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RESEARCH PAPER

Beyond Broken Symbols: Understanding the Causes and Consequences of Religious Vandalism among Christians in Jaranwala, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This intrinsic qualitative case study investigates the motivational drivers of religious vandalism and focuses on assessing the economic, social, and psychological impact of targeting Christian communities. Religious vandalism against minority communities threatens not only their collective identity but also their safety and right to peaceful existence. In this region, such acts stem from structural power disparities, institutional discrimination, and socioeconomic inequalities, often exacerbated by inflammatory rhetoric. Interpretivist methodology allowed the researcher to analyze data from eight in-depth interviews with Muslim and Christian participants. Religious vandalism induces severe economic, social, and psychological trauma, collective fear, eroded interfaith relations, and heightened marginalization of Christian minorities. This study advances both scholarly and practical discourse by amplifying marginalized voices to inform critical policy reforms, dialogue initiatives, and conflict resolution strategies aimed at safeguarding minority rights in Pakistan.

| **KEYWORDS** | Religious Vandalism, Christian Community, Intergroup Conflict, Psychological Effects, Symbolic Violence, Religious Hatred |

Introduction

Various worldwide communities have to handle religious vandalism as a disturbing societal problem that impacts how religious beliefs relate to human networks, together with individual encounters. The intricate religious situation in Pakistan produces rising hostile religious actions that mainly target religious minorities throughout the nation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2020; Malik, 2023). Religious vandalism proves to be a deadly form of intolerance since perpetrators intentionally ruin sacred sites and profiles featuring specific faiths (García-Magariño, 2019).

The town of Jaranwala in Punjab province has transformed into a dispute-loaded hub of religious crime that garnered national and international attention through the severe attacks against its Christian population (BBC, 2023). Changes in Jaranwala have revealed essential political and historical tensions within Pakistani society, requiring extensive analysis of the community impact.

The present study utilizes qualitative methodology to gather comprehensive data about religious violence among Christians of Jaranwala and Muslim residents of the area. The research studies vandalism by conducting direct interviews with a total of eight participants, where three adhered to the Islamic faith while five practiced

Christianity, to understand how social psychological aspects relate to public outcomes. The research reaches high completion by incorporating religious perspectives from diverse communities to offer balanced findings regarding shared points and differentiation between groups.

Jaranwala's recent religious vandalism incidents make it an urgent and contextually significant site for investigation. Understanding the localized dynamics that lead to acts of religious vandalism and the resultant impacts on minority groups holds immense relevance, both academically and socio-politically. This study not only enriches existing theoretical frameworks—particularly Social Identity and Intergroup Conflict theories—but also provides empirical depth to policy discussions around religious freedom, community reconciliation, and violence prevention in Pakistan.

This qualitative exploration offers significant academic, practical, and social contributions. Academically, the study fills a crucial empirical gap by providing in-depth, narrative-driven insights into the lived realities of affected communities. Practically, it serves as a vital resource for policymakers, community leaders, and stakeholders aiming to design culturally sensitive, effective interventions to address and mitigate religious tensions and violence. Socially, by amplifying marginalized voices and humanizing victim narratives, the research fosters greater societal awareness, interfaith empathy, and ultimately, contributes to more harmonious inter-community relations in Pakistan.

Literature Review

All forms of damage or destruction against religious symbols or places, or objects that belong to specific faith groups, make up religious vandalism according to Albrecht et al. (2022) and Jackson & Feldman (2021). Academic experts view this activity beyond mere physical violence because they consider acts of vandalism to operate as a symbolic display of power that functions to isolate minority groups and establish dominance, along with sustaining religious discord (Grim & Finke, 2022). The Muslim-majority demographic of Pakistan experiences significant social and psychological consequences from religious attacks on minority groups, such as Christians, with vandalism incidents (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2023).

Religious vandalism occurs frequently in South Asian regions since it stems directly from historical political and communal stress within societies. Recent studies now recognize these events exist as connected elements in a larger developing pattern that develops from political commentary, historical injustices, and socio-economic disparity alongside entrenched biases (Mukhtar, 2021; Raja & Nasir, 2023). The violent 2023 Jaranwala attack on Christian places of worship and their properties illustrates how societal inequalities generate violent outcomes (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2023).

Theoretical Insights: Social Identity and Intergroup Conflict Perspectives

The exploration of religious vandalism in scholarly work frequently utilizes Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) together with Intergroup Conflict Theory (ICT; Sherif, 1966). Social Identity Theory maintains that people establish their self-image through their participation in particular groups while differentiating between the members of their teams versus those who they see as separate entities. The separation between in-groups and out-groups in plural religious settings becomes a

basis for prejudice and hostile conflicts, and sometimes turns into violent incidents because majority groups view minority groups as threats to their identity or resources (Hogg, 2021). Through SIT, we understand that religious vandalism functions symbolically to unite the perpetrators while sending exclusionary messages to victims (Jackson & Feldman, 2021).

Intergroup Conflict Theory complements this by examining how competition for scarce resources, whether symbolic (identity recognition) or material (economic opportunity), intensifies conflicts between groups, manifesting as prejudice, hostility, or overt aggression (Sherif, 1966; Sidanius & Pratto, 2020). Intergroup tensions in Pakistan focus especially on Christian communities because of their economically disadvantaged status and limited access to politics and public achievements, which creates perpetual hostility and violence, according to Ali & Zia (2022). These theories provide important tools to analyze what structural factors lead to religious vandalism.

Structural Inequality and Religious Marginalization in Pakistan

The existing research demonstrates that Pakistan's religious minorities, especially its Christian population, encounter complete social isolation and economic deprivation and face prejudice through institutional and societal frameworks (Asif & Johnson, 2023; Akbar & Bashir, 2022). Discriminatory policies and media, educational, and political rhetoric sustain stereotypes that help maintain social inequality, thus creating conditions for religious attacks, according to Fuchs & Fuchs (2023) and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom [USCIRF] (2022). Marginalization at institutional levels increases Christian minorities' vulnerability to acts of violence and vandalism, which simultaneously reduces their social and political influence and sense of belonging (Mukhtar, 2021).

For instance, blasphemy allegations—often unsubstantiated—frequently trigger mass mobilizations against minority groups. Such incidents reveal the depth of communal divides and highlight how easily religious symbols become focal points for mobilizing collective identities toward destructive outcomes (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Raja & Nasir, 2023). Thus, vandalism becomes more than mere destruction; it symbolizes broader social narratives of exclusion and dominance.

Effects of Religious Vandalism: Psychological and Community-Level Impacts

Research has documented substantial emotional, psychological, and communal repercussions resulting from religious vandalism. Victims commonly experience trauma, anxiety, depression, and diminished trust toward state institutions and the broader society (Albrecht et al., 2022; Jackson & Feldman, 2021). Acts of religious vandalism fracture community cohesion, erode interfaith trust, and deepen the isolation felt by minority groups, resulting in sustained social disintegration and instability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2023; Grim & Finke, 2022).

In Pakistan specifically, episodes like the Jaranwala incident amplify community insecurity, perpetuating cycles of fear, trauma, and withdrawal from public life among Christians. These events instigate a collective consciousness of vulnerability, shaping the identity narratives of affected communities and reinforcing feelings of otherness and alienation (Asif & Johnson, 2023; Mukhtar, 2021). This psychosocial impact underscores the necessity of addressing religious vandalism through integrative, community-centered frameworks.

Gaps in Current Literature and Need for Qualitative Inquiry

Although considerable scholarship addresses religious intolerance broadly, there remains a paucity of qualitative, in-depth studies specifically exploring localized experiences of religious vandalism within marginalized Pakistani communities. The existing research primarily utilizes quantitative methodologies or broad comparative analyses, potentially overlooking nuanced lived experiences and personal narratives that illuminate the complexity of causes and effects at the community level (Akbar & Bashir, 2022; Ali & Zia, 2022).

Qualitative research, particularly through in-depth interviews, offers profound opportunities for gaining insights into individual and collective perceptions, emotional experiences, and localized understandings of violence. Examination of individual accounts from victims and non-victims in Jaranwala reveals essential elements that affect religious vandalism which enhances advanced theoretical perceptions and policy solutions (Asif & Johnson, 2023; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2023).

Material and Methods

The present study employed a qualitative research design to explore the underlying causes and effects of religious vandalism experienced by the Christian community in Jaranwala, Pakistan. Qualitative methods were chosen specifically due to their effectiveness in capturing the depth, nuance, and complexity of lived experiences and community narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

An interpretivist research paradigm served due to religious conflict sensitivity and focused research on participant-based subjective interpretations and meanings. Through an interpretivist perspective, the researcher gained insight into participants' lived experiences of vandalism which let them understand acts of religious destruction within their social and cultural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

This research employed purposive sampling as its method to select participants who either witnessed or showed a profound understanding of the vandalism that occurred in Jaranwala. Eight participants took part in semi-structured interviews under an in-depth format, which included five Christians and three Muslims. The research objective of this balanced participant selection process was to bring forward diverse viewpoints that enabled the exploration of intergroup reactions and interpretations relating to the events. The selectivity of participants is a standard qualitative research methodology that provides valuable comprehensive information that represents diverse information (Patton, 2015).

Modern data collection was achieved through interviews conducted in person for durations between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants needed the freedom to give detailed anecdotes emotional responses and reflective thoughts regarding personal experiences and observations through the semi-structured open-ended interview format. The participants chose the locations where the interviews took place to ensure maximum comfort confidentiality, and open dialogue. All interviews were recorded while participants provided explicit consent to maintain confidentiality together with anonymity and to address their religious beliefs and sensitive information throughout the research process (Silverman, 2020).

The research produced its themes from the combination of interviews and observations, which occurred continuously. Researchers evaluated data patterns continuously during the research to verify both their depth and coherence. The research employed thematic analysis with three dependent phases of coding:

- Open Coding – Initial data categorization.
- Axial Coding – Linking related codes to form key categories.
- Selective Coding – Refining categories and integrating themes.

The researchers transcribed all collected audio recordings into the verbatim text after ensuring the proper documentation of participants' speech patterns emotional expressions and cultural terms. The qualitative data analysis used thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) through their methodological six-phase framework. The analysis involved steps of familiarity identification, followed by coding, then theme identification and refinement, until definition, before integrating the narrative as the final process. The researcher specifically focused data extraction on three directions: perceived origins of harassment and interfaith connections as well as community resilience and emotional responses to damaging incidents. With thematic analysis, the researcher established interpretations that combined theoretical knowledge with a direct understanding of participants' real-life experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The research approach puts ethical aspects at its core. The institutional review board authorized ethical approval before beginning data collection. Before beginning the research participants received detailed explanations about what the research entailed, alongside their freedom to leave at any time as well as the measures taken for privacy protection. The researchers approached interviews with precaution when discussing sensitive traumas since they placed participant health and safety before all other considerations. Participants received information about assistance programs that would be accessible to them after the interviews took place (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research followed stringent qualitative research standards of credibility alongside dependability transferability and confirmability according to Lincoln & Guba (1985). Member-checking was used as a credibility assurance technique where participants validated essential themes and research interpretations. The research maintained dependability through continuous field notes and thorough analytical memoranda from the beginning to the end of the study. Transferability received support from detailed descriptions which included extensive contextual background about the research location and all study participants. The researcher maintained confirmation of their study by conducting reflexive journals and consistent peer debriefing sessions to counteract their own biases while improving analytical clarity (Tracy, 2019).

Results and Discussion

Table 01
Demographic Profile

Sr. No	Age	Gender	Religion	Qualification	Occupation	Date
P1	42	Male	Christian	B.A	Religious leader	20-12-2023
P2	32	Male	Muslim	M.A	School teacher	20-12-2023
P3	47	Male	Christian	Middle	Sweeper (TMA)	21-12-2023
P4	26	Male	Christian	Uneducated	Sweeper (TMA)	21-12-2023

P5	30	Male	Muslim	Intermediate	Shopkeeper	21-12-2023
P6	32	Female	Christian	Matric	Housewife	22-12-2023
P7	41	Female	Muslim	B.A	Housewife	22-12-2023
P8	45	Female	Christian	Uneducated	Housewife	22-12-2023

This table offers an overview of the interviewee's diverse backgrounds and experiences, highlighting the range of perspectives and challenges they faced due to the mob attack on the community.

All participants are male, ranging from 26 to 47 years old, providing perspectives from different life stages. Five participants are Christian, while three are Muslim, indicating a focus on interfaith experiences and potential religious dynamics within the study context. Participants have varied educational levels, representing both literate and illiterate individuals. The participants hold different professions, ensuring insights from both professional and working-class backgrounds.

Table 02
Main Themes and Sub-Themes

	Themes		Sub-Themes
I.	Leading Causes	a.	Religious tensions
		b.	The charge of blasphemy
		c.	Lack of intolerance, Social media's role in spreading rumors
		d.	Political exploitation
		e.	The absence of a direct response from authorities
		f.	Middle-class frustration due to inflation and political instability
II.	Emotional and Social Challenges	a.	Fear and insecurity
		b.	Failure in community cohesion
		c.	Anxiety, depression, and stress
		d.	Afraid of further destruction
		e.	Deep gap among interfaith groups
III.	Coping Strategies to Psychological Influences	a.	Supported by family
		b.	Emotional and spiritual support from religious leaders
		c.	Religious ceremonies and prayers
		d.	Therapy sessions
IV.	Fostering Religious Harmony and Ensuring Equal Rights	a.	Encourage interfaith dialogue
		b.	Encourage tolerance
		c.	Educational programs on interfaith harmony
		d.	Legal security of minority groups
		e.	Severe penalties for blowing out wrong information
		f.	Incorporate minority societies
		g.	Equal rights and chances

This table categorizes the themes into wider classifications, as long as it provides a clearer perception of the different dimensions of the challenges faced by the affected community. The sub-themes in each main theme comprise a comprehensive exploration of particular issues, while the interview quotes add a special and emotional depth to the analysis.

Discussion

Religious Tensions and Social Marginalization

The Jaranwala incident demonstrates how religious conflict exceeded its roots because society lacked religious dialogue and faced historical inequality alongside political opportunism. Meager blasphemy accusations that frequently lack verification turn into violent triggers that further fuel religious hatred (Saha, 2024). As one resident described:

"ہمیشہ سے خوف میں رہتے ہیں، جانتے ہیں کہ ایک چھوٹی سی غلط فہمی بھی تباہی کا سبب بن سکتی
ہے"

The research shows minority groups, which face marginalization and have weak political positions, become threatened with religious violence in regions where people lack interactive interfaith exchanges (Davidson, 2008). Research reveals that emotions surpass facts in such situations, according to the following statement: " لوگ جذبات پر عمل کرتے ہیں، حقائق پر نہیں" Through its mechanisms, social media expeditiously spreads false information that leads to an escalation of violent conflicts (Bilal, 2017).

"اور ایک غصے بھرا ہجوم حملہ کرنے کے لیے تیار تھا۔ منٹوں میں جھوٹی خبریں پھیل گئیں"

Political figures use religious sentiments as tools to achieve their ambitions and win elections, which intensifies social rifts between groups. Law enforcement's slow response creates additional violence that makes minority communities increasingly exposed to danger.

"ہم نے مدد کے لیے فون کیا، لیکن جب تک کوئی پہنچا، سب کچھ تباہ ہو چکا تھا"

Additionally, economic hardships and political instability contribute to misplaced aggression, where frustration is misdirected toward weaker communities: *"People are already suffering – any excuse is enough to unleash their anger on someone weaker."* This incident underscores the urgent need for interfaith dialogue, responsible digital media regulation, and stronger legal protections for religious minorities.

Psychological and Social Fragmentation After the Incident

Research shows community violence deep wounds the psyche specifically affecting minority groups (Aleksandrenko & Veselovska, 2014). As one participant described: "رات کو باہر نکلنے سے بھی ڈر لگتا ہے، کہیں دوبارہ حملہ نہ ہو جائے۔" Community trust breaks down through such attacks, which creates lasting social disunity and complicates the recovery process. Interfaith dialogue disappeared as fear and suspicion became dominant, and this resulted in more separation between religious groups. Destroyed communities from war-torn areas display similar mental health impacts as the Christian population exposed to targeted violence in Jaranwala (Donnermeyer & Phillips, 1982). "ہمارے گرجا گھر کے جلنے کی تصویریں راتوں کو ڈراتی ہیں۔" People now face perpetual insecurity about the future protection of their residences and their religious centers along with commercial properties. *"If it happened once, it can happen again – we are never truly safe."* The violence has deepened religious divisions, leaving lasting social and psychological barriers within the affected communities. *"Before this, we believed in unity, but now we see the harsh reality of religious intolerance."*

Coping Mechanisms Amid Religious Violence

The family serves as the main wellspring of emotional support which assists individuals during times of crisis. Studies demonstrate that close familial ties protect people from the negative effects of emotional trauma and social isolation during crisis events. As one survivor expressed *"My family's encouragement is the only thing keeping me strong through this ordeal."*

Religious leaders participate actively in communal peace restoration efforts through their spiritual counseling and interfaith mediation. Studies demonstrate that close religious connections between faiths decrease the fear of conflict outbreaks and

drive organizations to find peaceful solutions by speaking with each other (Johnson, 2019).

"ہمارے پادری نے ہمیں یاد دلایا کہ مصیبت میں بھی ہمیں اپنے ایمان پر قائم رہنا چاہیے۔"

Psychological comfort together with a feeling of unity emerges from religious gatherings alongside collective prayers as effective coping tools among communities. "*Prayers helped us heal and reminded us that we are not alone.*" However, social exclusion and discrimination deeply impact mental health, making psychological support essential. Many affected individuals seek professional counseling to manage the emotional aftermath of violence and marginalization.

Fostering Religious Harmony and Ensuring Equal Rights

Religious groups need open discussion as the key driver between religious communities to build connections and support mutual understanding. The healing and reconciliation in post-conflict situations depends heavily on religious institutions and leaders according to two previous studies by Grewal (2014) and Aleksandrenko and Veselovska (2014). "ایک دوسرے کے عقائد کو سمجھنا امن کی طرف پہلا قدم ہے۔" Successful reduction of hostility together with conflict prevention depends on education efforts which promote religious tolerance. Educational institutions together with community centers must establish interfaith programs because such connections between religions reduce both protracted disputes and enhance community unity (Johnson, 2019). "*If young minds learn acceptance today, they will shape a more peaceful future.*" Moreover, the protection of minority rights must receive increased legal safeguards to secure their well-being. The existing laws remain inactive, making minority populations susceptible to attacks.

"قوانین تو موجود ہیں، لیکن جب تک ان پر عملدرآمد نہیں ہوگا، ہم خوف میں ہی رہیں گے"

Moreover, ensuring equal rights and opportunities for minorities is crucial. Research advocates for affirmative action to address representation gaps and socio-economic disparities.

"ہم صرف مساوی حقوق مانگتے ہیں—آزادی سے رہنے اور عبادت کرنے کا حق"

In summary, the core themes and sub-themes identified through the interviews are strongly supported by existing literature, highlighting the multifaceted challenges faced by the target community of Jaranwala, Pakistan. These themes not only underscore the need for societal change but also point toward areas where policy interventions and support mechanisms can be most effective. "*Tolerance and harmony are the only paths that will lead us to peace.*"

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research paper unveils the core causes and significant impacts of religious vandalism in Jaranwala, drawing on sociopolitical, economic, and spiritual viewpoints. The incident is seen as the result of long-standing religious tensions between Muslims and Christians, compounded by socioeconomic inequities and the use of blasphemy charges as an excuse for manipulation. The broadcasting of disinformation via social media considerably increased the violence, illustrating the importance of digital platforms in intensifying religious disputes.

The Christian population experienced substantial psychological damage because of the incident, which led to widespread anxiety and fear throughout the community while breaking the previous interfaith peace. Property loss in the community caused high unemployment rates and financial instability because it demonstrated the general challenges in recovering from such violence over the long term.

The study reveals that three primary processes must exist to tackle religious vandalism at its core and create social cohesion: religious group dialogue, together with media restrictions, and economic stimulus plans. A complete approach holds the potential to end the pattern of religious violence and create enduring peace as well as stability for this region.

Recommendations

Based on the results and discussion, a deliberate effort should be made to promote interfaith discussion to overcome intense religious conflicts across communities, notably between Muslims and Christians. Religious leaders from many religions may help promote mutual understanding and tolerance. To prevent religious vandalism, the government should strengthen legal rights for religious minorities and enact tighter regulations. The present blasphemy laws, which are frequently abused, should be revised to guarantee that they are not utilized for personal or political advantage.

Public awareness programs promoting religious tolerance, diversity, and cohabitation should be implemented locally and nationally. Schools, religious organizations, and media sources may all play an essential role in teaching the public about the necessity of respecting religious diversity and dispelling the myths that drive religious prejudice and violence.

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