Association Between Time Spent Online and Vulnerability to Radicalization: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to investigate the risk of online radicalization among young adults, particularly university-attending students, by relating their vulnerability to online radicalization with the amount of time they spend online. This research is an outcome of the "Building Resilient Universities Project" (BRUP), funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private non-profit, US-based organization, and implemented by the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). The study adopts a quantitative research approach using a sample of 600 ULAB undergraduates. Analysis of data collected from students shows that the high-internet-user group, i.e., those who use the internet for seven hours or more a day, are more likely to find radical and religiously offensive material online; less likely to be influenced by family, faculty and community members; and have lower access to learning and knowledge resources that can render them resilient to radicalization. Therefore, it is posited that high-internet-user students are more vulnerable to online radicalization than others. The data also supports that high-internet-user males more vulnerable to online radicalization than females.

Keywords: Online Radicalization, Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE), Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), Bangladesh

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1. Background of the Study

Following the globalization of violent extremism at the turn of this century; in-depth research, academic studies and investigations have been conducted globally, to explore various aspects and dimensions of violent extremism. With the advent of the smart phones, increased accessibility of the internet, and more time spent by the youth online, it has become imperative for researchers to start exploring the correlation between this new avenue of human communication and spread of violent extremism.

The current study is an outcome of a twelve-month-long project named the Building Resilient Universities Project (BRUP), funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a US-based private sector institution, and implemented by University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). The over-arching goal of the project was to inculcate knowledge and encourage practices of civic education, social media literacy (digital media critical thinking), and emotional health among 45 faculty members and 2500 students across both universities. In the course of this project, a quantitative survey was conducted on 600 students and key informant interviews (KII) was conducted with 75 faculty members and counselors, and 4 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with family members of undergraduate students. Findings from the sample of 600 students, exclusively ULAB students, have been drawn upon for this paper, as have select interviews with faculty members.

The significance of the study is that it unlocks a new avenue of research in the arena of preventing violent extremism by focusing on time spent online and vulnerability to radicalization. In the context of Bangladesh, such a line of inquiry is novel. It ought to be mentioned that the scope of the entire project is also novel in the context of Bangladesh, as there are no known projects that address the issue of radicalization of university students and prevention thereof, by addressing the three areas of project intervention: civic values, internet safety, and emotional health. It should be pointed out that evidence exists globally about the relevance of these themes to preventing violent extremism (PVE) (UNDP, 2016; Caprara et al., 2009; European Commission, 2016; and Astleitner, 2001). The study is limited in its scope because it sampled exclusively ULAB students. However, it is hoped that the study will generate interest and lead to further empirical research related to youth and online radicalization in Bangladesh, among local and global academics and researchers.

2. Literature Review

In the context of Bangladesh, studies that focus on the relation between youth's online behavior and radicalization and extremism, or the prevention thereof, are still relatively scarce in comparison to that of the West. The recent upsurge in youth radicalization and involvement in violent extremism in Bangladesh has widened the need for drafting better strategies and policies to counter youth radicalization. Therefore, better comprehension of the existing radicalization mechanism in Bangladesh is required with a view to drafting effective local counter radicalization policies and strategies.

2.1. Insights from West

A 2013 study conducted by RAND Europe unveils several important findings on the relationship between internet usage and radicalization. The study tested hypotheses from relevant literature on a sample of UK-based extremists focusing on their previous online behavior. The study supports the hypothesis that internet enhances the opportunities to become radicalized and it facilitates the process in a way that worked as an "Echo Chamber" for confirming similar beliefs or ideologies (Behr et al., 2013). The study also highlights evidence that subjects were in continuous contact with like-minded individuals, often virtually, that facilitated their radicalization. The study recommends relevant resource allocation to combat the security challenges related to new media and more public-private collaborations by arranging training and similar initiatives to create greater public consensus on this regard. Another study aimed at preventing online radicalization in United States discouraged reactionary preventive approaches that impede online freedom of speech and remove potential threatening contents from internet. Instead it suggests proactive approaches that can prevent the online radicalization process by challenging the extremist narratives with counter narratives and promoting civic awareness and education of the young people (Neumann, 2013).

Researchers such as Conway (2017) have argued for more open approaches to the issue. Since a majority of the researchers are focusing only on religious-based violent extremism, the author advocated a widening of the scope of research by focusing on the threat of extremism from different group of ideologies and activists. The author also recommends the introduction of big data analysis since the scale and dimensions of this phenomena require more in-depth analytical approach, through multidisciplinary collaboration between researchers, academicians and the technical experts such as data and computer scientists (Pearson, 2015). There are instances of successful collaboration between academic institutions and public and private sectors in combating and preventing violent extremism online, particularly in Europe. To cite an example: the Cybercrime Centres of Excellence Network for Training, Research and Education (2CENTRE) launched in 2010, is a project funded by the European Commission with the aim of creating a network of Cybercrime Centers of Excellence for Training, Research and Education in Europe. Under this project centers were established in multiple countries of Europe. Each of these national centers were founded on a partnership among representatives of law enforcement, industry and academia (United Nations, 2012).

2.2 Insights from East

In Saudi Arabia, the well-known "Sakinah" campaign was undertaken for several years at the turn of the century and stands as an example of an innovative counter radicalization campaign on the internet. This unique campaign utilized Islamic scholars to interact online with individuals looking for religious knowledge, with the aim of steering them away from extremist sources. Therefore, this campaign targeted only those individuals who use the internet to seek out religious knowledge and aimed to prevent them from accepting extremist beliefs which eventually diminished their chances of getting recruited online via any online extremist group. Although it was officially a non-governmental project, the campaign was supported and encouraged in its work by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Interior belonging to Saudi government (Boucek, 2008). The campaign was also later adopted by other Gulf countries.

Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, propaganda was used to attract Kyrgyz youth to Syria, persuading them to join the fight against President Assad and participate in holy warfare. The propaganda was also deployed through family and friend recruitment networks, and it portrayed IS almost as an employer that provided decent wages, accommodation and access to a righteous Islamic lifestyle. Individuals who were struggling financially sensitive to what they could be made to perceive as injustices, were particularly vulnerable to such recruitment efforts. To counter such recruitment efforts, Kyrgyz national police implemented an online campaign. In collaboration with university student volunteers, they identified and blocked YouTube videos and other online recruitment materials. Moreover, the counter-terrorism unit of the police also swapped recruitment videos by IS and other extremist groups with counter-messaging from Kyrgyz mufti denouncing violent extremism. These initiatives have been widely appreciated and regarded as effective (Speckhard et al., 2013).

Radicalization and recruitment process in Malaysia was also facilitated by social media in general and Facebook in particular. Daesh or IS had creatively utilized the popular social and digital media tools to allure and recruit new members. After the individuals showed deeper interest in Daesh's online post and activities, they were then asked to move to other platforms which accorded more privacy. Through such strategies, they could considerably shorten the time needed to radicalize and recruit an individual in Malaysia. With a view to counter Daesh's narrative into the virtual world, Malaysia in collaboration with the United States, launched a regional digital counter messaging center which would look into monitoring the terrorist messaging, developing counter-narratives and disseminating the digital products to best reach and impact the audience (Samuel, 2016).

2.3 The Context of Bangladesh

For a long period of time, the leading narrative regarding religious radicalization in Bangladesh, was focused on poverty and madrasa-based education systems pertinent to lower-income groups. This narrative tended to correlate the rise of Islamic radicalization in Bangladesh and lower income group focused madrasa education system. However, the

upsurge of violent extremist groups led by youth following the gruesome Holy Artisan bakery attack at Dhaka in 2016, challenged the validity of this conventional narrative as majority of those violent extremists belonged to well-educated upper middle-class segment of the society. This attack confirmed the involvement of university-going students as well as faculty members in certain universities as motivator and instigators. Therefore, the question was raised that why and how were the upperclass university students, never touched by traditional madrasas, being radicalized? In response, many analysts posited that this was a new wave of radicalization likely driven by the spread of the internet and social media (Rashid, 2017). This study opined that there is an inadequacy of sophisticated cyber monitoring and reporting systems in Bangladesh which is crippling the law enforcement authority in preventing and combating online radicalization. The study also proposed an anti cyber radicalization model for Bangladesh that would involve both constructive and coercive measures. There are three strategic elements in this model and those are: "Reducing the Supply" which involves coercive measures; "Reducing the Demand." which involves constructive measures; and "an effective organization to coordinate and implement the actions," which will be a dedicated entity coordinating all the necessary constructive and coercive measures.

Another study in Bangladesh attempted to examine, anthropologically, how international politics, violation of human rights, youth unemployment, pessimistic outlook of the future and declining family integrity may be contributing to the recent surge of extremism in Bangladesh (Jubaer, 2017). The respondents of this study were Bangladeshi youth who projected their views and remedies of violent terrorism and extremism in Bangladesh. One of the interesting finding of this study explored the dearth of content that encouraged critical thinking in our education system, which in turn, rendered Bangladeshi students vulnerable to extremist narratives available online and offline. A quote from one of the study respondents is illustrative:

> *Our education system is based on memorization. Students are given books, lecture sheets which they try to memorize. They do not think critically whether those pieces of information are correct or not. The long-term impact of this system is terrible. When these students are convinced that their religion is in danger and they need to sacrifice their lives, they passively accept that call without thinking twice. (Jubaer, 2017, p.30).*

The threat of online radicalization is still alarming for Bangladesh as according to Sobhan (2017), despite the territorial defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria, it is likely to continue inspiring, supporting and instigating attacks by opening a virtual network, transcending state boundaries, to promote indoctrination and recruitment throughout the world. Another empirical study from Bangladesh reveals that Dhaka district is the most affected area in terms of number of extremist attacks from January 2013 to August 2016 followed by Chattogram, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, and Khulna. This is an indication that radicalization is creeping into the large urban centers of Bangladesh where the educated youth are mostly tech savvy and heavily engaged in the use of Internet and social media. Concentrating on the urban centers and alluring urban youth, Islamist militants have been trying to spread their operational base throughout the country (Kabir & Banik, 2017).

3. Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper are based on a quantitative survey consisting of ULAB students as respondents. Stratified random sampling technique was used on a sample of 600 students. This sample corresponds to a less than 5% error margin and a confidence interval of 95%. A structured questionnaire was used as the data collection tool and a five-point Likert scale deployed in recording responses from students.

Descriptive demographic analysis of the data was conducted through pivot analysis in Microsoft excel. For the purposes of this research, "high internet users" (HIU) are those who use the internet at least 7 hours a day. The rationale behind labelling this user group as HIU is based on few global findings on youth online behavior. A 2017 report generated by UK-based think tank, Education Policy Institute, reveals that over a third of UK's fifteen-year-old age group can be classed as "Extreme Internet Users" (6+ hours of use a day), which is markedly higher than the average of OECD countries (Frith, 2017). Moreover, according to the data from the Center for Parenting Education, globally, young people between the ages of 8 to 28, spend about 44.5 hours each week in front of digital screens (Clark, 2018). Furthermore, according to the 2017 statistics provided by Statista, the average time spent online by the millennials is about four hours a day (Statista, 2017). Therefore, based on such global findings on internet behavior, the HIU group has been identified as those students who use the internet at least 7 hours a day or 49 hours a week. The sample breakdown with regard to age, sex, and total versus HIU groups, are shown as follows.

Table 1: Sample Breakdown

Total Respondents		High Internet Users	
Number of Respondents	*600*	Number of Respondents	*151*
Male %	64.0%	Male %	64.0%
Female %	36.0%	Female %	36.0%
Age (18-24 years)	85.0%	Age (18-24 years)	73.0%
Age (24+ years)	15.0%	Age (24+ years)	27.0%

In course of analyzing data from the survey, we have found it useful to develop a three-fold heuristic device as follows:

1. Influence Matrix
2. Resilience Matrix
3. Online Safety Matrix

By matrix, we essentially refer to a table formed of findings on the HIU group and other students we refer to as the non-HIU group. In the influence matrix, we represent data from the questionnaires that allow us to consider how the role of three predominant influencers in university-attending student's lives – faculty, family and community members - are able to influence male and female students in both the HIU and non-HIU student respondent groups. The level of influence was recorded through self-assessment of influence by the respondents.

While this method has limitations because often respondents are not able to effectively and in an unbiased manner attest to degrees of influence of people in their lives, self-assessment in student surveys is still a widely practiced methodology (Trendence, 2018). Similarly, we have developed a resilience matrix to explore how the resilience of respondents vary for HIU and non-HIU groups. In this instance, "resilience" is used to refer to resilience to radicalization, and encompasses three attributes (captured with the questionnaire and self-assessed by students):

- Current level of emotional health related awareness
- Current level of knowledge and understanding of civic values
- Current level of ability in exercising critical thinking on the internet to be able to distinguish what is false information / propaganda from authentic information

It should be noted that the core attributes indicated above, i.e., emotional health, civic values and "digital critical thinking",[1] once inculcated, have, in various researches and studies, proved to be very effective in creating resilience to violence at large and in violent extremism in particular (UNDP, 2016; Caprara et al., 2009; European Commission, 2016; and Astleitner, 2001). Furthermore, it should also be noted that the questionnaire attempted to understand knowledge and awareness of emotional health and not actual emotional health status. This has pros and cons. The benefit is that it is easier to assess knowledge of emotional health rather than actual emotional health in a self-assessment survey. The disadvantage is that while there may be a correlation between knowledge of emotional health and actual emotional health, they are not one and the same thing.

Lastly, we developed what we call the "Online Safety Matrix" which essentially tries to capture, through tabulated findings, how HIU students and non-HIU student sample at large fare with regard to the following attributes:
- Frequency of encountering content offensive to religious sensibilities
- Frequency of encountering fake news and conspiracy theories
- Frequency of encountering radical / extremist content online

Through the above attributes, the Online Safety Matrix attempts to assess how students fare with regard to how safe they are from radicalization when browsing the internet.

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[1] "Digital critical thinking" is an expression we have coined to refer to the ability to think critically when browsing the internet, in particular, in relation to distinguishing authentic from fake news, truth from propaganda, and so forth. Although the topic of critical thinking and its importance when browsing the internet has received scholarly attention (Astleitner, 2001), we have attempted to introduce a term for the sake of brevity and portability and also to increase focus on this important issue.

4. Analysis of Findings

4.1. Influence Matrix

Considering the influence matrix, in Table 2, overall, among the three influencer groups, family has the greatest influence on both the HIU group and non-HIU students.

Table 2: Influence Matrix

Influencers	Non-HIU			HIU		
	High Influence			High Influence		
	Total	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*
Family	64.8%	60.0%	73.6%	62.3%	58.3%	69.1%
Faculty	53.6%	50.0%	59.7%	35.1%	33.3%	38.2%
Community Members	43.4%	43.4%	43.4%	38.4%	40.6%	34.5%

It is interesting to note an anomaly for the HIU group in that the influence of faculty members is significantly[2] lower for this group than for other students, with regard to their views on social issues and world affairs. Around 35.1% of HIU group reported to faculty member influence on their views on social issues and world affairs compared to 53.6% of non-HIU students. Within the HIU group, family tends to have a significantly higher influence on females rather than males. In general, all three influencer groups, as per self-assessment by the student respondents, have less of an influence on the HIU group than the non-HIU group.

Moreover, considering the sample holistically, i.e., within the non-HIU group, females at 73.6% are significantly likelier to report to being influenced by family than males at 60.0%. What is interesting to note is that the influence of faculty members for the entire sample is 48.8%, and the influence of community members is 42.2% (not shown in table). The fact that less than half the sample report to being influenced by faculty members was surprising to many faculty members consulted with in the course of the study.

4.2. Resilience Matrix

Moving on to the Resilience Matrix, as shown in Table 3, both groups of respondents, the HIU and non-HIU groups, fare better with regard to knowledge and understanding of civic values than with regard to the other parameters: emotional health awareness and digital critical thinking abilities. However, this may be different for different universities. It is possible that ULAB's progressive orientation and an emphasis on extracurricular activities and programming for students related to current affairs and social issues are the reason why response rates are higher for this particular attribute of resilience to radicalization.

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[2] The expression "significantly higher" or "significantly lower" in the course of this paper has been used in a statistical sense, and is done so, only in case where the level of significance with regard to difference in response rates are 80-99%.

Table 3: Resilience Matrix

Indicators	Non-HIU			HIU		
	High Level			High Level		
	Total	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*
Emotional Health Awareness	60.1%	56.9%	66.0%	66.9%	67.7%	65.5%
Knowledge and understanding of civic values	69.5%	66.6%	74.8%	68.9%	72.9%	61.8%
Digital Critical Thinking Abilities	53.2%	52.1%	55.3%	67.5%	75.0%	54.5%

Also noteworthy from the above table is that among the non-HIU sample, female students have a higher likelihood of possessing emotional health awareness than male students: 66.0% to 56.9%. In fact, females also fare better with regard to their knowledge and understanding of civic values. However, when one considers the HIU respondent group, males actually fare better. Although these are self-reported responses, for all three parameters this paper considers as constituents of resilience to radicalization, HIU males fare better than the non-HIU males. Furthermore, HIU males fare better than HIU females on all three parameters of resilience and significantly so, for knowledge and understanding of civic values and digital critical thinking abilities.

The important take-aways from this table are that HIU females have significantly lower knowledge and understanding of civic values than the overall sample. Although not directly related to the study, the lower score for male students with regard to emotional health awareness is also noteworthy, for purposes of larger policy and practices intervention in tertiary education. And last but not least, a substantial majority, about 75% of HIU males, reported to having high digital critical thinking abilities. Student counselors and psychiatrists consulted with opine that this may attest to a lack of self-knowledge and self-awareness. Experts interviewed have opined that perhaps HIU males may find it more difficult to objectively assess their own emotional health and other abilities than the others.

Another important parameter related to resilience that has not been considered in the aforementioned "resilience matrix" is the availability of learning resources through the university and outside, that can reinforce student's civic values, emotional health and digital critical thinking abilities. The research data yields that HIU males report far lower availability compared to the overall sample. While 68.2% of non-HIU students find learning resources on civic education to be available, only 54.2% of HIU males do so. Similarly, while 59.0 % of non-HIU students find learning resources on "digital critical thinking abilities" to be available, only 45.8% of HIU males do.

Table 4: Availability of Learning Resources

Themes	Non-HIU			HIU		
	High Availability			High Availability		
	Total	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*
Civic Education Related Learning Resources	68.2%	67.2%	69.8%	55.0%	54.2%	56.4%
"Digital Critical Thinking" related Learning Resources	59.0%	59.3%	58.5%	51.0%	45.8%	60.0%

Faculty members consulted with during this research opine that HIU students and males in particular are less engaged with real world learning opportunities and resources whether at a university or available through external means, which is likely to render them vulnerable to online radicalization and extremist propaganda.

4.3. Online Safety Matrix

As noted earlier, the following indicators were incorporated in the study to understand how safe or unsafe students were on the internet, with regard to potential radicalization, as shown in Table 5:

- Frequency of encountering content offensive to religious sensibilities
- Frequency of encountering fake news and conspiracy theories
- Availability of radical / extremist content online

Table 5: Online Safety Matrix

Indicators	**Non-HIU**			**HIU**		
	High Frequency/Availability			High Frequency/Availability		
	Total	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*	*Male*	*Female*
Frequency of encountering content offensive to religious sensibilities	84.0%	83.4%	84.9%	90.7%	93.8%	85.5%
Frequency of encountering fake news and conspiracy theories	74.2%	74.5%	73.6%	90.0%	93.8%	83.6%
Availability of radical / extremist content online	78.0%	77.9%	78.0%	81.5%	79.2%	85.5%

The above table is very revealing as it shows that HIU males are likelier than any non-HIU group to encounter content offensive to religious sensibilities; fake news and conspiracy theories; and radical/extremist content. Noteworthy that 93.8% of HIU males encounter conspiracy theories online compared to 74.2% non-HIU students. Similarly, 93.8% of HIU males find content online that is offensive to their religious sensibilities compared to 84.0% of non-HIU respondents. HIU males are also more likely to report radical / extremist content online. Since this self-reported, if the theory that HIU students and males in particular are more vulnerable to radicalization, this number is likely to be lower because it is self-reported. However, this particular matrix does make a strong case that HIU students and males are certainly more exposed to radicalization than other groups, possibly because of the "echo chamber" effect of Facebook and Social Media (Behr et al., 2013).

5. Conclusion

From the interpretation of findings of this research, it is possible to not only establish that the students who use the internet for seven hours or more per day, are more exposed to radical content, but also surmise that they are more vulnerable to radicalization. It is already observed that HIU students are more likely to find radical / extremist content online as well as material that can be considered offensive to their religious sensibilities, and male HIU students more likely than female HIU students. Moreover, HIU students are far less impressionable to their family, faculty and community members, and less open to the guidance thereof, than other students. Faculty members we consulted also confirm this understanding. Furthermore, HIU students are also less likely to find learning resources on civic values and digital critical thinking and ways to be safe online, than the total respondent group, either at their university or externally. Male HIU students are less likely than female HIU students.

In sum, in light of the increased propensity to find radical and religiously offensive material online; lower influence of family members, faculty and community members; and lower access to learning resources that can render them resilient, HIU students are more vulnerable to online radicalization than others, and males more likely than females. In the course of the BRUP Project, it has also been evidenced that students respond quite positively to learning on civic values, emotional health and digital critical thinking. Students exposed to such learning resources picked up the topics well and displayed increased appreciation for such learning in relation to rendering them more resilient to and aware of how radicalization works. Therefore, this research recommends endeavors at the level of university administration, regulators, and civil society stakeholders, to initiate more training on civic values, digital critical thinking and emotional health, to prevent radicalization and violent extremism.

Preventing violent extremism (PVE) proactively is of course more desirable than countering violent extremism (CVE), and given Bangladesh's significant demographic dividend, in which over a third of students are below the university-going age, it is incumbent on universities which usually have reasonable resources at their disposal, to revisit their goals and objectives with regard to youth development, in the context of Bangladesh and existing and future challenges to not just economic growth, but development of a just, tolerant and pluralistic society.

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