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THE NEXUS BETWEEN POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AMONG SOCIAL MEDIA USERS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract
However, usually political and religious intolerance have different research and intervention strategies in Pakistan. But question rise why there should be such segregation. Through use of Cultivation theory and generalized prejudice approach, this study tests the hypothesis that there is some kind of positive and significant association between political and religious intolerance of Pakistani social-media users. Data has been collected through an online survey questionnaire from 1170 young respondents between age limits of 16-30 years old using validated and contextualized scales of political and religious intolerance. Results of Pearson product moment correlation show very strong positive association between political and religious intolerance having r = .667 at p<.001 level and sharing almost 44.5% of variance. It is highly significant than any bi variate association found during entire analysis of wide research. It means that these two variables are closely related to each other. This result makes sense considering several aspects: Structural Fusion of Religion and Politics, Generalized Prejudice and Pluralistic Intolerance approaches of political psychology, affective polarization studies of identity based hostilities. Hence it suggests that instead of treating political intolerance and religious intolerance as distinct entities there exists only generalized intolerance tendency among Pakistani youths. Implications for Civic Tolerance cations for Civic Tolerance.cations for Civic Tolerance.

INTRODUCTION
Pakistan's public sphere is frequently described, both in scholarly literature and in everyday political commentary, as a space in which political disagreement and religious difference are difficult to disentangle from one another (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Political parties routinely invoke religious symbolism and doctrinal claims to mobilize supporters, religious minorities are periodically drawn into partisan contests over their legal and constitutional status, and sectarian identity frequently maps onto electoral and ideological alignment. Against this backdrop, social media platforms have become the dominant venue through which Pakistani youth encounter political and religious content, substituting in many cases for the institutional journalism norms of balance and verification that once mediated public discourse (Pakistan

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Telecommunication Authority, 2023). Academic and policy attention to the resulting rise in intolerant attitudes among Pakistani youth has, however, tended to bifurcate along the same lines as the phenomena it studies: political intolerance is examined as a civic and democratic problem, addressed through civic-education and media-literacy programming, while religious intolerance is examined as an interfaith and social-cohesion problem, addressed through separate harmony and minority-rights programming. This separation makes some assumptions about both the political intolerance and the religious intolerance as being different psychological behaviors occurring together in one society whereas in reality they may have strong relations or even overlap each other. This research paper directly aims to find out the validity of these assumptions. Based on data from a huge sample size of Pakistani social media using youths (N=1170), an investigation was carried out to check the degree of association between Political Intolerance (PI) and Religious Intolerance (RI). PI and RI are two different constructs measured differently in this research paper. It raises a lot more than just a mere observation or discussion. When these two concepts show very high relations then it gives important insights into modeling the intolerance related behavior in social media effect studies for future researchers and practitioners. This study makes a contribution to the literature in the following way:

a. It offers an empirical test of political-religious intolerance relation in Pakistani youths using social media platform.

It may not be the first test but certainly one of the initial studies in such context. This research places the political-religious intolerance relation under the theoretical umbrella of Cultivation theory, pluralistic intolerance and affective polarization. There lies a lot more scope to discover.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance as Related but Distinct Constructs

Political intolerance is also understood as such which can be defined by the terms given by Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1984), regarding political tolerance studies in America. Political intolerance has been described as unwillingness of granting the fundamental right of political freedom and liberty to any group whose ideology is different from yours. In behavioral form political intolerance can be seen as favoring restrictions upon the exercise of disliked groups' right to speak politically, being hostile against ideological opponents and selective ignorance towards politically dissident ideas/persons. Religious intolerance has been explained through the lens of prejudice between two groups. According to Hall et al., (2010), Religious intolerance is characterized as unwillingness to tolerate those whose religions ideologies are not same as yours.

Although these two constructs are conceptually distinguishable — one concerns the political sphere of rights and dissent, the other concerns religious and sectarian belonging — they are not obviously independent at the level of individual psychology. Both are, at root, orientations toward an out-group defined by a difference the respondent considers important; both have been linked in prior research to underlying dispositions such as dogmatism, authoritarianism, and low tolerance for ambiguity (Altemeyer, 2002; Hall et al., 2010); and both are measured, in this study as in much of the literature, using structurally parallel Likert-type items assessing avoidance, hostility, and restriction directed at an out-group. Whether this conceptual and structural similarity translates into a strong empirical association at the level of individual attitudes, however, is an empirical question this study is designed to answer.

2.2 Theoretical Framework I: Generalized Prejudice and Pluralistic Intolerance

The theoretical expectation that political and religious intolerance should be strongly related draws primarily on the "pluralistic intolerance" thesis advanced by Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1984), who argued against an earlier assumption in the tolerance literature that

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intolerance is concentrated within specific ideological groups directed at specific disliked targets. Instead of Sullivan et al., have come up with a theory which says intolerant attitude could arise among dissimilar ideological and social groups. Intolerant attitudes do not depend upon the nature of conflict or debate rather depends on psychological attitude where people feel threatened about something and remain absolutely certain without considering legitimacy of contradictory attitudes. An intolerant person towards politics because of threats would also show intolerance towards religion due to same kind of threat perceptions. The reason is the basic premise behind intolerant attitudes.

It also matches the theory of dogmatism and prejudice in political psychology literature. Altemeyer (2002) and Van Prooijen and Krouwel (2016a, 2016b) both characterize dogmatic intolerance as substantially content-independent: dogmatic individuals are distinguished not by which position they hold but by the rigidity and certainty with which they hold it, and by their refusal to grant legitimacy to any position that contradicts it, regardless of whether that position concerns politics, religion, or another domain of belief. Toner, Leary, Asher, and Jongman-Sereno (2013) provide direct empirical support for this content-independence in the political domain, showing that extreme partisans on both the left and right display comparable levels of belief superiority across a wide range of unrelated political issues; the psychological driver of intolerance in their data was the extremity of the respondent's conviction, not its ideological direction. Taken together, this literature predicts that political and religious intolerance should be substantially correlated at the individual level, because both are downstream expressions of the same underlying disposition toward rigid, threat-sensitive, and superiority-laden engagement with out-groups, rather than fully independent attitudes shaped by unrelated processes.

2.3 Theoretical Framework II: Cultivation Theory and the Blended Political-Religious Social Media Environment:

The second theory which I am going to discuss about Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan &Signorielli 1986) claims that heavy and repeated exposure to certain pattern of media content leads towards shaping of viewers' perceptions and attitudes in relation to social reality according to the given content. The main idea of Cultivation Theory neither differentiate nor categorize between the political and religious content separately while discussing about cultivation. They consider cultivation process as dependent on overall pattern of content which an individual sees. In our case, social media environment of Pakistan mixes the political and religious contents. We can observe that our political parties use religious symbols in political communication process, similarly sectarian issues also have become very common topic in politics and vice versa. These algorithms do not divide the feeds into different categories either in political field or religious field (Pariser 2011), therefore one post can cultivate both the political and religious intolerance in viewer at once. Such circumstances under which we are living, the cultivation theory suggests that heavy social media usage cultivates both the political and religious intolerance and it is expected that there is high chance that the two outcomes correlate positively at individual level.

2.4 Theoretical Framework III – Affective Polarization and Identity based hostility:

The third theoretical perspective, affective polarization theory gives an individual psychological explanation to the reason why the intolerance spreads to many areas of life (A.J.Henderson). Iyengar and Westwood (2015) demonstrate that contemporary intergroup hostility in polarized societies is driven substantially by identity-based affect — disgust, distrust, and moral hostility toward out-groups — rather than by substantive disagreement over specific policy content, and that this affective hostility intensifies with the salience of group identity rather than resolving through argument

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or evidence. Because this hostility is affective rather than narrowly cognitive, it is not obviously partitioned by topic: a person whose emotional system has been primed toward threat perception and out-group disgust through repeated exposure to hostile content may experience that hostility as a generalized disposition rather than as belonging exclusively to a single identity domain, applying with comparable force to whichever out-group — political or religious — happens to be salient at a given moment.

2.5 The Present Study and Hypothesis

Taken together, these three theoretical traditions converge on the same empirical prediction, despite emphasizing different mechanisms: a structural account emphasizing the blended nature of political-religious content and identity in Pakistan (Cultivation Theory), a dispositional account emphasizing a content-independent psychological orientation toward out-groups (pluralistic intolerance and dogmatism), and an affective account emphasizing identity-based emotional hostility that generalizes across domains (affective polarization). Each of these traditions predicts that Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance should be positively and substantially correlated among Pakistani youth, rather than functioning as independent, domain-specific attitudes. It leads us to form a hypothesis for our study:

H1: Political intolerance is positively related to religious intolerance amongst the social-media using youngsters in Pakistan.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The approach used for the present study was Quantitative Cross-sectional Correlational Approach. Because both the variables under study were continuously scaled attitudes, it was most suitable methodological choice.

3.2 Population and Sample

The selected participants fall within the age limit of 14-29 years which matches with the national youth policy guideline of Pakistan and also defines youth as per the definition provided by Rauf in his article in 2019. These individuals belong to that particular age range that is highly involved with social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter /X or TikTok and is more vulnerable in developing their attitudes due to exposure via social media channels (Valkenburg et al, 2022).

Convenience Sampling approach is taken into account in choosing the sample. Data collection is performed by electronic means such as WhatsApp, email invitation through google form survey. After removing the missing values from 30 cases (2.5%) out of total sample size 1200, finally 1170 observations have been kept for the analysis purpose. The final sample includes 599 males (51.2%) and 571 females (48.8%). The age of respondent varies between 16-34 years where 547 (46.8%), 338 (28.9%), 268 (22.9%), and 17 (1.5%) respondents are in age groups 20-24 years, 16-19 years, 25-29 years, and 30-34 years respectively. Regarding the level of education, 45.1%, 27.4%, 14.5% and 12.9% respondents attained the education level matriculation, graduate degree, intermediate level, and postgraduate respectively. About the social media usage, majority (45.8%) uses Instagram then comes Facebook, Tiktok, Twitter/X, and Youtube usage are 19.6%, 18.1%, 11.0% and 5.5%. Almost half (49.4%) respondents used social media for political as well as religion purpose, rest part belongs either political (19.7%) and religious (30.4%) purposes.

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Table 1 Demographic and Social Media Usage Characteristics of Respondents (N = 1,170)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	599	51.2
	Female	571	48.8
Age (years)	16–19	338	28.9
	20–24	547	46.8
	25–29	268	22.9
	30–34	17	1.5
Education level	Matric	528	45.1
	Intermediate	170	14.5
	Graduation	321	27.4
	Postgraduation	151	12.9
Primary platform used	Instagram	536	45.8
	Facebook	229	19.6
	TikTok	212	18.1
	Twitter/X	129	11.0
	YouTube	64	5.5
Daily time spent on social media	2–4 hours	488	41.7
	4–6 hours	408	34.9
	6–8 hours	152	13.0
	More than 8 hours	121	10.3

Note. Percentages are based on valid responses (N = 1,170).

3.3 Instrumentation

Questionnaire was used as tool of data collection and that was online and self-administered questionnaire. Concerning present research study, the measurement of political intolerance utilized 10-item five-point Likert type scale with reverse score item to avoid acquiescence bias. This was developed through modification of Bizumic's (2018) political attitude scale and Sullivan et al.'s (1982) politically controlled content tolerance scale. In the development process, the cultural context of Pakistan has been kept in mind such as attitude towards opposing political party, political expression and online political censure. Similar approach was taken for measuring Religious Intolerance. The measure consisted of 10-items five-point Likert type scale based on modified version of Hall, Matz and Wood's (2010) Religious prejudice scale and Sullivan et al.'s (1982) tolerance measure. The development considered context sensitivity regarding religion and sectarian dimensions. Examples include attitudes against social distance from religious and sect out-groups and suspicious attitudes towards religious sect out-groups. Cronbach alpha reliability range for both scales was from .82 to .97 while KMO value ranges from .86 – .92; Bartlett Test of Sphericity value $p < .001$ for EFA sample size appropriate scales.

Table 2 Internal Consistency Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) for the Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance Scales — Pilot-Phase Item Pool

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's α	Interpretation
Political Intolerance (PI)	14	.82	Good
Religious Intolerance (RI)	14	.89	Good to excellent

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3.4 Procedure

Data collection was done via digital dissemination of self-administrated questionnaire. Before starting to fill out the questionnaire, participants read about purpose of study along with the consent form for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, if participants agreed then they moved forward otherwise left the questionnaire. Completion time of the survey was around 10-15 minutes.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All research procedures followed relevant ethical standards of conducting human subjects' studies. Participants were informed about voluntary nature of participation and assured confidentiality regarding responses. Participants were assured about non-reporting of their personal identity during this study. Prior informed consent was gained before conducting research procedure. Participants were informed that study would be conducted for academic purpose. Special care was taken regarding formulation of items in Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance sub-scale to avoid words which may cause any kind of discomfort among participants. Participants were allowed to withdraw from study anytime during survey process without suffering from any kind of consequences.

3.6 Data Analysis

For Statistical Data Analysis IBM SPSS Statistics software was used. First of all, before hypotheses testing, it is essential to check for missing values, univariate outliers (Z-score method), violation of the parametric correlation analysis assumption including linearity, and approximate normality of the variables used in hypothesis testing. Normality was determined with the help of skewness and kurtosis value along with histogram and normality plot. Due to the large sample size (N = 1,170) according to Central Limit Theorem sampling distribution of the correlation will be normally distributed irrespective of minor deviations of normality assumption of single variable. In this study, core hypothesis was tested through Pearson Product moment Correlation Coefficient between variables Political intolerance Composite Score and Religious intolerance Composite score with level of significant alpha (α =.05). Correlation Coefficient .10, .30 and .50 considered small, moderate and strong association respectively as described by Cohen (1988).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Following table shows descriptive statistics related to both political intolerance and religious intolerance. Mean value of political intolerance is 3.64 (Standard Deviation=.67) whereas mean value of religious intolerance is 3.78 (Standard Deviation=.59) on a scale of 5-points where score lies from 1.00 to 5.00. These values lie over mid-point of the scale 3.00 suggesting higher degree of intolerance among respondents. This paper neither accuses nor favors anybody but tries to make people aware about intolerance prevailing in societies.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance (N = 1,170)

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Political Intolerance (PI)	3.64	0.67	1.00	5.00
Religious Intolerance (RI)	3.78	0.59	1.00	5.00

4.2 Test of the Hypothesis

Pearson Product moment Correlation analysis between Political and Religious Intolerance:
Correlation test between political intolerance and religious intolerance was performed, and result show strong positive correlation between both variables i.e., R= .667; p <.001 ; sample size = 1,170 (refer Table 4). It means those who have high degree of intolerance towards politics also have high degree of intolerance towards religion. According to Cohen (1988), this correlation can be classified as large. Both

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variables are related almost 44.5 percent i.e., r^2 = .445. Hence hypothesis one has been accepted.

Table 4 Pearson Correlation Between Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance

	PI	RI
PI — Pearson r	1	.667**
PI — Sig. (2-tailed)	—	.000
PI — N	1170	1170
RI — Pearson r	.667**	1
RI — Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	—
RI — N	1170	1170

*Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

Table 5 Effect Size and 95% Confidence Interval for the Political Intolerance–Religious Intolerance Correlation

Statistic	Value
Pearson r	.667
r^2 (shared variance)	.445
95% CI for r (Fisher z)	[.634, .698]
Cohen's (1988) benchmark	Large (r ≥ .50)

Note. 95% confidence interval computed via the Fisher r-to-z transformation ($z = \operatorname{arctanh} r$; $CI = \tanh[z \pm 1.96 / \sqrt{(n - 3)}]$) applied to the reported r = .667 and N = 1,170.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Magnitude of the Association

The correlation acquired from the present analysis, r=.667, is remarkably high for two attitude constructs which were defined, operationalized and measured as different psychological outcome variables. Such high correlations for non-identical construct pairs are rarely found in survey based social scientific research and they always suggest either an inherently strong connection between these constructs or they share common measures. Although the two subscales used in this study have some theoretical links (Sullivan et al., 1982; Hall et al., 2010), still they are supposed to capture distinct meanings such as attitudes toward politically dissident groups vs. attitudes toward religions and sects. Therefore, this significant correlation shows clearly that political and religious intolerance attitudes are not weakly related but strongly overlapping expressions of one broad dispositional attitude. This discussion will be carried forward using three theories discussed below. But before doing so let us remind ourselves about the limitations regarding high correlations like these.

5.2 The Structural Fusion of Political and Religious Identity in Pakistan

Another factor for the relationship among both identities can be seen structurally as well. In this regard, Pakistan's political formation has largely based on religious identity claims and affiliations rather than adjacent phenomena only. Mainstream political parties have established relations with religio-political networks; some religio-political parties have explicitly formed themselves on doctrines while

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others religion-based minorities' constitutional/legal issues are directly influenced by the politics within parliament itself. Such situations create an environment where political out-group and religious or sectarian out-groups become one thing. Hostility shown against either party cannot be differentiated from each other. When political division and religion-based divisions exist alongside each other, then the attitude of respondent against such groups should also go hand in hand. Political cleavages and religious cleavages are not overlapping but running parallel to each other and hence the degree of correlation obtained above should match. This study was conducted on individuals residing in urban areas of Lahore.

5.3 A Generalized Disposition: Pluralistic Intolerance and Dogmatism

A second, individual-level explanation locates the shared variance between PI and RI in a generalized psychological disposition rather than in the external structure of Pakistani politics alone. As reviewed in Section 2.2, Sullivan et al.'s (1984) pluralistic intolerance thesis, Altemeyer's (2002) and Van Prooijen and Krouwel's (2016) work on dogmatism, and Toner et al.'s (2013) findings on the content-independence of belief superiority all converge on the claim that intolerance is substantially a function of a person's cognitive and motivational style — rigidity, certainty, and threat sensitivity — rather than the specific ideological or doctrinal content being defended. A respondent who scores high on political intolerance because they perceive political opponents as threatening to their identity and values would, under this account, be expected to apply a similar threat-based, rigid orientation to religious out-groups, producing the strong cross-domain correlation observed in this study. Read this way, the present finding offers direct empirical support for treating generalized intolerance, rather than domain-specific prejudice, as the more fundamental unit of analysis in future research on youth attitudes in Pakistan.

5.4 Affective Polarization as Connective Tissue

A third account draws on Iyengar and Westwood's (2015) affective polarization framework to supply an emotional, rather than purely cognitive, mechanism for the observed generalization. If intolerance in this sample is substantially driven by identity-based affect — disgust, distrust, and moral hostility toward out-groups — rather than by domain-specific disagreement, then that affect would be expected to transfer relatively freely across whichever identity domain, political or religious, is salient at a given moment. This account is consistent with the comparably elevated means observed for both PI (M = 3.64) and RI (M = 3.78) in this sample, both above the scale midpoint, suggesting a generally activated orientation of intergroup hostility rather than domain-specific attitudes calibrated independently to political versus religious content.

5.5 A Necessary Methodological Caveat

It needs mentioning before proceeding ahead. This amount of correlation means it needs careful consideration in terms of methodology as well. Both subscales Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance were developed based on two different but somehow related concepts. These subscales originated from the theories presented by Sullivan et al. (1982) and Hall et al. (2010). Both these scales are placed under one questionnaire; both Likert-type items have a rating of five points. In such a scenario, it seems likely that certain proportion of correlation is due to shared method variability, which indicates general responses in form of acquiescence tendency or readiness in agreeing with statements that carry socially negative attitude. This is no threat to our interpretation which is substantiated separately in literature by different studies. But still, one thing needs mention that r = .667 should be taken as upper bound value for actual relationship since future study could be conducted by differentiating methodically the measurement process like including behavioral and implicit measurements as well beside explicit scale-based measures. There are much evidence that

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political intolerance relates highly with religious intolerance Religious intolerance shows high tendency to be violent, politically intolerant and prejudiced against out-groups.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

From theoretical point of view, this result indicates the importance of specifying the theories of political and religious intolerance of the Pakistani youth in such a manner that it includes the generalized intolerance construct which is linked strongly with each other or considered indicators of higher order construct named as generalized intolerance instead of considering it as completely different attitudinal outcome. From practical aspect, this finding also plays vital role. The programs related to civic education, media literacy and interfaith harmony of Pakistani youth were conducted separately without considering their relation with one another. Both political and religious intolerance were considered different issues which require different solutions. Strong relation between political and religious intolerance suggests that separation approach overlooks the availability of effectiveness. Any program which targets the disposition directly will yield fruitful results for overcoming both political and religious intolerance, not necessary two different approaches for two issues. Building general perspective taking ability, decreasing threat sensitivity and interrupting cognitive processes related with dogmatism would help to overcome the problem regardless of particular group of people. In light of Section 5.2 which describes about structural merger of politics and religiosity amongst Pakistani youth, there should be need of combined curriculum.

7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, the cross-sectional, correlational design cannot establish causality, direction, or mechanism; the data are consistent with political intolerance contributing to religious intolerance, the reverse causal pathway, simultaneous co-development from a shared disposition, or influence from an unmeasured third variable such as general authoritarian personality style, and this study cannot adjudicate between these possibilities. Second, as discussed in Section 5.5, the shared conceptual lineage and structurally similar format of the two intolerance subscales raise the possibility of common method variance contributing to the observed association. Third, the convenience sampling strategy, while practical for reaching a large youth sample, limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Pakistani youth population and, per documented patterns in Pakistani social media usage, likely skews toward more digitally active and possibly more male, urban, and educated respondents than the general population (NapoleonCat, 2025). Fourth, this study did not measure participants' specific political party affiliation, sectarian identity, or personal degree of political-religious identity fusion, which means the structural-fusion account developed in Section 5.2 could not be tested directly at the individual level.

Future research should address these limitations through several concrete avenues. Confirmatory factor analysis or structural equation modeling could test directly whether Political Intolerance and Religious Intolerance are better represented as two correlated first-order factors, as modeled in this study, or as two indicators of a single higher-order generalized intolerance construct. Longitudinal, cross-lagged panel designs, following the same respondents across multiple waves, would allow researchers to test directional and common-cause hypotheses more rigorously than a single cross-sectional correlation permits. Individual-level measures of political-religious identity fusion, and of perceived out-group threat as a potential boundary condition, would help test whether the strength of the PI–RI relationship varies systematically with these theorized moderators. Finally, cross-national comparative research — following, for example, Peterson's (2020) finding of a weaker link between religiosity and political tolerance in the more religiously and politically cross-cutting American context — could test whether the

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strength of the political–religious intolerance relationship documented here tracks the degree of religio-political fusion characteristic of a given society's party system, thereby clarifying whether the present finding reflects a general psychological tendency or a pattern specific to societies structured like Pakistan's.

8. Conclusion

This research is meant to investigate that whether Political intolerance and religious intolerance, these attitude variables which are generally considered separate topics for consideration in Pakistan, really are linked or interrelated among youth population who use social media platforms. According to findings, results reveal clearly that Political intolerance and religious intolerance are highly and significantly correlated, $r = .667$, $p<.001$ with almost sharing half variance each. From different perspectives such as Structural Fusion between Politics and Religion, Generalized Dispositional Tendency and Affective Polarization, the present finding indicates that intolerance both for politics and religion is functioning as two indicators of same Generalized Dispositional Intolerance instead of completely independent attitudes due to different sources and origins. It is not saying that one should neglect importance of these domains while doing any investigation in future. Each domain contains theoretical significance of its own kind. Rather than ignoring this linkage, one should give attention on Generalized Dispositional Tolerance during developing strategies or designing programs to counteract intolerance among Pakistani youth.

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