

Bangladesh: Time spent online, conflict and radicalization

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to investigate the risk of online radicalization, and invariably conflict, among young adults, particularly university-attending students, by relating their vulnerability to online radicalization with the amount of time they spend online. This research develops an original conceptual framework that maps out social influence, attributes of resilience and online safety vis-à-vis radicalization to assess and identify the said relationship. The study predominantly adopts a quantitative research approach using a sample of 600 University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) undergraduates. Analysis of data collected from students shows that the high-internet-user group, i.e. those who use the internet for seven hours or more

a day, are more likely to find radical and religiously offensive material online; less likely to be influenced by family, faculty and community members; and have lower access to learning and knowledge resources that can render them resilient to radicalization and conflict. The results fare better for females than males, belonging to the high-internet-user categories, but female students are expected to be susceptible due to gender norms. In conclusion, it is posited that high-internet-user students are more vulnerable to online radicalization than others.

Keywords: online radicalization, preventing violent extremism (PVE), countering violent extremism (CVE), youth, Bangladesh.

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Following the globalization of violent extremism at the turn of this century, in-depth research, academic studies and investiga-

tions have been conducted globally to explore various aspects and dimensions of violent extremism and conflict. With the advent of smart phones, increased accessibility of the internet, and more time spent by the youth online, it has become imperative for researchers to start exploring the relationship between this new avenue of human communication and spread of violent extremism.

The current study is an outcome of a twelve-month-long project named the Building Resilient Universities Project (BRUP), funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a US-based private sector institution, and implemented by University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). The over-arching goal of the project was to inculcate knowledge and encourage practices of civic education, social media literacy and emotional health among faculty members and 2,500 students across universities. The significance of the study is that it unlocks a new avenue of research in the arena of preventing violent extremism, and invariably protecting from conflict, by focusing on time spent online and vulnerability to radicalization. In the context of Bangladesh, such a line of inquiry is novel. It ought to be mentioned that the scope of the entire project is also novel in the context of Bangladesh, as there are no known projects that address the issue of radicalization of university students and prevention thereof, by addressing the three areas of project intervention: civic values, internet safety, and emotional health.

Drawing from Groppi (2017), radicalization can be defined as the process by which an individual or a group adopts interpretations of an ideology or ideological tenets that conflict with mainstream society's core (liberal) values, which turn into the justification of violence and conflict and/or active engagement in actual acts of violence and conflict to subvert existing social and political (democratic) systems or achieve particular profound (illiberal) social and political goals¹. Thus, with the advent of the internet and its penetration, particularly pertaining to the youth, time spent online and vulnerability to radicalization becomes an area to examine in order to address violent extremism and identifying the pathway(s) to conflict. Nevertheless, the study is limited in its scope because it exclusively sampled ULAB students. ULAB is a liberal arts college and the type of education the students receive can, additionally, allow for the research to compare students with others undergoing a similar curriculum. Furthermore, while translating the results of the research it can be expected, at times, that the youth that undergo a more conservative approach are more susceptible to radicalization given the research parameters. It is hoped that the study will generate interest and lead to

1 Additionally, Della Porta and LaFree (2012) demonstrate that there remains various definitions of radicalization. Some existing definitions include: "a process leading towards increased use of political violence;" "the strategic use of physical force to influence several audiences;" and "an escalation process leading to violence." Nevertheless, what remains common among definitions of radicalization is that it is a process that in all cases can lead to violence and conflict.

further empirical research related to youth and online radicalization (in Bangladesh), among local and global academics and researchers. Additionally, identifying with the young middle-class, the research can offer measures required by relevant stakeholders to building adequate strategies to prevent violent extremism and addressing future conflict. *This research develops an original conceptual framework that maps out social influence, attributes of resilience and online safety; and investigates the relationship between high internet usage among university-going youth and radicalization through the lens of the framework.*

In the context of Bangladesh, studies that focus on the relation between youth's online behavior and radicalization and extremism, or the prevention thereof, are still relatively scarce in comparison to that of the West. The recent upsurge in youth radicalization and involvement in violent extremism and potentially conflict in Bangladesh has widened the need for drafting better strategies and policies to counter youth radicalization. Therefore, better comprehension of the existing radicalization mechanisms is required with a view to drafting effective local counter radicalization policies and strategies.

Insights from West

Researchers, such as Conway (2017), have argued for more open approaches to the issue of online radicalization and conflict. Since a majority of the researchers are focusing only on religion-based violent extremism, Conway (ibid.) advocates a widening of the scope of research by focusing on the threat of extremism from different group of ideologies and activists. Although the author acknowledges the importance of addressing religion-based violence and extremism, she elaborates on the subject by identifying the role of competing and harmful ideologies vis-à-vis values that leads to extremism and radicalization. Conway (ibid.) further recommends the introduction of big data analysis since the scale and dimensions of this phenomena require more in-depth analytical approach, through multidisciplinary collaboration between researchers, academicians and the technical experts such as data and computer scientists. This remains a broad and varied field as the subject-matter addresses an overarching and systematic issue that affects the social environment, and society at large, through multifarious angles: let it be social, political, economic or even cultural.

There are instances where there have been successful collaborations between academic institutions and public and private sectors in combating and preventing violent extremism online and reduction of foreseeable conflict, particularly in Europe. To cite an example, the Cybercrime Centres of Excellence Network for Training, Research and Education (2CENTRE), launched in 2010, is a project funded by the European Commission with the aim of creating a network of Cybercrime Centres of Excellence for Training, Research and Education in Europe. These project centers were established in multiple countries of Europe. Each of these national centers were founded on a partnership among repre-

sentatives of law enforcement, industry and academia (UNODC, 2012). The involvement of such a diverse group of stakeholders, apart from being functional, is a testament to the growing concern of (online) radicalization, terrorism and, overall, conflict.

Moreover, delving further into the subject a study (Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013) conducted by RAND Europe unveils several important findings on the relationship between internet usage and radicalization. The study tested hypotheses from relevant literature on a sample of UK-based extremists focusing on their previous online behavior. The study supports the hypothesis that internet enhances the opportunities to become radicalized. Furthermore, it facilitates the process in a way that works as an “echo chamber” for confirming similar beliefs or ideologies (ibid., p. 18), and without adequate support that reinstates liberal and secular values such effects can make internet users more vulnerable to radicalization, and lead to acts of violence and conflict. This is further evident as the study also highlights that subjects were in continuous contact with like-minded individuals, often virtually, that facilitated their radicalization and social influence and integration can provide positive influence and bring about resilience towards extremist agenda. The study recommends relevant resource allocation to combat the security challenges related to new media and more public-private collaborations by arranging training and similar initiatives to enhance the social environment and create greater public consensus on this regard. Another study (Neumann, 2013) aims at preventing online radicalization in United States by discouraging reactionary preventive approaches that encroach upon online freedom of speech and remove potential threatening contents from internet. Instead it suggests proactive approaches, or constructive measures, that can prevent the online radicalization process by challenging the extremist narratives with counter narratives and promoting civic awareness and education of the young people. As evident, varied liberal measures that addresses emotional health, e.g. measures that do not infringe upon inalienable rights, with particular emphasis on society, civic values, and knowledge and critical thinking become viable strategies to countering radicalization and extremism, and to reduce conflict.

Insights from East

In Saudi Arabia, the well-known “Sakinah” campaign was undertaken for several years at the turn of the century and stands as an example of an innovative counter radicalization campaign on the internet. This unique campaign utilized Islamic scholars to interact online with individuals looking for religious knowledge, with the aim of steering them away from extremist sources. Studies (Darden, 2019; Onuoha, 2014; M. A. Rahman, 2016) have shown that there is an inability of people to distinguish between accurate religious knowledge and radical or extremist teachings. Thus, proper religious knowledge and teachings (Islamic in this instance) with adequate emphasis on critical thinking can bring about feelings of inclusion pertaining to tolerance and

overall emotional health, and negate discriminatory and violent values. Therefore, this campaign targeted only those individuals who use the internet to seek out religious knowledge and aimed to prevent them from accepting extremist beliefs which eventually diminished their chances of getting recruited online via any online extremist group, and engage in conflict. Although it was officially a non-governmental project, the campaign was supported and encouraged in its work by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Interior belonging to Saudi government (Boucek, 2008). The campaign was also later adopted by other Gulf countries.

Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan, propaganda and conspiracy theories, which is an important ingredient to radicalization, was used to attract Kyrgyz youth to Syria, persuading them to join the fight against President Assad and participate in “holy” warfare. The propaganda was also deployed through family and friend recruitment networks, and it portrayed Islamic State (IS or Daesh henceforth) almost as an employer that provides decent wages, accommodation and access to a righteous Islamic lifestyle. Individuals who were struggling financially and sensitive to what they could be made to perceive as injustices i.e. suffering from financial and social exclusion leading to weakened emotional well-being, were particularly vulnerable to such recruitment efforts. To counter such recruitment efforts, Kyrgyz national police implemented an online campaign. In collaboration with university student volunteers, they identified and blocked YouTube videos and other online recruitment materials. Moreover, the counter-terrorism unit of the police also swapped recruitment videos by IS and other extremist groups with counter-messaging from Kyrgyz mufti denouncing violent extremism. This allowed for engagement within the broader societal network, reinstating values through knowledge creation and dissemination and contributed to the capacity to identify accurate content through reasoning and (digital) critical thinking. These initiatives have been widely appreciated and regarded as effective (Speckhard, Shajkovci, & Esengul, 2017).

In Malaysia, radicalization and recruitment processes to engage in violent activities and conflict were also facilitated by social media in general and Facebook in particular. Daesh had creatively utilized the popular social and digital media tools to allure and recruit new members. After the individuals showed deeper interest in Daesh’s online post and activities, they were then asked to move to other platforms which accorded more privacy². Through such strategies, they could considerably shorten the time needed to radicalize and recruit an individual in Malaysia. With a view to counter Daesh’s narrative into

2 Once potential recruits are diverted away from social media to more private avenues, a societal network or a healthy social environment constituting of family, community and other similar groups can have positive influences, even if the targets suffer from lack of qualities like sound emotional health, strong civic values and critical thinking that can render them resilient to radicalization. The concepts will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

the virtual world, Malaysia in collaboration with the United States, launched a regional digital counter messaging center which looks into monitoring the terrorist messaging, developing counter-narratives and disseminating the digital products to best reach and impact the audience (Samuel, 2016). This illustrates the importance of online engagement to counteract radicalization where influence of society – family, community and other groups – to reinstate its liberal and secular values can become shorthanded, and resilience to extremism can be developed with narratives that promote inclusion, universal ideals and values and critical thinking, albeit digital.

The Context of Bangladesh

For a long period of time, the leading narrative regarding religious radicalization and conflict in Bangladesh was focused on politics, poverty and madrasa-based education systems. This tended to correlate the rise of Islamic radicalization in Bangladesh with political and lower income group focused madrasa education system, identifying mostly to economic exclusion bearing effects on their social and overall political being. However, the upsurge of violent extremist groups led by youth following the gruesome Holy Artisan bakery attack at Dhaka in 2016 challenged the validity of this conventional narrative as majority of those violent extremists belonged to well-educated middle-class segment of the society. Therefore, the question was raised as to why and how were the university students, never touched by traditional madrasas, being radicalized? In response, analysts posited that this was a new wave of radicalization likely driven by the spread of the internet and social media (Rashid, 2017), which can directly focus on social and political exclusion and impede emotional health³. However, this study (ibid.) opines that there is an inadequacy of sophisticated cyber monitoring and reporting systems in Bangladesh which is crippling the law enforcement authority in preventing and combating online radicalization. The study also proposes an anti-cyber radicalization model for Bangladesh that would involve both constructive and coercive measures. There are three strategic elements in this model and those are “Reducing the Supply”, which involves coercive measures, “Reducing the Demand”, which involves constructive measures, and relates to building resilience through digital critical thinking and reinstating values, and “an effective organization to coordinate and implement the actions”, which will be a dedicated entity coordinating all the necessary constructive and coercive measures.

Another study (Jubaer, 2017) in Bangladesh attempts to examine, anthropologically, how international politics, violation of human rights, youth unemployment, pessimistic

3 Such methods of radicalization generally portray grand narratives of Muslim subjugation and Western domination aiming to alienate youths socially and politically affecting their religious, and to a certain extent existential, identity (I. Rahman, Amit, & Mannan, 2019).

outlook of the future and declining family integrity, which directly impacts emotional well-being and complimentary social values, may be contributing to the recent surge of extremism in Bangladesh. The respondents of this study are Bangladeshi youth who projected their views and remedies of violent terrorism, conflict and extremism in Bangladesh. One of the interesting finding of this study explores the dearth of content that encourages critical thinking in the education system, which in turn, renders Bangladeshi students vulnerable to extremist narratives available online and offline. A quote from one of the study respondents is illustrative:

Our education system is based on memorization. Students are given books, lecture sheets which they try to memorize. They do not think critically whether those pieces of information are correct or not. The long-term impact of this system is terrible. When these students are convinced that their religion is in danger and they need to sacrifice their lives, they passively accept that call without thinking twice (ibid., p. 30).

The threat of online radicalization is still alarming for Bangladesh as according to Sobhan (2017), despite the territorial defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria, it is likely to continue inspiring, supporting and instigating attacks by opening a virtual network, transcending state boundaries, to promote indoctrination and recruitment throughout the world. Another study (Kabir & Banik, 2017) reveals that Dhaka district is the most affected area in terms of number of extremist attacks from January 2013 to August 2016 followed by Chittagong, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, and Khulna. This is an indication that radicalization is creeping into the large urban centers of Bangladesh where the educated youth are mostly tech savvy and heavily engaged in the use of internet and social media. Concentrating on the urban centers and alluring urban youth, Islamist militants have been trying to spread their operational base throughout the country.

Thus, in totality, the literature review with insights from both the West and the East and the context of Bangladesh asserts the increasing importance of the internet in both the global and national radicalization process of the youth, and validates undertaking this research that aims to associate time spent online by university students with vulnerability to radicalization and conflict. Additionally, the review shows that social influence through the active engagement of family and community and the involvement of relevant stakeholders can act as effective counter-measures to (various and all forms of) radicalization. Furthermore, such influence can add to attributes of resilience through affecting emotional health, civic values and critical thinking. Such qualities, alone at times, inherent among students can act as barriers to radicalization; and the following section provides a conceptual framework that addresses influence and resilience in conjunction with online safety vis-à-vis radicalization.

Conceptual Framework: Influence, Resilience and Online Safety

Family, community and influence of other groups⁴ can directly, and indirectly through increasing resilience to radicalization, contribute to online safety and security. Doosje *et al.* (2016) identifies that people are social beings, and inability to be associated with the immediate social environment can lead to identifying oneself with radical groups/institutions/organizations through radical content and material, i.e. contributing to in-group mentality with the terrorist cells. Thus, a healthy social environment, where family, community and other groups like faculty members in this particular case can be considered to be (social) influencers, can provide direct support to a university-going youth through creating a sense of belongingness with the society that can negate and act as a direct countermeasure to subverting existing (liberal) systems and overall radicalization and conflict.

Furthermore, the social environment can provide countermeasures to radicalization by contributing to emotional health, civic values and (digital) critical thinking⁵. A significant portion of emotional health can be attributed to the social environment, where a healthy and active person or student can counter feelings of alienation, loss of identity and dignity, and mistreatment and social exclusion, which are all drivers of radicalization (UNDP, 2016). Additionally, when it is considered that “civicness” is practiced within the family and other social settings, students are more likely to identify themselves with similar behavior and attune to civility and existing values, and counteract civic moral disengagement (Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbaranelli, 2009, p. 508; Fox & Spector, 2005). Also, Astleitner (2002), through reviewing literature, identifies the importance of external influences, which resonates with the social environment, while thinking critically. This allows for identifying radical or extremist material and reasoning against them to be integral, and in such cases “values,” or understanding them thereof, to render oneself more resilient to radicalization that can inevitably lead to conflict.

Research and studies (e.g., Astleitner, 2002; Caprara *et al.*, 2009; European Commission, 2016; UNDP, 2016) have found that the three attributes – emotional health, civic values

4 For this particular research, the faculty is considered as the other group of social influencers. The research deals with university students where faculty members fall under their near and immediate social hierarchy and periphery, and are considered to be viable influencers that allow the students to combat radicalization.

5 “Digital critical thinking” is an expression we have coined to refer to the ability to think critically when browsing the internet, in particular, in relation to distinguishing authentic from fake news, truth from propaganda, and so forth. Although the topic of critical thinking and its importance when browsing the internet has received scholarly attention (Astleitner, 2002), we have attempted to introduce a term for the sake of brevity and portability and also to increase focus on this important issue.

and digital critical thinking – have proved to be very effective to counter processes and contribute to increasing resilience to radicalization, terrorism and conflict, and provide greatly to online safety and security. A study by UNDP (2016) indicates that lack of emotional health can lead to feelings of social, political and economic rejection and exclusion, which along with factors of socialization as indicated above, contribute to radicalization. Bandura (1990, 1999) illustrates in his theory of moral disengagement that lack of moral agency is indistinguishably linked with (violent) terrorism. Understanding universal morals and norms, and conforming to societal values allows one to adhere to moral standards and avoid discomfort / reward self-worth. This ensures self-sanctions in matters consistent with harmfully alternative, extremist and radical understandings. Finally, digital critical thinking, which is based upon interpretation, analysis, evaluation and inference (Astleitner, 2002), can allow for persons to assess content found online and identify material that are offensive and discriminatory, “fake” and conspiracies, and extremist and radical, i.e. content that takes advantage of individuals and all-in-all brings negative, conflictual and disharmonious effects within the existing social environment and society at large.

Thus, it is evident that social influence through family, community and faculty is imperative to attain online safety directly. Here social cohesion acts as a direct safeguard to the overarching thesis of radicalization that includes religious sensibilities, fake news and conspiracies and radical/extremist content that dissuades, in this case, the university students to act against liberal and secular arrangements. Although social influence can make students resilient through indirectly acting on emotional health, civic values and digital critical thinking, the three components in themselves remain inextricably linked. To illustrate, ideals and civic values remain at the forefront where emotional health, or lack thereof, can allow for students to shift to alternative ideologies. However, critical thinking, which refers to digital in this case, can allow students to identify false and harmful content and material online. This allows them to adhere to social norms and values that is beneficial at a personal, contributing to emotional health, as well as a societal level. The following schematic, Figure 1, summarizes the relationship between (social) influence, resilience and online safety vis-à-vis radicalization.

The finding discussed in this paper are based on a quantitative survey consisting of ULAB students as respondents. Stratified random sampling technique was used on a sample of 600 students. This sample corresponds to a less than 5% error margin and a confidence interval of 95%. A structured questionnaire was used as the data collection tool and a five-point Likert scale deployed in recording responses from students. In addition, key informant interviews of faculty members and counselors, and focus group discussions with family members of undergraduate students were conducted for the BRUP project, which assisted this particular research.

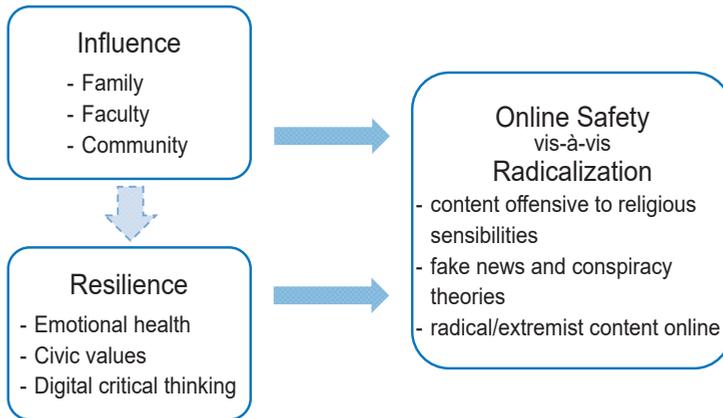


Figure 1: Influence, Resilience & Online Safety Framework

Descriptive demographic analysis of the data was conducted through pivot analysis. For the purposes of this research, “high internet users” (HIU) are those who use the internet at least 7 hours a day. The rationale behind labelling this user group as HIU is based on few global findings and benchmarks on youth online behavior. A 2017 report (Frith, 2017) by the UK-based think tank, Education Policy Institute, reveals that over a third of UK’s fifteen-year-old age group can be classed as “Extreme Internet Users” (6+ hours of use a day), which is markedly higher than the average of OECD countries. Moreover, according to data from the Center for Parenting Education (Clark, 2018), globally, young people between the ages of 8 to 28, spend about 44.5 hours each week⁶ in front of digital screens. Furthermore, according to Statista (2018), the average time spent online by the millennials is about four hours a day. Therefore, based on such global findings on internet behavior, the HIU group has been identified as those students who use the internet at least 7 hours a day or 49 hours a week. The sample breakdown with regard to age, sex, and total versus HIU groups, are shown as follows in Table 1:

Table 1: Sample Breakdown

Total Respondents		High Internet Users	
Number of Respondents	600	Number of Respondents	151
Male	64.0%	Male	64.0%
Female	36.0%	Female	36.0%
Age (18-24 years)	85.0%	Age (18-24 years)	73.0%
Age (24+ years)	15.0%	Age (24+ years)	27.0%

⁶ This averages over 6 hours per day.

In course of analyzing data from the survey, we have found it useful to develop a three-fold heuristic device based on the conceptual design, as follows:

- Influence Matrix
- Resilience Matrix
- Online Safety Matrix

In the influence matrix, we represent data from the questionnaires that allow us to consider how the role of three predominant influencers in university-attending student's lives – faculty, family and community members – are able to influence male and female students in both the HIU and non-HIU student respondent groups. The level of influence is recorded through self-assessment of influence by the respondents. Similarly, we have developed a resilience matrix to explore how the resilience of respondents vary for HIU and non-HIU groups. In this instance, “resilience” is used to refer to resilience to radicalization, and encompasses three attributes (captured with the questionnaire and self-assessed by students):

- Level of emotional health related awareness.
- Current level of knowledge and understanding of civic values.
- Current level of ability in exercising critical thinking on the internet to be able to distinguish between false information / propaganda and authentic information.

It should be noted that the core attributes indicated above, i.e., emotional health, civic values and “digital critical thinking”, once inculcated, have, in various researches and studies (Astleitner, 2002; Bandura, 1990, 1999; Caprara *et al.*, 2009; European Commission, 2016; UNDP, 2016), proved to be very effective in creating resilience to violence and conflict at large and in violent extremism in particular. Furthermore, it should also be noted that the questionnaire attempted to understand knowledge and awareness of emotional health and not actual emotional health status. This has pros and cons. The benefit is that it is easier to assess knowledge of emotional health rather than actual emotional health in a self-assessment survey. The disadvantage is that while there may be a correlation between knowledge of emotional health and actual emotional health, they are not one and the same thing. Furthermore, level of knowledge and understanding of civic values and level of ability in exercising critical thinking on the internet to be able to distinguish between false information / propaganda and authentic information is recorded through self-assessment. While self-assessment has limitations because often respondents are not able to effectively and in an unbiased manner attest to degrees of knowledge about themselves, this method in student surveys is still a practiced methodology (trendence UK, 2018). However, data on civic values and digital critical thinking will be verified, and cast further light, using proxy indicators: (a) availability of resources relating to civic values, and (b) availability of resources relating to digital critical thinking.

Lastly, we develop the “Online Safety Matrix”, which essentially tries to capture, through tabulated findings, how HIU students and non-HIU student sample at large fare with regard to the following attributes:

- Frequency of encountering content offensive to religious sensibilities.
- Frequency of encountering fake news and conspiracy theories.
- Frequency of encountering radical / extremist content online.

Through the above attributes, the online safety matrix attempts to assess how students fare with regard to how safe they are from radicalization when browsing the internet. This suggests that students are more prone to radicalization where frequency of such material is higher and, understandably, the vulnerability is higher where social influence and extremist resilience is lower.

Influence Matrix

Considering the influence matrix, in Table 2, overall, among the three influencer groups, family has the greatest influence on both the HIU group and non-HIU students.

Table 2: Influence Matrix

Influencers	Non-HIU			HIU		
	High Influence			High Influence		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Family	64.8%	60.0%	73.6%	62.3%	58.3%	69.1%
Faculty	53.6%	50.0%	59.7%	35.1%	33.3%	38.2%
Community Members	43.4%	43.4%	43.4%	38.4%	40.6%	34.5%

It is interesting to note for the HIU group that the influence of faculty members is significantly⁷ lower for this group than for other students. Around 35.1% of HIU group reported to faculty member influence on their views, compared to 53.6% of non-HIU students. Among the three groups of influencers, faculty members are best equipped to have the greatest influence with regard to their views on social issues and world affairs. Family and community members can be expected to have a high degree of influence on reinforcing civic values and better emotional health. This finding can be considered to be problematic as faculty members contribute highly to think critically, whether digitally or in understanding and attaining greater knowledge on norms, values or even emotional health. What is interesting to note is that the influence of faculty members for the entire sample is 48.8%, and the influence of community members is 42.2% (not

7 The expression “significantly higher” or “significantly lower” in the course of this paper has been used in a statistical sense, and is done so, only in case where the level of significance with regard to difference in response rates are 80-99%.

shown in table). The fact that less than half the sample report to being influenced by faculty members was surprising to many faculty members consulted with in the course of the study, alluding to greater vulnerability of the students towards radicalization and conflict through conspiracies, propaganda and other forms of religiously insensitive and extremist content online.

Within the HIU group, family tends to have a significantly higher influence on females rather than males. The research provides similar results for the non-HIU group, where females at 73.6% are significantly likelier to being influenced by family than males at 60.0%. This may be attributable to the social arrangement pertaining to gender norms and values in Bangladesh (and other similar societies), where women in all aspects – social, cultural, economic and political – are marginalized when compared to men. “Traditional” gender norms are expected to play a significant role for women, or female students in this case, as they tend to interact and remain in close relation to persons within their social proximity (Salway, Jesmin, & Rahman, 2005; World Bank, 2008). Here, family remains at the forefront and as they are students they tend to interact, and have the capacity to be influenced, by faculty members. Although, this setup can facilitate influence to render them resilient to radicalization, it should be noted that terror cells, particularly Islamist, do take conservative gender norms into account and provide strategies to “reclaim their position in stern patriarchal communities” (Groppi, 2017, p. 70). The research finds HIU groups to be more vulnerable than non-HIU groups, and the results do not fare well for women, at times, as lower influence by community members suggests exclusionary social structures and restrained mobility. In general, all three influencer groups, as per self-assessment by the student respondents, have less of an influence on the HIU group than the non-HIU group.

Resilience Matrix

Moving on to the resilience matrix, as shown in Table 3, both groups of respondents, the HIU and non-HIU groups, fare better with regard to knowledge and understanding of civic values than with regard to the other parameters: emotional health awareness and digital critical thinking abilities. However, this may be different for different universities. It is possible that ULAB’s progressive orientation and an emphasis on extracurricular activities and programming for students related to current affairs and social issues are the reason why response rates are higher for this particular attribute of resilience to radicalization.

Also noteworthy from the above table is that among the non-HIU sample, female students have a higher likelihood of possessing emotional health awareness than male students: 66.0% to 56.9%. In fact, females also fare better with regard to their knowledge and understanding of civic values. These results are notably illuminating as such attributes of resilience can offset gender norms and social hierarchies. However, when

Table 3: Resilience Matrix

Indicators	Non-HIU			HIU		
	High Level			High Level		
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Emotional Health Awareness	60.1%	56.9%	66.0%	66.9%	67.7%	65.5%
Knowledge and understanding of civic values	69.5%	66.6%	74.8%	68.9%	72.9%	61.8%
Digital Critical Thinking Abilities	53.2%	52.1%	55.3%	67.5%	75.0%	54.5%

one considers the HIU respondent group, males actually fare better. The important take-away from this table is that HIU females have significantly lower knowledge and understanding of civic values than the overall sample and HIU males fare better than HIU females on all three parameters of resilience and significantly so, for knowledge and understanding of civic values and digital critical thinking abilities. This indicates that although there may be greater social influence on women, albeit low by community members, women remain at a disadvantageous position as their resilience is recorded to be low leaving them prone to radicalization and engage in affairs pertaining to conflict that may be facilitated by inherent gender norms.

Although these are self-reported responses, for all three parameters this paper considers as constituents of resilience to radicalization, HIU males fare better than the non-HIU males. Also, substantial majority, about 75% of HIU males, reported to having high digital critical thinking abilities.⁸ Student counselors and psychiatrists consulted opine that this may attest to a lack of self-knowledge and self-awareness. Other experts interviewed also opined that perhaps HIU males may find it more difficult to objectively assess their own emotional health and other abilities than the others. Thus, proxy indicators that look at the availability of such resources provide a better perspective into the subject-matter.

The important parameter related to resilience that has not been considered in the aforementioned “resilience matrix”, which is the availability of learning resources through the university and outside, can additionally reinforce student’s civic values, emotional health and digital critical thinking abilities, along with providing as proxies. The proxy indicators, as tabulated in Table 4, indeed reflects that HIU students, both male and female, are less resilient than non-HIU students. When we consider the values in conjunction with the influence matrix, the results suggest that the HIU students are indeed

8 Although not directly related to the study, the lower score for male students with regard to emotional health awareness is also noteworthy, for purposes of larger policy and practices intervention in tertiary education.

more vulnerable to radicalization and prone to conflict and violence. The data further indicates that female students, when compared to male, encounter more learning resources in relation to civic values and (digital) critical thinking, that can allow them to invest in such content to account for their inherent vulnerabilities promulgated by sociocultural factors.

Table 4: Availability of Learning Resources (Proxy Indicators)

Proxy Indicators	Non-HIU			HIU		
	High Availability			High Availability		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Civic Education Related Learning Resources	68.2%	67.2%	69.8%	55.0%	54.2%	56.4%
“Digital Critical Thinking” related Learning Resources	59.0%	59.3%	58.5%	51.0%	45.8%	60.0%

Looking more closely, the research data yields that HIU males report far lower availability compared to the overall sample: while 68.2% of non-HIU students find learning resources on civic education to be available, only 54.2% of HIU males do so. Similarly, while 59.0% of non-HIU students find learning resources on “digital critical thinking abilities” to be available, only 45.8% of HIU males do. Faculty members consulted with during this research opine that HIU students and, in addition to encountering material that can build resilience, males in particular are less engaged with real world learning opportunities and resources, whether at a university or available through external means, rendering them vulnerable to online radicalization and extremist propaganda.

Online Safety Matrix

As noted earlier, the three frequency/availability indicators are incorporated in the study to understand how safe or unsafe students are on the internet with regard to potential radicalization, where higher values for the indicators denotes greater chances of being radicalized and more prone to violence and conflict, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Online Safety Matrix

Indicators	Non-HIU			HIU		
	High Frequency/Availability			High Frequency/Availability		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Frequency of encountering content offensive to religious sensibilities	84.0%	83.4%	84.9%	90.7%	93.8%	85.5%
Frequency of encountering fake news and conspiracy theories	74.2%	74.5%	73.6%	90.0%	93.8%	83.6%
Availability of radical / extremist content online	78.0%	77.9%	78.0%	81.5%	79.2%	85.5%

The indicated table (Table 5) is very revealing as it shows that the HIU group is likelier than the non-HIU group to encounter content offensive to religious sensibilities; fake news and conspiracy theories; and radical/extremist content. Noteworthy that 93.8% of HIU males encounter conspiracy theories online compared to 74.2% non-HIU students. Similarly, 93.8% of HIU males find content online that is offensive to their religious sensibilities compared to 84.0% of non-HIU respondents. Thus, the HIU male group is more prone to radicalization than the others as they spend more time online where the frequency of encountering such radical/extremist content online is highest.

This, technically, fares well for the female students, particularly belonging to the HIU group, where previous vulnerabilities have been identified. The influence matrix has identified women to be at a safer position with respect to radicalization, despite commenting on socially constructed gender boundaries. Additionally, the research has also identified that content relevant to increasing resilience is more readily available to the female students. Even though they self-assessed that their knowledge and awareness of such content is lower than male, provided that they can harness their rationalization, reasoning and critical thinking abilities, they have the potential to be in a favorable position to garner social influence and become resilient to radicalization. However, the female group does not perform well with regards to availability of radical/extremist content, which is higher for HIU females. Nevertheless, given the frequency values, which is lower than HIU males' in both cases as seen in Table 5, if the influence and resilience of the female students can indeed break the gender norms, they may indeed be considered to be better equipped to counteract radicalization.

From the interpretation of findings, it is possible to not only establish that the students who use the internet for seven hours or more per day, are more exposed to radical content, but also surmise that they are more vulnerable to radicalization and arguably conflict. It is observed that HIU students are far less impressionable to their family, faculty and community members, and less open to the guidance thereof, than other students. Faculty members we consulted also confirm this understanding. Furthermore, HIU students are also less likely to find learning resources on civic values and digital critical thinking and ways to be safe online, than the total respondent group, either at their university or externally. Therefore, the research finds the safety mechanisms of influence and resilience to suffer for the HIU group, where, understandably, taking coercive measures can become a requirement as opposed to constructive ones as drawn out by the conceptual framework.

Conclusion

The research finds that the group of students who spend a significantly higher amount of time on the internet has their online safety challenged, and there indeed needs to be mechanisms that can allow them to withstand radicalization and make them resilient

to engaging in conflict and terrorism. This research, with an original theoretical framework, identifies social influence, emotional well-being, civic values and critical thinking to negate and counteract the online radicalization process. Even if the mechanisms provided by the framework may not seem exhaustive, radicalization and extremism is a process that remains deeply entrenched in ideology and ideological differences⁹, which speaks to the core of human identity. "Subjects" can deviate from the basic constructs that hold societies together, but society itself and a clear and well-trained mind remains the strongest of forces that can contribute to a better emotional health with well-established values. Thus far, the research finds that the HIU group is not only directly more prone to radicalization through greater frequency and availability of radical and extremist content, but they also lack the aforementioned mechanisms that can increase online safety and reduce the chances of being radicalized that ultimately leads to terrorism, violence and conflict.

In sum, in light of the increased propensity to find radical and religiously offensive material online; lower influence of family members, faculty and community members; and lower access to learning resources that can render them resilient, HIU students, are more vulnerable to online radicalization than others, and, at times, males more likely than females. However, one must not fail to identify the marginalized position of women bound by patriarchal social norms that can make them vulnerable to the radicalization process. In the course of the BRUP Project, it has also been evidenced that students respond quite positively to learning on civic values, emotional health and digital critical thinking. Students exposed to such learning resources picked up the topics well and displayed increased appreciation for such learning in relation to rendering them more resilient to and aware of how radicalization works.

Consequently, the conceptual approach that alludes to constructive measures as opposed to coercive ones remains extremely viable to tackle radicalization and terrorism. Therefore, this research recommends endeavors at the level of university administration, regulators, and civil society stakeholders, to initiate more training on civic values, digital critical thinking and emotional health, to prevent the pathways to violent extremism and conflict. There needs to be emphasis on these constructive measures highlighted by the original framework developed in this paper as preventing violent extremism (PVE) proactively is of course more desirable than countering violent extremism (CVE). Given Bangladesh's significant demographic dividend, in which over a third of students are below the university-going age, it is incumbent on universities which usually have reasonable resources at their disposal, to revisit their goals and objectives with regard to youth development in the context of Bangladesh. They need to address

9 This is well evident from the definition of radicalization that has been further exemplified by the framework and the analysis.

existing and future challenges to not just economic growth, but development of a just, tolerant and pluralistic society.

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