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Perceptions of Youth on the Role of Sectarianism in Shaping Social Identity and Religious Conflict in Pakistan

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Abstract
Sectarianism is still affecting social relationships between different groups within Pakistan, and especially between the youth who are trying to define their sectarian identity. In this regard, this study intended tto explore the perception of youth regaring roleof sects in shaping social identity and conflict. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with 15 participants aged 18-30, identified using purposive sampling techniques. The sample consisted of youth from the Sunna, Shia and Ahl-e-Hadith sects who had experienced and could provide information about sectarianism and its implications for their social identities. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data. The major themes derived were sectarian identity, inter-sect perceptions, role of educators and religious institutions, social media influenc, perceptions of sectarian conflict, emotion responses to sectarianism, boundary maintenance, hopes for unity and peace-building strategies. Study concluded that social influences and institutional support often lead to an increase in the prominence of one's sectarian affiliation (socio-religious identity). The rise of social media has also increased the amount of false sectarian information being presented, and therefore decreased the amount of trust, acceptance, and love for one's own (or other) sects within the youth. The findings of this research highlight several areas of policy reform and intervention to address sectarianism. These include increasing educational opportunities; educating the public on media usage and misuse; holding more leaders to account for their actions; and providing more robust legal support mechanisms.

Keywords: *Sectarianism, Social Identity, Religious Conflict, Youth, Perceptions, Pakistan*

Introduction

Background of the Study

Sectarianism has become an important social and religious political issue in Pakistan. Sectarian issues have had an influence on both how people relate to other groups within society and the collective sense of national cohesion. In addition, sectarianism further influences an individual's feelings of self-perception, particularly regarding religious or spiritual affiliation. In a nation where Islam is mainly practiced by the Sunni and Shia sects, long-standing divisions between these two groups have periodically resulted in violent confrontations and serious divisions within society. Though their differences were originally based on religious beliefs, over time the divisions have come to represent an individual's identity and have continued to be stoked by political

interests, as well as national and regional geopolitics, and an educational system that does not foster inter-sect acceptance (Ahmad 2021; Zahra 2015). This youth has lived and grown in a society that is full of religious divisions. Depending on how the youth develop their social identity and beliefs, they can either continue these divisions or help reform them.

A study explored Sunni-Shia divisions in Islamabad and concluded that people feel proud and confident to be the part of their own sect. However, they also become hostile and suspicious towards people from other sects (Khan & Uzzaman 2020). This conclusion is not just a theoretical explanation, but it has serious real-life effects. The stronger the sectarian identity, the lower the tolerance and higher risk of being influenced by extremist ideas (Batool et al. 2024). Another finding by Zahra (2015) states that identity confusion, division of sects and subjective religious education have made the youth in Islamabad to adopt sectarian prejudice. These findings emphasize the importance of understanding the ways in which sectarianism shapes the self-identity of youth and how it leads to religious conflicts.

The Hazara Shia community of Quetta is an example of how sectarian violence has caused external marginalization and continues to be a significant source of solidarity among youth. Mujtaba et al. (2022) stated that, due to years of ongoing violence against the people of Hazara community, they have developed a strong Shia identity. These young people after facing all the prejudice and fear, stayed politically active. They used their sectarian identity to remain united, demanded their rights and counter marginalization. In the same way, Siddique and Saleem (2025) studied the impact of sectarian symbols as they play a big role in daily lives of youth. People use these symbols to show pride in their sect and to separate themselves from others. Other than being used as a tool for understanding what influences feelings of safety and comfort among young people, this study also explores how sectarian identities are formed, and how those identities can be constructed socially. These examples show the extent to which sectarian divisions exist in Pakistani society.

Madrassa education, media and political talks plays a major role in forming people's perceptions and thinking. The study of Syed and Khan (2024) found that continuous and repeated exposure to sectarian violence and discrimination creates self-isolation and this can lead them to extremism. Their research policy gave the idea of adding inter-sect education and critical thinking lessons in schools in order to decrease the ongoing influence of sectarian beliefs. In similar research, Shaukat (2020) studied the experiences of Muslims and Christians. He found that minority students had weaker social identities because there was a strong sectarian atmosphere. This indicates that sectarianism affects how non-Muslim people in Pakistan develop their identities. Overall, the studies reveal that youth in Pakistan experience sectarianism as a social and political issue, and also affecting them mentally. This impacts how they socialize with others and involve in society.

Taking a broader historical and sociological context, sectarianism in Pakistan emerged out of a colonial history and the process of state-building following the partition. Early political organizations and institutional favors toward religious communities resulted in asymmetries that overtime and through history became sectarian ruptures (Zaman 2018). The passage of the Islamization campaign of General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1980s complicated the scene further in the way that it globally assumed the defence and sponsorship of a specific origin of

sectarianism endorsed by education and the media to analyse a particular religious interpretation of Islam. These market and structural acts further embedded the perception of religion as something that was not just privately held but a public indication of social belonging and legitimacy of political obligations (Abdullah et al. 2024). Consequently, in the case of younger generations who were raised in and around this legacy, they did internalize sectarian identities as a norm of their social reality.

The Pakistani schooling system (formal as well as informal) has been demonstrated to promote sectarian differences, with religious textbooks often containing a focus on aspects of theological differences rather than similarities of shared Islamic principles, as well as identified precursors to sectarian identity development becoming a notion to develop sustained difference through practices of distinction and difference in terms of sectarianism (Hamza 2019). Additionally, the significant lack of critical pedagogy, or exposure to other sects in schools, left unchallenged sectarian stereotypes that would condition attitudes towards intergroup relations in adulthood (Jamil & Sohail 2020). For example, young people receiving a madrassa education often form a more localized worldview shaped by the religious tradition under which they receive educational instruction, while university students in secular higher education institutions encounter some degree of sectarian divisions through peer groups and student organizations (Fiaz et al. 2022).

Beyond education, digital media and online outreach are becoming influential vehicles for sectarian dialogue. Today's youth use online platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and X (previously known as Twitter) as environments through which they are exposed to multiple layers of sectarian rhetoric and counter-narratives (Lak et al. 2024), and as a result of anonymous online interactions, youth are able to express greater levels of intolerance and disdain toward others without concern for the level of accountability for expressing such attitudes in real-life settings. Nevertheless, at least some youth-led peace and unity-oriented groups are using social media to promote dialogue and to increase awareness of the need for non-sectarian values in Pakistan (Fiaz et al. 2022). Therefore, the current multi-layered influence of the media provides an example of the complexity involved in the development of sectarian identities in Pakistan at present.

From a psychological standpoint, for youth, sectarian identification affects aspects beyond beliefs and extends into the emotional and cognitive domains. Belonging to a strongly drawn sectarian group can confer a sense of meaning and purpose but can also develop a sense of superiority and distrust towards others (Manzoor et al. 2023). Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals develop parts of their self-esteem from belonging to groups, meaning sectarian belonging can provide social harmony, if inclusive, or reinforce conflicts in cases of exclusion (Tajfel & Turner 1979). In Pakistani youth, this influence can frequently emerge in daily situational social choices, i.e., with friendships, marriage partners, and community engagement are often indirectly staged these decisions are influenced by sectarian.

The socio-political implications of these sectarian identities are even more severe. Sectarian identity instead social engagement patterns, they often also dictate how political these associations influence voting patterns, employability, and effectively their access to security in some cases and regions. Abdullah, Iqbal and Skindar (2024) write in their research that sectarian identity was a

main aspect in students' political disclosures and perceptions of justice with regards to education. Further, youth from minority sects experience systematic discrimination and exclusion from normative forms of engagement (Hussain & Mobeen 2024). These systems drive populations in to the systemic grievances and marginalization particularly amongst Shia and Ahl-e-Hadith youth population.

This research into the youth perspectives offer an understanding of the complexities of sectarianism that individuals experience, internalize, and resist individually. While exploring the young people lived experiences of sectarianism, this research aims to investigate how and by what social process sectarian identity is developed and expressed.

Research Objectives

1. To find out how sectarianism affects the emergence and representation of social identity among youth.
2. To explore the opinions of youth on how sectarianism leads to religious conflicts in their community.
3. To gather opinion of young people on possible measures that reduce sectarian tensions and encourage religious harmony.

Research Questions

- In what way do young people view the role of sectarianism in defining their social identity and social connectedness within their community?
- What are the perspectives of youth on the causes of sectarian conflict?
- What solutions do they propose to reduce sectarian tensions and promote interfaith harmony?

Research Methodology

This study was grounded in qualitative method, because it was accurate for exploring the lived experiences of young people and their viewpoints and also how they interacted according to their identities. This approach was appropriate in understanding how youth experienced and saw sectarian divisions in their day to day lives. This research design explored individual experiences and what meanings they formed while understanding their social realities.

Population and Sampling

The population of this study was the youth who belonged to some religious party, age 18-30 were taken who belonged to Shia, Sunni and Ahle Hadith groups from two main cities of the Punjab Lahore and Gujranwala based on the availability of respondents. The researchers with the help of gatekeepers (religious leaders of these sects) approached the respondents. The purposive sampling strategy was used to choose those respondents who prior experiences with sectarian beliefs and were active members of the religious groups. The research sought to conduct interviews with 15 participants (5 Shia, 5 Sunni, 5 Ahle Hadith), providing a balance across sectarian affiliations.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The participants of the study were selected according to their real-life experiences and knowledge of sectarian identity. The following criteria was used in the process by which selection was done.

Inclusion Criteria

- The youth (18 to 30 years old) who were involved in creating their social/religious identity make up most of the participant pool for this research.

- Participants had to identify as Sunni, Shia and Ahle Hadith Muslims and must be educated.
- Participants must have experienced exposure to sectarian discourse through Family, Peer Networks, Education, Religious Gatherings or Media, which would allow them to reflect meaningfully on the subject.

Exclusion Criteria

- Anyone outside of the age range (younger than 18 or over 30) would be excluded because they do not fit the target demographic definition of 'youth'.
- Anyone who cannot identify themselves as Sunni, Ahle Hadith, and Shia would be excluded.

Data Collection

The data collection was conducted through the semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was prepared based on critical evaluation of the literature review. As seen in the research of Batool et al. (2024), and Siddique & Saleem (2025), the study primarily focused on sectarianism, social identity and group behaviour. The interviews for data collection were conducted physically and virtually via digital platforms i.e., Google Meet, or WhatsApp etc, based on respondent's preference. The use of online platforms allowed flexibility, accessibility and a safe environment for the qualitative interviews which were dynamic and open to participant experience and meaning. With the participant's informed consent, the interviews were recorded and ran for approximately 40–60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Urdu or English as per participant preference. The ability to have the interviews conducted in Urdu or English allowed the participant to verbally communicate comfortably and allowed for the expression of rather sensitive views without fear and hesitancy. Given the interviews were conducted online, schedules for interviews were determined by the availability of the participants. There was a formal interview protocol utilized in the research for quality and reliability purposes of data. The protocol allowed for a balance of rigor and continuity through questioning while also allowing probing for the purposes of theme identification and exploration. All interview materials were kept confidential, with all recordings securely stored.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed by following the six-phase criteria developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic analysis. In the first phase, all the interview transcripts were read thoroughly to understand participant's stories and context of their experiences. In the second phase, initial codes were created manually to find meaningful or repetitive factors of the data from different participants. After that, the codes were arranged and refined in a way that related codes were grouped together to find the comprehensive themes that captured the common meanings and experiences. During the stage of theme reviewing, the thematic framework was analysed to make sure that all the themes were accurate, clear, coherent and separate from one another. Further, every theme was explained clearly with examples from selected quotes of respondents to make the analysis look clearer and more meaningful. At last, themes were combined and written in a clear structure linking back the participants' experiences to the larger social and religious context.

Table 1: *Themes and subthemes of youth perceptions on sectarianism and social identity (n=15)*

Theme	Subthemes
1. Sectarian Identity and Belonging	Personal identity; Religious self-definition; Sect-based pride
2. Family and Community Influence on Sectarian Perspectives	Early religious socialization; Community-shaped beliefs; Family-driven guidance
3. Inter-Sect Relations and Perceptions	Social distancing; Differential treatment; In-group comfort
4. Role of Religious Education and Institutions	Neutral curriculum; Unity-focused teaching; Institutional influence
5. Perceptions of Sectarian Conflict	Everyday triggers; Personal loss; Localized tensions
6. Aspirations for Unity and Change	Shared Muslim identity; Dialogue and education; Hope for inclusivity
7. Social Media as a Shaping Force	Misinformation spread; Online hostility; Viral sectarian content
8. Youth Experiences and Emotional Impact	Social withdrawal; Emotional strain; Fear of judgment
9. Boundary Maintenance and Stereotyping	Prejudiced images; Rumor-based assumptions; Sect-identification efforts
10. Strategies for Peace-making	Respectful dialogue; Youth tolerance-building; Action against hate speech

Ethical Considerations

Participants chose to engage in the study voluntarily and informed consent was obtained after explaining the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the study. As a measure of confidentiality and anonymity related to sensitive content about sectarian issues discussed with them, pseudonyms are used, and identifying information was removed from all data. All interviews took place in a private, safe space. In addition, respondents were informed that at any time during the interview, they could break, skip questions, or leave without any penalties. In all interactions, the researcher was mindful of the cultural and religious practices. The researcher also employed reflexivity in an effort to curb personal bias. Ethical approval was received through relevant Institutional Review Boards prior to collecting data.

Results

Participant Demographics

The age of subjects ranged from 21-30 years of age and included eight males and seven females. The youth had a demographic balance of Sunni (n = 5), Ahl-e-Hadith (n = 5), and Shia (n = 5). Most participants lived in urban areas, while some were from semi-urban or rural areas. The education level varied widely from intermediate to master's degree. However, all subjects were in or had completed their bachelor's or master's training. Thirteen participants were students while two were professionals. All of the participants were proficient in both Urdu and English. The demographics of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 2: *Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants (n=15)*

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	21–25	8	53.3%
	26–30	7	46.7%
Gender	Male	8	53.3%
	Female	7	46.7%
Education Level	Bachelor's degree	9	60.0%
	Master's degree	6	40.0%
Religious Affiliation	Sunni	5	33.3%
	Ahl-e-Hadith	5	33.3%
	Shia	5	33.3%
Occupation/Status	Student	8	53.3%
	Employed	7	46.7%

Thematic Analysis

The analysis covers ten overarching themes, which reflect the perspectives and lived experiences of youth in Pakistan regarding sectarianism. These themes demonstrate how sectarian identity is an influential force on the individual and collective identity of youth and demonstrate how socialization and interactions within family and community create boundaries that reinforce sect-based divisions and how youth interpret, cope, and respond to sectarian stress and strain.

Sectarian Identity and Belonging

The very first theme emerged out of analysis was sectarian identity and belonging of the respondents. All of the participants identified their social identities first through Islam and, secondarily, by a sect affiliation or sectarian identity; however, the experience of the secondary sect/sect-based identity varied across participants. A number of respondents spoke about sect as an inherited, communal marker that organized their daily life and indicated belonging (e.g., P1 stated, "*I'm a university student, I'm a Muslim, and I am of the Sunni sect.*" and P3 expressed strong sect-based identification, "*I identify myself as a Muslim and a follower of Ahl-e-Sunnah wal Jama'at.*"

Similarly, other participants who identified as Shia indicated that sect was central to belonging and identification, but they framed it based on historical, rather than communal devotional or sect practice e.g., one participant (P12) only provided her sect identification in terms of religious adherence, *"I identify myself primarily as a follower of Ahl-e-Bayt (the family of the Prophet ﷺ)*". Instead, one Shia participant (P13) on the contrary expressed a very firm sense of attachment, "*I identify myself first as a Muslim but my sect is Shia, and I believe in it completely.*"

Ahl-e-Hadith participants in turn exhibited a different emphasis. Many repeated the idea that Muslim was first and sect was secondary and identified their secondary identity in doctrinal terms more rather than communal ritual. P6 mentioned, "*I identify myself first and foremost as a Muslim, and then as Ahl-e-Hadith,*" and P10 added, *"I am from Gujranwala, and I simply identify as a Muslim. I am Ahl-e-Hadith, but I do not consider it a separate identity from my being Muslim."* These two quotes reveal a tacit orientation towards textual or doctrinal loyalty (Qur'an and Hadith) over inherited customs.

A few participants noted that others frequently inquired about sect, and transformed what might be a personal religious preference into a public designation as P6 stated, *"in our city people will immediately ask, 'Which sect are you?'"* Similarly, P2 noted the accumulation of sectarian talk from the time he was young, "*We have been hearing discussions related to sects since childhood, and naturally, that has some impact on your mind."*

Ultimately, sectarian belonging exists as an internal means of identification, while also serving as an external social identifier; its importance varies on a personal basis (heritage, doctrine, practice) and as a social identifier.

Family and Community Influence on Sectarian Perspectives

Family and the broader local community were identified as the most salient agents that shaped how these participants learned about and engaged with sectarian identity. Sunni respondents pointed to ways that rituals practiced within families and local communities had formative influence. For example, P1 made explicit how sectarian markers are solidified in everyday identification processes, *"Since I am Sunni, people identify me as a Sunni and then call me that. It has simply become a label for me."* P2 had a similar take, explaining how norms of sect-based distinction were imprinted through exposure from childhood, "*We have been listening to sectarian discussions since childhood, so of course it became stamped in the head."* Participant 05 explains this generationally, *"For some people sects and denominations are extremely important, especially for older people."*

Shia participants similarly articulated family narratives and commemorative practices as essential to implant sectarian identity. P11 made the explicit connection between narrative and belief, stating, "*In our home, my grandparents would narrate stories of Imam Hussain, of his sacrifice, etc.; these things develop beliefs."* P12 highlighted something similar in terms of allegiance to ritual, even in stating that he identifies, primarily, as a *"follower of Ahl-e-Beyt,"* it keeps alive the notion that his family and community ritual (such as majalis and Muharram commemorations) have established a different religious memory and moral imagination.

Ahl-e-Hadith participants highlighted a somewhat different view, where parents encourage religious interpretation and engagement with scripture, rather than adherence to practices as an uncritical follower. P6 shared their experience of parents' commitment to fidelity to the text when it came to parenting, *"I've always learned that a person's identity should come from their actions, not just their name or sect*" P10 said something similar in continuing to discuss the importance of the Qur'an and the Hadith: *"We usually study Quran at home and we have small gatherings at someone's house with a local Ahl-e-Hadith scholar. We don't do Mawlid, we don't go to the shrines."*

Community level influences from mosques, local events and community practices helped reinforce what participants were taught in their families. Participants reported that local mosque and community gatherings embed sectarian norms. What is acceptable forms of worship or public expression is defined by the sectarian order dominating locally. P2 noted that there are public rituals of celebrations of community that create publicly available practices that mark a belonging to the group (e.g. Rabi-ul-Awal). P11 & P12 reported about the significance of Shia public communal rituals in creating spaces for participants to maintain their identity across generations.

Inter-Sect Relations and Perceptions

When discussing relationships across sectarian divides, the respondents indicate a combination of daily cordiality and sustained boundaries. Respondents from the Sunni community described casually socializing across sects, while being careful to avoid theological disagreements. For example, one respondent (P5) noted, "*We attend college with others, we talk about our schooling but we rarely talk about religion." S*everal other respondents from the Sunni community made essentially the same comment in relation to recognizing the importance of living cohesively across sects, while also preferring to form social ties and friendships, without extended religious disputes and practices.

Participants from the Shia sect, similarly, noted careful everyday relationships with others, but also defined clear boundaries around religious events and religious practices. P11 stated, *"these labels create invisible walls among youth... Most people would prefer to socialize within their own sect, as it feels safer."* P13 noted a similar social withdrawal during Muharram and the safety of staying within the community gathering. "*I try to keep equal relations with everyone, but sometimes people stay away once they know I am Shia,"* quoted another Shia (P14).

Participants from Ahl-e-Hadith shared the separate ritual practices at times develop a feeling of distance. P7 stated, *"When people know that I am Ahl-e-Hadith, that is my main identification,"* P8 and also shared, *"I am proud of being Ahl-e-Hadith... I am strict about some things, for example, not following an innovation of faith."* These examples provide insights into how doctrinally based practices create a social lens through which religious practices impact how likely they will be invited to participate and the perception of how participants "fit" into mixed gatherings."

Sects displayed some similar social patterns: (a) living in social proximity in secular contexts like education, employment, (b) choosing to reside apart in the presence of ritual and religious gathering, and (c) politeness to create distance without overtly challenging one another. P4 said, "*Friendships shouldn't be based on these separations,"* in a reflection of trying to engage religious moderation on an individual level. Meanwhile, distancing can also be selective. P13 contributed: "*Even my Sunni friends won't come around during Muharram*." This suggests that while youth may not demonstrate outright hostility toward one another, religious event(s) and geminations that are contextually aligned reinforce quiet boundaries that support sectarian distinction just as resistance to activity appears innocuous.

Role of Religious Education and Institutions

Participants revealed the major role of educational and institutional settings, like madrasas, mosques, and schools, in constructing sectarian identity and affirming beliefs. Sunni participants connected their earliest religious experiences, which occurred in mosques and schools, with their later understandings of faith and sect. P3 said, "*From a very young age, we were told the Sunni way of prayer and festivals."* P5 described learning this way as socialization rather than an active choice, "*Whatever we were taught in our family and at the mosque was the way we lived."*

For Shia participants, religious institutions, such as Imambargahs and majalis, were not solely educational spaces but also spaces of collective memory where the identity was reinforced. P11 said, *"In Muharram we gather as a community, and this teaches us patience and sacrifice."* P12 for example, explained, *"The majalis and processions solidify our faith in Ahl-e-Bayt."* These statements demonstrate that Shia

religious institutions, *Imambargahs and majalis*, provide a dual role that is spiritual and socio-educational in nature, tying youth to the past, to belief, to each other.

Individuals participating in the Ahl-e-Hadith referred to religious learning in a way that emphasized study of texts instead of traditions or social gatherings; participant P6 explained, *"Our scholars teach that everything must be according to Qur'an and Hadith."* Participant P9 further explained how the Ahl-e-Hadith individuals study religious texts, "*We go to small study circles instead of larger gatherings, because we want to learn directly from the texts."* Participants described religious institutions as not sites of social bonding, but rather as places where doctrinal and individual reform could take place.

Outside of religious institutions, in educational institutes such as in universities sect or sect differences were observed in an oblique way. Participant 02 described the conversation that was engaged by "*teachers and students, often creating division, when they speak about sects and we have class discussion related to religion*." Participant 13 shared his experiences in higher education, saying *"students grouped based on sect, even when students weren't even aware of forming based on sect membership."*

Regardless of sect affiliation, most participants understood the role of education in shaping one's view of religion. However, generally differed on whether education resulted in forming a perspective of unity of sect or disunity of sect affiliation. Many people stated that educational experiences as contributor to unity and spiritual development is confusing. Whereas a few expressed the layered stories or partial meaning in relation to sects contributed to separating individuals. As participant P11 stated, *"If our schools and scholars were to help kids in a fair way on all sects, individuals would socially understand each other significantly improve."*

Perceptions of Sectarian Conflict

Participants from all groups recognized sectarian conflict as a significant social issue that is commonly misunderstood. A majority of the participants (12/15) reported that conflict surfaced during religious months such as Muharram and Rabi-ul-Awal when sectarian rituals could be seen publicly. While a few had personally observed violent events, the majority reflected they had witnessed hostility, mockery or verbal provocation.

Shia participants gave the most direct accounts of experiencing victimization or fear. P11 shared, *"During Muharram, they remind us about our sect or just don't associate with us."* P13 shared a painful memory, *"some girls made jokes, these are the ones who hit themselves'; I did not respond, however it hurt a lot."* Participant 14 revealed, *"A procession turned violent and my cousin was killed during that event. Since then, I do not even engage in conversations."* Participant 15 commented, *"During our procession some Sunni boys made fun of us, they called it shirk; a fight broke out."* Each testimony illustrates the social and emotional impact sectarian conflict has on the experiences of minority youth, especially during times of religious observance.

Sunni participants generally coincided that there are tensions but typically characterized them as deriving from ignorance or outside influences. As participant 2 stated it this way, *"Differences are natural, but people make them personal."* Participant 4 expressed the idea, *"We all have our ways of praying; the problem arises when people try to prove others wrong."* This analysis raises individual attitude preferred as a cause in conflict as opposed to structural discrimination.

Ahl-e-Hadith respondents, in contrast, noted verbal confrontation and labeling as potential sources of conflict. Participant 7 noted, "*When people find out I am Ahl-e-Hadith, they think right away we don't accept others."* Participant 8 said, *"There is always someone saying we are strict or cruel as a result of avoiding some rituals.*" These are statements that demonstrate how doctrinal differences may not be hostile, but misunderstood, socially, leading to suspicion and exclusion.

Despite the active differences in experiences through the interviews, participants were in agreement in their views toward sectarian conflict to be ultimately attributed too lack of education and tolerance. Participant 11 put it simply, "*Each sect believes itself to be right and everyone else is wrong. That kill trust."* Similarly, P12 stated, *"It is easier for people to hold on to the stereotype of others, than to listen."*

Figure 01: Word Cloud generated from Reponses of three sects' respondents

Aspirations for Unity and Change

Participants described serious divisions among sects, there was also a powerful sense of hope for unifying, tolerance, and reforms. Young people across sects expressed an interest in moving beyond hostility and reconstructing a Muslim identity that acknowledges inclusion.

Several Sunni participants framed unity as both a moral and national obligation. As participant 3 stated, *"We are all Muslims and shouldn't be divided by our differences,"* and participant 5 added "*True Islam has respect for each sect, fighting just weakens us*." These remarks illustrate the normative consensus that sectarianism is opposed to the Islamic sensibility.

Participants from the Shia sect, also recognized their unique traditions, had a similar vision for unity based on understanding rather than ignorance of difference. Participant 11 stated, "*As long as we show tolerance and mutual respect. Dialogue and education are the best tools."* Participant 13 remarked on the need for teaching children that difference is not wrong, saying "*Schools and madrasas should teach respect."* Participant 14 commented in empathy, *"We all believe in one God, why is there this hatred?"* These comments in varying degrees exhibited a willingness to coexist by virtue of recognition, not assimilation.

Ahl-e-Hadith participants also encouraged unity and, they pointed to the need to return to key Islamic values as the way to unite. For example, Participant 6 expressed, *"If people truly live by the Qur'an and Hadith, there would be no differences"*

Participant 9 urged, *"Unity can come only when we stop making sect our identity and see ourselves as Muslims first."* These comments rose to the practical consideration of a reform agenda leading back to the de-sectarianizing process, the way to unification is to think of what we all share in scripture, as opposed to what led us to separate in history.

These participants also offered practical means toward making this change. This was especially articulated around education and media, and the religious leadership. Participant 11 explained, *"Curriculum should include the discussion of repetition of tolerance, humanity and respect."* Participant 12 suggested some legal and policy strategies where "*anyone who promotes hate in the name of religion should be taken to task."*

While the tone of these comments varied in the sense of successful reform being a moral argument or political matter. All believed in an improved social order in which youth are not only exposed to differences but also, engages with the differences. As Participant 11 concluded, "*If tolerances and understanding become a part of your persona reform will happen."*

Social Media as a Shaping Force

Participants from all three sectarian groups identified social media as a strong catalyst for sectarian narratives, as a platform that may have educational value but more commonly fuels sectarian fervor. Some participants indicated the informative aspects and issues with unverifiable information. A Sunni participant stated, *"Social media has a huge impact on this issue"* (P1), while another observed, *"On social media, everyone acts like a scholar"* (P2). Ahl-e-Hadith participants also described the mixed effects, *"Social media has made it easier and worse as well."* (P6) and another stated *"Social media is actually the biggest problem."* (P8). Shia participants pointed toward more direct harm due to online content, "*social media has made things worse. They share videos that mocked our rituals"* (P13).

Participants discussed three main things regarding social media 1) the rapid and widespread distribution of short clips taken out of context, 2) individuals mimic the teachers authority, even though they are not an expert in the subject, and 3) when content goes viral, this provocation serves deepen mistrust. Sunni participants emphasized misinformation and sensationalism as the main issue; Ahl-e-Hadith youth saw the need for scholarship that is verified on social media; Shia participants talked about the harm and exclusion that mocking, or provocative content, could cause in the "real world." A majority of participants proposed corrective measures such media literacy, promoting positive content, and limiting hate speech online (P11, P12, P15).

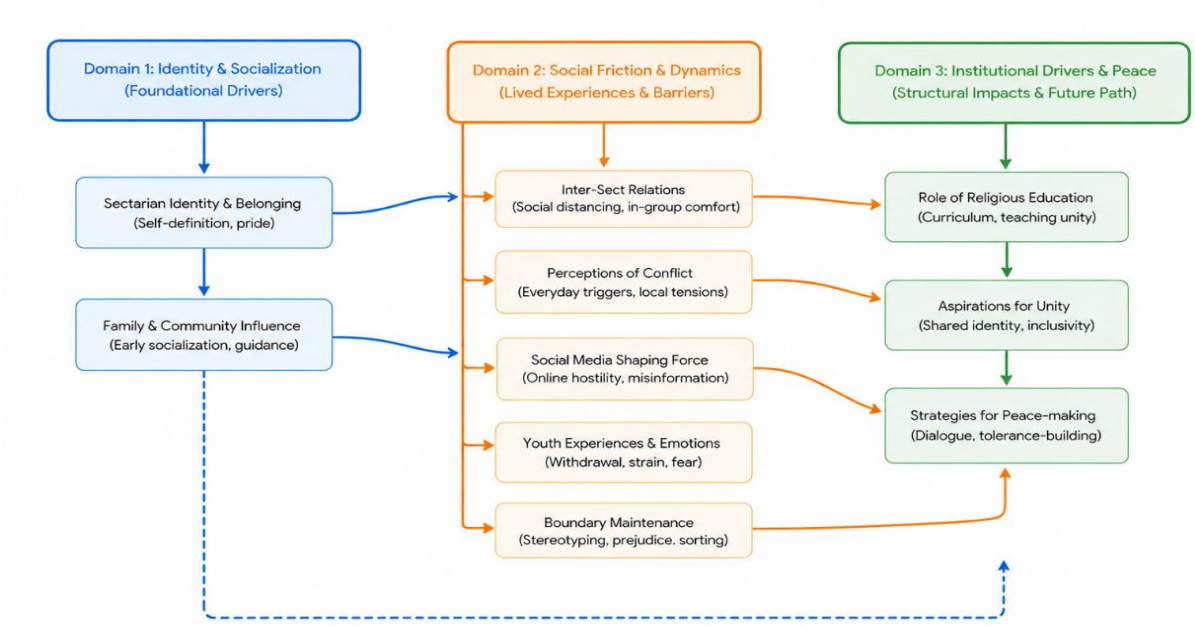

Figure 02: Categorization Framework of thematic Analysis

Youth Experiences and Emotional Impact

During the interviews, participants spoke about the emotional consequences of living with sectarian difference, characterized by feelings of humiliation, exclusion, fear, anger, yet also resilience and commitment to faith. Shia participants reported the greatest emotional toll. One described being ridiculed at a prayer event: "Some girls joked with one another, saying *'Here are those who hit themselves.' I did not say anything, but it really hurt."* (P13). Another remember being physically attacked and the long-term trauma, "*Once, during an Ashura procession, some people attacked us with stones. Many people were hurt."* (P12). One particularly poignant narrative described the loss of a family member, *"a few years ago, during Ashura, the procession turned violent... my cousin was shot dead."* (P14)

Sunni and Ahl-e-Hadith participants also expressed emotional impacts; however, these were more typically reflected as social distance and frustration compared to straightforward physical harm. Ahl-e-Hadith participants expressed that they felt labelled and socially distanced, *"I heard people said, 'You guys are Ahl-e-Hadith, and really strict. You forbid everything.'" (P6).* Another explained, *"Us Ahl-e-Hadith people avoid every happy occasion."* (P7). Sunni's expressed sadness regarding sectarian divisions and their impact on youth, *"Things like these create rigidity. The communities become divided."* (P1). Many participants reported adaptive behaviors: avoiding public declaration of sect (P15), withdrawing from certain gatherings (P9), or choosing silence rather than conflict (P6).

Boundary Maintenance and Stereotyping

Respondents described how interactions in their daily lives reproduce boundary-making and stereotype maintenance that creates a sectarian distance between them. The same types of boundary-making discussed earlier occurred here too, labeling, shorthand judgments, and social sorting. Some examples from the data with participants are illustrative, one described being labeled after declining to participate in a ritual, saying, *"You people avoid every happy occasion"* (P7). Ahl-e-

Hadith members even said they were called "rigid" because they were unwilling to participate in specific practices. They would say things like, "You people are very strict, you forbid everything" (P6). Shia respondents often noted being mocked for their mourning rituals, saying, "*They mocked our rituals, they called it shirk."* (P15)

Boundary maintenance occurred in a handful of domains, social invitations (where members reported being invited less often after their sect was known), other educational or workplace environments (when socially being treated differently either subtly or at times not explicitly), and rituals (where members would attend communal worship, but not share gatherings because of their sectarian difference in faith). Often, participants mentioned that they learned pressures associated with their biases from listening to family members or growing up in communities where these perceptions of other sects were spatially managed and, after that, often reproduced in circles among friends and colleagues. The repetition of these geographic boundaries led many participants to observe that every-time specific micro-boundaries, usually small commentaries daily or more informal contexts (i.e., jokes, questions, sarcasm, etc.), accumulate. Together, they can create social boundaries that lead to more extensive forms of sectarian separation, that could become larger barriers down the road (P2, P5, P9).

Strategies for Peace-making

Participants suggested a number of overlapping strategies to mitigate sectarian tensions, including educational reform and community-based interventions. Some of the most frequent recommendations were curricular change, dialogue across sects, youth-based community mixed activities, and formal legal or policy mechanisms against hate speech. There were also a number of specific recommendations, *"Curriculum should include ideas about tolerance, humanity, and mutual respect"* (P11); *"Have programs that mix youth across sects by doing sports or work in the community"* (P7), "*Anyone who promotes hate in the name of religion should be punished"* (P12).

There were frequent proposals that were practical and at a grassroots level, such as youth groups across sects, shared service with each other, events at universities, and media campaigns supporting unity (P2, P5, P14). Leaders have a big responsibility, as well as parents, teachers and religious scholars, who model restraint and disrespect (P1, P10, P14). Ahl-e-Hadith respondents expressed doctrinal clarity as a long-term pathway, *"If people were following the Qur'an and Hadith in sincerity there would be no conflict."* (P6). A Shia respondent emphasized precautions for vulnerable events and accountability of agent's provocateurs (P15).

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effects of sectarianism on social identity, social connectivity, and intra-religious conflict for youth. The first research question was intended to illuminate how young people viewed the influence of sectarianism on their social identity. All sects were discussed by participants as constituting only a small component of their identities, all individuals identified first as Muslims, but their sect identified them within the social domain. These finding aligns with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979), which suggests that individuals manage multiple identities, and these identities become salient in contexts where group boundaries are socially meaningful.

The second research question focused on youth perspectives regarding the causes of sectarian conflict in their community. According to the participants, most agreed that sectarian conflict is learned through society. Contemporary research shows that sectarianism continues to act as a structural barrier to social and political participation of minority sects in Pakistan (Mujtaba et al. 2022; Khan et al. 2021). Media, particularly social media was viewed by all groups as a key contributor to division. Existing research similarly identifies the potential of online forums to amplify sectarian rhetoric, and the rapid dissemination of incendiary content that can result from their use (Batool et al. 2024).

The third research question sought to understand what solutions young people proposed for reducing sectarian tensions and promoting harmony. They emphasized educational change, and many urging unified or neutral curriculum. Ahl-e-Hadith youth stressed avoiding sect-based distinctions. Youth also recommended increasing inter-sect interaction as mixing youth "in sports or community work." This aligns with research highlighting how structured intergroup contact reduces prejudice and fosters social cohesion (Lak et al. 2024). Participants further recommended stronger laws against hate speech and social media incitement. These suggestions reflect that youth from all sects saw themselves as active agents of change, committed to building a more harmonious society.

This study contributes empirically grounded insight into youth-level experiences of sectarianism, an area underrepresented in Pakistan. Based on previous researches, these results are in alignment with other calls for educational reform, media literacy, legal protection against hate speech, and promotion of inter-sect social contact, all ways towards harmony. The peace education model has been suggested as an effective way of promoting inter-sect tolerance in Pakistan (Hamza 2025). This is supported by studies indicating that structured intergroup contact leads to reduced levels of prejudice and greater levels of social cohesion (Lak et al. 2024). Additionally, the participants suggested implementing more severe penalties for hate speech and hate-motivated incitement on social media platforms. Additionally, current literature shows that digital anonymity and perceived safety offered by social media facilitate an increase in the radicalization and organized activity of "digital fascism", thus underscoring the importance of youth embracing a model of accountability and media regulation (Huda et al. 2024; Sarwar et al. 2023).

Conclusion

To sum up, the results of this study indicate that sectarian conflict has a substantial impact on the social identity of youth, and the development of religious conflict. The youth initially identified themselves as Muslims; however, sects serve as strong social identifiers as young people learn through familial socialization, community-based socialization, and institutional socialization. Social networks, institutional reinforcement and accelerated social media are the main drivers of sectarian conflict among youth. The result of these influences leads to numerous forms of emotional harm (fear, social exclusion, and trauma) as well as boundary maintenance on a daily basis. The youth were able to articulate a number of actions they believe could assist in reducing sectarian tension within Pakistan. These include educational reform, intentional inter-group interactions, accountability for leaders, the development of media literacy as well as establishing legal ramifications associated with hate speech.

Limitations

Certain limitations need to be considered when interpreting the results. The sample group (N=15) was purposeful and limited geographically and therefore cannot be generalized across all Pakistani youth using statistical analysis. The online interview method was helpful in gaining access and anonymity and probably prevented accurate observation of nonverbal communication and the gaining of participants having access to the internet. Social desirability may have influenced the results in terms of intergroup tolerance attitudes.

Recommendations

On the basis of these findings, a number of important recommendations can be made. First, religious education with greater focus on common values and less sectarian bias can and should be promoted through education reform policy. Second, more interaction programs among different sects can and should be promoted through educational institutions and community-based projects with a focus on understanding among young people. Third, media education with a focus on critical assessment of sectarian material on SM can and should become a critical imperative for young people. Fourth, religious-political elite held accountable for sectarian narrative dissemination can and should become a critical task. Finally, hate speech laws can and should strictly be enforced.

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