
CES Current Event Analysis

Social Media and Radicalization of University Students in Bangladesh

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July 2019

Background

A study by UNESCO in 2017 shed light on how the internet and social media facilitate radicalization of youth, driving them towards violent extremism. The study identified the various ways in which social media outlets have been used by violent extremist groups for attracting young minds, sharing radical content and recruitment of vulnerable youth.¹ In the case of Bangladesh, a few empirical studies reveal that radicalization among university students is correlated and perhaps even caused by exploitation of internet and social-media-based channels. In a survey conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) in 2017 on youth radicalization, 61.0% of the respondents indicated the internet as the most powerful media for radicalizing the youth.² It is believed that urban centers such as Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna and Sylhet are particularly vulnerable. A survey conducted by the Bangladesh police on 250 jailed militants found that 82.0% of them were radicalized through social media.³ Sources also reveal that four of the perpetrators of the infamous Holy Artisan Bakery Attack were radicalized online.⁴ Therefore, given that Bangladesh has one of the fastest growth rates of internet users and Dhaka currently ranks second in terms of Facebook users, Bangladesh faces grave threats of youth radicalization and recruitment through social media and the internet. In this context, a deepening of understanding regarding the existing online radicalization and recruitment process in Bangladesh is the need of the hour. This exploratory study is a small step towards that direction. The findings of this study have been generated from a quantitative survey of 470 university students in Dhaka, Sylhet and Rajshahi. The complete version of the paper based on this study is intended to be published as a CES working paper.

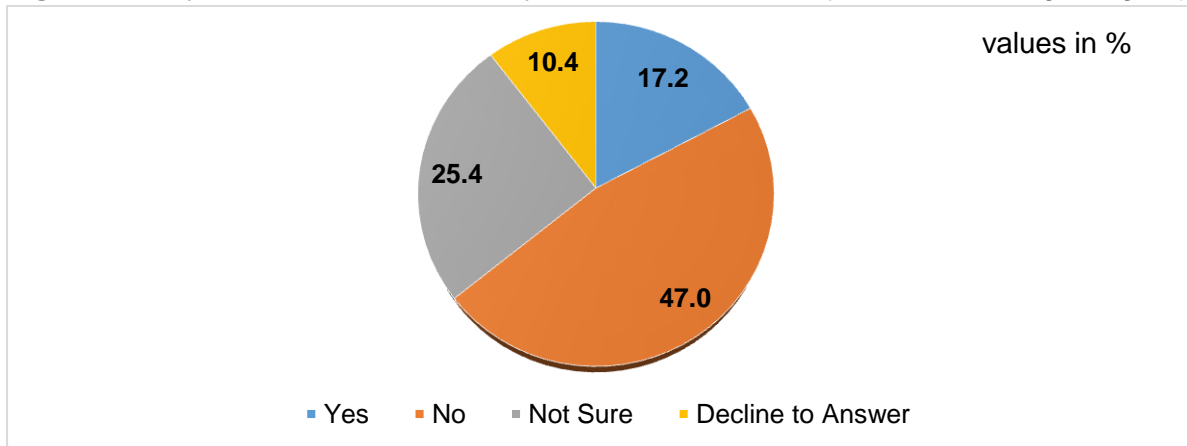
Salient Findings of the Study

The study focused on several aspects of how social media has been deployed towards radicalization of youth, although this current event report covers how social media may be deployed for purposes of recruiting youth into violent extremist groups; social media communication channels used; types of narratives propagated; and views of youth on radical interpretations of their religion.

When students surveyed were asked if they have been contacted to join a radical or extremist group via social media, 17.2% of the students claimed that they indeed have been contacted by such groups and another 25.4% students answered that they were not sure

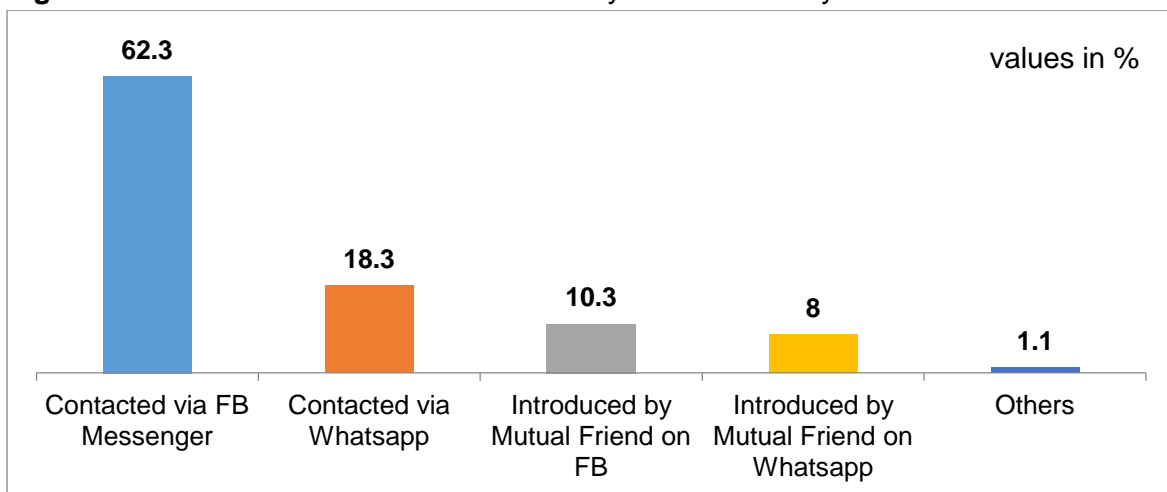
(Fig 1). In addition, about 10.4% students simply declined to answer to this question. It has to be underscored that 17.2% is a very high number, and even if this is over-reported, in-depth interviews with experts bear out the preponderance of messaging-based recruitment efforts by radical groups in certain parts of Bangladesh.

Fig 1: Has anyone ever tried to contact you via social media to join a radical religious group?



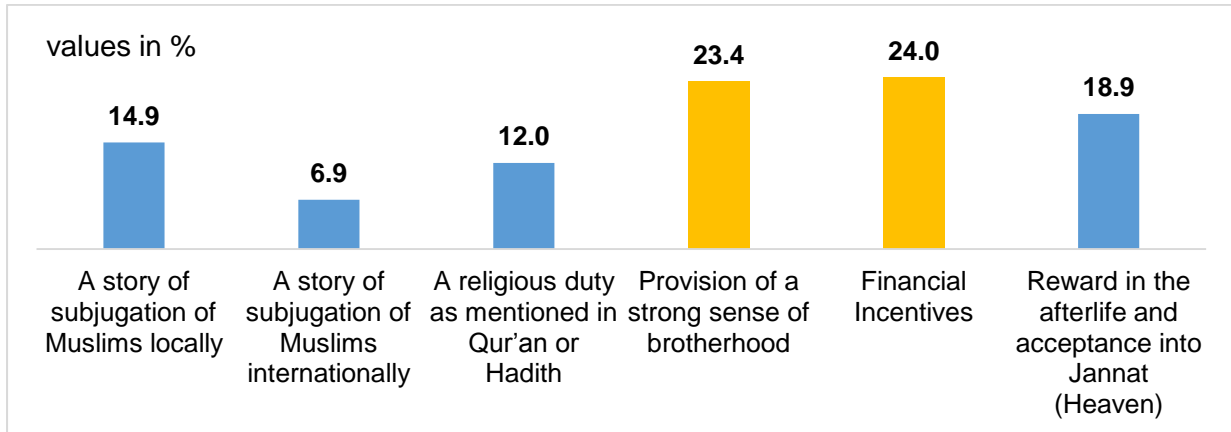
The students were inquired about the social media channels they were contacted through and Facebook and WhatsApp have been found to be the most prevalent media channels used by the extremists for communicating with the students (Fig 2).

Fig 2: What channel of communication did they use to contact you?



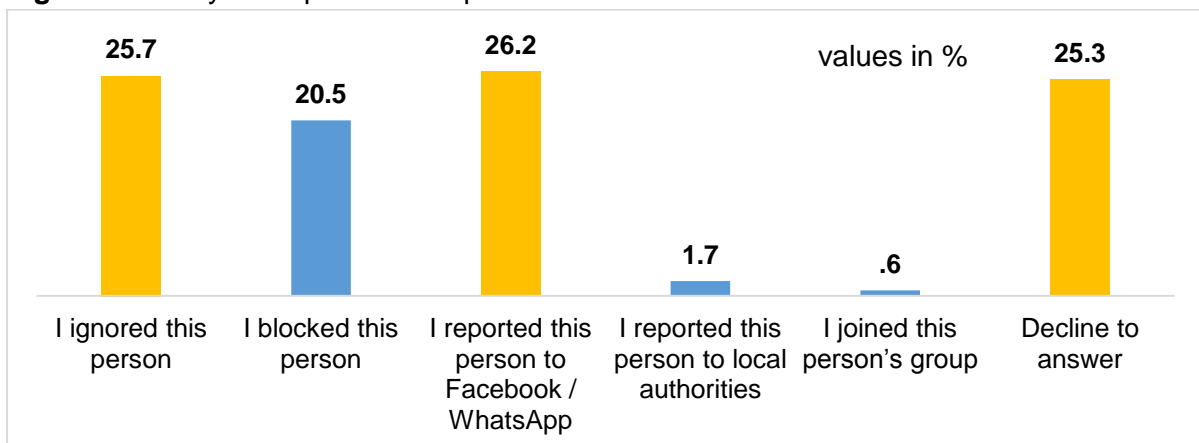
In response to what sort of narratives or motivations were deployed to persuade them into joining the extremist groups, students were most likely to report that “financial incentives” and promise of “strong brotherhood” were used to incentivize them into joining the groups (Fig 3). This indicates that secular motivations and tactics are being used by the extremists alongside religious and ideological ones.

Fig 3: What sort of narrative did they try to persuade you with, in order to join their group?



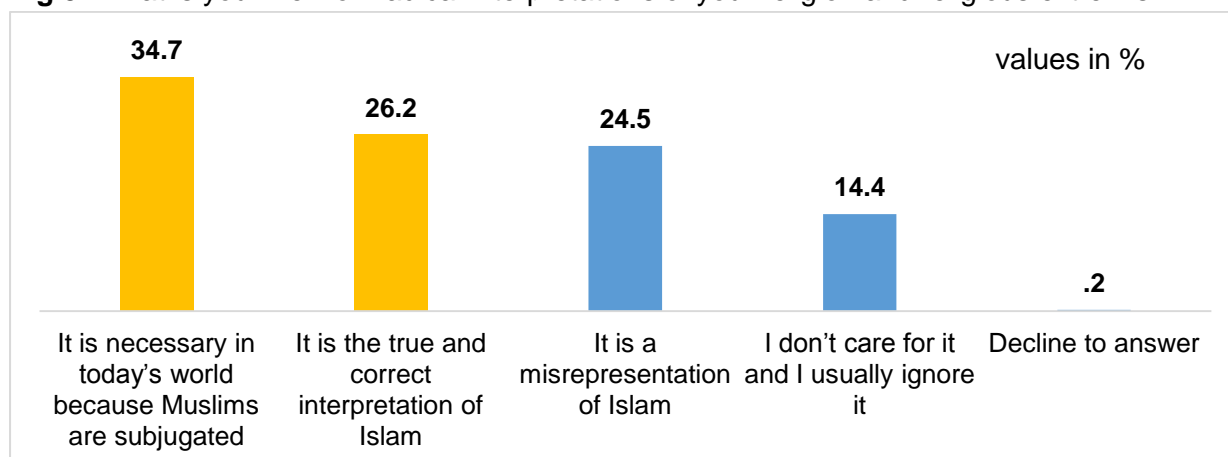
When asked how the students responded to those persons who approached them, a large portion of the students reported that they have either blocked, ignored, or reported the person to Facebook (Fig 4). However, a mere 1.7% could claim that they reported that person to local authorities. Moreover, with increasing age and income, the propensity to block the person goes up and to report him/her goes down.

Fig 4: How did you respond to this person?



This study also tried to understand students' existing perceptions on religious extremism and underlying drivers behind it. In response to one such question on their views on radical extremism, the largest portion of respondents expressed that religious extremism is necessary due to the subjugation towards Muslims around the world (Fig 5). In addition, the second largest percentage of respondents said that extremist acts⁵ fell within the purview of correct and true understandings of Islam. Such responses indicate that an alarming portion of the youth might be vulnerable to being radicalized, even if joining an extremist group is far-fetched. Experts believe that young Bangladeshis have a hazy understanding of what is permissible and what is not, in Islam. They further posit that this is often the result of populist messaging that can verge towards religious chauvinism from even non-violent religious leaders, which are often picked up by family and friends and subsequently, disseminated. Populism finds fertile breeding grounds on social media.

Fig 5: What is your view on radical interpretations of your religion and religious extremism?



Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, there are clearly risks to society from influences of extremists seeking to prey on vulnerable youth. The Government of Bangladesh has set a high bar in terms of effective and successful efforts at counter terrorism. Prevention is also important, e.g. “soft power” interventions, in addition to policing and law enforcement. Therefore, on the basis of global best practices and expert interviews, the following interventions are recommended for stakeholders:

1. Promoting anti-radicalization values through curricular and co-curricular activities in the educational institutions
2. Teaching social media ethics / social media safety best practices to the students, so that they learn to share contents in the social media responsibly
3. Inspiring and facilitating youth-led social media awareness campaigns online and offline
4. Producing content like posters, short videos, TVCs etc. that can build resilience among students to radical content, since filtering or censoring such content completely might not be possible
5. Universities could offer a mandatory course on current affairs that offer a nuanced view of events and conflicts, so young people do not grow up with victimhood festering inside them.

Social media and the internet have the potential to build bridges between people and promote tolerance, unity, fairness and equity. At the same time, in the wrong hands, they can be used as tools to spread fear, hate, communalism, enable radicalization and thus, destabilize societies. There is clear evidence from multiple sources that youth are particularly vulnerable to manipulation through social media. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary for all the relevant stakeholders, e.g., university authorities, government agencies, civil society leaders, and the diplomatic community and of course, experts in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) to collaborate and pre-empt risks to society from his clear and present danger.

¹ The full UNESCO report is available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260382>

² See, for example, the study by the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies (BIPSS), at: <http://bipss.org.bd/pdf/Local%20Drivers.pdf>

³ For the article, see: <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/About-82-per-cent-of-militants-radicalised-on-social-media-in-Bangladesh-40277.html>

⁴ Same as above

⁵ Examples of the Holey Artisan Bakery Attack and assassination of bloggers were used as examples of extremist acts, during the process of data collection.