



Digital Qur'anic Exegesis: Emerging Trends and Challenges in the Age of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received: Jan 07, 2024
Revised: Feb 19, 2025
Accepted: March 21, 2025
Available Online: March 30, 2025

Keywords: Exegesis,
social media, Tafsir,
Trends and Challenges,
Digital Qur'anic

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Digital Qur'anic exegesis has broadened access to religious text but also emerged with some risks of misinterpretation and sectarianism. Although the conventional tafsir focuses on language, context and jurisprudential lenses, but the digital interpretations entail the emotional appeal, immediacy and accessibility. In the realm of digital spheres verses are not presented in their wider historical and textual contexts and appear as short videos on Facebook, Tiktok and YouTube. The research questions of the study were; What are the trends and platforms of digital Qur'anic exegesis as they are dominant today? What are the transformations between digital tafsir practices and classical practices of Quranic exegesis? How does the digital Quranic exegesis provide Muslims with opportunities of access and/or engagement? The research design in this study has been a qualitative research design in an attempt to understand the emerging trends and challenges of digital Qur'anic exegesis in the age of social media in particular to Pakistan. The study concludes that in reflection of these alternations, digital tafsir should be comprehended not only as disruption but as an essential aspect of the Qur'anic interpretation in cyber era. It is blessing for the marginalized groups by providing them new horizons of understanding religious knowledge.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61503/ciissmp.v4i1.314>

Citation: Khursheed, M., Ullah, S., & Khursheed, B. (2025). Digital Qur'anic exegesis: Emerging trends and challenges in the age of social media. *Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences and Management Practices*, 4(1), 287–298

1.0 Introduction

The Quran has been the focal point of the intellectual and spiritual life of Muslims since the beginning of time and aroused centuries of interpretation. Since the monumental works of Al-Tabari, Al-Razi and Ibn Kathir, reformist perspectives of the modern period have had a solid foundation in the science of tafsir (ilm al-tafsir). Historically, Quranic exegesis has long been developed in the ranks of scholars, and the guidance to authority was obtained by means of mastery of Arabic linguistics, jurisprudence and the science of hadith and principles of the methodology of *usul al-tafsir*. It was a communal trust deeply rooted in the act of interpretation not only an intellectual exercise but also a spiritual responsibility that intersected intellectual rigor and spiritual responsibility (Abou El Fadl, 2014; Zaman, 2020).

However, however, in the 21st century, this landscape has changed radically. Digital technologies have transformed the manner in which Muslims create, share and receive religious knowledge. The interpretation of Quran no longer exists in the mosque, madrasa, or the shelves of classic libraries; it has become a part of YouTube, Facebook, Tik Tok, podcasts, Instagram reels, and mobile applications. The development has produced so-called digital tafsir - a form of exegesis that has been mediated and influenced by the Internet (Campbell and Tsuria, 2021; Bunt, 2018). This change has brought unexplored accessibility to many believers and mostly to the younger generations. A Muslim in Karachi, Kuala Lumpur or Toronto can instantly access tafsir content, pose questions in real-time on livestreams or hear AI-generated explanations of the Quranic verses. Mufti Menk, Javed Ahmed Ghamidi, Nouman Ali Khan, and Tariq Jameel are some figures who have built huge followings and their talks spread well outside the academic arena (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003; Ghamidi, 2022). Through this, digital tafsir has democratized the knowledge of the Quran, dismantling the limits of geography, social stratification and institutional privilege, and sacred interpretation has become a daily aspect of the digital lives of people (Campbell, 2013).

Nevertheless, there is a severe problem associated with this democratization. Authority--previously a strict preserve of centuries of academic training--has now been devolved through a great variety of voices, some of which have very little or no formal training in Islamic sciences. In social media, what is popular is not necessarily the most accurate but the most clickable, emotional or controversial. Algorithms are fast and viral hence they tend to reduce Quranic exegesis to snippets and soundbites at the expense of context and complexity (Anderson, 2015; Hirschkind, 2006). Sometimes verses are deprived of their historical and textual contexts and are used to promote sectarian theses, political and even fake news (Ahmed, 2019; Campbell and Tsuria, 2021). Compared to the past experiences in scholarly traditions, online platforms do not involve the peer review mechanisms, and it is up to the audience to settle on the tricky question of what qualifies as rigorous scholarship and what is preaching to the populace. What is being witnessed is the creation of a more fragmented interpretive space, in which the Muslims can be subjected to a multitude of interpretations of the same scripture, which are occasionally contradictory.

A case in point is the case of Pakistan which can be studied in detail in terms of this transformation. The country has registered one of the largest Muslim populations in the world and possesses a fast boost of internet penetration; hence, making it a center of religious discourse over the internet. The social media preachers are left with millions of followers and influence over the manner in which Quran is read and how people conduct their lives in Islam. Digital tafsir is also rather widespread to substitute traditional madrasa or mosque-based learning in the mind of the Pakistani youth in specific, as one of the elements of their religious education and religious identity (Jamal, 2021; Khan, 2022). Such accessibility is, however, also associated with a growing degree

of sectarian polarization, politicization of religion and overall mistrust of traditional institutions. Digital tafsir may thus be some sort of empowerment and the origin of fragmentation (Zeb, 2020). In that regard, the present paper tries to critically analyze the phenomenon of digital exegesis of the Quran in Pakistan. It also tries to put the contemporary practice into perspective within the broader intellectual history of tafsir, consults the sociology of religion and digital media studies. It aims not just to indicate the opportunities, that is, the availability, taking part, and globalized connection, but doubts the danger of sensationalism, decontextualization, and fragmentation of epistemology. That way, it is hoped that the study can assist in the better understanding of how the sacred knowledge is being rewritten in the digital age and what the re-writing can mean to the way religious experiences are practiced by the Muslims nowadays.

Problem Statement

Digitization of the exegesis of Quran is a giant opportunity and a profound crisis simultaneously. Tafsir was stored and transmitted since ancient times upon the study of Arabic linguistics, jurisprudence, theology, and a profound understanding of historical conditions, in a rigorous scholarly discipline. The exegetes of the classical era worked in a system of emphasis that emphasized on accuracy, continuity and accountability. On the contrary, the present social media situation has eliminated the boundaries between academic knowledge and general opinion. Qu verses are now being disseminated in digital ecosystems whereby the use of algorithms takes the place of intellectual rigor to establish reach and impact. Authenticity and context are often overshadowed by popularity, virality, and brevity, an urgent question arises: who is the one with the authority to define the meaning of the Quran in a digital public that is mediated by likes, shares, and clicks (Campbell and Tsuria, 2021).

This is especially the tension in Pakistan. As the majority of the population has entered the world of the internet, and the number of young people is large, the most important sources of religious education turned out to be YouTube, Tik Tok, and Facebook. To the millions of young Muslims, the Quran has ceased to be met in the madrasa or the mosque but rather in short videos, livestreams, and posts on social media. On the one hand, this trend is an indication of a democratization of religious knowledge - there is a geographical, class, and gender crossing of knowledge about tafsir by making it very widespread. Conversely, it creates room to interpret it in fragmented, decontextualized and sometimes ideologically-inspired ways (Echchaibi, 2023). The risks are manifold.

Occasionally, simplistic or dramatized interpretations contribute to sectarian polarization, strengthen an ideological bias, or falsify classical approaches that give prominence to contextual consistency. Verses that do not lie between asbab al-nuzul (occasion of revelation) and asbab al-nasus (hearers- sayers), are in danger of being politicised or sectarianised. It also transforms power dynamics, where charismatic preachers, influencers and lay interpreters now compete with the ulama trained to authoritise religious truth, which transforms how religious truth may be recognised and believed in the societies (El-Nawawy and Khamis, 2022). The question does not really lie in the dispensation of online tafsir per se after all but the tension that is there between the availability and the authenticity. On the one hand, by making the Quran more open to many, the digital platforms are decommissioning the institutions of scholarly responsibility which have traditionally been the Defence of interpretation. Democratization of exegesis betrays centuries of traditions of the production of knowledge in Islamic societies; Muslim societies have to grapple with new questions: Who should interpret scripture? So, what do communities need to know in order to identify reliability surrounded by the sea of competing voices? And where is digital media to make spiritual awareness (Bunt, 2018; Ahmed and Rao, 2024)? These problems cannot be

addressed by mere criticisms only and this is by conducting systematic researches and by having good interactions. The mapping of the new trends in digital Quranic exegesis can assist the academic, teachers and the policymakers to understand the threats and opportunities the change presents. Not only does this questioning protect the authenticity but it also reevaluates a potential thriving of sacred knowledge in a globalizing, algorithmic mediation, youth-driven religious inquisitiveness era.

Significance of the Study

The research is of great academic, social and religious meaning as it studies a rapidly growing area of Quran interpretation with respect to the digital age. It will contribute to the discourse on digital religion and Islamic sociology more generally and not only to the strengthening of the Quranic Studies. The central inquiry of the research is how the new media devices and cultures are changing tafsir, and its impact on power, knowledge and common believers. There is an academic gap in the study. The classical tafsir traditions and the trends of modernist of the 19th and 20th centuries have been well examined, though the digital tafsir has never been taken seriously as a phenomenon. Based on the knowledge of the Islamic Studies, sociology of religion and media studies, this paper can add to the debate around the role of the interpreted sacred texts in the contemporary world and offer a framework through which the manner in which the digital platforms, such as mobile applications, mediate the interaction with the Quran can be comprehended. The research is responding to a pressing question of power, truthfulness, and trustworthiness socially and religiously. These questions are lived life in Pakistan, where millions of people (in particular the youth) are introduced to the Quran via digital feeds. Mapping this landscape, the study identifies the possibilities of accessibility and inclusion on the one hand and the dangers of the sensational, the fragmented, the sectarian misuse on the other, and has much to say that would be of interest well beyond Pakistan.

Research Objectives

- 1.To analyse the new forms, platforms, and approaches of digital Qur'anic exegesis in the era of social media.
- 2.To examine the opportunities that digital tafsir has offered, including accessibility, democratization, and world coverage.
- 3.To extract the issues of digital exegesis of the Quran, such as the issue of authenticity and authority and sectarian polarization.

Research Questions

1. What are the trends and platforms of digital Qur'anic exegesis as they are dominant today?
2. What are the transformations between digital tafsir practices and classical practices of Quranic exegesis?
3. How does the digital Quranic exegesis provide Muslims with opportunities of access and/or engagement?

2.0 Literature Review

The science of the exegesis of the Quran has always been closely intertwined with classical academic traditions, in which great personalities of Al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and Al-Razi laid the groundwork of tafsir. Their works were not commentaries but complete intellectual projects which

were based on the Arabic linguistics, jurisprudence, theology, and the science of hadith (Rahman, 1980; Ayoub, 1993). They also embraced a sense of exactness, rigour and contextualization especially by such ideas as *asbab al-nuzul* which related verses of the Quran to certain historical contexts (Rippin, 2001). These classical exegetes established the pattern in which the Quran was to be approached, studied and explained centuries ago.

This landscape however started to change with the coming of modernity in the 19th and the 20th centuries. Muslim reformers like Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan tried to put the Quran into dialogue with modern science, rationalism, and new socio-political realities (Esposito, 2002; Haddad, 1994). Their interpretive work was an attempt to re-read the scripture so that it addressed the matters of progress, government and education in a new world. The movement also represented a phase of early democratization of the interpretation of the Quranic meaning, as the power to interpret it was not vested in the hands of the traditional *ulama* any longer (Zaman, 2012). Rather, the reformists and even the non-scholar readers started to cut their own interpretive space, challenge the inherited paradigms, and place the Quran as a text with new readings (Metcalf, 2009; Moaddel, 2005).

3.0 Methodology

The research design in this study has been a qualitative research design in an attempt to understand the emerging trends and challenges of digital Qur'anic exegesis in the age of social media in particular to Pakistan. The reason why a qualitative approach has been adopted is that the phenomenon is an interpretive and contextual one and based on the lived experiences of both the producers and consumers of digital tafsir. This design enables the development of subtle understanding of meanings, power relations, and epistemological consequences that would not be realized in an entirely quantitative system (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Methods of Inquiry

It has adopted a mixture of content analysis as well as semi-structured interviews. Content analysis allows subjecting the tafsir content to a systematic analysis because it is shared on YouTube, Facebook, Tik Tok, and mobile Quran apps. This is supplemented by semi-structured interviews that will give access to the views of various groups of people, including scholars, influencers and ordinary users, regarding the authenticity, relevance and risks of digital exegesis. This combination is one of the strengths of the study as it presents both production and reception of Quranic interpretation in the digital environments.

Sampling Strategy

The purposive strategy of sampling has been embraced. In the analysis of the content, 8-10 tafsir websites will be chosen according to their popularity (views and followers), representativeness (modernist, reformist, traditionalist, and Sufi Islam), and the availability of languages (Urdu, Arabic and English). In the case of interviews, 15 to 20 respondents have been selected that include scholars trained and specialized in classical tafsir and are active on digital forums, social media influencers creating Quranic content, and students at universities who consume digital tafsir often.

Data Collection

Data collection is directed by two complementary methods. First, the content analysis requires the transcription and analysis of tafsir videos, lectures, and social media posts and will focus on interpretive approaches, linguistic techniques, and contextualization. Algorithms, the influence of likes, shares, and comments have also been taken into account as a strong force that predetermines the appearance and acceptance of interpretations (Fuchs, 2021). Second, the semi-structured interviews were carried out to interview perceptions of credibility, interpretive authority, and effects of online tafsir on Islamic learning.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis has also been used to bring out common patterns in both data sets. Codes have been created inductively and reviewing them, including accessibility, authenticity, fragmentation, sectarian bias, and democratization of knowledge. Data have been organized using NVivo software to make sure that the theme development is systematic (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical sensitivity has been given precedence considering the intercourse with holy books and individual faith. Consent has been informed and participants of interviews obtained and the anonymity maintained. The material on tafsir available publicly has been responsibly analyzed and cited. The results have been discussed in a fair manner, and no interpretive tradition is supported or discredited.

Limitations

The paper does not seek to determine the theological validity of interpretations but looks into the trends, opportunities and challenges of digital Quranic exegesis. It is contextually well-developed because of its concentration on Pakistan but can be somewhat restricted in how well it can be applied to the Muslim world at large. However, the results are relative to other societies in which digital media determines religious knowledge and power.

4.0 Findings and Results

1. Democratization of Qur'anic Knowledge

One of the most important changes that are defining Muslim societies now is the democratization of the Quranic knowledge in the digital age. Since the centuries, the analysis of the Quran was mostly in the hands of trained specialists who had to work within the institutional framework of madrasas, mosques, and academic communities. They had a legal basis of power that was composed of command over the Arabic language, education in jurisprudence, and peer acknowledgement. The average believer normally came across the Quran through their teachings and they had no chance to have a personal interpretation. With the emergence of smartphones, social media apps, and digital technologies, this has changed dramatically because tafsir has left the pulpit to the palm and spreads to WhatsApp groups, YouTube feeds, and Tik Tok reels (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003; Mandaville, 2020).

The key to this change is its accessibility. Social sites such as YouTube and Facebook avail the interpretation of the Quran using local languages and simplified to suit the masses and adjusted to the issues of today. In Punjab, a worker in Dhaka, or a driver in Karachi can now get tafsir on a device in their pocket immediately, something that would have been hard to imagine a generation

ago (Campbell and Tsuria, 2021). Such availability compromises the privilege of the scholars who are trained at the madrasas and redefines the membership of religious knowledge.

It is also very impressive how lay interpreters and women preachers came into being. Unprofessional tafsir is also likely to go around on the internet in a casual way through the discussion of stress, parenting, or self-improvement, through ordinary Muslims. These voices are available and informal specifically to the youth especially (Khan, 2022). Females, who in the old times had no access to formal spaces, are able to now teach and interpret the Quran in groups, in YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp and create their own spaces, where they can go around the gatekeeping of patriarchy (Bano, 2021).

There are still problems: the authority of online tends to be not scholarly, but popular, which exacerbates the risks of provocation, sectarianism, or lack of understanding (Larsson, 2022). This is a step also to empowerment. Nevertheless, digital tafsir makes the scripture closer to life and reveals it to the debate concerning the necessity to achieve a balance between the accessibility and strictness of the interpretation.

2. *Shifting Religious Authority*

The emergence of digital platforms has altered the way Muslims interact with the Quran and changed the nature of having religious authority. Traditionally the power was centralized in the heads of scholars that spent years of their lives in madrasas learning the rules of Arabic grammar, jurisprudence and chains of transmission. They were legitimate because of academic appreciation and social confidence. However, today, the power no longer lies in the pulpits or seminaries of the mosques. It is being negotiated more and more on the internet where the voices of the most vocal are decided on by visibility, charisma and involvement with the audience.

On YouTube, Tik Tok, and Instagram, regular people with little or no professional background can rapidly grow with a huge following by delivering Quranic messages in a friendly and relatable manner. Their appeal is less about qualifications than about the capacity to appeal to the heart, by way of the story, the inspirational speech, or the brief, snappy video clip. An example is in Pakistan, where inspirational speakers who use verses of the Quran in their speech about confidence or professional success are so well known that on the scale of influence and coverage can be compared to the scholarly preaching of the seminaries. Technology supplements this change. The algorithms are much more focused on the content that drives clicks, shares and strong reactions that puts people who can create messages that will make them the highest rated at the top. This introduces a contradiction in which most of the individuals online who appear to be the people in authority are due to the digital skills and not the extensive knowledge. It is these developments that have created tensions. Traditional ulama also have the tendency of misinforming or corrupting the scripture by internet preachers, and the influenced believe that scholars are not in touch with the realities on the ground. What comes out is not just a theological counterargument, but a general war over who makes Islam to the new generation. Women and the young ones have also revolutionized power. Through the internet forums, women, who, in the past have been side sided by the mosque system, have a chance to interpret the scripture and speak to fellow women on normal day matters. In the meantime, the youths can contextualize the Quran

through the assistance of digital tools and can project it to such problems as mental health or identity and create a form of power which is not founded on institutional authorities but rather on cultural relatability.

Global connectivity creates an extreme form of reconfiguration. This is because the diaspora communities or the Western Muslim influencers are finding their way into the Pakistani scholars or the debate in the South Asia hence bringing about a transnational marketplace of meaning. There is a greater number of voices involved in this democratization and also generate the dangers of decontextualization, sectarian abuse and politicalization. To most of the faithful, however, particularly young people, such changes make the Qur'an contemporary, more dynamic. The power has to be delivered not on a silver platter, but through resonance, relevance and recognition in the virtual public.

3. Fragmentation and Sectionalization

The appearance of a digital exegesis of the Quran has provided an extremely heterogeneous space where various voices, methods, and interests are involved with a limited number of rules or more generally scholarly evaluation. Along with this, democratization has caused the sacred texts to be more accessible, it also leads to fragmentation and sectionalization. In classical traditions, the exegetes of Al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and Al-Razi were working within the institutionalized manpower of mosques and madrasas, in which they were directed by linguistic abilities, jurisprudence, and the application of the system of transmission that created coherence. These boundaries, in their turn, are broken by online communities, which enables the proliferation of competing interpretations uncontrollably. The social media is the one that encourages this disintegration. Virality and emotion are rewarded by YouTube, Tik Tok, and Facebook, and this characteristic is preferred on these platforms. Sectarian or ideologically inclined messages propagate in a shorter clip with a quote of separate verses than subtle lectures according to the classical approach or model (Campbell and Tsuria, 2021). This is also aggravated by sectionalization especially in Pakistan where the Sunni-Shia tensions and Sunni rivalry are literally constructed.

The tafsir has been algorithmically interpreted to claim the sectarian core of the digital preachers, and algorithms constitute an echo chamber, which reinforces the identities that already exist (Bunt, 2018). This is a relationship where authority is flattened. Whereas in earlier times the disputes between classical thinkers were rammed out by the similitude of scholarly principles, laymen with no training have come into the limelight just like adepts. The appearance of the so-called digital muftis proves that credibility is substituted by charisma and popularity, and the audience is left to resolve contradictory statements (Anderson, 2015). This is also applied to segregate individuals by political players who apply verses out of context to support political interests (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003). In such a way, the digital tafsir increases accessibility and at the same time the interpretive authority is undermined. Nevertheless, this issue is to strike a balance between transparency and safeguards against scripture becoming a sectarian or ideological instrument whereas keeping it as an ethical and spiritual guide.

4. Youth-Centric Engagement and Identity Formation

The emergence of digital Quranic exegesis has transformed the way Muslim young people are practicing religion particularly in places such as Pakistan where technology has been quickly integrated in the everyday life. Compared to the previous generations, who were exposed to tafsir via the sermons of mosques, teaching in madrasas, or published literature, the young people nowadays are exposed to scripture by watching YouTube videos, TikToks, and Instagram posts. This makes the Quran more democratized and makes young Muslims active participants in the process of interpreting and sharing its meanings.

The main focus of this change is accessibility. The digital platforms provide the religious content in the local languages and formats that suit the youth. Short videos, podcasts, and other visually stimulating postings are well-integrated in the digital lives and attention spans. This access is open to young women, secular students and youth in the rural or diaspora who might feel marginalized in the normal space. The learning of the religion is autonomous and empowered by the involvement in peer groups or privately (Bunt, 2018). The success of digital preachers points to the affective and performative interest of the modern tafsir. Storytelling, humour and examples that are relatable are used by figures like Nouman Ali Khan, Mufti Menk and Javed Ahmed Ghamidi to simplify the complex and appeal to the young mind. They represent an aspirational combination of piety and modernity by being on social media (Campbell, 2013). Digital tafsir also facilitates participatory practices that are important in the formation of youth identity. The process of sharing, commenting and remixing content of religion makes the young Muslims to be co-producers of religious meaning. Peer-led groups and online forums serve as another example of how young people connect scripture to daily challenges, which fits the template of the networked religion when a governing power can be created via interactivity (Campbell and Tsuria, 2021). On the whole, digital tafsir opens the opportunities in access and identity formation to the youth and asks questions of profundity and fragmentation. Thus, in order to achieve a balance between access and intellectualism, critical digital literacy should still be developed.

5. Decontextualization and Sensationalism

Digitizing the Quranic text has presented forward decontextualization and sensationalism. Quite on the contrary, traditional tafsir in its placing of verses in historical, linguistic and jurisprudential contexts, the digitized platforms offer immediacy, emotionality and convenience. This transformation has the effect in the meantime of the Quran being more and more read in the logics of the digital media in which the most likely content to circulate is the one that generates immediate responses, rather than prolonged attention. Similarly, Instagram or Tik Tok Quranic bits are frequently filled with the eye-catching images, backgrounds music and the inspirational texts. Conversely, this sort of presentation causes scripture to sound friendly, they stand the risk of falsifying meaning by removing verses out of the broad descriptions in which they are found. Poems about war or gender e.g. may be circulated without any reference to historical context, and allow militant or patriarchal interpretations to emerge other than the classical interpretation (Bunt, 2018). Although it has been observed that in the congested online markets, religious influencers tend to vie over loyalty, using dramatic headlines, over-the-top thumbnails, or emotionally reactive

rhetoric. Likewise, in this process, Qur'an can be turned into a clicker capturing tool, instead of being able to promote reflection. According to Campbell and Tsuria (2021), digital religion is influenced by the culture of performance of the social media in which virality is more important than theological rigor. Remarkably, the dynamics in Pakistan are completely sensitive. Since the decontextualized content makes sectarians arguments stronger, the Islamophobic actors use contrarily isolated verses to represent Islam as violent. In general, in both settings, Quran is in danger of being relegated to soundbites in broader cultural and political battles (Anderson, 2015).

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

It is described that digital platforms are shifting the interpretation of the Quran to a considerably less centralized and more decentralized place, decentralizing then further into the decentralized control of the social media. That shift signifies that religion knowledge has been democratized, since Campbell and Tsuria (2021) observe that the mediation of religious text through algorithms is the source of the vulnerability and power as well. It leads to increased access of Quran and involves the issues of interpretation as well.

The paper concludes that as the reflection of such alternations, digital tafsir must be understood as disruption, but as a necessity of the Quranic interpretation in cyber years. It is an advantage to the marginalized groups in that it offers them new vistas of knowledge of religion. On the negative side, it also transforms the legitimate fears of power, true interpretation and sectarianism as well. The situation is an outright contradiction in the context of Pakistan due to the appearance of new ideas that is not connected with the traditional interpretations by the online religious influencers.

Maryam Khursheed: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

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Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and publication.

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