

FROM SECTARIAN LABELS TO UMMAH IDENTITY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC SCHOLARS' INSTAGRAM REELS

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Abstract

Sectarian labels have long been a part of the religious identity debate in Pakistan. With Instagram Reels becoming a prominent platform of religious communication, the contemporary Muslim scholars increasingly use short form video to frame "Muslim identity" beyond the naming of sects. This shift needs to be critically examined as it may shape how young audiences are viewing unity, difference and religious authority. This study focuses on how the Pakistan-based Islamic scholars reconstruct the Ummah-centered identity through Instagram Reels and how they discursively diminish or reframe sectarian boundaries. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with the multi-model lens, the study is based on the 30 sample of Instagram Reels from Sahil Adeem, Sheikh Atif Ahmed, Dr Waseem, Dr Hammad Lakhvi, Muhammad Ali and archival/reposted clips of Dr Israr Ahmad. Data include video speech, captions, on-screen text, hashtags and selected high engagement comments. Fairclough's three-dimensional model is used to analysis the three levels: textual features (wording, pronouns, evaluations), discursive practice (reel format, citation of sources, audience interaction), and social practice (sectarian history and authority, and digital religiosity in Pakistan). Thematic coding is applied to the mapping of recurrent identity frames and strategies. The analysis reveals that unity is built on (i) inclusive "we/ummah" language, (ii) de-labelling movements highlighting "Muslim" vs. sect names, (iii) moral judgment involving characterization of sectarian conflict as fitnah and ego-driven, and (iv) authority grounding expressed through Qur'an/Sunnah referencing and reformist appeal to "core" Islam. However, comment sections often bring up sectarian positioning once again, demonstrating that unity discourse is accepted by some audiences but contested by a few. Instagram Reels allow scholars to enact an idealized and emotionally resonant Ummah identity, however platform dynamics and the polarization of audiences can reproduce boundaries the reels aim to soften. Religious communicators should pair unity messaging with a defined set of ethical standards for disagreement (*adab al-ikhtilaf*) and moderation in sectarian provocation. Future research could compare the unity discourse among scholars across platforms and examine the effects of this on youth attitudes through interviews or surveys.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Instagram Reels, Ummah identity, Sectarianism.

Introduction

Sectarian labels have long shaped religious identity debates in Pakistan by marking boundaries of belonging, credibility, and interpretive authority. These labels are not neutral descriptors; they function as social boundary markers through which speakers and audiences position themselves and others, often with implications for inclusion, exclusion, and legitimacy. In the

digital media, this boundary work is taking a different form, as it is increasingly spread via platform-based communication where religious messages are marketed for visibility, engagement and quick sharing. Studies on digital religion focuses on the fact that online spaces do not merely "host" religious talk; they restructure the ways religious knowledge is made, legitimized and contested as part of struggles over authority as well as audience response (Zaid et al., 2022). These platforms have allowed religious speakers to broadcast outside of traditional gatekeepers and position narratives of identity in a media-savvy and attention economy and platform norms (Febrian, 2024; Zaid et al., 2022).

Instagram is one of the most notable sites where Islamic identity and community are publicly performed through mediated forms (e.g. captions, hashtags, and interactive engagement). Recent studies on Islam and digital technology discusses the growing importance of social media, such as Instagram, in the development of Muslim identity and its discussion on the internet (Wahid, 2024). Yet the new platform moment is being dominated by shorter forms of video content, specifically Instagram Reels, for fast, rapid consumption, affect and algorithmic circulation. These affordances foster shrunken messaging that is dependent on good hooks, moral appraisal and memorable identity cues. Research on Reels usage has indicated that the structure of attention, entertainment, and social interaction motivation, which is the engagement, suggests that Reels are a separate ecosystem of attention rather than a simple extension of the past Instagram practices (Menon, 2022). For religious communication, this is important because short form video condenses complex theologies and identity questions into small units of narrative that are reinforced by the use of captions, on-screen text, and repost practices.

In Pakistan, the platforming of religion has been documented as transforming religious authority and religious subjectivity, especially among youth audiences gaining more access to religious reminders and arguments via social media routines. Researches on digital religious environments in Pakistan reveal the ways that online platforms can reconfigure the forms of religious teaching into the forms acceptable to the platform and complicate established authority relations, raising the questions of persuasion, credibility, and formation of pious subjectivities under digital conditions (Salam-Salmaoui et al., 2025). Related media Studies proves that religious communicators also use strategic media techniques to maintain attention and increase reach, reinforcing the need for studying preaching as a mediated practice as opposed to a simple transfer of offline sermon culture (Tabassum & Riaz, 2024).

This focus is timely because the sectarian discourse continues to be socially consequential and persist in Pakistan on the digital platform. Sectarian identity is not reducible to a level of online expression, however, social media environments can enhance making of boundaries in terms of polarized exchanges, the use of labelling practices, and antagonistic framing. Computational research on Urdu social media has identified inter-faith, sectarian, and ethnic hateful expression as a significant concern, demonstrating both the presence of such content and the need for systematic approaches to understand its patterns (Akram et al., 2023). Even when creators foreground unity, interactive comment spaces can reintroduce sectarian positioning through identity policing, demands for doctrinal alignment, or delegitimizing labels. In this way, platform interaction becomes part of the communicative event through which religious identity is negotiated.

This study examines how Pakistan-based Islamic scholars use Instagram Reels to reconstruct Muslim identity through an Ummah-centered frame that seeks to reduce the salience of sectarian labels. Rather than treating sect naming as the primary marker of belonging, scholars in the dataset frequently foreground "Muslim" and "Ummah" as preferred identity categories and represent sectarian conflict as morally and socially harmful. This matters because it shapes

how unity, difference, and religious authority are framed for audiences (especially youth), who encounter religious messages through brief, emotionally resonant clips embedded in everyday scrolling routines. The concern is not only what scholars say, but how Reels as a format (through multimodal cues such as voice, captions, on-screen text, hashtags, and visible interaction) supports particular identity framings and enables specific audience responses.

Literature Review

Sectarian labelling, identity, and boundary-making in Pakistan

Sectarian identity in Pakistan is not only a matter of theological difference; it also functions as a social boundary that shapes everyday judgements of credibility, belonging, and religious legitimacy. Empirical work treats sectarian intolerance as a measurable attitude linked to prejudice and exclusion across sect lines (Shahzad et al., 2022). For the present study this is important because sectarian labelling is not neutral description but rather works as a boundary marker through which religious speakers are authorized or delegitimized in public discourse. In digital environments, boundary-making can be more visible and interactive as audiences publicly signal a sense of alignment, endorsement and rejection through the use of comments and reply chains.

Pakistan-focused research has also shown that sectarian antagonism exists online, with polarizing and hate-oriented narratives circulating online. Studies of sectarian hate speech point to the fact that social media spaces, Instagram among them, can enable antagonistic messaging and fast labelling and mobilizations that makes it necessary to explore how sectarian positioning is reproduced and challenged in platform interaction (Haider, 2025). Taken together, this literature reveals that sectarian talk continues to be socio-cultural consequential, and that digital spaces can be places in which boundaries are reiterated, challenged, or strategy softened.

The digital religion and religious authority platforming

Digital religion Studies show how online media remediate claims, circulation and valuation of religious authority. Research that focuses on Islam and digital technology underscores that "digital Islam" and notions such as a "digital Ummah" have become a key element in modern debates, as the process of Muslim identity and community is increasingly mediated through digital infrastructures and everyday online practices (Wahid, 2024). In Pakistan, as preliminary work is emerging, it is now evident that digital platforms are not simply a way to preach; they can contribute to the construction of Islamic subjectivity through platform-specific strategies, mediated instruction and new forms of authority performance (Salam-Salmiwa et al., 2025). This enhances the reasons for studying Reels as sites where authority is exercised in conditions of visibility, brevity and audience feedback.

The youth dimension is especially relevant as young audiences in particular are increasingly looking for religious knowledge online and will form impressions of religious speakers based on narratives on the platforms, including indicators related to the difference between sects and legitimacy claims (Baig Mughal et al., 2023). This establishes a direct connection to the present study's concern: unity-oriented discourse on Reels may affect the way that viewers understand Muslim identity, difference and authority in everyday short-form consumption.

Affordances of short form video and engagement logics

Instagram Reels are influenced by brevity, vertical aesthetics, fast-paced and algorithmic circulation. These features promote the use of condensed, affective and rhetorically pointed communication. Uses-and-gratifications studies have suggested that Reels' engagement is motivated by factors such as entertainment, novelty, surveillance, and socially rewarding self-presentation, implying that Reels function as a unique environment of attention rather than a passive space of viewing (Menon, 2022). While this literature is not specific to religion, it helps

to explain why religious messaging may be reformatted into short unity stories, designed to "land" quickly and travel through captions, on-screen text and repost practices.

A related concern is the use of algorithmic curation and engagement-based ranking can have an influence on repeated exposure and possibly reward polarizing interaction. Experimental research shows that algorithmically curated environments can affect patterns of exposure, as well as preference, and can interact with preference-consistent content in ways that reinforce polarization (Kelm et al., 2023). Although the present study does not test for the effects of algorithms, these findings help put the question in perspective as to why unity-oriented creator discourse could be compatible with comment layer contestation, where the use of identity policing and re-labelling may continue to be salient.

CDA of online religious discourse and multimodality

CDA examines how power, ideology, and social relations are enacted through language in context. In digital religion research, CDA has been used to analyze how preachers frame issues, mobilize moral evaluation, and construct collective identities in online discourse. For example, corpus-based CDA of Muslim preachers' social media messaging shows how ideological patterns and persuasive strategies are embedded in routine religious communication (Hamouda et al., 2023). This is directly relevant because unity and sectarian boundary management are not simply "topics"; they are discursive accomplishments realized through pronoun choices, evaluation, modality, intertextual citation, and the positioning of audiences.

Fairclough's three-dimensional model is particularly suitable for short-form video because it connects micro textual choices to discursive practices of production and consumption and to wider socio-historical contexts (Fairclough, 1992). Applied to Instagram Reels, it enables analysis of (i) textual features such as collectivizing "we/Ummah" language, de-labelling moves, and moral judgement, (ii) discursive practice such as reel formatting, citation cues, and comment interaction, and (iii) social practice including sectarian history, authority contestation, and platformed religiosity in Pakistan.

Synthesis and gap statement

Existing literature shows that sectarian identity remains socially significant in Pakistan and that digital platforms can intensify boundary-making and authority contestations. At the same time, Studies on digital Islam points to the emergence of broader communal imaginaries such as the Ummah under platform conditions (Wahid, 2024). However, there is limited focused work on how Pakistan-based Islamic speakers use Instagram Reels to discursively reposition Muslim identity beyond sect naming, and how this unity discourse is received, contested, or re-sectarianized within high-engagement comment spaces. Addressing this gap, the present study applies Fairclough's CDA to a multimodal dataset of Reels and comments to explain how unity frames are constructed and how platformed reception can reintroduce sectarian positioning.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with a multimodal lens to examine how Pakistan-based Islamic scholars construct an Ummah-centered Muslim identity and soften sectarian boundaries in short-form religious communication, guided by Fairclough's three-dimensional model linking textual features, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 1992). The corpus comprises 30 purposively selected Instagram Reels posted or reposted within the last three months from Sahil Adeem, Shaykh Atif Ahmed, Dr Waseem, Dr Hammad Lakhvi, Muhammad Ali, and archival/reposted clips of Dr Israr Ahmad, selected where unity and boundary themes were explicit or strongly implied (e.g., Ummah framing, "Muslim first" positioning, fitnah moralization, and ethics of disagreement). Each Reel was treated as a communicative event integrating speech with captions, on-screen text, hashtags, and audience interaction; spoken content was transcribed, with Urdu/Arabic expressions

transliterated and glossed. Reception was examined through a consistent comment-sampling rule: for each Reel, the top 10 comments by likes and the first 10 comments in chronological order (where visible at capture) were collected, focusing on unity endorsement, re-labelling, escalation, and authority challenges. The analysis combined thematic coding with interpretive mapping to Fairclough's levels, and public commenters were anonymized with identifying details paraphrased to reduce traceability.

Findings and Analysis

This section reports recurrent identity frames and discursive strategies across the 30-item corpus (Table 1). Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, the analysis connects textual features (lexis, pronouns, evaluation, modality), discursive practice (short-form conventions such as hooks, compression, captioning/on-screen text, citation cues, and audience address), and social practice (Pakistan's sectarian history, authority contestation, and platformed religiosity) (Fairclough, 1992). Clip IDs are used to maintain an audit trail between claims and corpus items.

| ID | Scholar | Clip title / descriptor (short) | Tags (core criteria) | Metadata keywords | Link |
|-------|-------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|---|
| SA-01 | | Unity / Ummah theme clip | Ummah | unity, ummah | [Shttps://www.instagram.com/reel/C8-uHWINr63/?igsh=d2k1ZGR4N2Rs] |
| SA-02 | | "Fractured Ummah" framing | Ummah; Moral eval | fractured, unity | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHYsvwtbkm/?igsh=MWl6YTdibXAYZTZ6cw==)] |
| SA-03 | Sahil Adeem | "To unite the Ummah..." | Ummah; Discursive practice | unite, ummah | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DS6SMrJAWkF/?igsh=ZHAxd2ZmcW84dzdh] |
| SA-04 | | "Be Unite Ummah" | Ummah | unite, ummah | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/Dlbn_bmsNJg/?igsh=eDE3eDZqYnloMHQ0] |
| SA-05 | | "Debunking Muslim sects" | De-labelling; Moral eval | sects, firqa | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIovBk8A0gY/?igsh=c2g0bnFxaHVjd2V2] |
| AA-01 | Shaykh Atif Ahmed | "Lives for the Ummah..." | Ummah; Authority | ummah | https://youtu.be/o1hwZ1y7Riw |
| AA-02 | Ahmed | "Firqa Parast" | De-labelling; Moral eval | firqa, parast | https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cw21bG3t03M/?igsh=MTB0ZXEycXUzaWM2OA== |

| | | | | | |
|-------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|---|
| AA-03 | | “Ikhtilaf/Hasad/Munafiqat” | Moral eval | ikhtilaf, hasad | [] https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGDyV3VoNOQ/?igsh=dnh3Z2ExODRmcHp0 |
| AA-04 | | “Firqa wariyat...” | De-labelling; Authority | firqa, shariyat | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DESfaXgpdnq/?igsh=MTV6aHRhZDV3NjB2bQ==] |
| AA-05 | | Norm-setting reminder (adab tone) | Discursive practice | advice, behaviour | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/CryV-dVgaPJ/?igsh=MWY2dXA0bnA4aXMw] |
| HL-01 | | “Khair-ul-Umam” | Ummah; Authority | ummah, khair | https://youtu.be/N-ozPFKGJG8 |
| HL-02 | | “Jannati firqa?” | De-labelling; Authority | firqa, jannati | https://youtu.be/OSk85aCsw8 |
| HL-03 | Dr Hammad Lakhvi | “Fitna...” prevention | Moral eval; Authority | fitna | [] https://www.instagram.com/reel/DTSdg1bjDG1/?igsh=MXd0OTF0NzR0bGNIMQ== |
| HL-04 | | “Biggest fitna...” | Moral eval | fitna | https://www.instagram.com/reel/DEkiR_5NVkd/?igsh=dWMYdjV3djRmNHpj |
| HL-05 | | “Ummat-e-Muhammadiya...” | Ummah; Authority | ummah, afzal | https://youtu.be/nfHd2wybp10 |
| MA-01 | | “If insulted, keep quiet” | Discursive practice; Moral eval | sabr, silence | https://youtu.be/w9umTDa6Ing |
| MA-02 | Muhammad Ali | “Trust Allah” | Authority; Moral eval | tawakkul, Allah | https://youtu.be/ZA99-Q0rfl8 |
| MA-03 | | “Love of Allah” | Authority | Allah, love | https://youtu.be/Sva0ZeXefDk |
| MA-04 | | “Fitna-e-Dajjal...” | Moral eval; Authority | fitna, dajjal | https://youtu.be/NHLkByk7ScY |
| MA-05 | | Surah Kahf / fitna framing | Authority; Moral eval | surah kahf, fitna | https://youtu.be/YtvPP9fDwIU |
| IA-01 | Dr Israr Ahmad (archival) | “Revive the Ummah” | Ummah; Moral eval | revive, ummah | [] https://www.instagram.com/p/CdNl_y9OT3B/?igsh=MW8zamxxOTkwaGowag== |

| | | | | | |
|-------|--------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------|---|
| IA-02 | | “Unity of Muslim Ummah” | Ummah | unity, ummah | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cj7bJHG Lr8j/?igsh=MWtwZHdvOHE4eDR2cg==] |
| IA-03 | | “How Unity is possible” | Ummah; Discursive practice | unity | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cj7bJHGLr8j/?igsh=MWtwZHdvOHE4eDR2cg==] |
| IA-04 | | “A big fitna...” | Moral eval | fitna | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DOWeZq8iFVC/?igsh=MTJ2d3hjOTl6dzNicg==] |
| IA-05 | | “Fitna-e-Dajjal” | Moral eval; Authority | fitna, dajjal | [https://www.instagram.com/reel/DSCwgOjjV8w/?igsh=MWUzbTEzZGdkaGVqMw==] |
| DW-01 | | Islamic reminder (Ummah/dua cue) | Ummah; Authority | ummah, dua | https://youtu.be/NkSwa36DDAM |
| DW-02 | Dr | Aakhirat / yaqeen reminder | Authority; Moral eval | aakhirat, yaqeen | https://youtu.be/c02XyonZ5p0 |
| DW-03 | Waseem | “Allah ne yaad kiya...” | Authority | Allah | https://youtu.be/RAv8MsoSak8 |
| DW-04 | | “Ilm aur Amal” | Authority; Moral eval | ilm, amal | https://youtu.be/K0o3df-GZV4 |
| DW-05 | | Youth Club-style reminder | Discursive practice | youth, reminder | https://youtu.be/VivA6x8zR-Q |

**Table lists dataset identifiers (ID, speaker, brief descriptor, access link); analytical categories are treated as coding outputs and are discussed in the findings.*

Inclusive collectivization and the “Ummah/We” frame

A dominant pattern across the corpus is **collectivization**, where “Muslim” and “Ummah” are foregrounded as superordinate identity categories. At the textual level, speakers frequently rely on inclusive pronouns and collective address (“we”, “our”, “Ummah”) to present unity as a shared obligation rather than an optional preference (e.g., SA-01–SA-04; IA-01–IA-03). This collectivizing register is typically accompanied by elevated moral vocabulary attached to the collective (e.g., “unity”, “revival”, “one body”), which positions Muslim community as an ethical ideal. At the level of discursive practice, the short-form format amplifies this strategy through headline-like phrasing that is reinforced by captions and on-screen text, enabling the unity cue to remain salient even when viewers watch without sound or scroll rapidly. At the social-practice level, Ummah-centered collectivization functions as an attempt to reduce the salience of sub-sect boundaries in a context where sectarian labels can trigger distrust and

exclusion; unity is presented as a stabilizing moral stance within an environment of historically charged boundary-making.

De-labelling and boundary softening (anti-firqa positioning)

A second recurring strategy is **de-labelling**, where sect naming is discouraged, downgraded, or represented as religiously unhelpful and socially damaging. Textually, this appears through the direct problematization of “firqa/sects” and the negative labelling of sect attachment (e.g., “firqa-parast”), alongside a corrective reclassification in which “Muslim” is positioned as the preferred identity term (SA-05; AA-02; AA-04; HL-02). In discursive-practice terms, de-labelling is often delivered in a compact argumentative sequence suited to short-form video: a clear claim, a moral judgement, and a concluding corrective (“Muslim first”/avoid sect fixation). Such packaging works as an engagement-friendly stance-taking move—easy to quote, repost, and contest—without requiring extended doctrinal exposition. At the social-practice level, de-labelling operates as an intervention into everyday sectarian common sense by disciplining the language through which boundaries are invoked. Yet, because sect identity is embedded in social institutions and histories, this boundary-softening remains contested, particularly in interactive spaces where audiences can reassert labels.

Moral evaluation: sectarian conflict framed as fitnah, ego, and harm

A third pattern is the **moralization of sectarian conflict** through negative evaluation, most visibly indexed through fitnah language and related moral vocabulary. At the textual level, sectarian division is repeatedly framed not as a routine difference but as an ethical failure tied to ego, envy, and corruption of religious intent (HL-03; HL-04; MA-04; MA-05; IA-04; IA-05; AA-03). This evaluative framing shifts the issue from doctrinal disagreement to moral danger, which strengthens the persuasive force of unity claims. At the discursive-practice level, moral evaluation becomes an affective device: short clips heighten urgency through compressed causality (“division comes from fitnah/ego”) and direct the viewer toward a desired stance (restraint, humility, unity). Where norm-setting cues are explicit (e.g., sabr, silence, avoidance of escalation), they operate as behavioral pathways by which unity is made practical rather than merely symbolic (MA-01; MA-05). At the level of social practices, fitnah framing makes sense in a broader context in which sectarian tension is experienced as socially destabilizing; and it allows speakers to delegitimize the work of boundary hardening while presenting themselves as ethical arbiters in an environment of polarized religious context.

Authority grounding through Qur’an/Sunnah orientation and “core Islam” appeals

Across the corpus, unity talk is repeatedly legitimized through **religious evidentiality**, signaling that unity is not personal opinion but anchored in recognizable Islamic sources and normative registers. Textually, authority is performed through scripture-oriented cues (Qur’an/Sunnah referencing, piety lexicon, eschatological reminders) and high-certainty modality that frames unity as an obligation rather than a negotiable stance (AA-01; AA-04; HL-01; HL-03; HL-05; MA-02; MA-04; IA-05; DW-01–DW-04). At the discursive-practice level, short-form authority is built through condensed legitimization: brief claims gain force via intertextual cues and familiar doctrinal reminders (e.g., tawakkul, aakhirat, ilm-o-amal), allowing the speaker to appear aligned with foundational Islam while avoiding extended jurisprudential debate. In macro terms, this authority posture is significant in Pakistan’s crowded religious marketplace: by grounding unity discourse in Qur’an/Sunnah orientation and reformist “core Islam” appeals, speakers position themselves as guardians of foundational Islam rather than representatives of a sub-sect, thereby attempting to speak above sect boundaries.

Reception and contestation: re-sectionalization in audience interaction

A final, cross-cutting finding concerns **reception**, where comment-layer interaction frequently reintroduces sectarian positioning despite creator-led boundary softening. At the textual level, sampled comments often perform identity policing by demanding sect identification, testing doctrinal alignment, or challenging the speaker's legitimacy through *maslak*-based cues and boundary claims (e.g., "which *firqa* is correct?" / "this contradicts our *maslak*" moves). At the discursive-practice level, comment sections are participatory spaces in which viewers remediate and challenge the framing of the clip, creating counterclaims that may take attention away from unity and focus on enforcing boundaries. Even if the clip explicitly discourages sect naming (as in de-labelling items), the interactional layer may recreate the very labels which are being problematized. At the social-practice level, this pattern reflects the durability of sect boundaries in Pakistan's religious public sphere: unity discourse does not simply replace sectarian logics; it competes with them in a platform environment where public stance-taking and contestation are structurally enabled. Consequently, the same communicative event can simultaneously stage an idealized Ummah identity and reveal the persistence of sect-based boundary work through audience response.

Discussion

This study examined how Pakistan-based Islamic scholars use short-form video to foreground an Ummah-centered Muslim identity while reducing the salience of sectarian labels. Across the corpus, unity is constructed through four linked strategies: inclusive collectivization ("we/Ummah"), de-labelling that problematizes *firqa* naming, moral evaluation that frames sectarian conflict as *fitnah* and ego-driven harm, and authority grounding through Qur'an/Sunnah-oriented claims and reformist appeals to "core" Islam. Read through Fairclough's model, these strategies show how unity is produced through connected levels of textual choice, platformed communication practice, and the socio-historical context in which sectarian categories remain meaningful (Fairclough, 1992).

A key implication is that Ummah identity on short-form video is not simply asserted; it is *formatted for circulation*. The reels encourages compressed moral reasoning, high-certainty statements and memorable cues, which are reinforced by captive whimsy of captions, on-screen text and hashtags. This is in support of broader arguments that social platforms have become central sites in which the narratives of Islamic identity and community are negotiated, while at the same time emphasizing the performance of unity as a moral stance rather than something that is consumed as a doctrinal discussion (Wahid, 2024).

At the same time, the results indicate a dynamic tension between boundary softening by the creator and reassertion of boundaries by the audience. Even in situations where speakers might discourage the naming of sects, it is observed that comment spaces usually rediscover the use of sectarian positioning in the form of identity policing, the challenge of legitimacy and/or calls for doctrinal alignment. This indeed rings true, as a range of evidence shows religious social media's power of both expanding exposure and deepening work of in-group boundaries between people, causing polarized confrontations instead of stable conversation (Haq & Kwok, 2024). The interpretive claim is, then, not so much that unity discourse fails, but, rather, that it competes with durable logics of identity which reemerge in participative interaction.

Although this study did not measure algorithmic effects, this pattern of unity messaging together with comment escalation is in line with findings from Studies that find that the engagement-oriented ranking of conflictual interaction may increase the visibility of conflictual interaction and strengthen the dynamics of polarization (Bojic, 2024; Stray, 2021). This cautions against treating unity discourse as independent of platform reception structures:

what becomes salient is shaped not only by what is said but also by how audiences respond and what interaction is amplified.

Finally, the findings clarify how authority is negotiated in Pakistan's digital religious sphere. Scholars legitimize unity by anchoring it in scripture-oriented cues and moral ordering, positioning themselves as arbiters who can speak above sect labels; however, comment-layer contestation indicates that authority remains unsettled and open to audience testing through sect-based credibility checks.

Conclusion

Using multimodal CDA and Fairclough's three-dimensional model, this paper shows that Ummah-centered identity on Instagram-style short videos is constructed through collectivization, de-labelling, moral evaluation of sectarian conflict, and scripture-grounded legitimization, while comment spaces frequently reintroduce sectarian positioning (Fairclough, 1992). Practically, unity messaging should be paired with a teachable ethic of disagreement (*adab al-ikhtilaf*) and clearer moderation against repeated provocation and identity policing, so that calls for unity are supported by workable norms for handling difference.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by a purposive corpus ($n = 30$) and the interpretive nature of CDA, which prioritizes analytic depth over statistical generalization; platform visibility dynamics were not directly measured. Future research may (i) compare unity discourse across short-form platforms, (ii) track unity framing over time and across sectarian flashpoints, and (iii) examine youth reception through interviews, focus groups, or surveys to assess how exposure relates to attitudes toward sect identity, authority, and ethical disagreement.

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