violence. Rai, Valdesolo, and Graham (2017) found that people who see others as less than human are more likely to support instrumental violence—that is, violence used as a tool to achieve certain goals—even if they do not necessarily agree with violence done out of revenge. In the same year, the National Institute of Justice (2017) reported that radicalization becomes strongest when offline networks such as family, friends, or extremist groups reinforce the extremist material people are exposed to online.

This means that political violence does not come only from personal beliefs or online propaganda. Instead, it grows out of the interaction between personal attitudes, criminal thinking, and the combined influence of online and offline social networks.

In recent years, researchers have focused on the role of social media algorithms in spreading extremist ideas. Scholars argue that platforms like TikTok and YouTube act as "polarization engines" because they increase division and make extremist messages stronger, which speeds up the path toward violence (The Guardian, 2024). This connects to earlier concerns about algorithmic radicalization, where online systems recommend increasingly extreme content to users, trapping them in echo chambers and making political violence more likely (O'Callaghan et al., 2015).

Overall, the research from 1957 until now shows how ideas about neutralization, dehumanization, criminal attitudes, and social networks have developed into a full framework for understanding political violence. Dehumanization reduces empathy for others, criminal attitudes make aggression seem acceptable, and social networks—both offline and online—strengthen these hostile ideas and turn them into collective support for violent action. This study adds to the existing research by testing how social networks act as a bridge between dehumanization, criminal attitudes, and support for political violence.

Study 1 Conceptual Model



Hypothesis

H1: Dehumanization and Criminal Attitude lead towards Support for political violence, with the mediation of social networks supporting political violence.

H2: Dehumanization and Criminal Attitude directly lead towards Support for political violence.

Method

Participants

We demonstrated our study on a population where we collected data from different locations and different people, i-e, from prisoners, drug addicts and college students. A total of 354 individuals participated, and data were collected from four different places. Of the participant data collected, prisoners were 33.1% (n=117), drug addicts were 13.8% (n=49), students were 24.9% (n=88), and online participants were 28.2% (n=100). Out of all the participants, 79.7% (n=282) were males and 20.3% (n=72) were females. Based on education, 23.4% (n=83) were bachelor's students, 70.6% (n=250) had done FSc, 5.1% (n=18) had done Matric, and 0.8% (n=3) were master's students. Of the participants, 34.7% (n=123) were married and 65.3% (n=231) were unmarried. From the participants, 105 individuals were prisoners, and only 2.5% (n=9) of the participants mentioned that they had some mental illness. The treatment of participants, the

protection of their anonymity, the acquisition of their free and informed consent, and the purposive sampling method was applied to select the appropriate samples.

Measurement Instruments

Dehumanization

Dehumanization happens when people deny the humanity of others and see them as less than fully human. This can involve thinking of others as animals, objects, or enemies who do not deserve empathy, dignity, or fair treatment. When people are dehumanized, it becomes easier to justify mistreating them, discriminating against them, or even using violence against them. For example, calling opponents "vermin" or "animals" strips away their human qualities and makes aggression toward them feel acceptable.

Criminal Attitude

A criminal attitude is a way of thinking that excuses, justifies, or supports crime and antisocial behavior. People with such attitudes often see laws and rules as unfair or unimportant, and they may believe that breaking them is necessary to achieve their goals. This mindset provides a mental framework that makes harmful actions seem normal or legitimate. For example, someone may think violence is an acceptable solution to problems or that harming others is justified if it benefits their group.

Social Network Supporting Political Violence

These are groups of people, such as friends, peers, or organizations, that encourage and support violent political beliefs. Such networks provide social approval, belonging, and validation for extremist ideas, making individuals feel justified and even rewarded for endorsing violence. Both offline networks (like gangs, extremist groups, or radical peers) and online communities (such as extremist forums or social media groups) can reinforce these beliefs. By constantly sharing and validating extremist views, these networks play a key role in turning individual hostility into collective support for violence.

maintenance of complete confidentiality were all conducted following ethical principles. The

Support for Political Violence

This refers to the willingness of individuals to agree with, justify, or take part in violent actions aimed at achieving political goals. It can range from supporting violent protests and riots to endorsing terrorism, assassinations, or armed conflict. People who support political violence often believe that peaceful methods are ineffective and that violence is the only way to bring about change. This support may remain as an attitude (agreement with violence) or develop into behavior (actively joining or committing violent acts).

Procedure

The initial phase involved taking permission from the authorities of the concerned organization or institution. Purposive sampling technique was employed to approach students, prisoners and drug addicts in the next step. In the third step, individuals were provided with a comprehensive briefing, emphasizing the unforced involvement and clarifying that no academic credit would be granted as an incentive for participating in the research survey. Questionnaires were distributed among them, with participants spending approximately 15 to 20 minutes on completion. Following the conclusion of data collection, all questionnaire responses were aggregated, and the data were input into data management software, namely SPSS and AMOS, and subsequently subjected to computation.

Analytic Approach

SPSS and AMOS were utilized to conduct statistical studies. Descriptive statistics were computed based on the sample's characteristics. Regression analyses were utilized to determine whether the dehumanization and criminal attitude significantly predicted support for political violence by mediation of the social network supporting political violence. For this study, the reliability of the scales according to Cronbach's alpha was sufficiently good.

Ethical approval

Informed consent was taken from the participants, and the participants were informed about the purpose of the current research. No such committee exists in our institute; therefore, all the ethical factors were taken into consideration during the entire pr

Table 1 Regression Analysis for Mediation of Social Networks Supporting Political Violence between Dehumanization, Criminal Attitude and Support for Political Violence.

Variable	B	95%CI		SE B	β	R^2	ΔR^2
		LB	UB				
Step1						.508	.508**
Constant	17.91	[6.24	29.57]	5.91			
Dehumanization	1.84***	[1.57	2.11]	.137	.688***		
Criminal Attitude	.653***	[.321	.986]	.169	.197***		
Step2						.557	.049*
Constant	12.37	[1.02	23.71]	5.75			
Dehumanization	1.53***	[1.24	1.83]	.146	.572***		
Criminal Attitude	.671***	[.355	.988]	.160	.203***		
Social Networking Supporting Political Violence	1.08***	[.618	1.55]	.236	.250***		

Note. CI = Confidence Interval

***P<.001.

Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis testing whether social networks mediate the relationship between dehumanization, criminal attitudes, and support for political violence. In the first step, both Dehumanization (β = .688, p < .001) and Criminal Attitude (β =.197, p < .001) were significant predictors of Support for Political Violence. This means that individuals who scored higher on dehumanization and who held stronger criminal attitudes were more likely to support political violence. Together, these two factors explained 50.8% of the variance (R^2 = .508) in support for political violence, which is considered a large effect. In the second step, when Social Networks Supporting Political Violence were included as a mediator, the explained variance increased to 55.7% (R^2 = .557), with an additional 4.9% of variance explained (ΔR^2 = .049, p < .05). This shows that social

networks partially mediated the effects of dehumanization and criminal attitudes, making their impact on support for political violence stronger. In simple terms, people who dehumanize others and hold criminal attitudes are already more likely to support violence. However, when they are part of social networks that approve violent ideas, their support becomes even stronger.

Table 2- *Evaluation Table of Correlation among Variables of the study model (N=354)*

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Dehumanization	29.79	7.00	-	-	-	-	-
Criminal Attitude	24.45	5.65	-.015**	-	-	-	-
Social Network Supporting Political Violence	13.22	4.34	.461**	-.031	-	-	-
Social Alienation	88.77	18.84	.685**	.186**	.509**	-	-

p<.001 *. Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows the correlations among the main variables: Dehumanization, Criminal Attitude, Social Networks Supporting Political Violence, and Support for Political Violence. The results indicate that Dehumanization was strongly related to Support for Political Violence (r = .685, p < .001). This means that people who see others as less human are much more likely to support violent political actions. Criminal Attitude also showed a positive relationship with Support for Political Violence (r = .186, p < .01), but this link was weaker compared to dehumanization. In addition, Social Networks Supporting Political Violence were positively correlated with both Dehumanization (r = .461, p < .001) and Support for Political Violence (r = .509, p < .001). This suggests that people who belong to networks that encourage violence are more likely to dehumanize others and to support political violence. Interestingly, Criminal Attitude and Social Networks did not show a significant relationship (r = –.031), meaning that being part of violent-supporting networks does not necessarily depend on already having criminal attitudes. Overall, the results show that dehumanization is the strongest predictor of political violence, followed by the influence of social networks, while criminal attitudes play a smaller but still meaningful role.

General Discussion

This study examined how dehumanization and criminal views affect political violence support and whether violent social networks strengthen this effect. Dehumanization was the strongest predictor of political violence. Criminal attitudes and social networks exacerbated these impacts. Political violence cannot be explained by ideology or inequality alone. Psychological beliefs and social influences explain it better.

The findings confirmed that dehumanization has a powerful effect, as people who saw others as less human were much more likely to support violent political actions.. This supports earlier research by Kelman (1973), who said that when victims are seen as less human, moral limits against harming them are removed, making aggression easier to justify. Haslam (2006) explained that dehumanization happens in two forms: animalistic, where people are denied human qualities such as civility, and mechanistic, where people are treated like objects. Both forms reduce empathy. Similarly, Rai, Valdesolo, and Graham

(2017) found that dehumanization increases support for violence used as a tool to achieve goals. These studies, along with the current research, show that dehumanization reduces empathy and provides a strong psychological foundation for political violence.

Criminal attitudes also contributed to support for political violence, although their effect was weaker than dehumanization. Walters (2015) showed that criminal thinking helps sustain antisocial behavior by justifying crime. Agnew's (2014) General Strain Theory explains that people who face injustice may adopt criminal attitudes that make violence seem like a fair response. Prison research also supports this: Silke (2014) found that prisoners with criminal mindsets are more likely to be recruited into extremist groups. The present study supports these findings and adds that even outside prisons, criminal attitudes increase the likelihood of supporting political violence.

A key finding of this research is the role of social networks. People who were part of networks that supported violence were more likely to turn their dehumanizing beliefs and criminal attitudes into real support for violent action. This finding matches Borum (2011), who explained that extremist groups provide social support, identity, and validation that encourage violence. The National Institute of Justice (2017) also found that radicalization is strongest when offline networks—such as peers, families, or extremist groups—reinforce online extremist material. Other studies support this as well. Weimann (2016) showed that groups like ISIS used Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube to spread propaganda around the world. O'Callaghan et al. (2015) found that YouTube's recommendations often lead people toward more extreme content. More recently, The Guardian (2024) described social media as a "polarisation engine" that increases anger and division, pushing people more quickly toward extremism. Taken together, these studies and the present findings show that social networks act as a bridge, turning hostile attitudes into shared support for political violence.

The findings also have both theoretical and practical importance. The results support Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement, which explains how people justify harmful actions through processes like dehumanization and blaming victims. They also connect with McCauley and Moskalenko's (2011) model of radicalization, which shows that while many people may have grievances, only those with social reinforcement are pushed toward violence. Practically, this study suggests that preventing political violence requires reducing dehumanization by building empathy, addressing criminal attitudes in prisons and at-risk communities, and disrupting violent social networks. Interventions like counter-narratives, community engagement, and stronger regulation of extremist online content can reduce the reinforcement of violent ideologies.

This study, however, has some limitations. The sample included prisoners, drug addicts, and students, which brought diversity but may not represent the whole population. The reliance on self-reporting means some participants may not have given completely honest answers. Also, the cross-sectional design does not allow clear conclusions about cause and effect. Future research should use long-term studies, explore cultural and gender differences in radicalization, and study more deeply how social media algorithms spread extremist beliefs.

This study concludes that dehumanization and criminal views cause political violence. Their influence is greater in violent social networks. This means preventing political violence requires changing individual attitudes and social environments that foster antagonism. This study illuminates how hostile ideas might lead to political aggressiveness by examining psychological and social aspects.

Conclusion

This study reveals that personal and social factors influence support for political violence. The biggest factor is dehumanization, which lowers empathy and makes others seem less human. Second, criminal attitudes normalize hostility and violence. Social media, both online and offline, reinforces these hostile ideas and supports violent actions. The data indicate that political violence is influenced by personal beliefs and social

influences. Prevention should change individual attitudes and improve social situations that cause violence.

Recommendation

Many recommendations can be made from this study. Schools, community programs, and media campaigns should promote empathy and respect. These can foster tolerance and help people perceive others as equals, reducing hatred and violence. Second, criminal attitudes must be changed, especially in prisons and underprivileged neighborhoods. Rehab and awareness programs help change negative thinking and promote improved problem-solving, reducing extremist recruitment. Third, because social media spreads violent ideas, offline and online groups should be targeted. Communities can provide safe alternatives to extremist groups, while governments and social media corporations should combat extremist propaganda, censor harmful content, and promote constructive ideas. Fourth, digital literacy should be strengthened to identify extremist content, avoid deception, and use social media responsibly. Finally, future research should examine how dehumanization, criminal views, and social networks affect political violence across time. It should also examine cultural disparities and how internet algorithms disseminate extremism.

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