EXPLORING THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE DYNAMICS OF BULLYING AND FORGIVENESS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract: Bullying behaviour among adolescents is a prevalent concern all over the world as it holds significant implications for their mental health and social life. Similarly, bullying has emerged as a grave concern in high schools in Pakistan. However, very

limited literature has covered the dynamics of religious education and bullying behaviour among high school students in Pakistan. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the impact of religious beliefs and practices on the prevalence of abuse and bullying among high school students in Pakistan. The study has adopted a qualitative research design to fulfil this objective. The primary qualitative data for the study was collected by interviewing high school students from three prominent high schools in Pakistan. The data was analysed with the help of thematic analysis. The findings of this study indicate that religious education can help promote compassion, empathy, and respect among students. Thus, the study holds significant implications regarding the role of the community and teachers in taking a stand against bullying.

Keywords: Bullying, forgiveness, religion, religious beliefs, educational institutions.

1. Introduction

Bullying is a global phenomenon in the education sector, not sparing Pakistan high schools as well, with very dire outcomes for the mental health, academic performance, and social relationships of students (Usman & Hashmi, 2023). Religion has been used for centuries to create a value system which influences people's emotions and behaviours such as bullying and forgiveness (Camino-Gaztambide et al., 2022). This study seeks to investigate the complex relationship between religion bullying and forgiveness in the high school student populations in Pakistan. Religion comes as the cornerstone of life of the majority of Pakistanis, Islam mostly being the leading faith in the country (Rollier, 2019). Based on their Islamic teachings, which underlines compassion, kindness, and forgiveness, they encourage the creation of a peaceful and harmonious society (Imran et al., 2023). Though the lesson of peace and forgiveness from these teachings are still there, impartiality and cruelty are still seen among Pakistani youth which gives a thought about the effect of religion in these behaviours (Ali & Mukherjee, 2022).

Studies have shown that being religious makes you dispose to bullying while other studies show that the opposite might be the case (Alam, 2021; Jalali et al., 2020; Ru'iya, 2019). Some studies found that religious people were less likely to engage in bullying than were others (Afifi et al., 2020; Schihalejev et al., 2020), while other researches do not support a direct link between religion and bullying (Ryan & Gardner, 2021). Moreover, the relationship between religion and forgiveness is multifaceted (van Herpen & Kruizinga, 2022). While religious teachings commonly centre upon the notion of forgiveness, forgiveness is a complex process which is affected variously by several variables, including religious faith and practices. Moreover, it is also dependent on the circumstance of where religion can be used to forgive form one area but not another (Hendricks et al., 2023). Given such

complexities and inter-relationships found in religion, bullying and forgiveness, it is integral to understand how these runs in Pakistan since, Pakistan is a multi-cultural, and a multi-denominational country, having different sects and ethnic minorities so the role of religion in bullying and forgiveness may change (Ahmed, 2020). These insights are important in the development of culture-sensitive, bullying-prevention programs and initiatives that seek to instil a spirit of forgiveness in Pakistani students. The objectives of this study include:

- To understand the relationship between religious beliefs and practices, and the prevalence of the abusive behaviours among the high school students in Pakistan.
- To investigate the effect of religion education and teachings on behaviour of high school students of Pakistani, especially in the context of bullying and forgiveness.
- To explore the contribution of religion towards the possibility of forgiveness among high school students in Pakistan.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the phenomenon of bullying and forgiveness among high school students in Pakistan in relations with Religion. The research aims at exploring the tendencies of religious beliefs and practices to increase the bullying behaviours and develop the capacity of individuals to forgive. The study also throws light upon the effect of teaching lessons on religion education and doctrines difference on the behaviours of individuals in context to bullying and forgiveness. The results of this study will be useful in the understanding of the nature of religion in building attitudes and behaviours relating to bullying and forgiveness among students in Pakistan, and hence, identify ways of designing intervention and prevention programs on bullying and support on forgiveness in this context.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

- *Religion and Bullying: An Overview*

A lot of religious practices such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism hold respect for all as their core value. In the most part, these teachings outlaw behaviours and actions like gossiping, back biting, and spreading rumours which are indirect forms of bullying. For example, in Islam, the Quran teaches that "backbiting is as abhorrent as eating the flesh of one's dead brother" (Surah Al-Hujurat, 49 (Al-Jubouri, 2021). Similarly, Right speech (Samma Vaca) is a Buddhist concept that recognizes the significance of speaking honestly, gently, and compassionately, and this prevents the need for hateful speech resulting in bullying (Wasnik, 2020).

Though religious teachings mostly forbid the physical aggression which entails direct form of bullying, they can capture the indirect forms of bypassing, such as social, gossips, and rumours spreading (Abimanyu & Saraswati, 2022). Nevertheless, religious teachings that speak on the themes of compassion and kindness may serve as a means of indirectly preventing bad behaviours by encouraging the formation of healthy interactions and feelings of community and belonging among people (Gilbert, 2020). Such is in Islam where the "ummah" (community) concept stresses on the necessity of unity and mosquitoes among believers and this way discourages behaviours that might bring the social cohesion down, such as gossiping and spreading rumours (Hoque, 2019). Similarly, in Christianity, the concept of "love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matthew 22:39) fosters empathy and sympathy to connect with others and prevent any harm to others (Morell, 2023).

• *Religion and Forgiveness*

Religion is a powerful force in the process of forgiveness because many religious principles give forgiveness a major place (Murphy, 2020). For example, in Islam, forgiving others in the Quran "But if you pardon and overlook and forgive - then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful" [at-Taghabun 64:14] (Islam-Awakened, 2024). Furthermore, religious rituals and practices which include prayer, meditation, and confession will offer individuals a virtue of having a time of reflection, self-examination, and spiritual development (Vermander, 2022). For instance, Christianity has a sacrament of confession which enable believers to admit their sin to God and the others (Wilhoit, 2019). Also, in Islam the seeking forgiveness of Allah (Istighfar) is asking for forgiveness of Allah for the mistakes one has done (Rahmani & Muradi, 2023). Faith and its practice can have a huge impact on the process of forgiveness as it offers people a system which helps them to comprehend forgiveness and have some purpose in their lives (Krok & Zarzycka, 2021). Such as religious beliefs that endorse forgiveness as an essential moral quality, can instigate setting forgiveness as a goal that should be pursued, regardless of the level of difficulty (Worthington et al., 2019). Furthermore, religious activities such as praying, meditating, and confessing could be conduits for reflection, examination of consciousness, and spiritual growth, leading to the understanding on them who forgive. Also, a research shows that the highly religious individuals are more likely to forgive than the individuals with no strong faith because the religious faith gives them hopes and guides to optimism leading to the individual forgiving people (Foroozanfar, 2020).

The topic of religion, forgiveness, and psychological adjustment is complex, and a variety of studies have reported decidedly mixed findings. Research has suggested

that being religious leads to having better psychological health than being non-religious (lower anxiety and depressive levels) (Francis et al., 2019; Park et al., 2019). The beliefs and practices of religion can give people the chance to be connected with someone of the supernatural or a higher being such as Allah or God and this can give people comfort and hope. For instance, several studies have determined that people who have a strong sense of religious faith tend to have better mental health outcomes, like lower rates of depression and anxiety or positive mental health experiences, when compared to those who do not have a strong sense of religious faith (Dein, 2020). On the other hand, religion, forgiveness, and mental health have a relationship that is not always helpful. Religious people often experience mental effects that are worse for their mental health including higher levels of guilt and shame more than people who do not have religious beliefs (Garssen et al., 2021; Thomas & Barbato, 2020). This may be the case since religious beliefs and practices are sometimes used as justification for the wrong doings as, for instance, bullying and discrimination that may lead to guilt and shame.

- *The Pakistani Context: Religion, Bullying, and Forgiveness*

Pakistan has a religious heritage because of diversity. In this heritage, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and other religions being practiced (Al Mustafa et al., 2023). Islam predominates and most of the Pakistanis identify themselves as Muslim while majority of them are Sunnis, then Shias (Kalin & Siddiqui, 2020). On the other hand, there are also religious minorities which are majority in Pakistan like Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and others. The religious diversity of Pakistani is manifested in the cultural panorama of the country, with different religions and practices of them living and influencing each other in harmony (Mehrdin et al., 2023). Likewise, Sufism, the mystic form of Islam, is quite prevalent in Pakistan and hence has affected the country's cultural and religious outlook (Saeed et al., 2021; Sarwar et al., 2023). The Hinduism and Sikhism can also be traced in the cultural heritage of the Pakistan, where temples and gurdwaras have been spread throughout the country (Boivin, 2023). Cultural elements are responsible for designing of attitudes in the matter of bullying and forgiveness in Pakistan. One example is the collectivist cultural values centred on the importance of preserving relationships and avoiding conflict which, in turn, leadership to forgiveness and suppression of bullying behaviours (Abbas et al., 2023). People might pay less attention to bullying behaviours too when cultural beliefs accentuate the responsibility of respecting elders and respect of other authority figures because they are less likely to engage in disrespectful and even harmful behaviours.

Religious education in this regard largely influences what the Pakistanis think

about bullying and forgiveness (Sarwar et al., 2023). Being an Islamic country, the Pakistani schools, both private and public ones, include religious education in their curricula, which is intended to teach students about morals, ethics and how to be good and compassionate to people, others do not provide such education (Ashraf et al., 2021). The teachings can affect how students perceive these acts by guiding them towards understanding the right and the wrong. Nevertheless, religious education supports a feeling of belongingness for students to their religious principles and values which thereby translates to positive social interactions and intentional avoidance of bullying behaviours (Flensner, 2020; Panjwani & Chaudhary, 2022). Flensner (2020) indicate that the students who get religious education are highly likely to forgive others compared to those who do not receive religious education. These are the result of religious education that gives students with a sense of direction and purpose, which can foster forgiveness. Religious leaders and institutions have a vital function in the rectification of bullying and the development of forgiveness in Pakistan. Numerous religious leaders and organizations in Pakistan work to propagate non-violence, compassion, and re-entrant as the core values of their faith (Mehfooz, 2021). For example, the situation where religious leaders or pastors will preach or speak to their congregation on the essence of treating people in love and compassion which in most cases changes the mindset of their followers. The religious leaders and institutions also help individuals who have been victims, and people experiencing difficulty in forgiving by providing support and guidance (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

- *Research Method*

The study is qualitative which seeks to look at the functions of religion in the phenomenon of bullying and forgiveness among high school students in Pakistan. Qualitative research is particularly good at dealing with complex issues (Myers, 2019). This is true for areas like religious beliefs and activities, attitudes to bullying and forgiveness, and the role of culture and other factors in these processes. The quality approach for example allows a more astute and multifaceted investigation of these phenomena (Roulston, 2019) and thus would have enable it to gain a deeper understanding on the high school life experiences of the Pakistani students. The study used a qualitative research design for several reasons. First, this approach looked into the complexities and intricacies of phenomenon under observation such as religious beliefs and practices, attitudes towards bullying and forgiveness, and how

these dynamics were shaped by cultural and contextual factors. Also, as this approach was completely descriptive it had better potential to describe these issues at length and in detail thus providing greater understanding and practical situation of high school students in Pakistan.

- *Data Collection and Sampling strategy*

A primary data was collected through interviews with high school students in Pakistan for the research study. The interviews were semi-structured which served the purpose of flexibility in the sequence of the questions and participants to express their thoughts and experience in their own words (Karatsareas, 2022). The interviews looked into students' religious beliefs and behaviours, attitudes towards bullying and forgiving and the students' experiences with bullying and forgiving. Data collected from the interviews was analysed through thematic analysis, which is a qualitative research technique that aims at finding themes or patterns in the data and then interpreting the meaning of the patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The data obtained through the interviews with high school students in Pakistan was thematically analysed following the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2021) as shown in Figure 1.
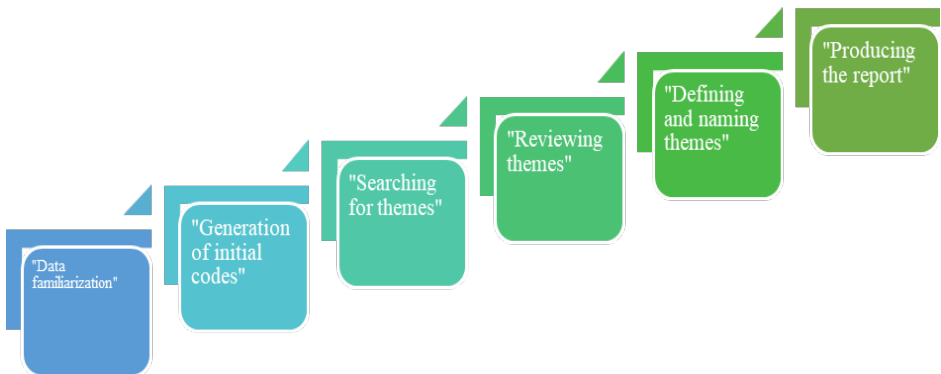

Figure 4.1: Phases of thematic analysis

- *Findings*

Moreover, Figure 2 shows major themes that emerged as a result of the thematic analysis, and figure 3 presents a generic word cloud depicting major themes within the study
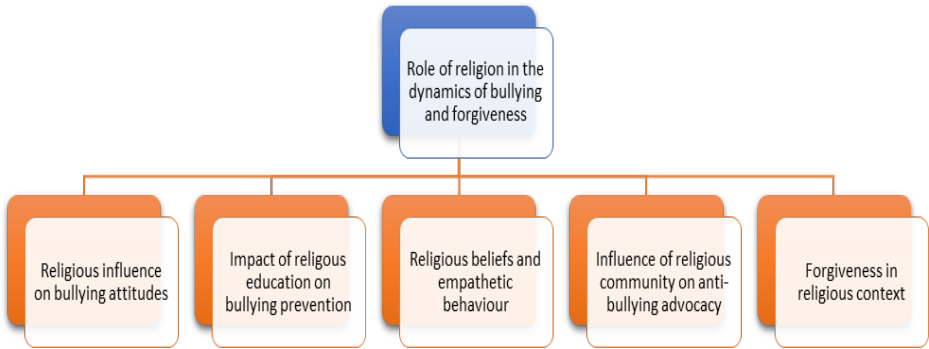
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Figure 2: Findings from the interviews

Figure 3: Word cloud for thematic analysis

- *Religious Influence on Bullying Attitudes*

Interviewees acknowledged the significant role of religion in shaping the attitudes and mindsets of high school students towards bullying. Responses from interviewees helped establish several links between religion and bullying attitudes. Respondents offered mixed views regarding religious influences on bullying attitudes. According to them, following the Islamic values of tolerance and kindness can wipe bullying from the society. However, there are a lot of people who misinterpret the teaching of Islam and use them to bully the weak people. The second

interviewee stressed on the significance of religious influence for helping people navigate their conflicts with others: *"Religious influence can be instrumental for helping students empower themselves to deal with their conflicts and exhibit compassion and respect for their fellows."* However, the 4th interviewee pointed towards the other side of the picture and shared that sometimes, perceiving oneself as morally upright and superior can be very dangerous. Such a mentality can promote bullying attitude in the society. *"According to my experience, when people consider themselves as morally above others, it makes them bully the people regarded as morally weak. I have seen people being bullied for their non-religious lifestyles."* Thus, the perspective of the 4th interviewee is quite unique as it presents the flipside of the religious influence. This perspective shows that religious influence can be encouraging for bullying attitude, if used as an instrument of violence.

- *Impact of Religious Education on Bullying Prevention*

Almost all of the interviewees were in favour of introducing religious education for helping students stay away from all forms of bullying. Interviewees viewed Islam's emphasis on kindness and respect as instrumental for establishing a culture of respect and equality. Moreover, interviewees also mentioned the responsibility of teachers to take a stand against all kinds of bullying in lights of Islamic teachings. Moreover, students also cited various verses during the interview to highlight how Islam prioritises taking a stand against oppression and promoting harmony. Similarly, the 5th interviewee viewed Islam's focus on kindness as a key to establishing a society based on respect for all.

"If you notice, every teaching in Islam is focused around treating people with respect regardless of which sector of the society they belong to. Thus, it leaves no room for people to bully anyone based on their social status or identity." Similarly, the 2nd interviewee shared a Hadith in this context: *"There is a hadith, 'Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or he is oppressed'. This hadith encourages Muslims to stand up for the victims and be their voice to help them get rid of oppression."*

- *Religious Beliefs and Empathetic Behaviour*

All of the participants regarded empathy as a critical virtue for preventing bullying behaviour among students. According to them, various religious beliefs and practices help Muslims develop an empathetic attitude towards their fellows. Interviewees viewed religious beliefs as having a significant influence on the

emotional intelligence of the followers. Islam preaches its followers to understand the pain and emotions of others. In the context of empathy, Islam preaches Muslims to be socially aware and understand the struggle of their fellow Muslims. According to the 7th interviewee:

"If a person is not able to understand the pain of his fellow, he will succumb to an apathetic attitude, which takes him away from empathy. On the other hand, Islam teaches its followers to be empathetic."

Interviewees believed that having strong religious beliefs makes a person grow an empathetic stance in his treatment of others. He becomes gentle and kind in his behaviour and abstains from harming others. This is because of his awareness of the repercussions of his actions. Moreover, interviewees also empathetic behaviour as crucial to sustaining peace and harmony in society.

- *Influence of Religious Community on Anti-Bullying Advocacy*

When asked about the role of the religious community in propagating anti-bullying advocacy, the respondents held different stances. Some of them were quite optimistic regarding the role of the religious community in curbing bullying. They viewed the religious community as a platform to preach the teachings of compassion and kindness. Students highlighted the responsibility of religious scholars to preach peace and harmony in society. The 7th interviewee suggested that the religious community included people from all walks of life. A person's religious community begins at his home where his parents familiarise him with the values of kindness and respect. *"A child's family is the immediate community around him. Therefore, families in Pakistan should focus on ensuring the positive religious influence on the behaviour of the child."* However, some students were very pessimistic regarding the role of the religious community in curbing abusive behaviour and bullying. They revealed that religious disagreements sometimes lead the followers of the religion to succumb to abusive behaviour and bullying. The 9th interviewee said in the regard: *"I have witnessed the religious community acting as a platform for promoting abusive behaviour and hatred, which usually stems from people's misinterpretation of Islamic teachings."*

- *Forgiveness in Religious Context*

The interview with the students also included an in-depth discussion on the emphasis of Islam on forgetting and forgiving. The respondents were mindful of the significance of forgiveness in the Islamic context. They were mindful of the situation

in which the bully is able to repent and to be ashamed of his bullying attitude. In such situation, it depends on the victim whether to forgive or not. However, Islam favours forgiveness as mentioned by the 7th interviewee: *"Repentance is incomplete without seeking forgiveness from the victim. Moreover, Islam has promised great rewards in exchange for forgiving others."* Thus, the culture of forgiveness can help promote positive and compassionate feelings. This can help students to respect each other and establish healthy relationships where nobody gets bullied.

4. DISCUSSION

• *Discussion of Findings*

The thematic analysis of interviews conducted with high school students in Pakistan offered unique insights into the dynamics of bullying incidents and the potential role of religious education in this regard. The findings revealed that religions influence can be a strong predictor of bullying attitudes. Those who follow the religious teachings in their pure essence, exhibit a compassionate disposition. However, they are people who are superficial followers of religion and consider themselves as morally superior to their fellows and proceed to bully them. Thus, the findings of the study reveal a strong influence of Islamic education in shaping students' attitudes towards bullying. There should be a positive influence of religion on adolescents to keep them away from violence. Islamic education emerges as a tool to prevent bullying incidents across high schools in Pakistan.

Therefore, students should be taught in the light of Islamic values of compassion and respect for each other. Furthermore, the role of the religious community was also met with mixed reviews from the participants. The findings reveal that the religious community has the responsibility to play a positive role in preventing abusive tendencies in society. Similarly, the religious education and training of adolescents should also be devoid of any kind of discrimination based on religious identities, race, and gender. In addition, the findings emphasise the cultivation of empathetic behaviour in students through the preaching of Islamic values. Students should be encouraged to be empathetic towards their fellows, particularly those who are marginalised and are the victims of abuse and violence. Moreover, Islamic education can empower students to take a stand against bullying and support the victims of abuse.

Previously, Hafidurrahman and Dannur (2023) have also reported a significant role of Islamic education in preventing bullying incidents among students. The study revealed that Islamic values teach self-control to students, and it shapes their

attitudes, behaviour, and tolerance levels. This leads to the prevention of bullying. Similarly, Maksum et al. (2023) are of the opinion that the education of students in Islamic ethics can help prevent bullying. Thus, students should be familiarised with the moral standing of bullying behaviour to help them stay away from abuse.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study revealed several valuable findings in terms of the role of religion in the dynamics of bullying and forgiveness in the context of high schools in Pakistan. The respondents acknowledged the significant role of Islamic education in promoting the culture of forgiveness and curbing incidents of bullying. In terms of the purpose of religious education, the participants viewed it as a robust tool to preach the values of compassion and kindness. The Quran and Hadith emerged as the primary tools for promoting Islamic values among high school students. The findings lead to the conclusion that Islamic education is crucial to establishing a harmonious environment. Moreover, the inhibitions of some participants regarding the misinterpretation of Islamic teachings led to the conclusion that Islamic education should be focused on promoting peace and harmony instead of highlighting ideological differences. Thus, a culture of forgiveness and tolerance should prevail to prevent bullying incidents in high schools.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The study enhanced the understanding regarding the intersection of religious education and the prevention of bullying in high schools. Focusing on the context of Pakistan, the study helps understand the dynamics of the culture of bullying and forgiveness in high schools across Pakistan. Moreover, the study establishes a robust link between Islamic education and the teaching of the values of tolerance and forgiveness in high schools. Above all, the study helps understand the religious influence on adolescents in terms of shaping their attitudes and behaviour towards abuse and bullying.

The practical implications of the study include an emphasis on promoting religious education to prevent abuse and bullying at schools. Moreover, teachers should exercise compassion and kindness to promote tolerance and gentleness among students and to take an anti-bullying stance. Moreover, the study implies that the religious community needs to promote a healthy and positive role in preaching love and harmony. Furthermore, students should be taught about the

harmful impact of bullying on the physical and mental health of both the assailant and the victim to keep them away from such activities.

7.   LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There are several limitations of this study, which should be addressed to map out guidelines for future studies. This study adopted a qualitative design and collected data through interviews. Therefore, its methodological design lacks quantifiable findings. Thus, the study offers no numerical findings concerning the bullying incidents and their influences on students. Future studies can adopt a mixed research design and investigate the impact of bullying on physical and mental well-being of students. This will offer various practical implications regarding addressing the bullying issues among adolescents. In addition, this study collected the data from high schools in Pakistan and therefore, it offers no findings related to other countries. Future studies can focus on other countries and investigate the impact of religious education on students in those countries. Moreover, future studies can also conduct a comparative analysis of Pakistan with other countries to explore the role of religious education in preventing bullying in schools.

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