Trust in Religious Others: A Three-Way Interaction Model of Religious Bias, Informational Use of Digital Media, and Education

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This study investigates the relationship between individuals' religious bias and trust in religious others and how this relationship is conditioned by education and the use of digital media in the context of Pakistan. Although recent studies conducted in Western democracies suggest that social media have potentially contributed to the growth of religious and racial cleavages, the impact of these platforms remains understudied in non-Western, predominantly Muslim societies such as Pakistan. Our analyses of the World Value Survey (WVS) data from Pakistan show that, not surprisingly, religious bias negatively predicts trust in religious others. However, the informational use of digital media platforms (i.e., the Internet and social media) moderates this relationship, indicating that this negative association becomes insignificant among heavy digital media users. This relationship is further contingent on education, suggesting that less educated people benefit more from the informational use of digital media. The findings are discussed in relation to the extant literature on the role of digital media and education in facilitating religious trust.

Keywords: religious bias, religious trust, digital media, education, survey, Pakistan

In line with democratic theories, out-group trust or trust in members of different faiths is highly significant since it is a normative component to build a prosperous and harmonious society (Delhey & Welzel, 2012; Kwon, Shao, & Nah, 2021; Valente & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2020). Moreover, trust in people from other religions (herein termed a religious trust) is a specific type of out-group trust, as faith is a typical cue for social categorization (Tajfel, 1974). More specifically, religious trust is a substantial social issue as it

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facilitates interactions across different religious groups (Kanas, Scheepers, & Sterkens, 2015; Mehfooz, 2021; Valente & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2020). Moreover, such intergroup interactions are vital for the well-functioning of any democratic society (Cawvey, Hayes, Canache, & Mondak, 2018; Delhey & Welzel, 2012; Kwon et al., 2021; Vallier, 2020). In other words, since people need to interact daily, religious trust is crucial for healthy relationships between members of different faiths (Mehfooz, 2021; Valente & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2020). Therefore, especially in multireligious plural societies, factors negatively accounting for religious trust become crucial, such as religious bias—the degree to which a person believes that their faith is the only acceptable one (Alsaad, Taamneh, & Al-Jedaiah, 2018).

This study examines the relationship between religious trust and digital media as a critical issue in a multireligious society, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. According to the latest census in 2017, the population of Pakistan is more than 220 million, and around 5% of them are non-Muslim citizens, among whom Hindu (1.8%) and Christian (1.6%) communities are the two dominant minority groups. Recent studies and surveys show that Pakistan is generally incapable of providing a safe and kind environment for its religious minorities ("A Closer Look," 2019; Ispahani, 2017). Pakistani government faces various challenges in protecting religious minorities from a small group of extremists and encounters enormous difficulties in enhancing the democratic qualities of the overall religious majority about religious minorities. Nevertheless, Jo (2012) reported that the suggested link between religious commitment and support for a militant group was unrelated. Hence, this study attempts to address the enduring problem of religious trust in Pakistan, mainly focusing on the Muslim majority's trust in members of non-Muslim minorities. Digital media technologies are widely regarded as an essential part of civic life and emerging as one of the critical repertoires of Pakistanis. Thus, this study also explores the role of digital media in influencing religious trust, particularly how its interaction with religious bias impacts trust in people of other religions.

Based on prior studies, in the following sections, we argue that religious bias is likely to be negatively associated with religious trust. Nevertheless, we argue that this relationship could be weakened by digital media use as it can facilitate an abundance of information and intergroup exchange and many other democratic opportunities, thus generating a liberating effect (as elaborated below). The growing literature mostly developed from western societies focuses on the negative role of the Internet and social media in fueling polarization, disinformation, and hate speech (Ahmed, 2021; Sunstein, 2017). We attempt to examine what implications digital media would have in Pakistan about religious trust. In addition, since education is one of the principal characteristics of individuals and Pakistan's literacy rate is low ("Economic Survey," 2020; "Literacy Rate," 2020), we explore whether education level further conditions this relationship. Highly educated people could already have some level of out-group trust (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Helliwell & Putnam, 2007; Zhu, Lu, & Chang, 2021); one could expect that low-educated people would benefit more from the informational use of digital media. In the following, we have outlined a brief scholarship on religious bias and religious trust in digital media as an alternative information sphere in Pakistan and its interaction effect, and the conditional role of education. This is followed by the method (survey), results, and discussion sections, respectively.

Religious Bias and Religious Trust

Scholars and professionals worldwide are concerned about growing religious extremism and intolerance, especially in Islamic societies (Hassan & Shalaby, 2019; Jo, 2012; Kanas et al., 2015; Kishi & Theodoro, 2016; Mehfooz, 2021; Wibisono, Louis, & Jetten, 2019). One of the significant factors arousing religious extremism is the perception that one's religion is the only true religion or the so-called religious bias (Alsaad et al., 2018). It is a bias against people or religions based on their beliefs. For example, my religion is the only one that is acceptable compared to other religions (Alsaad et al., 2018). Another general example of religious bias could be that religion is always correct when religion and science conflict (Trippas, Thompson, & Handley, 2017). The notion of religious bias aligns with belief bias, which refers to the "tendency to accept conclusions that accord with one's beliefs regardless of the actual validity of those conclusions" (Torrens, 1999, p. 2). Belief bias is one of the human cognitive biases predisposing our minds toward certain religious beliefs (Willard & Norenzayan, 2013). More importantly, such religious bias could impair individuals' trust in members of other faith. Past research demonstrated that religious bias affects one's ability of syllogistic reasoning (Evans, Barston, & Pollard, 1983; Klauer, Musch, & Naumer, 2000), which may elicit irrational and erroneous evaluations of others. Therefore, it is conceivable that highly religious people would consider members of other faiths less trustworthy than their fellow believers simply because of the disparity in religious beliefs. Moreover, prior research has reported that individuals view those sharing the same religious background as more trustworthy than people of different religions (i.e., King, McKay, & Stewart, 2014). The affiliation with the same religion can strengthen group identity and, in turn, induce in-group favoritism, which gives more confidence to trust individuals of the same faith (Chuah, Gächter, Hoffmann, & Tan, 2016). As a result, a lack of religious trust or trustfulness may lead to a lack of interaction across faith groups and promote religious polarization and extremism. On the other side, mutual trust among the various religious groups is essential to share responsibilities and work together in a given society (Mehfooz, 2021; Valente & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2020). This phenomenon is critical to examine in multireligious and transitional democracies like Pakistan. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis.

H1:   Religious bias will have a negative relationship with religious trust.

Digital Media as Alternative Information Sphere in Pakistan

On the one side, grounded on the echo chamber and filter bubble theorization, the extant scholarship argues that the prevalence of digital media contributes to the uprise of polarization and religious extremism (Coughlan, 2019; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Sunstein, 2017). However, empirical evidence of this assertion has been rarely validated beyond Western contexts, especially in developing Muslim majority nations like Pakistan. Unlike religious minorities in western societies, who are commonly immigrants and racially different from the majority, religious minorities in Pakistan are indigenous residents, mainly sharing the same cultural, linguistic, and ethnic background as the religious majority (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020; Rahman, 1996).

On the other side, scholarship suggests that digital media use, such as informational social media, increases interpersonal trust (e.g., Kwon et al., 2021). As such, informational use increases one's knowledge

and triggers discussion with others. As a result, it is likely to improve one's online and offline social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012), ultimately increasing trust in others. The mechanism is that people learn about the other side or other people through exchanging information or discussion, which potentially increases their social or interpersonal trust. The beneficial effects of informational digital media use on trust argue that digital media is conducive to developing trust as a civic outcome. Research showed that the overall amount of digital media use and specific use motivations, such as information seeking or relational goals, positively affect trust (Kwon et al., 2021).

Moreover, empirical evidence demonstrates a positive role of digital media in reducing religious bias through out-group contact. For instance, based on a meta-analysis of 23 studies from multiple countries, Imperato, Schneider, Caricati, Amichai-Hamburger, and Mancini (2021) found that online intergroup contact, including interfaith contact, significantly improves intergroup relations. Past research has also revealed a positive effect of intergroup contact on trust in out-group members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Vezzali, Capozza, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012), namely those with different group identities (Tajfel, 1974). More specifically, scholars have found a positive impact of interreligious contact on trust in religious out-group (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006; Kanas et al., 2015). Furthermore, digital media, especially social media, are conducive to diversifying personal networks that include more weak ties from different backgrounds (Ellison & Vitak, 2015; Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011). Therefore, people holding different religious groups are likely to interact to join common interest-based collective communication online, such as online talks among fans of a sports team or role-playing games (e.g., Skoric & Kwan, 2011). Intergroup contact in such form or environment may trigger a *deprovincialization* process of one's in-group, which fosters a perception that "in-group norms, customs, and lifestyles turn out not to be the only ways to manage the social world" (Pettigrew, 1997, p. 174). Thus, it eventually elicits more trust in out-group members. Also, recent empirical evidence indicates that digital media serve as an important, though not the perfect, setting for interreligious dialogue (Hassan & Shalaby, 2019; Illman & Sjö, 2015; Neumaier, 2020). Consequently, it could breed a more positive attitude toward the religious out-group (Tsuria, 2020). Hence, taken together, one could expect a liberating effect of digital media.

Contextually speaking, when the former prime minister (PM) of Pakistan Imran Khan assumed office in August 2018, he explicitly expressed that religious minorities' rights in Pakistan would be protected and that no discrimination would be tolerated (Chohan, 2020). Furthermore, his party's 2018 general election manifesto clearly stated that they "will protect the civil, social and religious rights of minorities; their places of worship, property and institutions as laid down in the Constitution" (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, 2018, p. 22). Besides, the current government has recently formed the National Commission on Minorities with representatives from religious minority groups to develop a national policy to make Pakistan religiously more inclusive by fostering interfaith harmony and religious tolerance (Ali, 2020).

Khan (2020) also tweeted, "I want to warn our people that anyone in Pakistan targeting our non-Muslim citizens or their places of worship will be dealt with strictly; Our minorities are equal citizens of this country." These tweets also made headlines in mainstream news media, educating millions of people (e.g., Chohan, 2020; "PM Imran," 2020). Therefore, when politicians and political parties, followed by millions of people on social media (e.g., Imran Khan has more than 16 million Twitter followers currently), strictly warn

and inform the public about the rights of minority communities, one could expect to see some positive changes in the attitudes and behavior of the religious majority in relation to religious minorities. Still, we cannot declare that Pakistani non-Muslims are fully protected in their country, but one could at least see an ongoing state-level push against injustices with Pakistani non-Muslims, as well as some political elites advocating interfaith harmony and religious tolerance on social media.

Speaking of Pakistan's digital media landscape, the country has experienced rapid growth in Internet penetration in recent years. Between January 2020 to 2021, the number of Internet users and active social media users in Pakistan has increased by 21% and 24.3%, respectively (DataReportal, 2021). Besides, according to a government source, there are 100 million 3G/4G subscribers in Pakistan, reaching a 46% penetration rate (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [PTA], 2021). With the growing popularity of digital media, Pakistani civil society members are empowered to make their voices louder and heard by larger audiences, which is particularly important about religious minorities (Schaflechner, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2013). Human rights activists and organizations are also active on digital media platforms in Pakistan (Yusuf et al., 2013). For instance, provincial minister Fayyaz-ul-Hassan Chohan was removed from office after a social media movement against his remarks on Hindus in February 2019 (Schaflechner, 2020). In September 2019, the mysterious death of a Hindu female student triggered a surge of social media discussion, particularly #JusticeForNimrita being the top Twitter trend in Pakistan, which further led to protests in some of the country's biggest urban areas (Ali, 2019). The civil society members made the #SindhRejectsForcedConversion one of the most tweeted events against the series of forced conversions of underage religious minority girls in June 2020 ("Forced Conversions," 2020; Maheshwari, 2020).

We argue that these contextual characteristics make Pakistan an engaging society to revisit the conventional findings from Western contexts—where, in recent years, digital media has been seen as the villain in the tale of technology and democracy. What implications would this change in the media landscape and information sources have for Pakistanis' religious bias? Before concluding, it is essential to note that mainstream international news media, especially Western ones, have published news stories reporting how social media are becoming a tool where people spread religious hate rather than conversation across faith in Pakistan (Bukhari, 2017; Kohari, 2019; Rasmussen & Wong, 2017; Rollier, Frøystad, & Ruud, 2019). However, empirical evidence deriving from Pakistani population data is scarce. Following the prior discussion, one could argue that the negative relationship between religious bias and trust in religious out-group would be weaker among those who use digital media more frequently. In other words, we attempt to enrich the literature by inquiring whether the informational use of digital media (i.e., the Internet and social media) has a positive effect on the relationship between religious bias and trust in religious others in the context of Pakistan. Following the prior literature on social media and trust, and Western news media reports on the polarizing role of social media in Pakistan (Bukhari, 2017; Kohari, 2019; Rasmussen & Wong, 2017), we proposed a research question.

RQ1:   Does informational digital media news use reduce or amplify the negative effect of religious bias on religious trust?

Education, Digital Media Use, and Religious Trust

In addition to digital media use that could function through one's life course, this study also investigates another factor influencing the development of trust in one's early years: educational attainment. We exploited the role of education based on both theoretical and contextual rationale. Theoretically, past research has extensively highlighted the effect of education in developing trust (e.g., Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Helliwell & Putnam, 2007; Huang, Maassen van den Brink, & Groot, 2009). However, despite the well-established effect of education on trust, little is known about whether the liberating impact of digital media is contingent on the individuals' level of education. An affirmative answer to this question implies two situations. One situation suggests a case of the rich get richer, or the knowledge gap hypothesis—namely, those who have received higher education in early life would benefit more (in terms of trust) from the use of digital media (Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970). In contrast, the other situation implies the liberating effect that digital media would be more significant for those who are less educated in their formative years (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2020). It could be expected that highly educated people have already formed a certain level of trust toward members of other faith than their counterparts, which is harder to improve, suggesting a ceiling effect. Hence, the impact of informational use of digital media among less educated people could be more substantial than highly educated ones.

Furthermore, such a possible moderating effect of education on the liberating effect of digital media is significant for countries with relatively low literacy rates like Pakistan. According to the 2019–2020 Pakistan Economic Survey, the current literacy rate of Pakistan is around 60% ("Economic Survey," 2020; "Literacy Rate," 2020). Since individuals' education level is one of their central attributes and Pakistan's literacy rate is low, we are interested in examining whether the above-proposed moderated relationship is further contingent on the individuals' level of education. More specifically, this study explores who would benefit more from the liberating effect of digital media by focusing on the moderating effect of education.

In addition, we learned from prior studies in non-Western contexts that the inconsistent findings about democracy and digital media scholarship ask for more advanced conceptualizations and examinations (Ahmed & Cho, 2019; Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2020). The framework offered in this study exploits a rarely investigated political context and explores the influence of the educational background of citizens in the relationship between digital media and trust. Primarily, we consider the Muslim majority's level of education as a critical intervening element between digital media use, religious bias, and religious trust (see Figure 1). Although it would be essential to examine the relationships between these four variables in any political context, it is of specific significance in the county of interest, given Pakistan's substantially low literacy rate. In short, we attempt to examine whether the conditional relationships between religious bias, informational digital media use, and religious trust differ across the levels of education. Notwithstanding the evidence that education positively impacts trust in the West, it is still unexplored how it would interplay with digital media and religious bias on trust in Pakistan. Therefore, the following research question is proposed.

RQ2:   How does education condition the interaction effect of digital media use and religious bias on religious trust?
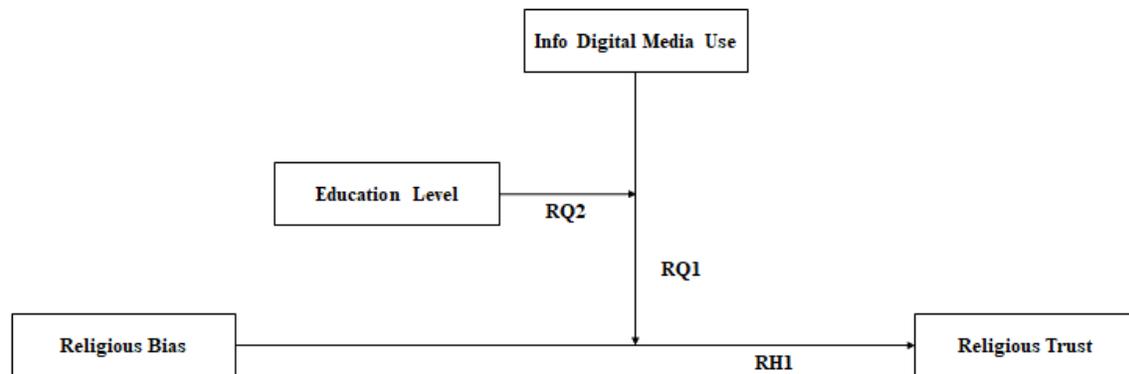
Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Method

Data

We test the hypotheses using the publicly available seventh Wave of World Value Survey (WVS) survey data. A reputational research firm, Gallup Pakistan, affiliated with Gallup International Association, administered the survey in September 2018. Survey items were double-checked with the Urdu version of the questionnaire to ensure that English translations were correct and synchronized. Since we were mainly interested in the Muslims' (i.e., religious majority) trust in people of another religion—minority non-Muslims—our analysis only included Muslim respondents ($N = 1597$; aged 18 and above, comprising 51.65% male).[1] Scholars have used similar individual-level public data to examine different patterns in certain societies (e.g., Su, Lee, & Borah, 2021).

Measurements

Dependent Variable (DV)

Religious trust was gauged using a single item asking respondents to what extent they trust people of another religion on a four-point scale (1 = *do not trust at all*, 4 = *trust completely*; $M = 1.92$, $SD = 1.01$).

Independent Variable (IV)

Religious bias was gauged with a single item on a four-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statement, "The only acceptable religion is my religion" ($M = 3.75$, $SD = .57$).

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[1] More details about the data can be found at https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp

Moderator Variables (W & Z)

Informational use of digital media (W) was measured using two items on a five-point scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *daily*). Respondents were asked about how people get information about what is going on in the country and around the world from various sources. "For each of the following sources, please indicate whether you use it to obtain information from (a) the Internet and (b) social media (e.g., Facebook and Twitter)." The two items were averaged to form an index (M = 1.98, SD = 1.44; Spearman-Brown (SB) Coefficient = .81). Education (Z) was measured on a nine-point scale ranging from zero, indicating "no education," to eight, indicating "doctoral or equivalent" (M = 2.22, SD = 2.00).

Covariate Variables

Multiple covariates were controlled in our analysis to ensure a more accurate estimation of the effects of interest (see Table 1).

Theoretical covariates are the following: Social distance was gauged by asking, "could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbors, people of a different religion?" (mentioned [31.2%] = 0; not mentioned [68.8%] = 1). Social distance is an important element in examining an in-group attitude toward an out-group (Lissitsa, 2017). Likewise, belief in God (yes [98.6%] = 0; no [1.4%] = 1) and religious behavior (i.e., frequency of prayer on an eight-point scale [M = 7.20; SD = 1.36]) were controlled as measures of religiosity (Valente & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2020). General trust (i.e., need to be very careful [76.6%] = 0; most people can be trusted [23.4%] = 1) was also controlled as a significant correlate of trust in religious others. In addition, to examine the unique contribution of informational use of digital media, our model controls for individuals' frequency of information acquisition via traditional media sources on a five-point scale, including newspaper (M = 2.31; SD = 1.54), television (M = 3.91; SD = 1.47), and radio (M = 1.53; SD 1.10).

Finally, controlled demographic variables included gender (female [48.3%] = 0; male [51.7%] = 1), age (M = 35.38; SD = 11.33), income (10-point scale*: M* = 4.42; SD = 2.32), residential area (village [66.6%] = 0; city/town [33.4%] = 1), ethnicity (Sindhi [14.5%]; Punjabi [48.2%]; Pashto [13.7%]; Seraiki [11.3%]; Hindko [7%]; Baluchi [3.1%]; Urdu and others [2.3%]), and marital status (single [14.7%]; married [82.7%]; divorced, separated, and widowed [2.6%]).

Results

This study used ordinary least squares regression to test the proposed hypotheses. All the variables used to create interaction terms were mean-centered to reduce collinearity (Jaccard, Wan, & Turrisi, 1990).

Table 1. Predicting the Religious Trust (N = 1597).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	2.03(.237)***	1.50(.192)***	1.58(.197)***
Key predictors			
Religious bias (X)	−.159(.044)***	−.157(.043)***	−.135(.045)**
Info. use of digital media (W)		.049(.019)*	.045(.021)*
X × W		.065(.030)*	.080(.035)*
Education (Z)			.025(.014)#
X × Z			.025(.020)
W × Z			−.005(.008)
X × W × Z			−.027(.014)*
Control variables			
Gender (male)	.112(.056)*	.100(.055)#	.100(.055)#
Age	.000(.002)	.000(.002)	.001(.002)
Income	.053(.011)***	.048(.011)***	.044(.011)***
Residence (urban)	.001(.054)	−.010(.054)	−.020(.054)
Ethnicity (ref. Sindhi)			
Punjabi	.233(.079)**	.217(.078)**	.218(.079)**
Pashto	−.131(.097)	−.137(.096)	−.125(.096)
Seraiki	.009(.102)	.016(.102)	.038(.102)
Hindko	.076(.120)	.056(.119)	.042(.120)
Baluchi	−.138(.154)	−.164(.153)	−.161(.154)
Urdu & others	.110(.177)	.104(.176)	.086(.177)
Marital status (ref. single)			
Married	−.091(.077)	−.071(.077)	−.069(.077)
Others	−.084(.181)	−.058(.181)	−.035(.181)
Social distance	−.031(.054)	−.036(.054)	−.040(.054)
Belief in God	.026(.210)	.013(.209)	−.010(.209)
Religious behavior	.021(.019)	.018(.018)	.013(.018)
General trust	.431(.058)***	.443(.058)***	.444(.058)***
Television	−.004(.018)	−.015(.019)	−.025(.019)
Newspaper	−.037(.018)*	−.040(.017)*	−.043(.018)*
Radio	.050(.023)*	.045(.023)*	.049(.023)*
R^2	.090***	.097***	.102***

Note. Info. refers to informational; ref. refers to the reference group; Others under marital status refers to divorced, separated, and widowed; X refers to the independent variable; W refers to the first moderator variable; Z refers to the second moderator variable. The open values are β unstandardized coefficient and *SE* are in parenthesis.
$p < .1^{\#}$, $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$ & $p < .001^{***}$.

Results of Model 1 indicated that religious bias is negatively related to religious trust ($\beta = -.159$; $SE = .044$; $p < .001$), which supports H1.

Results of Model 2 showed that the product of religious bias and informational use of digital media has a positive relationship with religious trust ($\beta = .065$; $SE = 030$; $p < .05$), suggesting that greater informational use of digital media significantly weakens the negative relationship between religious bias and religious trust. The relationship tends to be significant only for medium- and low-level informational digital media users (RQ1; see Figure 2 with slope values).

Last, the results of Model 3 showed that the product of religious bias, informational use of digital media, and education is negatively related to religious trust ($\beta = -.027$; $SE = .014$; $p < .05$). It means that individuals with a lower level of education significantly benefit the most from the informational use of digital media, followed by the group with a medium level of education compared to their counterparts. In other words, the moderated moderation relationship is not significant for those with a higher level of education (RQ2; see Figure 3; also see Table 2 for slope tests).
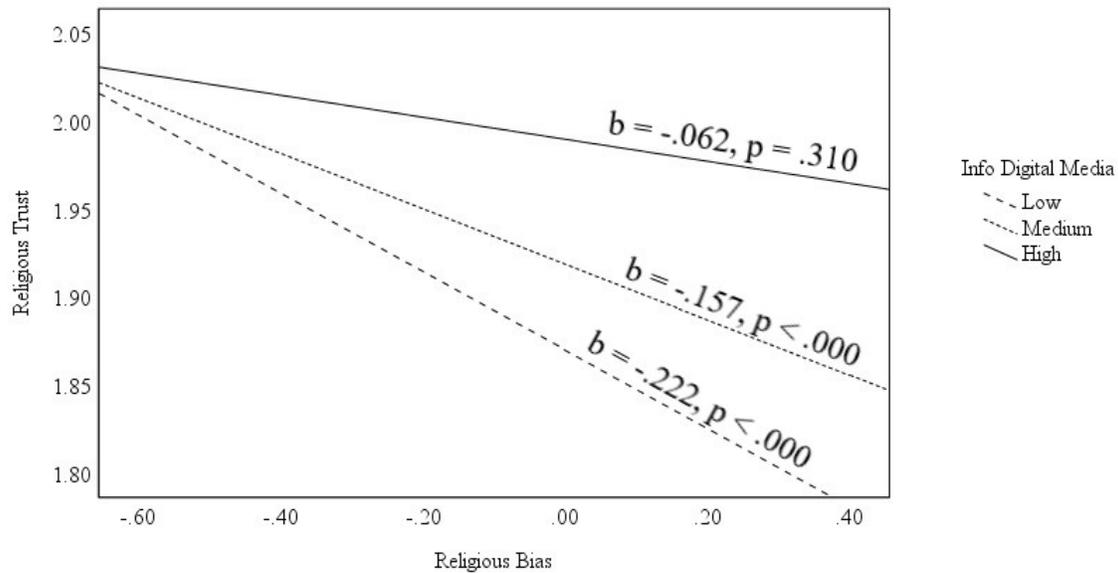

Figure 2. Two-way interaction between religious bias and informational digital media use predicting religious trust.
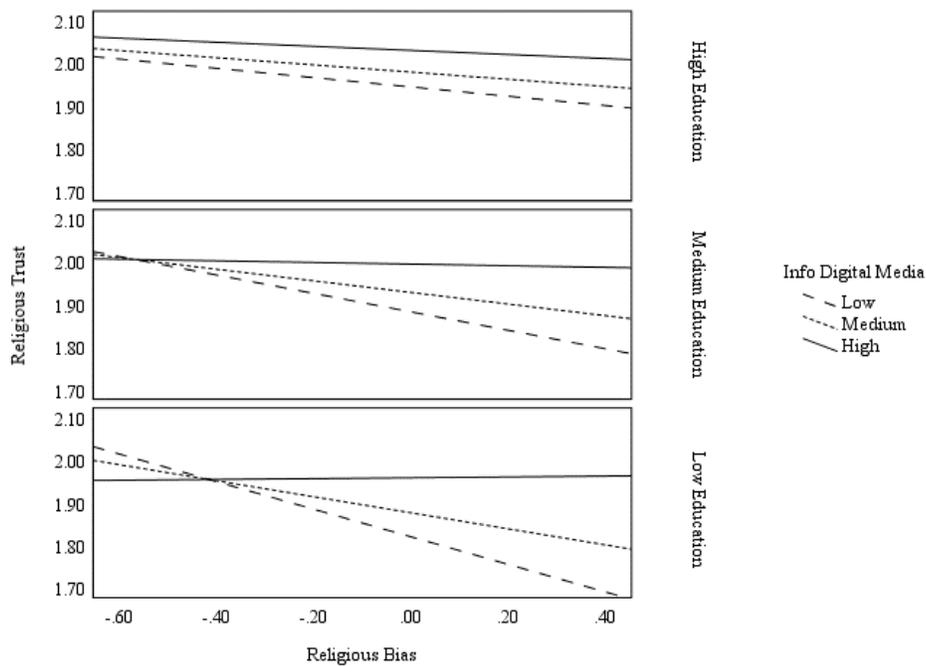
Figure 3. Three-way interaction between religious bias, informational digital media use, and education predicting religious trust.

Table 2. Test of Conditional Religious Bias * Informational Digital Media Use Interaction at Three Values of Education.

Education levels	β	p
Low	.136	.011
Medium	.080	.021
High	.025	.459

Discussion

Trust is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy (Cawvey et al., 2018; Vallier, 2020). In a multi-religion context, trust in people with different religious backgrounds is particularly crucial for social cohesion and the performance of democracy. This study attempted to address the enduring problem of religious trust by examining the effect of religious bias, digital media use, and education as possible moderators that can affect the development of this civic virtue. Based on a representative national survey of Pakistan, the results generally show that the negative relationship between religious bias and religious trust is moderated by informational digital media use. The negative relationship is weak for those with a high level of informational digital media use. As such, the relationship between religious bias and religious trust is insignificant for the high level of digital media users. However, the relationship between religious bias and religious trust remains negative for both medium- and low-level digital media users.

Moreover, this moderated relationship was further moderated by education. Low-educated and medium-educated individuals benefited more from the high level of informational digital media use than highly educated ones. Against the knowledge gap hypothesis (differential growth in knowledge; Lind & Boomgaarden, 2019; Tichenor et al., 1970), which argues that media use benefits people with a high level of education more. This study shows that highly educated people least gain from the interaction role of informational digital media use. As discussed earlier, it could be because of the significant effect of their education level on out-group trust independent of digital media use (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002; Helliwell & Putnam, 2007; Zhu et al., 2021). In a nutshell, the most significant contribution of this study is the interaction between religious bias, informational digital media use, and education level and their role in explaining religious trust. An association between digital media and polarization has been suggested in scholarly and policy discussions about technology and democracy in Western and developed societies. We investigated the relationship between religious trust and three theoretical predictors in Pakistan to provide empirical evidence for this discussion. Our findings show that digital media facilitate religious trust by weakening the negative effect of religious bias and the effect is more substantial among less-educated individuals.

In other words, this study enriched the empirical literature on the sociology of religious trust by analyzing a Muslim-dominant, multireligious and transitional democracy—Pakistan. Additionally, this study offered a theoretical contribution to trust from a non-Western context that not only does informational use of digital media weaken (i.e., a liberating role) the effect of religious bias on religious trust but also indicates that it benefits low- and medium-level educated people more than their counterpart (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2020). Although recent scholarship tends to depict digital media as a bad guy in the story of technology and democracy (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017), our findings show a solitary role of digital media that its informational use can significantly mitigate the negative effect of one's religious bias on religious trust. Hence, this study stands out against those who associate the growing religious extremism with the popularity of digital media (Coughlan, 2019).

In general, people who go online for information have broader sources of information consumption (national and international) and could actively seek various information and express personal opinions. For instance, Pakistani civil society members have been actively voicing injustices toward non-Muslim minorities by "increasingly going online to air their grievances, document violence against them, and mobilize protests or e-campaigns" (Dilawri, Salim, Ishfaq, & Saleem, 2014; Schaflechner, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2013, p. 64). Digital media users, especially social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram, could also connect people across religious boundaries and build their social networks, thereby reducing prejudice and negative stereotypes (White, Abu-Rayya, Bliuc, & Faulkner, 2015). Allport (1954) proposed intergroup contact as a substantial factor in reducing out-group prejudice and increasing out-group tolerance. The social contact hypothesis specifies that intergroup interactions improve positive attitudes toward one another, particularly when social contacts are attended by equal status, common goals, cooperation, and authority support (Allport, 1954). Using the same framework, Kanas and colleagues (2015) examined interfaith contact and religious trust in Indonesia and the Philippines. They found that the quality of interfaith contact is significantly associated with religious out-group trust. On the other hand, a lack of contact exists between members of different religious groups in Pakistani society because of preexisting negative biases and stereotypes and mainly because of the absence of opportunities. Nevertheless, digital media is very likely to facilitate interfaith contacts.

The introduction of digital ICTs in Pakistan allows people to connect across religions regardless of physical, temporal, and ideological boundaries previously not connected because of the lack of communication opportunities. According to the network society theory (Castells, 2011), optimists argue that digital ICTs can build better intergroup relations. For instance, the in-group members can gain information and build a social network related to the out-group. The extant literature from other countries shows that interfaith mediated contact positively affects the interfaith relationship, reducing out-group prejudice (e.g., Imperato et al., 2021; Lissitsa, 2017; Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to explore whether social media platforms, such as Facebook, can facilitate democratic attitudes and behaviors among the religious majority concerning religious minorities. More specifically, it is critical to investigate the role of social media in a Muslim majority and multireligious nations like Pakistan, which are increasingly becoming connected digitally because of rapid urbanization and playing a substantial role in educating citizens. Aforementioned, the current Internet penetration rate is 46% in Pakistan, with around 100 million subscribers. We suggest that future studies examine the role of mediated interfaith contact in the country.

Our findings advance the role of digital media in the story of technology and democracy. The stock of trust among citizens is a pressing need for the democratization of Pakistan. For instance, religious trust or out-group trust is critical in facilitating public cooperation and collective action, contributing to a well-functioning democracy. The findings have political and social implications for Pakistani plural society, with a diverse yet insecure group of religious minorities (e.g., Dilawri et al., 2014). This study expands our understanding of the digital media effect in an Islamic society, offering practical knowledge to academic and non-academic experts. Likewise, it provides an interesting perspective on the moderating role of individual education levels in the mechanism, theoretically expanding our knowledge of who benefits more from the high informational use of digital media. National policymakers could apply the findings in national integration and enhance interfaith harmony among different religious communities. For instance, the government can create opportunities for interfaith interaction by organizing various interactive events. Similar policies could also be applied to the online sphere through digital projects, such as running social media campaigns for religious tolerance, as reported in prior studies from Pakistan (Hussain & Silcock, 2019).

Our findings also offer practical implications for traditional Pakistani society, where non-Muslim religious minorities face numerous challenges. It shows that when the use of digital media increases and more people consume information through online sources, the deleterious impact of preexisting religious bias on others, especially the negative effect of religious bias on trusting non-Muslims, reduces. Importantly, it shows that less-educated citizens benefit from informational digital media use, noting that the county has one of the lowest literacy rates in the region. To build a more coherent and tolerant society, the government needs to take practical steps related to digital media use in Pakistan so that more citizens can be online. For example, launching digital infrastructure initiatives and providing digital media use packages to the public could increase overall digital connectivity in the county; as a result, potentially improve the existing religious bias issues.

Limitations and Suggestions

There are a few limitations to be considered in this study. First, although the proposed hypotheses have theoretical foundations, the causal relationship cannot be claimed from cross-sectional data. Future studies should collect longitudinal panel and/or experimental data. Second, the self-reported data raises

caution for under- and overestimations coming from a social desirability bias. In particular, the measurement of religious bias is susceptible to it. Indirect measures could be used in the future, such as observing offline and/or online behaviors. Third, because of the lack of data on Muslim respondents' religious affiliation, we could not examine whether the proposed model is contingent on major denominations of Islam in Pakistan, such as Sunni and Shia. Among the 95% Muslim population, Shias make up 15–20%, whereas Sunnis are around 75%. Since the Shia Muslim population is significantly smaller, they could be perceived as a minority in terms of denomination of Islam. Shia Muslims also have been targeted by extremists and fundamentalists in Pakistan (Yusuf, 2012). Thus, findings do not refer to a specific Muslim majority group in Pakistan. Future studies are suggested to examine the trust level of different denominations of Islam separately. Because Shia, who, a minority within the majority group, are affected by religious extremism, might show a greater level of trust in non-Muslim minorities since they are also facing similar challenges. Last, the criterion available, religious trust or trust in people of another religion, was not measured about specific other religious minority groups, such as trust in Hindu or Christian people. Instead, it was gauged as another religion in general. Scholars are suggested to focus on a specific group of religious minorities or individually in upcoming research works. In other words, findings cannot be entirely referred to all religious minority groups who experience a different set of challenges (Schaflechner, 2020).

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