



**Impact of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism on Psychological Distress among University Students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa**

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<p><b>Keywords:</b>          Radicalisation,          Violent extremism,          Psychological          distress, University          students, Mental          health, Pakistan</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>ABSTRACT</b></p> <p><i>This study aimed to investigate the impact of radicalisation and violent extremism on psychological distress among university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study used a purposive sampling technique, comprising 200 university students (100 males, 100 females) with a mean age of 25 years (SD = 8.40) from various institutions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Data were collected using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler et al., 2003) to measure anxiety and depression and the Extremism Scale (ES; Ozer &amp; Bertelsen, 2018) to assess radicalisation and violent extremism tendencies. Correlation analyses revealed a significant positive association between radical extremism and psychological distress and a weak negative correlation between age and distress. Gender comparisons showed females reported higher distress than males. These findings suggest that younger students and those with extremist tendencies are at greater risk of psychological distress, with females potentially facing higher distress severity.</i></p>
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## **1 Introduction**

Recently, the world has experienced an increase in violent extremism, leading to the deaths of innocent individuals across many races, religions, and nationalities (Javed et al., 2023). Radicalisation, a critical beginning to violent extremism, is increasing worldwide. Pakistan possesses one of the world's most rapidly expanding populations, with 60% consisting of young adults (Weinbaum, 2017). Many marginal regions of Pakistan have experienced severe manifestations of violent extremism for almost twenty years. Given that violent extremism necessitates intervention tools, it is crucial to go beyond typical security measures to tackle the underlying roots of the phenomenon. The global war on terror has subjected the young people of Pakistan to the enduring consequences of violent extremism.

### **1.1 Radicalisation**

Radicalisation is a complicated and diverse process that has become increasingly widespread in global society. Injustice and prejudice against individuals of differing religions are contributing elements to Radicalisation (Javed et al., 2023). Conversely, Schmid (2013) conceptualises Radicalisation as both a group and individual process in which various factions (e.g., political, religious, ethnic) and radical individuals promote intolerance, dissatisfaction, refuse dialogue, and employ nonviolent coercion in multiple violent manifestations that result in Violent Extremism. In Pakistan, the youth have encountered both direct and indirect effects of violent extremism. Radicalisation affects many age groups, with young age group people being more engaged than others (Odorfer, 2015), diverse faiths, individuals with varying educational backgrounds, both employed and unemployed persons, and both genders (although male involvement is more prevalent than female).

The societal context in which Radicalisation and the potential of violent extremism could appear has a close relationship to the fundamental reasons of violent extremism, which are complex, multifaceted, and interdependent. It arises from historical, political, economic, and social conditions, including the influence of regional and global power dynamics.

### **1.2 Violent Extremism**

Violent extremism (VE) constitutes a significant issue that affects society (Borum, 2011). Violent extremism is multidimensional, encompassing numerous aspects such as Radicalisation, religious extremism and terrorism. According to research (Weinbaum, 2017), violent extremism includes numerous kinds of terrorism which carry huge dangers and threats, leading to strategic, social, psychological, religious, and political complications simultaneously globally and within Pakistan. The culture of Violent Extremism (VE) disseminated by various extremist groups and individuals significantly impacted the beliefs and attitudes of the local populace (Khan, 2021). The majority did not publicly endorse or adhere to these extremist groups, popularly referred to as the Taliban, nor did they condone their acts of extremism. In many areas, acts of violent extremism became a customary practice as extremist groups rationalised these actions under the guise of religion (Qadeem, 2021).

### **1.3 Psychological Distress**

The term "psychological distress" refers to a wide range of common mental illnesses, from mild signs to official diagnoses like stress, depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Prevalence of mental maladies, such as anxiety or depression, or compromised mental health may be suggested by elevated levels of distress. Diverse manifestations of psychological distress, characterised by distinct diagnoses and assessments, exhibit high comorbidity, share identical symptoms, and may be associated with identical underlying dysregulation pathways (Drapeau et al., 2012).

Adolescents are especially vulnerable to psychological distress the correlations between personal risk factors and psychological distress become less comprehensible, with certain research yielding contradictory findings (Odorfer, 2015). Individuals often exposed to violence often display various emotional and cognitive reactions, such as heightened alertness, disturbing thoughts, and emotional numbing, all linked to psychological suffering (Drapeau et al., 2012).

Ahmed et al. (2011) conducted research that demonstrated that Pakistani students residing in conflict-torn regions experience elevated levels of anxiety and depression as a result of direct or indirect exposure to terrorist activity. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2011) explored how the fear of becoming radicalised and being judged by society affects the stress levels of college students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These results show that more research needs to be done on how Radicalisation and violent extremism, which are both mental and physical threats, affect the mental health of college students.

Since 2001, many people have agreed that violent extremism (VE) is one of the biggest security problems the world is facing. Even though violent extremism has affected many countries, there isn't a single agreed-upon way to describe, talk about, and deal with it (Khan, 2021). Research indicates that exposure to extremism and violence can worsen symptoms of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation (Bhui et al., 2020). Limited studies focus on the mental health impacts of Radicalisation and violent extremism, and existing research primarily explores Radicalisation's socio-political aspects, neglecting mental health consequences (Kasinathan & Parsons, 2025). Furthermore, the effects of Radicalisation on student mental health may be worsened by the social and cultural norms of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cultures' ideation (Bhui et al., 2020). The current study aims to investigate the knowledge gap as well as contribute to the development of effective strategies to prevent Radicalisation, promote mental health, and support the well-being of university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Social Movement Theory (SMT) investigate violent extremism and radicalisation. It has been described by Zald and McCarthy (1987) as "a collection of attitudes and ideas within a population that implies demands for modifying specific parts of the social structure and/or the distribution of rewards in a society". It illustrates how beliefs can evolve independently, surpassing the confines of specific groups. It has also underscored the significance of process, rather than solely change, highlighting essential distinctions that may exist between the procedures facilitating an individual's admission into a movement and those influencing the type and extent of participation (Borum, 2011).

#### **1.4 Problem Statement**

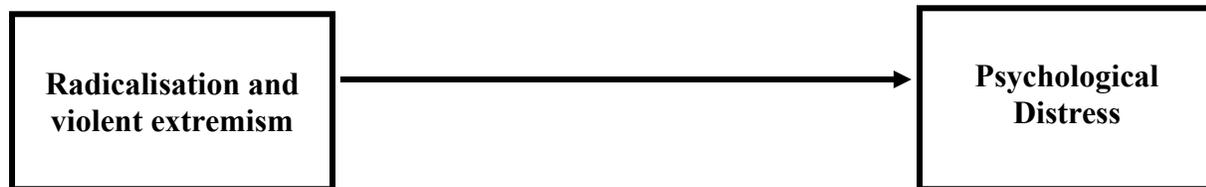
Mental health difficulties, including anxiety, sadness, PTSD, and suicidal thoughts, have increased due to violent extremism and Radicalisation. Despite the region's unique socio-cultural setting and history of terrorism, little is known about the complicated interaction between Radicalisation, violent extremism, and psychological distress in this vulnerable community. The absence of evidence-based therapies and mental health services harms these students' well-being, academic performance, and prospects. The increasing incidence of extremism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Pakistan has several causes. The conducive environment for VE was expanding in several regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, accelerated by several internal and external factors. Religion, economic decline, diminishing cultural connections, erosion of political institutions, declining national unity, absence of social justice, and corruption facilitated the rise of radicals (Bywater & Sharples, 2017). The current study aims to investigate the knowledge gap as well as contribute to the development of effective strategies to prevent Radicalisation, promote mental

health, and support the well-being of university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Thus, the study aims to

1. explore the association between radicalisation/violent extremism and psychological distress among university students.
2. explore the role of gender difference, radicalisation/violent extremism and psychological distress among university students.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual model of the study*



The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the direct relationship where radicalisation and violent extremism are the independent variables, and psychological distress is the dependent variable.

## **2 Method**

### **2.1 Research Design**

Correlation research design was used to assess the relationship between Radicalisation, violence extremism, and psychological distress among university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### **2.2 Sample**

The targeted population for the current study is University Students. The sample was recruited through a purposive sampling technique to ensure contextual relevance and in-depth data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2016) using the Google Survey forum. Only University Students with an age range of 18-45 and living in KPK were included. Students having any mental illness (like severe psychiatric conditions) or physical disabilities were not included.

### **2.3 Sample Characteristics**

The sample included 100 males and 100 females, with a mean age of 25 years (SD = 8.40). Participants were from various institutions, including the University of Peshawar (4.5%), Bacha Khan University (8.5%), and others, with 9.5% from Peshawar districts.

### **2.4 Instruments**

#### **2.4.1 Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al, 2001)**

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale is a ten-item scale with content associated with anxiety and depression. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with total scores ranging from 10 to 50, where higher scores indicate greater distress. In the present study, the scale reliability came out to be good, i.e.  $\alpha=.76$

### 2.4.2 The Extremism Scale (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2018)

The Extremism Scale is a 14-item tool designed to measure the central aspects of Radicalisation and violent extremism. The scale was designed to assess attitudes and beliefs associated with extremist ideologies, drawing from theoretical frameworks on Radicalisation processes. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale with total scores calculated by summing the item responses. Higher scores indicate a greater tendency toward Radicalisation and violent extremism. In the present study, the ES demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .89$ , reflecting high reliability among its items.

### 2.5 Ethical Considerations

The participants were provided with all the necessary information about the research to minimise any potential deception, thereby maintaining ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the study. Their responses were kept anonymous. The study is voluntary, and participants have the option to withdraw at any time if they feel uneasy. The dignity of study participants was a fundamental aspect of data acquisition, and the confidentiality of the information provided by research participants was guaranteed. The entire research procedure involved the use of copyrighted material. This is done to adequately credit the work that was done by other authors. The data was stored in a safe place in compliance with institutional and national ethical protocols.

### 2.6 Procedure

Demographic data sheets, in addition to the previously mentioned three measures, were distributed to the target population. Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Psychology, Muslim Youth University. Participants were thoroughly informed about the research topic. Data were acquired from university students using the purposive sampling technique. Participants were given the assurance of complete confidentiality and advised that they could discontinue participation at any time.

## 3 Results

The present research was conducted to examine the impact of radicalisation and violent extremism on psychological distress among university students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The data was analyzed by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The assumption of parametric met as the data was normally distributed. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to find the relationship among the variables, and *t*-test analysis was conducted to examine the gender differences.

**Table 1**

*Correlations Between Age, Extremism, and Distress Among University Students(N=200)*

Variables	1	2	3
1. Age	—	-0.07	-0.18*
2. Radicalisation & Violent Extremism		—	0.23**
3. Psychological Distress			—

*Note.*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (2-tailed)

Table 1 displays the correlations between age, radical extremism, and psychological distress among university students ( $N = 200$ ). Age showed a weak negative correlation with both radical extremism ( $r = -0.07, p > .05$ ) and psychological distress ( $r = -0.18, p < .05$ ), with the latter being statistically significant. Radical extremism and psychological distress exhibited a significant

positive correlation ( $r = 0.23, p < .01$ ). These findings suggest that younger students may experience higher levels of distress, and those with greater extremist tendencies tend to report increased psychological distress.

**Table 2**

*Group Statistics for Radicalisation & Violent Extremism and Psychological Distress by Gender (N=200)*

Variables	Gender				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Male		Female				LL	UL	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>					
Radicalisation & Violent Extremism	29.51	6.06	29.53	6.04	0.02	.98	-1.70	1.66	-.03
Psychological Distress	24.74	8.79	27.32	8.81	2.07	.04	-5.03	-0.12	-.29

*Note.*  $N = 200$ . *M* = Mean, *SD* = standard deviation, CI = confidence interval, LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit

Table 2 presents the group statistics and independent samples t-test results comparing radical extremism and psychological distress by gender among university students ( $N = 200$ ). For radical extremism, males ( $M = 29.51, SD = 6.06$ ) and females ( $M = 29.53, SD = 6.04$ ) showed no significant difference,  $t(198) = -0.02, p = .98$ . However, for psychological distress, females ( $M = 27.32, SD = 8.81$ ) reported significantly higher levels than males ( $M = 24.74, SD = 8.79$ ),  $t(198) = -2.07, p = .04$ , with a small to moderate effect size. These findings suggest that while gender does not influence radical extremism, female students experience greater psychological distress than their male counterparts.

#### 4 Discussion

The sample studied here represents a diverse group of university graduates and undergraduate students from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A variety of communities and institutions of higher learning are represented in the sample. To avoid gender bias or underestimation, the sample was intentionally selected to include equal numbers of males and females. The results found a weak, non-significant negative correlation between age and radical extremism, indicating that age does not strongly influence extremist tendencies in this university student sample. This finding aligns with some research suggesting that Radicalisation is not consistently tied to age, particularly in educated populations. For instance, Corner et al. (2020) found that personality traits like authoritarianism, rather than demographic factors such as age, were more predictive of radical tendencies. The lack of a significant correlation may reflect the university context, where students, typically aged 18–25, are exposed to similar social and ideological influences, diluting age-related differences.

However, the results showed a small but significant negative connection between age and psychological discomfort, indicating that psychological anguish is higher among younger university students. This finding aligns with research indicating increased mental health challenges among younger students. According to Grøtting and Lillebø (2020), first-year university students—who are usually younger—reported more psychological discomfort than their older counterparts. They attributed this to social adaptations, academic expectations, and transitions into university life. Young students often encounter distinct stressors, including homesickness and underdeveloped coping strategies, which can intensify their distress Liu et al.

(2022). This finding is consistent with developmental theories indicating that younger individuals exhibit greater emotional instability as a result of ongoing brain maturation and identity formation (Ragelienė, 2016).

Present research also explores gender differences in measured variables. Results found non-significant gender differences in Radicalisation and violent extremism. The absence of significant gender differences in radical extremism aligns with studies suggesting that Radicalisation processes may not be strongly gendered in certain contexts, particularly among educated populations like university students. For instance, research has shown that Radicalisation is often driven by social exclusion, identity struggles, or exposure to extremist narratives, which affect individuals regardless of gender (Corner et al., 2020). Corner et al. (2020) also found that personality traits such as psychopathy and authoritarianism, rather than gender, were more strongly associated with radical tendencies, supporting the current finding that gender may not be a primary differentiator in endorsing extremist attitudes.

However, results found a significant gender difference in psychological distress in university students. It was found that female university students experience significantly higher psychological distress than their male counterparts. Studies consistently report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among female students, often attributed to social, cultural, and biological factors. For example, a study found that female college students in Norway reported higher psychological distress compared to males, with a stronger effect size for women over time (Grøtting & Lillebø, 2020).

This gender disparity may be attributed to several factors. Initially, females frequently utilise emotion-focused coping strategies, which may increase stress and anxiety relative to the problem-focused approaches typically adopted by males (Matud, 2004). Furthermore, social pressures such as gender inequality and expectations regarding academic performance may have a disproportionate impact on female students. A study indicated that females exhibited lower depression scores than males when they received higher levels of social support. This suggests that perceived social support may alleviate distress; however, it may be less accessible to females in high-pressure academic settings (Liu et al., 2022). Furthermore, female students may encounter specific stressors, including sexual harassment or assault, which correlate with increased psychological distress, especially within gender-diverse populations (Jordan et al., 2014).

The study has several limitations as well, i.e. as the sample was selected from the Universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, thus the sample is not representative of all Pakistani university students. It is a cross-sectional study that has been conducted in a non-clinical sample does not allow for inference of causality and potential self-report biases. Further studies on Radicalisation and violent extremism can include other variables, including students' family relations and the environment of the institute. Studying this issue in a clinical population (like depression and anxiety patients) would enable a deeper understanding of the relationship between radicalisation and violent extremism.

## **6 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings confirm that higher levels of radical extremist tendencies are associated with increased psychological distress, particularly among younger students and females, who exhibit greater vulnerability to emotional strain. The significant positive correlation between radical extremism and distress indicates that both younger students and extremist attitudes are related to heightened distress. Additionally, the elevated prevalence of severe distress among females and graduates highlights the need for targeted interventions to address demographic-specific vulnerabilities. These results emphasise the importance of integrating trauma-informed mental

health support and media literacy programs into university settings and national de-radicalisation strategies to mitigate the psychological and ideological risks faced by students.

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