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There Is No Single Path: University Students' Perspectives on the Causes of Terrorism in Pakistani Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how senior undergraduate students at a public sector university in Punjab, Pakistan, perceive the causes of terrorism. Terrorism research has extensively examined the characteristics and motivations of perpetrators, yet comparatively little attention has been paid to how student explain the causes of terrorism. Public perceptions are important because they influence support for counter-terrorism policies, community cooperation with law enforcement, and social environments where radicalization may emerge. An exploratory qualitative research design was employed. Eighteen BS (4 Year) students were purposively selected from six social sciences departments. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed from the literature and piloted from three students. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts. Findings indicated that participants rejected single-cause explanations and instead identified multiple interconnected factors. These included individual characteristics, peer influence, distorted religious narratives, educational bad experiences, ethnic marginalization, family dynamics, economic hardship, political manipulation, revenge motives, foreign involvement, and media influence. Peer groups, economic insecurity, family disruption, and political instrumentalization emerged as the most influential factors, while biological determinism and emotional deprivation received limited support. Participants also challenged the association of terrorism with Muslim identity, attributing this perception to international media narratives. The findings support Sutherland's differential association theory and highlight the importance of media literacy, procedural justice, and inclusive campus environments in preventing youth radicalization.

Keywords: Terrorism, Radicalization, Student Perceptions, Differential Association, Qualitative Research, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism remains a defining problem of contemporary international and domestic politics, shaping security budgets, immigration regimes, policing doctrine and everyday civic life (Afxentiou, 2018; Asongu, 2021). Pakistan has borne an unusually heavy share of that burden. Successive waves of violence, entangled with the legacies of the Afghan-Soviet war, sectarian mobilization, and the regional reordering that followed September 2001, have touched almost every social institution in the country, including the family, the economy, religious life, the media and, most directly for the present study, education



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(Crenshaw & Robison, 2023; Feldmann & Hinojosa, 2009; Feyyaz, 2016). The scholarly response to this problem has been substantial but lopsided. A large body of work seeks to identify what distinguishes those who commit terrorist violence from those who do not, drawing on psychological assessment, biographical reconstruction, network analysis and increasingly on large event databases (Dhumad et al., 2020; Doering & Davies, 2021; Hwang, 2018). A much smaller literature asks a different question: what do ordinary people believe about why terrorism happens, and where do those beliefs come from (Avdan & Webb, 2018; Guss, 2011; Sensales et al., 2014)? This asymmetry is consequential. Counter-terrorism policy is implemented in and upon communities whose members hold their own causal theories. Where official explanations diverge sharply from lay ones, interventions lose legitimacy, intelligence-sharing dries up, and preventive programmes are read as surveillance rather than support (Al-Sumait et al., 2009; Bahadur Lamb, 2014; Cherney & Murphy, 2019).

University students occupy a particularly instructive position within this problem. They fall within the age band from which armed groups most actively recruit; they are exposed to competing interpretive authorities in the form of curricula, clerics, family, peer networks and a dense and largely unregulated digital media environment; and, in Pakistan, they belong to a sector that has itself been attacked, most notoriously in the assaults on the Army Public School in Peshawar in 2014 and on Bacha Khan University in Charsadda in 2016. Students are therefore neither detached observers nor a proxy for the general population. They are a population that has been simultaneously targeted by terrorism, courted by recruiters, and made an object of state preventive attention. How they explain terrorism is worth knowing in its own right. This article reports an exploratory qualitative study of how senior undergraduates at a large public sector university in Punjab explain the causes of terrorism and the pathways by which individuals come to participate in it. The study was guided by a single question: what do university students identify as the major causes and factors leading individuals to become terrorists in Pakistan? Rather than testing a predetermined causal model, the study sought to reconstruct the explanatory repertoires students draw upon, to identify where those repertoires converge and where they are internally contested, and to examine how they relate to established sociological theory.

The contribution is threefold. First, the article extends the small literature on student and public perceptions of terrorism to a South Asian setting that is heavily affected by political violence but under-represented in perception research, which remains dominated by North American, European and Australasian samples (Alam, 2003; Chubb, 2020; Del-Real & Diaz-Fernandez, 2022; Denemark, 2012). Second, it treats lay explanation as structured rather than random, showing that students operate with a multi-level causal model that closely tracks the sociological literature while diverging from it in specific and revealing ways. Third, it identifies a defensive interpretive frame, organized around the contested association between Muslim identity and terrorism, that shapes how students discuss the subject and how freely they feel able to do so.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From perpetrator profiles to public perception

Efforts to specify a terrorist personality type have a long and largely unsuccessful history. Comparative work on individual risk factors has produced modest and heavily contextdependent results; Dhumad and colleagues (2020), comparing convicted Iraqi terrorists with convicted murderers and non-offending controls, found family and childhood variables to be more discriminating than personality measures, and cautioned



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against any simple profile. Reviews of the field have repeatedly noted that the search for a distinctive psychopathology has yielded little (Crenshaw, 2014; Decety et al., 2018). Attention has consequently shifted toward pathways and processes: how individuals enter, remain within and exit violent movements, and what social conditions make those pathways available (Argomaniz & Lynch, 2018; Hwang, 2018).

Alongside this shift, a distinct strand of research has taken public perception as its object. Sensales and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that Italian citizens' representations of terrorism varied systematically with political orientation and cognitive style, and that media served as the principal vehicle for these representations. Avdan and Webb (2018) showed that public threat assessments respond to the perceived characteristics of attacks rather than to their actuarial risk. Breckenridge et al. (2010) found that additional media coverage measurably shifted American risk perceptions. Chubb (2020), tracing Australian perceptions over four decades, documented how the meaning of the term itself has migrated with geopolitical events. Güss (2011) examined Western lay understandings of suicide terrorism and found them organised around a small number of causal narratives that only partially overlapped with expert accounts.

Studies focused specifically on students remain rare. Alam's (2003) pilot study of Japanese students found perceptions structured by geographic distance from political violence and by media exposure; Ferguson and Kamble (2012), comparing British and Indian students after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, found revenge motives and just-world beliefs central to how students processed the events; and Del-Real and Diaz-Fernandez (2022) documented substantial gaps in Spanish students' knowledge of the security agencies acting in their name. Together these studies establish that student perceptions are neither uniform nor merely derivative of expert opinion.

Explanatory accounts of involvement in terrorism

The academic literature offers no single account of why individuals become involved in terrorism, but it does offer identifiable families of explanation, each of which reappears in lay discourse. Psychological and emotional accounts emphasize grievance, humiliation, identity crisis and the cognitive processes that convert these into a legitimization of violence (Akhtar, 2017; Decety et al., 2018; Sjodin, 2019); contemporary versions treat these factors as facilitating conditions within social settings rather than as sufficient causes. Socialization and social learning accounts locate the mechanism in intimate group life: involvement is learned in interaction with significant others, who transmit not only techniques but also motives, rationalizations and definitions favourable to violence (Matsueda, 1988; Sutherland, 1972). Empirical work on recruitment consistently finds friendship and kinship networks to be the dominant channel (Hwang, 2018), and research on children in families affiliated with armed groups documents intergenerational transmission of ideological commitment (Cook & Schneider, 2024).

Structural and economic accounts point to poverty, unemployment and inequality, on genuinely mixed evidence. Cross-national analyses associate ethnic polarisation, low economic development and resource inequality with domestic terrorism (Ajide & Alimi, 2022; Danzell et al., 2019), yet other work finds no straightforward poverty-terrorism relationship and notes that many perpetrators are comparatively well educated (Danzell et al., 2020). Human security framings reconcile these findings by treating deprivation as one determinant among several (Callaway & Harrelson-Stephens, 2006). Political and ideological accounts treat terrorism as instrumental violence directed at regime change, autonomy, policy influence or factional power (Abrahms & Gottfried, 2016; Ackerman & Burnham, 2021; Aran, 2019), while work on state sponsorship and terrorism financing shows how ostensibly ideological violence is underwritten by state and elite interests



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(Carter et al., 2021; Ejiofor, 2025).

Religious accounts have received sustained and contested attention. The dominant finding is that religion functions less as an independent cause than as a framing resource: ideology supplies a vocabulary of justification and a template for strategic behaviour rather than a motive in itself (Carter et al., 2023; Cohen et al., 2018). Survey work across Muslim-majority countries finds support for political violence to be predicted more strongly by political grievance and institutional distrust than by piety (Cherney & Murphy, 2019; Fair & Shepherd, 2006). Media-centred accounts hold that coverage amplifies the communicative effect of attacks, normalises violent imagery, supplies recruitment infrastructure and distorts public understanding of risk (Altheide, 2009; Banlaoi, 2009; Chen et al., 2022). A related critical literature examines how media discourse constructs Muslim populations as inherently suspect, with measurable consequences for those populations (Abu-Bakare, 2024; Downing et al., 2022).

Terrorism, discourse and higher education in Pakistan

Critical scholarship on Pakistan has argued that the local terrorism discourse cannot be understood apart from its geopolitical production. Feyyaz (2016) shows that the vocabulary of terrorism in Pakistan was substantially imported and then reworked to serve competing domestic agendas, so that the same acts are classified differently depending on the speaker's position. Feyyaz and Husnain Bari (2024) extend this to the India-Pakistan dyad, in which each state's terrorism discourse is calibrated against the other's. Ahmad (2017), writing on India, makes a parallel argument about the concept's capacity to obscure questions of injustice. Ashraf et al. (2022) situate South Asian political violence within longer-running disputes over water and development, while Iqbal et al. (2024) trace how Pakistan's counter-terrorism posture has been shaped by bilateral security co-operation with China. This body of work suggests that Pakistani respondents are unlikely to treat terrorism as a neutral analytic category, and that their accounts will be inflected by an awareness of how the label is deployed against them. Higher education occupies an ambiguous place in this landscape. Universities are sites of critical inquiry, targets of attack, and objects of preventive scrutiny simultaneously. Research from other jurisdictions indicates that preventive programmes operating in educational settings can generate mistrust and self-censorship among the very students they are intended to protect (Bahadur Lamb, 2014). Whether comparable dynamics operate in Pakistani universities has not been examined.

The gap addressed

Three gaps follow from this review. First, perception research remains geographically skewed toward high-income democracies with comparatively low exposure to sustained political violence. Second, the small student-focused literature has tended to measure attitudes toward terrorism rather than to reconstruct causal reasoning about it. Third, no published study has systematically examined how Pakistani university students explain terrorist involvement, despite their dual status as a target population and a recruitment pool. This study addresses those gaps.

Theoretical Framework

Three broad explanatory traditions inform the study. Biological accounts, descending from Lombroso and elaborated in constitutional typologies such as Sheldon's, hold that propensity to violence is inscribed in physical and genetic characteristics (Lombroso, 2001). These accounts have been discredited as explanations, but they retain a striking cultural afterlife, circulating as folk knowledge about what dangerous people look like,



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and it was therefore analytically useful to include them. Psychological accounts locate causation in cognition, personality organisation and emotional regulation, including the effects of chronic stress, rejection and trauma (Henry, 2002; Hunter et al., 2021; Hwang, 2018). Sociological accounts locate it in social relations: in learning, in deprivation, in disorganised communities, in modelling and in the differential availability of legitimate opportunity.

The study is anchored specifically in Sutherland's theory of differential association (Sutherland, 1972; see Matsueda, 1988, for the standard restatement). Its core propositions are that criminal behaviour is learned; that it is learned in interaction with others in a process of communication; that the principal learning occurs within intimate personal groups; that what is learned includes both techniques and the specific direction of motives, drives, rationalisations and attitudes; that a person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definitions favourable to law violation over definitions unfavourable to it; and that differential associations vary in frequency, duration, priority and intensity. Three features make this theory well suited to the present study. It is a theory of process rather than of type, which matches the pathway orientation of contemporary radicalisation research. It gives analytic priority to intimate association, which is precisely the domain where students, as members of dense peer and kinship networks, can be expected to have direct observational knowledge. And it treats motives and justifications as learned content rather than as preexisting dispositions, which allows lay explanation itself to be read as part of the definitional environment in which young people form attitudes toward political violence. The framework is used here abductively: not to test propositions, but as an interpretive lens against which student accounts are read and to which they are compared in the discussion.

DATA AND METHODS

Design: An exploratory qualitative design was adopted. The research question concerns meaning and reasoning rather than distribution or magnitude, and no validated instrument exists for eliciting causal accounts of terrorism in this population. Exploratory qualitative work is the appropriate response to that combination of conditions, and permits the identification of categories that subsequent quantitative work can operationalize.

Setting: Fieldwork was conducted at one public sector university in the Punjab. At the time of data collection, the campus enrolled approximately 17,814 students across seven faculties, comprising 33 departments and 684 faculty members. The campus draws heavily from the surrounding districts of northern Punjab, and its student body includes substantial rural and first-generation representation, together with a high proportion of students from transnational migrant households, a demographic characteristic of the region.

Population, sampling frame and participants: The study population comprised students enrolled in BS (4 Years) program in the Faculty of Social Sciences, specifically the Departments of Economics, Education, History & Pakistan Studies, Political Science & International Relations, Psychology, and Sociology. The unit of analysis was the individual student enrolled in the seventh semester in the Spring 2025 session. Departmental enrolment lists supplied by departmental office assistants provided a sampling frame of 1,515 students, of whom approximately 68 per cent were female.

Purposive sampling was used to select three students from each of the six departments, yielding a final sample of 18. Selection sought variation in gender, residential background and family occupation while restricting the sample to senior students, on the



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reasoning that students in their final semester of a social science degree have both the analytic vocabulary and the accumulated exposure to campus discourse required to reflect on the topic at length. The realized sample comprised 10 male and 8 female students aged 23 to 25, with a modal family size of five to seven, predominantly nuclear households, and a majority of rural residential origin. Family occupations included agriculture, business, government and private employment, professional practice and overseas employment. Full participant characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Personal Characteristics of Participants (N = 18)

Case	Gender	Age	Family occupation	Monthly family income (PKR)	Family size	Family type	Residence
1	Male	24	Agriculture	100,000	8	Nuclear	Rural
2	Male	24	Business	80,000	5	Joint	Rural
3	Male	25	Agriculture	150,000	7	Joint	Rural
4	Female	23	Private job	75,000	4	Nuclear	Rural
5	Female	23	Business	120,000	6	Nuclear	Rural
6	Male	25	Government job	65,000	5	Nuclear	Urban
7	Female	24	Medical professional	100,000	5	Nuclear	Urban
8	Female	23	Overseas employment	200,000	7	Nuclear	Rural
9	Male	24	Government job	95,000	4	Nuclear	Rural
10	Male	25	Overseas employment	250,000	6	Nuclear	Urban
11	Male	23	Business	150,000	3	Joint	Rural
12	Female	24	Agriculture	85,000	6	Nuclear	Rural
13	Male	23	Agriculture	100,000	4	Joint	Urban
14	Male	24	Business	200,000	5	Nuclear	Urban
15	Female	23	Agriculture	95,000	3	Nuclear	Rural
16	Male	25	Private job	250,000	7	Joint	Rural
17	Female	23	Business	150,000	6	Nuclear	Urban
18	Male	24	Business	100,000	5	Joint	Rural

Note: Income figures are self-reported monthly household income in Pakistani rupees. Case numbers are used in place of names throughout.

Instrument and pilot testing: Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide organized around themes derived from the review of literature: biological explanations, self-selection and agency, psychological strain, peer influence, media exposure, educational failure, socialization, emotional deprivation, family and parenting, economic pressure, community environment, political motives, religious framing, revenge, third-party intervention, ethnic background, and preventive suggestions. Each theme was introduced with an open prompt followed by nondirective probes. The guide was pilot tested with three students who were not included in the final sample; the pilot



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led to the simplification of two items whose phrasing invited yes/no responses and to the addition of an explicit closing prompt inviting participants to nominate factors the guide had omitted.

Data collection procedure: A case study approach was used, in which each participant was treated as a bounded case and interviewed individually at length. This technique was selected on the basis of the small sample and the exploratory purpose of the study. Interviews were conducted face to face in departmental classrooms and common rooms over a period of approximately one month. The researcher presented a student card, an institutional permission letter and personal identification at first contact, explained the purpose of the study, and obtained written informed consent before proceeding. Participants were free to respond in Urdu, Punjabi or English, and several did so in Urdu; Urdu responses were transcribed in the original and translated for analysis, with the original retained alongside the translation. Rapport-building steps preceded each interview, and participants were assured that they could decline any question or terminate the interview at any point.

Data analysis: Transcripts were edited and screened for completeness before analysis. Analysis followed the standard sequence of reflexive thematic analysis: repeated reading of the corpus for familiarization; systematic open coding of each transcript; collation of codes into candidate themes; review of candidate themes against both the coded extracts and the full corpus; definition and naming of final themes; and selection of illustrative extracts. Coding proceeded both deductively, using the domains built into the interview guide, and inductively, remaining open to categories the guide had not anticipated. Each theme was additionally classified by degree of consensus across the corpus, distinguishing themes on which participants substantially agreed from those on which they openly disagreed, since the pattern of disagreement is itself a finding.

Ethical considerations: Participation was voluntary and based on written informed consent. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw and the intended use of the data. Given the political sensitivity of the topic, particular care was taken to conduct interviews in settings where participants could not be overheard, to avoid recording identifying details beyond the demographic variables reported in Table 1, and to replace all names with pseudonyms or case numbers in analysis and reporting. No question invited participants to disclose knowledge of specific individuals or incidents, and participants were reminded that the study sought their views on causes rather than any factual information about events.



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Trustworthiness and reflexivity: Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement in the field, pilot testing, retention of original-language extracts, iterative review of coded extracts against the full corpus, and supervisory review of the thematic framework. Transferability is supported by the detailed reporting of setting and participant characteristics and Table 1. The researcher was, at the time of fieldwork, a postgraduate student at the same institution as the participants. This shared status assisted access and rapport but also carried a risk that participants would frame responses in terms they believed appropriate to an academic audience. The risk was mitigated by non-directive probing and by explicit invitations to disagree with the premise of each question, an invitation that participants accepted with some frequency.

Presentation of extracts: Interview extracts are reproduced below with minimal editing for readability. Where a participant spoke in Urdu, the extract is presented in translation. Participants are identified by case number and gender. Repetitions and false starts have been removed; no substantive content has been altered, and ellipses mark omitted material.

RESULTS

Analysis produced sixteen themes, which were grouped into four explanatory domains together with one cross-cutting frame. Table 2 summarizes the framework and records the degree of consensus on each theme. The most striking feature of the corpus as a whole is the near-total absence of monocausal explanation. Participants who nominated a factor characteristically qualified it, subordinated it to another factor, or denied that it operated alone.

Table 2: Thematic Framework and Degree of Consensus

Domain	Theme	Core mechanism identified by participants	Degree of consensus
I. Individual	Biological roots	Inherited or neurological predisposition activated by environment	Strongly contested
	Self-choice and adaptation	Decision taken under constrained conditions; groups adapt recruitment	Strong
	Psychological strain	Stress, anxiety and blocked aspiration lower resistance	Strong, with dissent
II. Relational	Peer group influence	Access, motivation, normalisation and reward within friendship networks	Near-unanimous
	Family and parenting	Disruption, neglect and coercive parenting; direct ideological transmission	Near-unanimous
	Socialisation deficits	Absent moral instruction; isolation; early exposure to violence	Strong
	Educational failure	Loss of critical capacity; humiliation of the failed student	Moderate, contested
	Emotional deprivation	Rejection converted into resentment and search for belonging	Contested
III. Structural	Economic precarity	Gap between household obligations and means; groups monetise need	Strong



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	Community ecology	Conflict-affected, disputed and excluded localities generate risk	Strong
	Ethnic marginalisation	Group identity plus perceived collective injustice	Strong
IV. Political	Political instrumentalisation	Violence sponsored by actors pursuing power, disguised as ideology	Very strong
	Religious framing	Distorted interpretation supplies justification, not motive	Very strong
	Revenge and enmity	Grievance converts to violence where redress is unavailable	Strong
	Third-party sponsorship	External funding, training and incitement; contested attribution	Moderate
	Media exposure	Desensitisation, instruction and stigmatising representation	Strong
Cross-cutting	Contesting the label	Terrorism-Muslim association treated as media construction	Pervasive

Note. Consensus categories reflect the distribution of agreement across the 18 cases: near-unanimous (no substantive dissent), very strong and strong (broad agreement with minor qualification), moderate (majority support with a substantial dissenting minority), and contested (participants divided).

Domain I: The Individual, Between Disposition and Choice

Biological explanations: invoked and dismissed

Biological accounts were the only domain in which participants divided sharply, and the division is instructive. A minority reproduced recognizably Lombrosian imagery, listing physical markers they associated with dangerousness. One participant offered a catalogue of large hands, heavy jaws, flat feet and an inverted skull; another suggested that "people with an extra-large physique have leaned towards extremism" (Case 13, male). A second group translated the biological into the neurological and hormonal, proposing that brain structure, hormonal profile or genetic predisposition might create a susceptibility that social conditions then activate. As one put it, biological roots are "linked with neurological and hormonal factors, and then social and environmental triggers lead the individual to extremist behaviour" (Case 1, male).

A third and larger group rejected biological explanation outright. "Biological roots do not matter much," one participant said; "the environment in which a person is brought up matters" (Case 8, female). Another was more categorical: "biological roots do not influence any person towards terrorism" (Case 11, male). Several participants who initially accepted a biological premise reversed themselves within the same answer, concluding that any inherited tendency was so heavily mediated by upbringing as to be causally uninteresting.

Two observations follow. Discredited biological criminology persists as available folk knowledge among social science students who can also articulate its refutation; and those who invoked it almost always qualified it immediately with social factors, so that biological determinism appeared not as a competing theory but as a residual vocabulary absorbed into a sociological account.

Self-selection, agency and adaptation

Participants consistently maintained that involvement in terrorism involves a decision,



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while denying that the decision is freely made. The characteristic formulation held both propositions together. "At the start no one wants to be involved in terrorist activities," one participant explained; "social differences and other social factors affect it, and ecology matters, peers matter" (Case 6, male). Another described involvement as a self-choice arrived at under duress: "most of them are self-choice, because they faced inequality and were dislocated from their homes, so they take part in these activities to get justice" (Case 4, female).

Several participants extended agency to the organisational level, describing armed groups as adaptive entities that adjust techniques and recruitment appeals in response to changing conditions, and as "adept at exploiting vulnerabilities, online propaganda and targeting marginalised groups" (Case 7, female). This dual attribution, in which the individual chooses within a field structured by others' strategic action, ran throughout the corpus.

Psychological strain

Stress, tension, anxiety and depression were widely accepted as contributory, though almost never as sufficient. Participants described psychological strain as lowering resistance rather than generating intent: "a person facing stress, tension or anxiety may go for terrorist activities" (Case 5, female); "people get involved in terrorism because of mental pressure and tension" (Case 15, female, translated from Urdu). Several linked strain explicitly to blocked aspiration, describing individuals who "did not get the chances" they expected and who converted that frustration into hostility toward the social order that denied them.

A dissenting minority resisted the psychologisation of terrorism altogether, insisting that the operative grievance was structural rather than clinical: "I do not think so, because they became terrorists because of not getting social justice" (Case 9, male). This objection recurred with enough frequency to be treated as a genuine countercurrent rather than an outlier.

Domain II: Relational Learning Environments

Peer group influence

Peer influence attracted the strongest and least qualified consensus in the entire corpus. No participant denied its importance, and several identified it as the single most powerful factor. Accounts described peers as supplying access, motivation, normalisation and emotional reward simultaneously. One participant described the appeal in terms of excitement rather than ideology: peers "attract them, they feel the adventure in doing these activities" (Case 12, female). Another described the group mechanism in terms close to the sociological literature: "social reinforcement; when peers share similar beliefs it creates a supportive environment for radicalisation, and violent actions become normalised, with isolation from opposing views" (Case 7, female). A participant speaking in Urdu put it plainly: "friends take young boys towards terrorism; because of the company of friends, boys become part of it" (Case 18, male, translated).

Notably, participants presented peer influence as morally neutral in mechanism and consequential only in direction. Several observed that the same group dynamics that produce radicalisation can equally sustain prosocial commitment, a formulation that maps closely onto the differential association proposition that what is learned depends on the balance of definitions available in the group.

Family structure and parenting

Family disruption was the second strongest theme. Participants identified broken



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families, parental separation and divorce, parental neglect and both authoritarian and indifferent parenting styles as producing children vulnerable to later recruitment. "Strict, controlling or abusive parenting can lead to resentment," one participant argued, while "a neglectful attitude can leave children feeling unloved, unguided and vulnerable to extremist influence" (Case 7, female). Another emphasised the atmosphere of the home rather than its structure: "young people choose terrorism after becoming fed up with a tense household environment" (Case 17, female, translated).

A smaller group described direct familial transmission, in which the household is not merely a site of deficit but an active source of ideological content: "when the individual's family is involved in terrorism, then they also adopt it" (Case 2, male). This account, though less frequently voiced, is theoretically significant, since it describes intergenerational learning rather than mere disorganisation.

Socialisation deficits

Improper socialisation was widely nominated, and participants used the term in a technical sense consistent with their disciplinary training. Accounts pointed to the absence of early moral instruction, to social isolation, and to exposure to violence or intolerance in formative years. "Those who were never told in childhood whether terrorism is right or wrong choose the wrong path without thinking," one participant said (Case 16, male, translated). Another linked isolation directly to susceptibility: "without proper participation in society, isolation can play a big role towards negative activities" (Case 14, male).

A dissenting strand held that socialisation was a minor factor relative to the failure of justice institutions, arguing that improving socialisation "may decrease terrorism, but this is a small factor; we need to provide justice to reduce terrorism" (Case 3, male). The disagreement is not about mechanism but about causal weight, and it recurs in several other themes.

Educational failure and illiteracy

Participants agreed that educational failure raises vulnerability, but disagreed on how. The dominant account treated illiteracy as removing the capacity for critical evaluation and thus leaving individuals exposed to manipulation: "most terrorists are illiterate and have no basic idea about their lives; their minds are stuck on one issue" (Case 5, female). A second account emphasised humiliation rather than ignorance: "boys who face failure in childhood, whom everyone humiliates, come under mental pressure and go into terrorism" (Case 15, female, translated).

A well-informed minority contested the theme directly by citing counter-evidence. One participant observed that education "does not matter to such an extent, because many terrorists were highly educated" (Case 6, male), and named a prominent Pakistani case in which the perpetrators were university-educated professionals. This exchange illustrates a broader pattern: where participants had access to specific counter-examples, they used them to complicate rather than to reject the general proposition.

Emotional deprivation

The failure of love, affection and devotion generated the second-largest split in the corpus. Supporters described emotional voids converted into resentment and into a search for belonging: rejection "can lead to feelings of loneliness and resentment, and these emotional voids may drive someone to seek validation or purpose in destructive activity" (Case 7, female). Others reported the phenomenon as generationally specific: "deception and failure in love are very common among young people, and because of



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this they adopt a wrong path without thinking" (Case 10, male, translated).

Opponents regarded the theme as a category error, arguing that emotional failure affects mental well-being and social connection without producing political violence, and that where socialisation is sound and religious ideas are correctly understood, romantic disappointment has no such effect. The disagreement here concerns the boundary between ordinary personal distress and politically directed violence, and participants on both sides articulated that boundary explicitly.

Domain III: Structural and Material Conditions

Economic precarity

Economic explanation attracted broad agreement, framed less as absolute poverty than as the gap between obligations and means. Participants repeatedly described household expenditure pressure, unemployment and the inability to meet daily needs as generating desperation that armed groups then monetise. "Terrorist groups often exploit economic hardship by offering financial support," one observed (Case 7, female). Another placed the mechanism in the pressure to provide: "even if a person is not able to meet his daily needs, he takes a wrong path to fulfil them, and that wrong path can be of any kind, even terrorism" (Case 11, male).

Two qualifications appeared. First, several participants noted that the effect is geographically uneven, being weaker where local economies offer alternative routes to income. Second, a minority denied the theme's sufficiency in strong terms: economic issues, one argued, "are not able to provoke a person to give his life" (Case 9, male). This objection identifies a real analytic problem, since financial motive explains participation in violence far better than it explains willingness to die, and the participants who raised it recognised as much.

Community environment and ecology

Participants described a spatial and ecological dimension to involvement, identifying conflict-affected areas, zones of ethnic dispute, land conflict and communities marked by exclusion as generating disproportionate risk. "The ecology of terrorism results in a breeding ground for terrorist activities, such as war-affected areas, ethnic conflicts and land disputes," one explained (Case 7, female); another situated the mechanism in socialisation, noting that "the surrounding environment changes the pattern of socialisation" (Case 3, male).

Ethnic marginalisation

Ethnic background was widely accepted as a mobilising factor, understood in terms of group identity and perceived collective injustice rather than in terms of ethnic character. Participants described marginalisation and discrimination as generating claims that armed groups then articulate: ethnic grievance "arises from group identity and perceived injustice, often leading to violence in pursuit of autonomy or recognition" (Case 1, male). Several named Balochistan directly as the domestic instance of this dynamic. A smaller number extended the analysis to caste-like hierarchies within Punjab, arguing that status injustice within apparently homogeneous populations operates similarly.

Domain IV: Political, Ideological and Mediated Drivers

Political motives and hidden agendas

Political instrumentalisation attracted very strong consensus, and participants articulated it with notable specificity. The dominant account distinguished between the stated



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objectives of violence and the interests it actually serves: political actors "use terrorist organisations for their own political benefit, but they cannot become terrorists themselves" (Case 14, male). Others described violence as a means of pressuring or discrediting governments, and several argued that ideological or religious justifications are routinely retrofitted onto what are in substance contests over power: aims such as "gaining power, control or influencing policy are frequently disguised under ideological or religious justification" (Case 7, female).

Religion as framing rather than cause

Participants overwhelmingly located religion in the domain of justification rather than motivation, and the distinction was made deliberately and repeatedly. Terrorism, in the dominant account, involves "manipulation of religious belief to justify violence" (Case 7, female) by leaders who present "a distorted interpretation of religious teaching" (Case 13, male). Several emphasised the authority structure through which such interpretations circulate, noting that religious speakers "make the mind of the society" and that communities respond according to the interpretations locally available to them (Case 14, male). Others pointed to the historical production of religiously framed militancy, with one participant identifying the statebacked mobilisation of the Afghan-Soviet war period as the origin of the religious framing now attributed to the region (Case 6, male). No participant argued that religious observance as such produces terrorism.

Revenge and enmity

Revenge was described as both a mechanism of entry and a mechanism of perpetuation, and was tied closely to institutional failure. Participants argued that enmity converts into political violence specifically where the justice system fails to provide redress: "revenge plays a vital role in terrorism if the judicial system fails to give justice" (Case 2, male). Others described the bereavement pathway: "people who lose their loved ones in terrorist incidents go into terrorism only for the sake of revenge" (Case 15, female, translated). A more analytic formulation described "a cycle of vengeance that creates a mindset where violence is justified as a means to settle scores and uphold honour" (Case 7, female). Several participants distinguished between interpersonal enmity, which they associated with ordinary crime, and enmity with state institutions, which they associated with terrorism proper.

Third-party intervention and external sponsorship

External sponsorship was widely accepted, though with more variance than other political themes. Accounts described foreign or local sponsors funding, training and inciting violence for strategic ends, and recruitment as transactional at the point of entry: sponsors "offer individuals money or other rewards to join" (Case 12, female). Several noted that attribution itself is contested, arguing that attacks are staged in order to be blamed on others, while a dissenting minority regarded the factor as marginal relative to domestic conditions (Case 6, male).

Media exposure

Media was described as operating through three distinct mechanisms, and participants separated them clearly. The first is desensitization: repeated exposure to violent content "can normalize aggression and desensitize individuals to harm" (Case 7, female). The second is instructional and promotional, with participants noting that live and recorded coverage teaches technique and confers status, and that "media glorification and coverage create misinformation that promotes extremism" (Case 3, male). The third, and the one raised most insistently, is representational: participants argued that international



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media coverage constructs Muslims as terrorists and that this representation has consequences for Muslims globally. This third mechanism is developed in Section 5.5.

The cross-cutting counter-frame: contesting the terrorist label

Running through the corpus, and appearing in response to questions that did not invite it, was a sustained argument about who gets called a terrorist and by whom. Participants asserted that the association between terrorism and Muslim identity is a media construction rather than an empirical finding: "most individuals think Muslims are the root of terrorism, but I would say that is without any solid proof" (Case 8, female). Several described the reputational consequences directly, observing that coverage "influences the negative image of Muslims" (Case 4, female).

This frame did more than register grievance. It functioned as an epistemological caution that participants applied to their own reasoning, prompting them to question the reliability of the evidence available to them and to distinguish between what they had been shown and what they could know. It also appeared to constrain expression. Several participants indicated that the fear of being profiled discourages open discussion of terrorism among students, and that the political sensitivity of the subject limits how far its causes can be examined publicly. That students should report inhibition while participating in a study about that very subject is a finding with direct implications for prevention work in educational settings.

Participants' preventive proposals

Asked what would reduce terrorism in Pakistan, participants generated proposals that were consistently structural and civil rather than coercive; no participant proposed expanded surveillance or harsher punishment as a primary remedy. The proposals clustered around consistent implementation of law and equitable distribution of resources; justice-system reform so that grievances secure redress through legitimate channels; expanded educational access and quality, with awareness programmes and seminars aimed at young people; employment creation; responsible conduct by political and religious leaders and by mass media; strengthening of both formal and informal institutions of social control; and the cultivation of tolerance as an explicit civic objective. One participant summarized the logic of the set: "inequality should be decreased, and the justice system should be maintained" (Case 12, female).

DISCUSSION

Lay theory as multi-causal theory

The most consequential finding is negative: students did not hold a single-factor theory of terrorism, and actively resisted invitations to produce one. Every participant nominated multiple factors, most specified interactions between them, and many explicitly denied that any factor operated alone. This convergence with the scholarly consensus that terrorism has no single cause (Crenshaw, 2014; Hwang, 2018) is worth stating plainly, because policy discourse frequently assumes that publics reason in monocausal terms and require simplified messaging. In this sample, the assumption was false. The students' model was not merely multi-factorial but multi-level, distributing causation across individual, relational, structural and political tiers in a manner that would be recognizable to any reader of the criminological literature.

Differential association as the organizing logic

The framework that best accounts for the corpus is Sutherland's. Four of its propositions map directly onto the strongest themes. First, the priority given to intimate personal



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groups is reproduced almost exactly in the near-consensus on peer influence and family transmission; participants located the decisive mechanism in friendship and kinship networks rather than in ideology or in individual pathology. Second, the proposition that learning includes techniques as well as motives and rationalizations is echoed in accounts of media as instructional and of groups as suppliers of justification. Third, the emphasis on an excess of definitions favourable to violation appears in the observation that peer groups operate identically in prosocial and antisocial directions, with outcome determined by the balance of definitions locally available. Fourth, the propositions concerning frequency, duration, priority and intensity are reflected in accounts stressing childhood exposure, prolonged household atmosphere and the intensity of specific relationships.

Where student accounts extend beyond differential association, they do so in the direction the theory has always been criticized for neglecting: the structural conditions determining which associations are available. Participants supplied that missing tier themselves, invoking economic precarity, community ecology, ethnic marginalization and political sponsorship as determinants of the associational field, assembling without prompting something close to an integrated learning-and-opportunity account.

The persistence and defeat of biological explanation

The biological theme yielded the corpus's clearest internal contradiction. Lombrosian imagery survived as folk knowledge and was reproduced by a minority in remarkable detail, yet it was defeated in argument within the same corpus, and often within the same interview, by participants who subordinated physical markers to upbringing. For educators this identifies a specific and tractable target: the physiognomic account of dangerousness is not merely obsolete but actively harmful, since it underwrites profiling by appearance, and it appears to be dislodged readily when students are prompted to reason about it.

Grievance, justice and the revenge pathway

The most policy-relevant convergence in the data concerns the relationship between institutional failure and violence. Participants repeatedly specified that revenge converts into terrorism where legitimate redress is unavailable, and their preventive proposals foregrounded justice reform and equitable resource distribution over coercive measures. This reasoning corresponds closely to research findings that institutional trust and procedural justice predict support for or rejection of political violence more strongly than religiosity does (Cherney & Murphy, 2019; Fair & Shepherd, 2006), and to the human security literature treating terrorism as a symptom of unmet security needs across multiple domains (Callaway & Stephens, 2006). It also converges with evidence that state repression can stimulate rather than suppress terrorism in South Asia (Chakma, 2022). The students' analysis and the empirical literature therefore point in the same direction, which strengthens the case for prevention strategies built on legitimacy rather than deterrence.

Media, representation and the securitized subject

The counter-frame identified in Section 5.5 situates these students within the critical terrorism studies literature on the racialization of the terrorism concept (Abu-Bakare, 2024; Downing et al., 2022; Feyyaz, 2016). Participants were not merely aggrieved by representation; they treated it as an epistemic problem affecting the reliability of their own knowledge. This has two implications. Analytically, it means that student accounts of terrorism in Pakistan cannot be read as unmediated perception, since they are formed



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in conscious opposition to a dominant external narrative. Practically, it means that any intervention perceived as extending that narrative to students themselves is likely to be resisted. The reports of self-censorship recorded here, from participants who nevertheless chose to take part in the study, suggest that the space for open discussion is already narrower than educators might assume. Given evidence from other jurisdictions that preventive programmes in educational settings can generate mistrust among their intended beneficiaries (Bahadur Lamb, 2014), the finding argues for prevention through open curricular engagement rather than through surveillance-adjacent mechanisms.

Implications

Four implications follow. Critical media literacy should be treated as core prevention infrastructure rather than curricular enrichment, since participants identified media as operating through desensitization, instruction and stigmatization simultaneously. Campus climate matters: a student body that reports inhibition about discussing terrorism cannot participate in its own protection. The near-consensus on peer and family mechanisms suggests that interventions targeting relational environments, including mentoring, family support and structured prosocial group activity, are better aligned with how young people understand the problem than individual risk-assessment approaches. And the linkage participants drew between unrepressed grievance and violence indicates that justice-system performance and equitable resource distribution should be treated as counter-terrorism variables rather than unrelated governance concerns.

Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations qualify these findings. The sample was small, drawn purposively from a single faculty at a single campus, and confined to senior social science students, whose disciplinary training equips them with an analytic vocabulary that other students may not share; the findings are consequently not generalizable and are best read as an account of the range and structure of explanation within this population. Interviews were conducted in an institutional setting on a politically sensitive topic, and the self-censorship participants themselves reported may have shaped what was said; extracts should be read as accounts offered in that context rather than as unmediated belief. Cross-language interviewing introduces the usual risks of translation, mitigated but not eliminated here by retention of the original-language material. Finally, the study elicits explanation, not causation: it documents how students account for terrorism, and cannot establish whether those accounts are correct.

Five directions follow. Mixed-method work combining a qualitatively derived instrument with survey measurement across multiple institutions would establish how far these themes are distributed in the wider student population. Comparative sampling across faculties, provinces and the public-private divide would test whether the explanatory structure reported here is specific to social science students in northern Punjab. Extending the design to teachers, administrators and law enforcement personnel would allow comparison of lay and institutional explanatory models, which is precisely the divergence that undermines preventive legitimacy. The self-censorship finding warrants dedicated study of the conditions under which students feel able to discuss political violence. Finally, larger datasets would support advanced analytic techniques, including machine learning approaches to pattern identification across perception measures (Chen et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study asked how Pakistani university students explain the causes of terrorism, and



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found that they explain it in much the way sociologists do. Participants rejected single-factor accounts, distributed causation across individual, relational, structural and political levels, and specified interactions among them. Peer influence, family disruption, economic precarity and political instrumentalisation attracted near-consensus. Biological determinism and emotional deprivation were openly contested, and religion was located almost unanimously in the domain of justification rather than motivation. The relational themes that dominated the corpus correspond closely to Sutherland's account of learning within intimate personal groups, while the structural themes supply the tier that differential association has traditionally underspecified. Two findings deserve emphasis: the counter-frame through which participants contested the association of terrorism with Muslim identity, applied reflexively as a caution about their own evidence; and the reported inhibition surrounding discussion of the topic, which suggests that the space for open reasoning about political violence in Pakistani universities is constrained in ways prevention policy should take seriously. Taken with the participants own preventive proposals, which were consistently structural and civil rather than coercive, the study supports an approach to prevention in higher education built on critical media literacy, procedural justice, economic opportunity and open curricular engagement, rather than on the securitization of students themselves.

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