

Prejudice Against Religious and Sectarian Others among Educated Youth of Pakistan: The Impact of Religiosity, Intergroup Contact, Intergroup Threats and Intergroup Anxiety

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Abstract: Prejudice, radicalization, and violent extremism are significant challenges in societies of contemporary world. Previous research on prejudice reduction, primarily conducted in western, secular contexts, may not fully address the unique dynamics of it in Muslim-majority countries. This study investigates the dual challenge of religious and sectarian prejudice in Pakistan, focusing on the role of intergroup contact, perceived threats, individual's religiosity, and intergroup anxiety. A cross-sectional survey of 1,013 university students in Pakistan was analyzed using hierarchical regression. The findings indicate that high-quality intergroup contact significantly reduces both religious and sectarian prejudice, while mere contact quantity can exacerbate prejudice if not facilitated by positive interactions. Perceived intergroup threats consistently increase prejudice, whereas higher levels of intergroup anxiety are also associated with increased prejudice against religious others. Individual's religiosity, however, does not have a significant direct impact on either form of prejudice. These insights provide valuable guidance for developing strategies to improve intergroup relations and reduce prejudice, sectarianism and exclusionary attitudes in societies where religion serves as identity consolidation factor.

Key Words: Intergroup Relations, Intergroup Threat Theory, Muslim Society, Religiosity, Intergroup Anxiety

Introduction

Religious prejudice harms society, effecting both economic and social growth (Ali et al., 2024; Britton, 2024). If left unchecked, it can lead to radicalization and violence, creating barriers to peace and inclusive institutions (Djedei & Kerboua, 2024; Walsh & Gansewig, 2024). Therefore, understanding the factors behind prejudice is vital for developing targeted solutions. Very recent events of intolerance, radicalization and polarization have raised new questions about the states' capacity to manage youth population for diversity and tolerance whereas global migrations make the world ever more multi-ethnic and multi-religious than before (Shaver et al., 2016; Greaves et al., 2020). Religious prejudice may have many significantly detrimental effects on the texture of a society. Unchecked consequences of religious strife affect the economic and social development of a country (Kalita & Baishya, 2023; Kelley & Evans, 2015). Prejudice and lack of intergroup contact may be linked to radicalization and imposition of belief on others through violence. Intolerance of religious or political out-groups leads to frictions and strains that inhibit inclusive and integrated institutions required

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for the socio-economic development and peaceful coexistence (Vergani et al., [2022](#); Cooley et al., [2016](#)). Studying religious prejudice provides insights into the cultural and historical factors that contribute to these attitudes. Understanding the context helps in appreciating the complexity of the issue and developing targeted interventions. This demands an empirical study of youth's out-group attitudes and the role of intergroup contact and intergroup threats in this regard (Bourhis, [2020](#)). Previous research demonstrates that Prejudice is an important outcome of social and cognitive processes as well as the institutional arrangements in a society (Nelson & Olson, [2023](#); Kite et al., [2022](#)). The societies where religion determines the social identity and group relations, experience prejudice of dual nature i.e. prejudice against religious others and sectarian others due to conservatism (Cuevas & Dawson, [2020](#)). Prejudice amplifies conflict between various segments of society, breeds exclusionary attitudes and negatively affects the social cohesion (Laurence et al., [2018](#); Tropp & Pettigrew, [2005](#)). The complex nature of prejudice and social exclusionary attitudes further demands effective strategies to reduce prejudice and eliminate social exclusionary attitude through the educational agenda of the state (Tropp et al., [2022](#)).

Prejudice in the Context of Pakistan

In Pakistan, where 60% of the population is under 30, there has been a recent rise in political and religious polarization (Ahmar, [2023](#); Jafri, [2021](#)). This polarization has led to increased prejudice and exclusion (Rutland et al., [2022](#); Killen et al., [2021](#)). Despite its origins as a state for Muslims from British India, Pakistan is plagued by extremism and hate crimes, with minorities facing exclusion, violence, and persecution (Lak et al., [2023](#)). Sectarian conflicts present significant challenges to the government, yet the rise in higher education offers hope for development and better intergroup understanding (Khan, [2021](#)). Violent extremism and hate crimes guided by religious and sectarian prejudice has been a common occurrence in Pakistan (Ittefaq et al., [2021](#)). Many reports have repeatedly declared the country as one of the unsafe places for its religious minorities (Lak et al., [2023](#); Ali, [2022](#)). Minorities not only suffer economic and political exclusion but have also been victim of violent attacks and persecution (Lak et al., [2023](#)). Sectarian conflicts also pose a challenge for state agencies. Parallel to the dismal state of religious and sectarian minorities, recently the country has experienced phenomenal growth in its higher education sector (Khan et al., [2021](#)). University-level education in Pakistan is nonetheless a great hope for the country's material and economic development (Batool et al., [2022](#); Abid et al., [2023](#)). Moreover, higher education embodies contact between diverse kinds of groups. Society seems to be divided on the basis of religious identities, despite that Pakistani universities offer a lot of opportunities to ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (Rais, [2007](#)).

Since its frontline role in war on terror, Pakistan has been facing a challenges of vindication of violent religious and ethnic extremism. Previous research literature focused on *madrassa* education as driver of prejudice while the group attitudes of general youth have not been studied empirically (Ahmed, [2023](#)). Faith based in-groups create out-group otherness among its members and this otherness leads to prejudice, exclusionary attitude and even hate crimes. Contact-prejudice and threat-prejudice nexus appropriately explains the group relations and both the intergroup contact and threat are considered as powerful predictors of prejudice (Kende & Krekó, [2020](#); Rowatt et al., [2013](#)). There has been a surge in the research on prejudice in the Muslim countries like of Indonesia, Pakistan and India (Jafri [2021](#); Chandra et al., [2022](#)).

Study Rationale and Significance

Previous research demonstrates that prejudice reduction is a challenging task both inside and outside the university (Paluck et al., [2021](#)). However, due to its transformative potential and owing to its cumulative effects on attitudes, mindsets, and behaviors universities are an ideal place to reduce prejudice and social exclusionary attitudes towards out-groups (Beelmann & Lutterbach, [2020](#); Lutterbach & Beelmann, [2019](#)). Exposure to interreligious and inter-ethnic activities in a transformative setting significantly reduces threats from others and advances frequency as well as the quality of contact between various segments (Killen et al., [2021](#); Turner, [2020](#)). Muslim societies such as Pakistan face a dual challenge of educating its youth bulge against negative out-group relations including violent extremism, discrimination, stereotypes, and social exclusion on one hand, and sectarian challenges within various segments of Islam on the other

(Mustafa, [2013](#); Majid, [2020](#)). Episodes of violent extremism guided by prejudice and hatred against other sects and minority religions are a common place in the world (Saiya et al., [2024](#)). Nonetheless, the events are very common in Pakistan due to lack of youth engagement policies to curtail violent extremism. There exists a paucity of empirical studies on the intergroup attitudes of Pakistani youth especially among faith-based groups (Nasir, [2022](#)). In view of this, current study was carried out through survey research design to fill in the gap within the sociological and social psychological literature on intergroup threat theory as well as simultaneous interaction of contact hypothesis in the context of Pakistan. The findings of the current study provided supports in the formulation interfaith policy and mechanisms to tackle social exclusion of minority groups which are very vulnerable to prejudice and exclusionary attitudes. As the current research on religious prejudice in Pakistan can inform the development of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting religious tolerance, diversity, and social inclusion.

Research Objectives

Following are the research objectives for this research:

1. To test the assumptions of contact theory and intergroup threat theory while explaining prejudice against religious others in university youth of Pakistan;
2. To study how various demographic variables of university youth are linked with their prejudicial attitudes against religious outgroups
3. To present a model of religious/sectarian prejudice as predicted and mediated by intergroup threats, intergroup contact, intergroup anxiety and religiosity;
4. To study the differences between prejudice against other sects (within one's own religion) and against the people of other religions as predicted by intergroup contact and intergroup threats.

Theoretical Support

Contact Theory

Intergroup contact theory is an important framework to understand how healthy interaction between various groups can attenuate prejudice and improve relations between them. This theory posits that under the appropriate conditions, contact between people of different group loyalties can reduce prejudicial attitudes among them and foster positive relationships. Contact, if occurs with specific prerequisites, can alleviate prejudice (Kanamori et al., [2022](#); Wojcieszak & Warner, [2020](#)). The contact hypothesis has been widely researched across several contexts including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class and religion (Majid, [2020](#); Paolini et al., [2024](#); Paolini et al., [2021](#)). Healthy exposure to out-group can help reducing prejudice and stereotypical attitude towards the out-groups. It has also been noted that not all types of interactions lead to reduction De Coninck et al., [2020](#); Pettigrew, [2021](#)). Some studies identify the pre-conditions for fruitful intergroup contact and some others have discussed the mediating influences of variables such as anxiety, contact experience and quantity of contact (Vezzali & Giovannini, [2011](#)). Intergroup contact applies to series of variables that serve as mediators in reducing prejudice and creating positive intergroup relations (Rullo et al., [2022](#)). However, it is recently being debated as to if opportunities for contact necessarily lead to pleasant outcomes. Several studies conclude that only positive contact and non-judgmental experience of interaction can lead to harmonious attitude towards others (Wojcieszak & Warner, [2020](#)).

Intergroup Threat Theory

Intergroup threat theory posits that perceived symbolic and realistic threats are important predictors of the intergroup relation. Contrary to contact theory these threats amplify the negative evaluation of out-groups (Stephan et al., [2015](#)). Intergroup threat theory is comprised of assumptions related to factors that predict the attitude toward out-groups. These include realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and stereotyping. It argues that these are factors play a role in aggravating prejudice toward out-groups (Rios, [2022](#)). Realistic threats refer to fears members have regarding their economic, material and political resources. The realistic threats breed competition over material and economic group interests. Clash of interests between groups triggers negative reactions and members of in-group feel competition



over scant resources i.e. labor market, business market and material resources (Huang et al., [2021](#)). They have perception that these interests are threatened by the members of out-group. People's urge to safeguard interests of their group lead to negative attitude, competition and sometime hatred against out-groups. Symbolic threats are threats to in-group's values, life approach, religious ideology and beliefs (Meuleman et al., [2019](#)). Groups' beliefs in rightness of in-group values, force them to think in favors of their own values system. These threats originate from the sense of moral rightness of the in-group. Either real or perceived, threats lead to out-group hostility and exacerbate prejudice (Splitter, [2022](#)). A few researches have used the assumptions of this theory in promoting educational agendas to reduce prejudice. Additionally there has been a shift towards the cumulative assessment of intergroup threat along with intergroup anxiety as an integrated threat theory approach (Bond, [2022](#)). Intergroup anxiety also leads to antagonistic feeling toward out-groups. People experience anxiety and discomfort while interacting out-groups. They have a fear of negative outcome of these interactions such as embarrassment and rejection. This discomfort is magnified when these groups have a history of opposition or when the interactions do not take place in a healthy environment rather they happen in competitive ways (Bozogáňová & Pethö, [2022](#)). Intergroup anxiety is also paramount in those interactions where one group is minority and the other belongs to majority. Many studies validate that there is an association between inter-group anxiety and prejudice (Fuochi et al., [2020](#)).

Hypothesis of the Study

- H1:** A significant model of linear relationship will result by taking religious prejudice as outcome variable while intergroup contact (contact quantity, contact quality), intergroup threats, religiosity and anxiety as it predictors
- H2:** A significant model of linear relationship will result by taking sectarian prejudice as outcome variable and contact quantity, contact quality, intergroup threat, religiosity and anxiety as it predictors
- H3:** There will be statistically difference between prejudice against other sects (within one's own religion) and against other religions while predicting through intergroup contact and intergroup threat.

Research Methods

The research was carried out using quantitative research design based on the cross-sectional survey of the university youth from Pakistan. Initially, multistage random sampling technique was used to access 1100 respondents from universities across Pakistan during March to May, 2023. A total sample of 1013 was retained for analysis of data. As part of the procedure, a list of public sector universities was prepared focusing the four provinces at the first stage and universities were shortlisted through simple random sampling technique. At second stage departments were shortlisted through random method for a subsequent data collection through self-administered structured questionnaire. At this stage the administrators of shortlisted departments were contacted and final data collection arrangements were made through the mediation of the administration and teachers by selecting the random classes for data collection. This strategy was adopted to select a representative sample, hence to reflect a number closer in proportion to their representation in the educational institutions at provincial and national level. This is how the researchers obtain a sample that is representative enough to include sufficient respondents on the bases of their gender, educational program, religious background and residential area. Ethical approval was obtained from the Advance Studies and Research Board (ASRB) of the University of Sargodha before conducting survey with the university youth of Pakistan. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent on the printed questionnaire. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in entire research process. Additionally, the administrative staff of each university also approved the questionnaire before its deployment. Students across all provinces of Pakistan were recruited as respondents for the study. Public sector universities were considered to minimize the social and economic class differences in the sample. The study employed established scales to measure the variables. These scales were adapted and contextualized by keeping in view the nature of study and the normative structure of Pakistani society. To measure the intergroup threat, the intergroup threat scale was used Jelić et al., [2020](#) and similarly, to measure the Intergroup Contact, the intergroup contact scale was used (Stathi et al., [2020](#)). Furthermore, to measure the religiosity variable, the religiosity scale was used developed by Huber & Huber, [2012](#). Lastly, the dependent variable, prejudice, was assessed using the prejudice scale was used (Maass et al., [2000](#)). After adaptation, these scales were validated through Cronbach Alpha statistical test.

Results

Table I

Prejudice and Background Variables

Prejudice						
Total	Low (n=505)		High (n=508)		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	243	44.6	185	39.5	428	42.3
Female	302	55.4	283	60.5	585	57.7
<i>Chi-Square P-value</i>			.104			
<i>Study Area</i>						
Science and Engineering	212	38.9	197	42.1	409	40.4
Social science / humanities	147	27.0	132	28.2	279	27.5
Medicine	57	10.5	49	10.5	106	10.5
Any other	129	23.7	90	19.2	219	21.6
<i>Chi-Square P-value</i>			.381			
<i>Religion</i>						
Muslim	531	97.4	443	94.7	974	96.2
Non-Muslim	14	2.6	25	5.3	39	3.8
<i>Chi-Square P-value</i>			.022			
<i>Sect</i>						
Barelvi	176	32.3	101	21.6	277	27.3
Deobandi	83	15.2	89	14.7	152	15.0
Ahle Hadees	78	14.3	116	24.8	194	19.2
Shia	58	10.6	27	5.8	85	8.4
Any other/not declared	150	27.5	155	33.1	305	30.1
<i>Chi-Square P-value</i>			.000			
<i>Residential background</i>						
Rural	154	28.3	153	32.7	307	30.3
Urban	283	51.9	257	54.9	540	53.3
Semi-urban/small town	108	19.9	58	12.4	166	16.4
<i>Chi-Square P-value</i>			.005			
<i>University residential status</i>						
Day Scholar	381	69.9	327	69.9	708	69.9
Hostel inmate	164	30.1	141	30.1	305	30.1
<i>Chi-Square P-value</i>			.990			

The above Table. I reflects that gender, religion, sect and residential status at university had a very significant association with the levels of prejudice displayed by the respondents. Faculty and the residential area had no bearing upon the levels of prejudice of the respondent. However, the gender is a significant predictor of the prejudice whereby females tend to display higher levels of prejudice as compared to the males. In fact, as compared to their percentage in the total sample (60.5%) their representation in the group of high prejudice is quite enlarged. Similarly, females constitute only 55.4% of those who displayed low levels of prejudice as compared to 55.4% of the males. Also, those students who declared themselves as non-Muslims seem to display high prejudice by standards of our measurement tool which was characterized by a high level of measurement invariance with chi-Square p-value = .022.

Similarly, the sect of the respondent seems to be an important associated variable with the prejudice levels among the respondents. Among stated sect categories the Ahle-Hadith students tend to display a higher than sample representation in the amplified prejudice group category. These differences are statistically significant with chi square P-value $<.005$. It was again found that a student's status as a day scholar or as an inmate of the university hostel facility was significantly associated with the dependent variable of the study. Incident of low prejudice was significantly higher among the hostel inmates as compared to the day scholars. These association patterns were statistically very significant as reflected in the Chi-Square test value reported in the table (Chi Square = .000 $<.005$). To sum it all up we can say that prejudice as a dependent variable was significantly influence upon the background variables of the respondent's profile. The only exception in this case is that of the faculty or area of study (Chi-square P-value = .281 $>.05$) and the residential area of provenance such as rural or urban (Chi-square P-value = .281 $>.05$).

Table 2

Correlation Matrix between Various Study Variables

Observed Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Prejudice (Sect)	1	.466**	.211**	.200**	-.171**	-.222**	-.123**	-.188**	-.107**	.130**
Prejudice (Religion)		1	.259**	.314**	-.216**	-.341**	-.277**	-.362**	-.063*	.210**
Intergroup Threat (Sect)			1	-.698**	.102**	-.112**	-.023**	-.052**	-.129**	.152**
Intergroup Threat (Religion)				1	-.143**	-.120**	-.033	-.062**	-.143**	.165**
Contact Quantity (Sect)					1	.559**	.554**	.546**	-.063*	-.196**
Contact Quality (Sect)						1	.320**	.522**	.120	-.173**
Contact Quantity (Rel)							1	.939**	-0.19	-0.67*
Contact Quality (Rel)								1	0.11	.107**
Religiosity									1	-.051
Anxiety										1

The correlation matrix above has a very strong support for the contact theory of prejudice reduction. Similarly, a moderate support for intergroup threat theory is also a pattern in the correlation matrix above. If we look at the association patterns the strongest correlation exists between the two dimensions of intergroup contact with other religions. An individual with high intergroup contact quantity is likely to give high importance to such contact when we refer to the other religions than individuals own (.939). Such a strong and significant correlation implies that the two dimensions of contact can be merged together with each other. Similarly, yet another rather moderately strong and highly significant correlation exists between the two dimensions of the intergroup threat between the religious and the sect dimensions. (-.698). Nonetheless, it is also true that this correlation is a negative one whereby higher threat from other religions corresponds to lower intra-faith threat perception. Apart from the subscales covariates such as dimensions of intergroup threat and those of the intergroup contact are also significantly correlated with each other (p-value $<.005$).

As to the correlation between the independent and the dependent variables various dimensions of contact especially its quality and quantity seem to correlate with the dependent variables of this research including SSE and two facets of prejudice. The strongest correlation among these exists between the importance of inter-faith contact and the prejudice against the other religion. Contact with other sects was also significantly associated with the importance of these contacts (.554) which was found to be significant at .001. Similarly, the dependent variable of Support for social exclusion of the religious others seems to be correlated with the mediating variable of anxiety (.301) this moderate correlation was statistically significant p-value < .05.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Results for Prejudice against Other Religions

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Variables	B	SE .B	B	B	SE .B	B	B	SE .B	B
Constant	17.910	.583		15.962	1.151		16.288	1.200	
Intergroup threat (Other Religions)	.129	.013	.279**	.120	.013	.261**	.101	.018	.218**
Contact Quantity(Other religions)	.315	.053	.473**	.297	.053	.446**	.238	.074	.357**
Contact Quality (Other religions)	-.375	.038	-.787**	-.358	.038	-.751**	-.296	.055	-.621**
Religiosity (Religiosity)				-.001	.010	-.003	.002	.010	.004
Intergroup Anxiety				.051	.012	.116**	.047	.012	.107**
Intergroup threat Sect (Sect)							.026	.018	.056**
Contact Quality Sect (Sect)							-.100	.071	-.068
Contact Quantity(Sect)							-.015	.028	-.022
R ²		.242			.255			.260	
Δ R ²		.242			.013			.005	
F for Change in R ²		106.638**			8.680**			2.291	

In Model 1, the analysis focuses on intergroup threat and the quantity and quality of contact with individuals from other religions. The results show that intergroup threat is significantly associated with increased prejudice against people of other religions (B = 0.129, p < 0.01). This finding is consistent with intergroup threat theory, which suggests that perceived threats to one's group identity or status can heighten negative attitudes towards outgroup members. Additionally, the quantity of contact with individuals from other religions also has a significant positive relationship with prejudice (B = 0.315, p < 0.01), indicating that simply increasing the number of intergroup interactions does not necessarily reduce prejudice and may, under certain conditions, even exacerbate it. On the other hand, the quality of intergroup contact is strongly negatively associated with prejudice (B = -0.375, p < 0.01), suggesting that meaningful and positive interactions are crucial for reducing prejudicial attitudes. Together, these variables explain 24.2% of the variance in prejudice against individuals of other religions, indicating a substantial initial model fit.

Model 2 incorporates additional predictors: religiosity and intergroup anxiety. The significant positive relationship between intergroup threat (B = 0.120, p < 0.01) and prejudice remains robust, though slightly reduced, indicating that perceived threats continue to play a pivotal role. The quantity of contact (B = 0.297, p < 0.01) and quality of contact (B = -0.358, p < 0.01) maintain their respective positive and negative associations with prejudice. Notably, individual religiosity does not emerge as a significant predictor (B = -0.001, non-significant), suggesting that general religious commitment, as measured here, may not directly influence prejudicial attitudes. However, intergroup anxiety shows a significant positive association with prejudice (B = 0.051, p < 0.01), highlighting that anxiety during intergroup



interactions can contribute to negative out-group feeling and biases. This model increases the explained variance to 25.5%, with a ΔR^2 of 1.3%, indicating that these additional factors provide some incremental explanatory power.

In the final model, additional variables related to intergroup threat and contact concerning sectarian differences are introduced. The core relationships observed in the previous models generally hold, with intergroup threat from other religions ($B = 0.101$, $p < 0.01$) and the quality of intergroup contact ($B = -0.296$, $p < 0.01$) remaining significant predictors. Interestingly, while the quantity of contact remains positively associated with prejudice, its impact is reduced ($B = 0.238$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting a complex interplay between contact frequency and other factors. The intergroup threat specific to sectarian differences shows a weak but significant positive association with prejudice ($B = 0.026$, $p < 0.05$), while the quality of contact concerning sects, although negative, is not a significant predictor in this context ($B = -0.100$, non-significant). The quantity of sect-related contact is also not a significant predictor ($B = -0.015$, non-significant). This model explains 26.0% of the variance in prejudice, with a marginal increase in R^2 (0.5%).

The cumulative analysis across these models underscores the complexity of intergroup prejudice dynamics. The consistent significance of intergroup threat highlights the crucial role of perceived threats in shaping prejudicial attitudes. The findings also underscore the critical distinction between the quality and quantity of intergroup contact. While increased contact alone can sometimes reinforce biases, quality interactions characterized by positive engagement are essential for reducing prejudice. The non-significant findings for religiosity and the nuanced role of sect-related factors suggest that the influence of these variables may be context-dependent or require more specific measurement. The study suggests that interventions aimed at reducing prejudice should prioritize enhancing the quality of intergroup interactions and addressing perceived threats. Moreover, the role of intergroup anxiety should not be overlooked, as it contributes to maintaining or exacerbating prejudicial attitudes. Further research should explore the mechanisms by which these variables interact and the potential moderating effects of broader socio-cultural and contextual factors.

Table 4

Hierarchical Regression of Prejudice against other sects

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
Variables	B	SE .B	B	B	SE .B	β	B	SE .B	β
Constant	16.199	.981		16.972	1.832		17.619	1.874	
Intergroup threat (Sect)	.124	.020	.188**	.114	.020	.173**	.083	.028	.125**
Contact Quality (Sect)	-.356	.077	-.169**	-.331	.077	-.157**	-.040	.110	-.019
Contact Quantity (Sect)	-.056	.036	-.057	-.048	.036	-.049	-.071	.044	-.072
Religiosity				-.031	.016	-.059	-.031	.016	-.060*
Intergroup Anxiety				.039	.019	.062*	.034	.019	.054
Intergroup threat (Rel)							.043	.028	.066
Contact Quality (Rel)							-.313	.086	-.461**
Contact Quantity (Rel)							.344	.115	.362**
R^2		.085			.090			.104	
ΔR^2		.088			.007			.097	
F for Change in R^2		32.044**			3.965*			6.206**	
Model Summary		F=32.044**			F= 20.927**			F= 15.611**	

Hierarchical regression analysis was applied on the sectarian prejudice. Three predictors of the first step included threats, contact quality and contact quantity. It was found that perception of threats was significant directly contributing predictor with ($\beta = .188$, p -value $< .005$) similarly quality of contact with other sects was another important negative predictor of prejudice against others ($\beta = -.169$, p -value $< .005$). Subsequently the model 2 further measures the variance in accounting for the sectarian prejudice based on the additional predictors of religiosity and anxiety. Once again the overall model was significant ($F = 20.927$, p -value $< .05$) religiosity was insignificant while anxiety had significant contribution in the model ($\beta = .062$, p -value $< .05$). It was also learnt that adding religiosity and anxiety brings about significant change

in the variance accounted for in the model 2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.007, p < 0.05$). As hypothesized earlier it was expected that the religious attitudes such as threat perception from other religions and contact with them will have no effect on sectarian prejudice. Surprisingly though both the contact quantity ($\beta = .362, p\text{-value} < .005$) and contact quality ($\beta = -.461, p\text{-value} < .005$) the changes in the overall variance was also significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.097, p < 0.05$).

In Model 1, the variables considered were intergroup threat and contact quality and quantity related to sects. The results showed that higher perception of intergroup threats ($B = 0.124, p < 0.01$) were significantly associated with increased sectarian prejudice. In contrast, higher quality contact between groups ($B = -0.356, p < 0.01$) was associated with reduced prejudice. However, the quantity of contact alone did not significantly affect sectarian prejudice ($B = -0.056$). This model explained 8.5% of the variance in sectarian prejudice.

Model 2 introduced additional variables: religiosity and intergroup anxiety. The significant positive relationship between intergroup threat and sectarian prejudice persisted ($B = 0.114, p < 0.01$), although the effect size slightly decreased. The negative impact of contact quality on prejudice also remained significant ($B = -0.331, p < 0.01$), while the contact quantity variable continued to be non-significant ($B = -0.048$). Religiosity emerged as a significant factor, with higher religiosity associated with lower sectarian prejudice ($B = -0.031, p < 0.05$). Additionally, intergroup anxiety was positively correlated with prejudice ($B = 0.039, p < 0.05$). This model accounted for an additional 0.5% of the variance, increasing the total explained variance to 9%.

In Model 3, the analysis expanded to include intergroup threat and contact quality and quantity variables specific to religion. The results indicated that the influence of sect-related intergroup threat on sectarian prejudice decreased but remained significant ($B = 0.083, p < 0.01$). The significance of contact quality related to sects diminished, becoming non-significant in this model ($B = -0.040$). However, contact quality across religious groups was found to have a strong negative impact on sectarian prejudice ($B = -0.313, p < 0.01$), suggesting that better quality intergroup contact reduces prejudice. Interestingly, the quantity of intergroup contact across religious lines showed a positive relationship with prejudice ($B = 0.344, p < 0.01$), indicating that more contact without quality may exacerbate prejudice. The inclusion of these additional variables increased the explained variance to 10.4%, with a ΔR^2 of 1.4%.

The overall F-statistic for each model indicated that all three models significantly predicted sectarian prejudice, with Model 1 having the highest F value ($F = 32.044, p < 0.01$), followed by Model 2 ($F = 20.927, p < 0.01$), and Model 3 ($F = 15.611, p < 0.01$). In summary, the analysis revealed that intergroup threat and contact quality are crucial factors in understanding sectarian prejudice. Specifically, while quality contact reduces prejudice, mere contact quantity may not be sufficient and can sometimes even increase prejudice if not accompanied by positive interactions. Additionally, religiosity and intergroup anxiety also play significant roles in shaping sectarian attitudes.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insights into the complex relationships between intergroup threat, intergroup contact, and prejudice against people of other religions. Consistent with intergroup threat theory (Stephan et al., 2015). Our results show that perceived threats to one's group identity, symbols or resources can heighten negative attitudes towards out-group members. This is in line with previous research demonstrating that intergroup threats can lead to increased prejudice and discrimination (Pereira et al., 2010). Interestingly, this study reveals that simply increasing the quantity of intergroup contact does not necessarily reduce prejudice and may even exacerbate it under certain conditions. This finding supports the notion that mere exposure to out-group members is insufficient to reduce prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Instead, high-quality intergroup contact, characterized by meaningful and positive interactions, is crucial for reducing prejudicial attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp et al., 2006). The inclusion of religiosity and intergroup anxiety in Model 2 provides further insights into the complex dynamics underlying prejudice. The persistent significant positive relationship between intergroup threat and prejudice ($B = 0.120, p < 0.01$) reinforces the notion that perceived threats to one's group identity or status continue to play a crucial role in shaping negative attitudes towards out-groups (Shamoa-Nir et al., 2020). The maintained associations between quantity of contact ($B =$

0.297, $p < 0.01$) and quality of contact ($B = -0.358$, $p < 0.01$) with prejudice underscore the importance of considering both the frequency and nature of intergroup interactions in prejudice reduction efforts (Paluck et al., 2021). The non-significant effect of religiosity ($B = -0.001$) suggests that general religious commitment of individuals may not directly influence prejudicial attitudes, which is consistent with research indicating that religiosity can have both positive and negative effects on intergroup relations, depending on the context (Van Camp et al., 2016).

The significant positive association between intergroup anxiety and prejudice ($B = 0.051$, $p < 0.01$) highlights the role of emotional and cognitive factors in shaping negative biases. This finding aligns with research demonstrating that intergroup anxiety can lead to increased prejudice and discrimination (Stephan, 2014). The incremental explanatory power provided by these additional factors ($\Delta R^2 = 1.3\%$) suggests that considering multiple predictors can offer a more comprehensive understanding of prejudice. The significant negative association between quality of intergroup contact and prejudice suggests that initiatives aimed at promoting positive intergroup interactions can be effective in reducing prejudice. This is consistent with research on intergroup contact theory, which emphasizes the importance of cooperative and supportive interactions in reducing intergroup biases (Dovidio et al., 2017). The final model introduces variables related to intergroup threat and contact concerning sectarian differences, providing a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics underlying prejudice. The persistent significant positive relationship between intergroup threat from other religions ($B = 0.101$, $p < 0.01$) and prejudice reinforces the notion that perceived threats to one's group identity or status continue to play a crucial role in shaping negative attitudes towards out-groups (Durrheim et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate predictors of prejudice against religious others and compare the predictors of sectarian and religious prejudice among youth from Pakistani universities, providing a nuanced understanding of the factors that drive these distinct yet related forms of intergroup bias. The analysis revealed that perceived intergroup threats, both within and across religious lines, are significant predictors of prejudice. This finding highlights the potent role of perceived threats in fostering negative attitudes, whether they stem from broader religious differences or more specific sectarian divides. The quality of intergroup contact was found to be a crucial factor in reducing prejudice, particularly in the context of broader religious interactions, while mere quantity of contact was insufficient and, in some cases, counterproductive. Additionally, intergroup anxiety emerged as a significant contributor to prejudice, highlighting the emotional dimensions of intergroup relations. Notably, religiosity did not significantly predict prejudice in either model, suggesting that other factors, such as the nature of intergroup interactions and perceived threats, play more critical roles in shaping attitudes.

Recommendations

For prejudice reduction and fostering harmonious intergroup relations among faith-based groups especially in youth of Pakistan, current study recommends that there is dire need to promote healthy intergroup contact through collaborative initiatives and dialogue sessions. Perceived threats can be reduced through education programs aim at promoting social justice and religious pluralism. Awareness campaigns about various faiths can reduce the perception of threat by enhancing familiarity and understanding, thereby reducing prejudicial tendencies. Additionally, it is suggested that intergroup anxiety can be minimized by arranging workshops on cultural sensitivity and cross-culture exposure. Working together on common projects can attenuate prejudice by building trust and demonstrating that diverse groups can cooperate and achieve common goals. Moreover, proactively addressing conflicts, before they escalate can minimize the threat perception and built peace among religious groups. Further research is needed to explore the underlying mechanisms of prejudice, including the role of religious teachings, media influences, and social networks. Research projects can be initiated with goal of investigating how attitudes evolve over time, with a focus on context-specific programs addressing sectarian as well as religious prejudice.

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