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Balochistan Youth's Attitudes and Perceptions on Social Media towards China: The Influence of Separatist and Terrorist Digital Narratives

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Abstract

This research addresses two intertwined issues, namely the perception of the youth of Balochistan and China via social media and how the stories circulating online – which have links to separatism or terrorism movements – try to deepen their sentiments of extremism among the young audience. Interpretative qualitative design was used which involved 17 in-depth interviews with journalists, social media content creators, university researchers, teachers, civil society observers, development practitioners and knowledgeable observers of youth communication in Balochistan. The participants were purposively sampled and anonymized as P1 - P17. The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis which broke down the interviews into the following areas of development expectations, trust, identity, grievance, emotion, misinformation and digital resilience. The results of the interviews suggest that overall participants' attitudes towards youth in China were positive, pragmatic and development-oriented. CPEC, infrastructure, job opportunities, education, connectivity, peace, prosperity and opportunity were the key points associated with China. Concurrently, participants made a point of the importance of increased development benefits being tangible and locally available to produce positive attitudes. The second key discovery is that grievance, identity, victimhood, selective evidence, emotional amplification, and repeated messaging are key elements of social-media narratives and are used in separatist, extremist-oriented discourses. Participants did not see social media exposure as a direct route to radicalization, but rather believed that social media has an impact when accounts of submissive social media content and the grievances it stirs are associated with a lack of trust in institutions, misinformation, and expectations that go unmet. The study finds that the four key factors to establishing a sustainable positive youth attitude and decreasing the persuasive room for violent extremist narratives are credible development delivery, locally rooted communication, media literacy and trusted intermediaries, and legitimate avenues for peaceful grievance.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Social media has emerged as one of the central arenas for teaching young people about public affairs, for being confronted with alternative political views and a sense of international actors. This is crucial in the province of Balochistan, where geographical remoteness, the imbalance in information access, political polarization and the strategic significance of Gawadar and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have rendered digital communication as a key component in development and identity discussions. Existing studies on the role that social media plays in the lives of university students in Balochistan have already illustrated that social media has become an integral part of social interaction and shape the understanding of social issues and their discussion as well as other studies on digital

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political communication show that social media platforms have polarizing effects and promote social polarization at the same time as it enables a wider participation in social life. (Rashid et al., 2019; Cinelli et al., 2021).

The China's visibility and the presence of CPEC in this digital space is unusual as CPEC ties Pakistan's development sops with a long-standing bilateral relation. Empirical studies of the attitudes of Pakistanis towards CPEC often find positive correlations between expected benefits, quality of life and employment prospects and support for CPEC. Other studies have revealed that perceived positive impacts and personal benefits were linked to greater support for CPEC, with Kanwal et al. (2019) reporting mainly positive impacts for Pakistani citizens when development projects were correlated with the benefits for the community. Comparative analysis of CPEC and quality of life also revealed positive attitudes in both samples (Pakistani and Chinese), as CPEC was related to jobs and better living standards (Kanwal et al, 2020; Saad et al, 2019).

In the context of Balochistan, public meanings are not solely generated through the development narratives. Developments claims are accepted, questioned, or reinterpreted based on local experiences, distribution of benefits, and the extent of political trust and the perceived public visibility of improvements over the day. Research into the coastal Balochistan and Gawadar indicates that people also appreciate infrastructure, but at the same time, they are also concerned about the feeling of being excluded, livelihood issues, lack of consultation and unequal benefits that are expected. The importance of this is attributed to the fact that positive attitude towards China does not mean uncritical acceptance or support of all CPEC projects or governmental decisions, it is be pragmatic as well as aspirational and dependent on whether development is experienced locally or not (Shahrukh et al., 2020; Ali & Sanauddin, 2022; Abb, 2023).

It is not just a question of whether Balochistan's youth are pro-China or anti-China; It is not just pro-China or anti-China Balochistan's youth; A more relevant question is what the meaning of China is in the youth oriented digital conversation. The evidence from the interviews in this study shows that the orientation of youth is generally positive towards China with most of them describing China as a helpful and important development partner and in some cases a blessing for Pakistan's future development. Academic evidence from Pakistan offers greater context for these observations as public-support studies consistently indicated that perceived economic and social benefits boost support for CPEC, and over-the-top media studies revealed that positive frames perceived progress, perceived importance, perceived benefit, perceived prosperity, perceived improvement, and perceived support emerged in the Pakistani media (Kanwal et al., 2020; Mahmood et al., 2022; Qianqian & Yijun, 2020).

The second is that social media is even used by actors trying to mobilize opposition on a grievance, identity and emotionally resonant narrative. Studies on the communication of Baloch separatists on X have revealed that the same themes of human rights violation, enforced disappearance, oppression, cultural identity, socioeconomic grievances, CPEC, China and calls for international attention have been repeated over this platform. A more contemporary scholarship characterizes a broader digital-nationalist context where victimhood, state repression, cultural legitimacy and transnational solidarity are constantly being shared across X, YouTube, Facebook, Telegram and other platforms. Despite the findings of these studies, there is evidence that there is no automatic radicalization process but that there is a process of manipulation of narratives for influence over interpretation and collective identity (Ijaz, 2025; Inam et al., 2024).

It is very important to distinguish between exposure, persuasion, radicalization and violence. Online research warns against online content being the sole or sole cause of violent extremism. As Conway (2017) points out, it's hard to isolate the cause of the internet and requires research that is "context-sensitive" in terms of ideology, platform and audience. While the same, research on extremist communication reveals that the Internet makes it easier

to disseminate propaganda in the digital way, facilitates multiple exposures to ideologically consistent content, and facilitate reinforcement of ideational content via social feedback. These contexts of social media therefore be used as accelerators or reinforcing contexts when the online context of messaging is linked to pre-existing grievances, identity concerns, social networks or feelings of political exclusion (Aly et al., 2017; Conway, 2017; Shree & Gupta, 2019).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

There is a considerable body of literature on the subject of CPEC, Balochistan and online extremism which is scattered. In CPEC studies, infrastructure is usually discussed, public support is predominantly discussed and centre-periphery tensions are usually discussed, whereas in studies of Baloch digital activism, it is usually discussed on separatist frames, identity narratives, and political grievances. The way in which these multiple streams converge in the same space of social media and influence their interpretation is less well-explained. It is not just whether or not young people are exposed to good or bad things about China, but what they see. It is how competing messages take on meaning: how a development claim is embraced, challenged or refuted; how a local grievance becomes a China and CPEC issue; how the repetition of messages leads to greater visibility; and how the trust in institutions and local experience and peer networks influence the acceptance or rejection of a narrative. There are few studies that focus on the negative, exclusionary, grievance-based and identity-driven reimagining of China by digital actors, while a positive, development-oriented image of China is co-composed by youth. Fewer studies have been dedicated to how the positive, development-oriented image of China is co-composed by youth, yet it is contested by digital actors who reinterpret China through grievance, exclusion, extraction and identity-based frames. This is not just a problem of misinformation, or discontent with development. It is a struggle of interpretation, that is, a search for evidence of prosperity, exclusion, partnership or exploitation of the same event. The present study aims to fill this gap by conducting 17 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders in Balochistan who are familiar with the situation and who focus not just on the content of their views, but on the means by which they come to hold them: local grievance, narrative framing, emotional salience, repetition, peer reinforcement, credibility judgments, and presence or absence of visible development outcomes. In this regard, this study aims to shift from a descriptive description of what social media is believed to do to a more systematic explanation of how social-media narratives are believed to affect youth's attitude towards a political development situation in this particular context.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the attitude of Balochistan youth towards the Chinese attitude on social media particularly development, peace, education, employment and CPEC.
2. To find out how the narratives disseminated through social media by separatist and terrorist groups affect the opinions of youths about China and development.
3. To explore factors that enhance or diminish the impact of these narratives including trust, misinformation, repetition, peer influence and visible development benefits.
4. To propose practical solutions to improve communication, involvement of youth, media literacy and development awareness.

1.4. Research Questions

1. What is the youth of Balochistan's perception about the China related development, CPEC and China on social media particularly on development, peace, education, employment and future opportunities?

2. How are grievances and extremist ideas disseminated through social media platforms among youth of Balochistan by separatist and terrorist groups and what are the elements of their messages that make them impactful or not?

1.5. Significance of the Study

The study is significant in two respects: firstly, it is an integrated development communication and research study on online extremism in one locally based analytical framework; and secondly, it investigates the development in the West, a region with a long history of countering extremist content, alongside the research into online extremism in the East. It's more than just reporting if the youth attitudes are positive or negative. Instead, it points to the circumstances of being more persuasive regarding specific digital narratives. The results indicate that influence through social media depends on the message – when there are local opportunities to attend the development-oriented messages are credible; when there are local opportunities to respond to grievance-oriented messages are more compelling when they are linked to an unresolved experience, institutional distrust, emotionally salient events and repeated reinforcement within like-minded networks. This for those who make policies and for those who act to make development happen, means that communication is not a thing that is separate from delivery, actual local experience. The analysis reveals, first, for teachers, why media literacy, source comparison and trusted local communication are important aspects of resilience and not merely one-way marketing campaigns; and, second, for journalists and civil-society actors, why they should focus on developing media literacy for the benefit of others. Finally, the study highlights the importance of the security professionals and peacebuilders being able to differentiate between peaceful dissent, cultural identity or criticism and violence advocacy or normalization. It is analytically significant that distinguishing between legitimate grievances and illegitimate ones can have the effect of reducing trust and thus leaving room for more extreme ideas to be persuasive. The study thus provides an understanding of digital communication and offline grievances, of trust and of identity and development expectations that is not only interactive but also does not take social media solely as an independent causal agent as well as an automatic catalyst of extremism.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Perceptions on China and CPEC Development and Associated Benefits

The literature of this study is divided into two overlapping streams, one on public perceptions towards China/CPEC and another on digital processes of the circulation of grievance, identity and extremist narratives. The key message of the first literature relates to the relationship between attitudes towards large development projects and perceived benefits. With the help of the theory of social exchange, Kanwal et al. (2019) demonstrated that the support for CPEC is positively linked with perceived positive impacts and personal benefits. This view is also helpful for assessing youth perceptions as it indicates that positive attitudes are not only a result of diplomatic rhetoric, but is also based on a set of expectations regarding employment, infrastructure, mobility, education and quality of life (Kanwal et al, 2019).

A number of empirical studies confirmed the association of perceived development benefits and support. Kanwal et al. (2020) conducted a survey of the citizens of Pakistan to gather their attitudes towards the CPEC projects and found that the attitudes were positively related to perceived community benefits. A cross-border research among Chinese and Pakistani people also revealed positive attitude towards CPEC and that there were significant relationships between perceived impacts, employment and quality of life. Based on these findings, it is tempting to theorize that, if opportunity and a more secure economic future are linked to bilateral cooperation, youth learn about China in a more pragmatic way, particularly from the developmental perspective.

Saad et al., (2019) also studied CPEC with respect to the economic and social objectives it is expected to achieve, and found local perceptions to be crucial for social policy

as infrastructure and investment become legitimate once they are seen as having implications for everyday life. This was taken a step further by Mahmood et al (2022) who looked at the attitudes of residents towards CPEC as an infrastructure and rural development enabler, and associated the attitudes with the perceived social, infrastructural and economic outcomes. Overall, these studies indicate that positive perceptions of China and CPEC are significantly higher if associated with tangible gains, usually either as a result of tangible benefits or when promoted as a combined three-fold gain, that is, geopolitical friendship, tangible benefits, and commercial benefits (Mahmood et al., 2022; Saad et al., 2019).

Media studies also reveal that there are positive strands relating to CPEC in the Pakistani discussion. According to Qianqian and Yijun (2020), the media from Pakistan mostly showed positive and favourable views regarding the English language. They tended to cluster their positive coverage around neutral concepts like progress, importance, support, benefit, prosperity, enhancement, improvement and economic boost while neutral coverage was grouped more tightly around security, debt, disputes and instability. This finding has direct implications for perceptions in social media as it demonstrates that the discourse of pro-CPEC is often developed in an optimistic way while the discourse of skepticism is developed in the same way by focusing on a smaller number of themes that are related to threat (Qianqian & Yijun, 2020).

Official statements are not the only source of discussion on CPEC as is seen from the research findings of the Pakistani Twitter sphere. Using the social media platform Twitter, Zain et al. (2020) studied opinion formation on CPEC and pointed out the importance of digitally active commentators to translate, contest, and recirculate narratives on the CPEC. For a study that is geared toward the youth, this research is crucial as social media means that state narratives, journalistic coverage, personal experience, activism, humor, rumours, and ideological messages come to contend for the same attention economy. Therefore, youths' perceptions are created in mixed information environment, as well as from one source (Rashid et al., 2019; Zain et al., 2020).

2.2. Balochistan Focused Local Development Narratives and Experiences

There is, however, a caveat to the broader trend of support which is unique to the context of Balochistan and is introduced by the literature specific to the region. Shahrukh et al. (2020) noted socio-economic issues and the desire for inclusion as determinants of coastal communities' perceptions on CPEC, while Ali and Sanauddin (2022) reported that although the motive of development of infrastructure was welcomed by many local residents, their expectations of enhanced livelihoods have not been met. The studies demonstrate that there is a positive attitude towards development and a critical attitude towards implementation. In this case, for the present study, youth consider China to be useful and significant but at the same time give rise to questions regarding distribution of benefits, whether there is enough local employment and whether the voice of the community is heard (Ali & Sanauddin, 2022; Shahrukh et al., 2020).

Abb (2023) sees such tensions in terms of overlapping relationships of the centre and the periphery, which she claims is not explained as a projection of China's power alone as local political contests affect implementation and have resulted in adaptations. The edited volume edited by Abb et al. (2024) also underscores that the impacts of CPEC are negotiated in the Pakistani institutions, local political economies, security concerns and social relations. This literature will prevent you taking a two extreme views, one being that it is always good for the Chinese to be involved in any locality and the other that local criticism is always anti-China. Rather, reception is the result of the intersection of national narratives and experience at a provincial and community level (Abb, 2023; Abb et al., 2024).

This multi-scalar point of view is supported by Zoppolato and Boni (2025) who studied the reception of Chinese narratives in the national and provincial media in Pakistan. Across

the nation, they have enjoyed wide distribution and expansion of narratives that are connected to China, while there are more intense areas of contestation in provincial settings, particularly Balochistan. Their analysis also shows us the need to focus the present study on the social process of reception rather than take any kind of single, public opinion. Youth attitudes are not necessarily negative, but they are different depending on the place they are from, the media coverage they receive, and how they perceive development is fair in their area (Zoppolato & Boni, 2025).

2.3. The Role and Influence of Social Media on Youth Politics

The second literature, on social media, political socialization and extremist communication, is related to the first literature. In Balochistan, Rashid, Baloch and Niaz (2019) reported that social media has turned into an integral part of the student life and one tool for raising awareness about social issues and social change. This is an added capacity of communication, which is not a good thing or a bad thing. It creates new avenues for education, engagement and communication for development, but at the same time it brings more emotionally charged and politically polarized content into contact with the audience. Narratives of grievance and threat about the political environment is also delivered through the same platforms that are used to provide information on infrastructure, economic opportunities and scholarships (Conway, 2017; Rashid et al., 2019).

2.4. The Foundations of Online Radicalization and Extremist Communication

Technology determinism is to be avoided in the context of online extremism, as is general research into extremism. Conway (2017) stresses the importance of not viewing internet use as a standalone factor in violent radicalization and highlights the importance of considering individual pathways, differences in Internet platforms, ideology, context, and offline relationships. But, despite this, Ayesha, et al., (2017) note how terrorist groups use digital media to spread their messages and recruit potential supporters, and Shree and Gupta (2019) review the literature on how social media is used to promote radicalization processes by linking social media users to ideologically oriented content and reinforcing interpretive communities. The most robust finding among this is that the impact of social media on radicalization processes is conditionally positive, that is, when users are vulnerable, networks are present and grievances exist, as well as when there is a social context (Aly et al., 2017; Conway, 2017; Shree & Gupta, 2019).

The findings of the Pakistan-centric research are the same. As educated youth seek meaning, belonging, purpose, or political meaning, Basit (2019) contends, there is a convergence of these factors that make them susceptible to radicalization, and he says social media makes it easier for extremist milieus to recruit. Hanfi (2022) specifically looks into the role of social media as a source of radicalization in Pakistan and mentions the role of online propaganda, recruitment based messaging and counter-narratives. While these studies cover various types of extremism, not Baloch separatism alone, they offer a valuable framework: Digital content is more effective when it offers an identity, explanation, emotional direction, and sense of meaningful action to audience members who are already looking for answers (Basit, 2019; Hanfi, 2022).

2.5. Digital Narratives of the Baloch and Digital Nationalism

Inam et al., (2024) studied the Baloch separatist digital communication, which is more direct. They were able to identify frequent themes in the selection of issues, and emotional framing, in 1,512 posts on X, including the themes of enforced disappearances, injustice, oppression, ethnic discrimination, cultural identity, socioeconomic issues, Pakistan, Iran, China, and CPEC. The study contends that certain times CPEC was presented as a way of resource control without providing benefits to the local communities. But crucially, this research does not show that all grievance claims are false – it shows that activists choose issues to discuss, add emotions and arrange them in an ideologically coherent narrative (Inam et al., 2024).

Building on this analysis, Ijaz (2025) introduces the notion of digital nationalism and argues that there are four frames that are more influential in Baloch separatist online spaces from 2020 to 2025—the frames of victimhood, state repression, cultural legitimacy, and transnational solidarity. The study highlights the significance of diaspora actors and various platforms in sustaining and making the nationalistic narratives visible. This literature indicates that the process of persuasion is likely to proceed by engaging with identity and moral interpretation without any explicit mention of violence even being made, for a study concerned with extremist sentiment. First, a user is invited to engage in the collective story of a grievance and later the more extreme elements. A grievance-centred collective story is introduced to a user first, and then, the more extreme items in the same digital ecosystem (Ijaz, 2025; Inam et al., 2024).

2.6. Misinformation, Echo Chambers, and Emotional Amplification

Emotionally-charged frames spread in social media, which explains the mechanics of communicating in these new media. Del Vicario et al. (2016) concluded that misinformation spread and the development of echo chambers were two phenomena that were propelled by selective exposure and homogeneity. Using a sample of over a billion pieces of content on a variety of platforms, Cinelli et al. (2021) also supported the presence of highly significant evidence of homophilic clustering and biased information diffusion toward like-minded peers on some of the major social networks. These findings do not mean that algorithms generate extremists per se, but rather that there is a potential increase in exposure to narratives that are similar in interpretation, which lead to a decreased exposure to alternative interpretations, and which makes the narrative appear socially normal (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Cinelli et al., 2021).

Group atmosphere also enhance the expression of emotion. Brady et al. (2021) demonstrated that positive social feedback increases the chances of subsequent moral-outrage expression as well as that users modify their expressions to the norms of their networks. A systematic review also by Iandoli et al. (2021) also finds that social media lead to group polarization, broken-up debates and conditions that facilitate the spread of misinformation. As these processes are directly relevant to grievance politics, repetitive interpretations of increasingly serious consequences become easier to repeat – even if they are not directly recruited into the organization in the first place – when anger is rewarded socially in a visible way and when users are embedded within networks where grievance is the dominant expressive norm (Brady et al., 2021; Iandoli et al., 2021).

Not only are there algorithms that create echo chambers, but user selections and networks reconfiguration also contribute to the formation of echo chambers. Sasahara et al. (2021) simulate the formation of segregated communities, in which similar viewpoints reinforce each other, as a result of social influence and unfollowing. This suggests that to improve youth's resilience, standards of violence are not the only kind that needs to be filtered out. Through the normal following, sharing and unfollowing activities a young user experience a shrinking sphere of visible interpretations of information until they are reduced to a certain extent. However, digital resilience is not only in terms of platform takedowns (Cinelli et al., 2021; Sasahara et al., 2021) but also through critical evaluation, source diversity and credible alternative explanations.

Emotion and misinformation also go hand-in-hand. Bakir and McStay (2018) suggest that misleading digital content effectively be delivered because it is sold on an economy of emotion, seeing to monetization and political use of attention, anxiety, anger and affective involvement. Exceedingly emotional content is particularly persuasive in the context of conflict situations, where the particular content seems to validate a proclivity or identity-based grievance. In the context of Balochistan, this is not just about the factual context but also about

a pre-existing narrative of deprivation, injustice, extraction and cultural threat (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Inam et al., 2024).

2.7. Ethical Counter Extremism Initiatives and Context Sensitive Preventions

In response to extremist propaganda, countering it poses risks as well. Henschke and Reed (2021) suggest that there is a need for such responses to be ethically underpinned as they clash with rights, legitimacy and democratic values if they are aggressive in their content control. This is especially important in Balochistan where there is a need to carefully maintain the distinction between nationalistic and peaceful expression of dissent from the Chinese initiative CPEC and the promotion of violence. Implementing a blanket ban on extremism damage the credibility of communication and it strengthen frames of grievance that is exploited by the violent actors. A resilient strategy should, therefore, address the falsehoods, reveal manipulation, defend legitimate speech and address legitimate development concerns concurrently (Henschke & Reed, 2021; Abb, 2023).

The last empirical issue is the non-uniform distribution of vulnerability. Muhammad et al. (2025) have reported differences in extremist-ideology scores among young adults across various ethnic groups in Quetta and suggested culturally sensitive education, counseling and dialogue-based interventions for the young adults in Quetta. What their research does show is that these attitudes are not caused by social media, nor is it justifiable to stigmatize any ethnicity but rather the importance of preventing in context rather than generalizing. Therefore, a focus on individual vulnerability, route of exposure, political grievance, misinformation, social isolation and avenues of positive engagement should be emphasized in messages targeting youth to reduce the risk of Baloch identity. Thus, messages targeting youth must focus on individual vulnerability, route of exposure, political grievance, misinformation, social isolation, and avenues of positive engagement rather than Baloch identity itself as a risk factor (Muhammad et al., 2025; Conway, 2017).

2.8. Research Gap

The difference between theory and practice is therefore very particular and not general. Previous studies have found that perception of benefits influences support for CPEC and that local concerns in Balochistan influence receptivity to development projects, while victimhood, repression and identity frames in the separatist movement have been found to repeat and that social-media environments have been found to increase repetition, emotional expression and selective exposure. What has yet to be explored is the interplay of these among the youth living in Balochistan when interpreting the content that is related to China. In particular, current research leaves only a bit of a trace as to how a local concern can become part of a larger political discussion, why the local concern is persuasive with one group and not another, and what factors can break that chain of influence. In the present research this issue is treated as the process of influence instead of being perceived as a mere result. In the 17 interviews, the analysis shows that there are consistent linkages between existing expectations or grievances, encountering the competing digital frames, emotional salience, repetition and peer reinforcement, assessing the credibility of the source, and their final understanding of China, CPEC and development. It also explores countervailing conditions like local visible benefits, access to other sources, trusted intermediaries and media literacy. The interview-based approach doesn't yield a quantitative estimate of youth opinion, but does enable convergent, divergent and qualified observations to be made that can be compared systematically to allow for identification of perceived mechanisms of influence, not just for intuitive statements about social media (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Ijaz, 2025; Inam et al., 2024).

3. Material and Methods

The interpretive qualitative research design was employed in this study to examine the perceptions of Balochistan youth attitude towards China on social media platforms and how separatist and/or terrorist linked narrative can impact their perceptions. Balochistan, Pakistan, was chosen as a study area. This study focused on the study population: those who had

professional experience and knowledge of youth communication, digital media, education, development, civil society and public discourse in the province. A total of 17 participants were interviewed who comprised journalists, social media content creators, university researchers, educators, civil-society observers, and development practitioners and youth-communication informed observers in Balochistan. The participants were selected purposively as they were in regular contact with youth communication, public narratives and/or digital information flows indicating that they could provide information-rich accounts that were relevant to the research questions. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the respondents on the social media use, perceptions of China, CPEC and Gawadar, expectation from development, aspirations, cultural identity, grievance, uninformed narratives, and exposure to separatist and extremist messages, trusting and non-trusting attitudes. The interview guide was flexible to allow participants to add processes and examples from their professional experience, but also to enable similar areas to be addressed during the interviews. Participants have been anonymous (P1–P17). Thematic analysis was done using the four stages of familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, review, definition and interpretive writing as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021).

4. Data Analysis and Findings

This section of the analysis draws on the 17 in-depth interviews that are described in the methodology. The participant identifiers P1–P17 are anonymous identifiers. The findings are presented in the form of thematic interpretations of the responses of the participants on the observation made during the visit of youth communication in Balochistan and not as statistics of all youth of Balochistan. The ten participant vignettes are not verbatim quotes, but rather paraphrased. Themes emerging from the analysis are China as a development oriented partner, conditional optimism, competition between digital frames, grievance and identity framing, emotional and network amplification and unmet expectations and resilience through credible development and media literacy. Significantly, these themes were not considered as being separate descriptions. Their relationships were analyzed for the cases of repeated linkages made by the participants. Over the course of all of the interviews it was possible to see how there was an influence process that could happen at the level of the participants' accounts: a pre-existing expectation or grievance served as a starting point for the interpretation; the material from social media informed the issue in a specific way; emotionally charged material drew attention and sharing; repetition and peer validation gave the frame an apparent normality and/or credibility; and users accepted or modified or challenged the interpretation, depending on their trust in the sources, local experience, and access to alternative evidence. The results presented below, then, reveal themes and the connections between themes.

4.1. Positive and Development Oriented Perceptions among Youth regarding China

The most obvious theme that surfaced in the interviews was the more positive and practical attitude towards China. In all media, education, development, research and digital communication, participants felt that youth had a better access to China when they saw development and opportunity for the future, rather than in abstract diplomatic language. These were always real points of reference, such as roads, energy, Gawadar, trade, scholarships, technology, and employment, as well as international connectivity. This is analytically significant since the favourable perception mentioned by the participants did not appear to be a stable political stance. It was forced into association: the idea of China was associated with image of development-related information, of which repeated exposure resulted linking the idea of China with the ideas of education, mobility, work and economic security. If there were examples of such associations that could be recognized to be local, the narrative became credible. In places where the anticipated linkage between bilateral cooperation and people's daily life was not discernible, the positive framing was either reduced or was put on a conditional basis. The interviews indicate that the use of social media is not just about

spreading a positive image of China; it offers the users symbols and examples for them to draw conclusions on the practical significance of cooperation for their own future.

As P2 explained that youth have a realistic attitude towards China, rather than ceremonial. The participant noted that young people are not necessarily paying attention to every aspect of diplomacy but instead they are largely getting to know China through the CPEC, Gawadar, the road projects, scholarships and with the prospect of economic growth. P2 saw a positive starting point as China is perceived to be helpful in Pakistan's development process and at the same time stressed that youth have seen the cooperation in Pakistan only if opportunity comes to their districts or otherwise they feel it as injustice. The story thus makes a positive association between attitudes and a tangible local association between national development claims and youth futures (Vignettes 1: P2-Journalist).

Positive youth attitudes were linked to P5's expectations of peace and prosperity. The participant noted that pupils sometimes see investment and connectivity as being choices for them to make rather than choices not to make. China was referred not only as a faraway foreign power but also as a development partner, given the prospect that Balochistan is able to be better integrated with the markets. P5 also explained that peace in their future learning is very related to the ability to learn, travel, work, trade and plan without disruption. Economic normality and opportunity for the future also embodied a symbolic value in relation to China's development, beyond infrastructure (Vignettes 2: P5-Educator).

4.2. Conditional Support and Expectations of Local Development Benefit

Another pattern was that positive attitudes were not often mentioned in relation to being unconditional. No one in the conversations interviewed gave the impression of young people just taking passively on-board what is being said about CPEC. Perceptions of China were constantly detached from judgments about how the projects would be implemented locally, about whether local people would be hired, and about how the benefits of the projects would be communicated and distributed locally. This is a very important mechanism of perception formation. Young users might start off with a positive development expectation, but social media information is then considered in the context of local experience. If a post guarantees jobs, scholarships or development, but the user only sees a small amount of them, the discrepancy leads to a lack of interpretation. But not all that uncertainty leads to anti-China sentiment; rather, it opens up a space for competing narratives to reimagine the space as an indication of unfairness, exclusion or exploitation. On the other hand, when opportunities are present that are readily available to these development claims, they offer experiential evidence to counter absolutist negative narratives. Thus, mediated claims' power to influence is dependent on the causal link between them and actual (lived or locally observed) outcomes, not just on exposure.

P8 spoke of the youth who are inspired by the development achievements of China and are keen on Pakistan-China cooperation but are puzzled by the fact that many Pakistani graduates have difficulty in identifying clear job pathways, linked to major development projects. The participant didn't read such questions as anti-China sentiment but rather as a request for "accessible opportunity" being the result of bilateral friendship. P8 focused on practical issues around skills required, pathways in to the job, opportunities for business and scholarships. The case study highlights the power of institutionalizing development optimism in terms of linking cooperation with clear and understandable pathways for youth (Vignettes 3: P8-Senior Researcher).

4.3. Social Media as the Potential Source of Information and Communication

The third pattern related to the platform environment. Social media, according to content makers and journalists, was a place where development stories and criticism, rumours, identity narratives, political grievances and emotionally charged content all litter the same attention stream. This implies that the young do not get a uniform message regarding China or CPEC; they are hit with contradictory frames of interpretations in fast succession. The

participants repeatedly pointed out that local content (content that is recognizable to participants, has a named opportunity, is visible to participants or has concrete procedures) is more credible than broad institutional claims. The mechanism outlined here is thus one case of reasonable plausibility. A claim of prosperity, which is not specific to the political situation, is not only competing against contrasting political messaging, but also with the user's own experience, as well as with other posts which offer more emotionally satisfying explanations. When official or development-oriented content is ambiguous or cannot be definitively dated or confirmed, an account based on a grievance may fill the explanatory void in a more effective way, as it has a simple causal explanation. This effect of social media on perception is not only direct, it is also indirect, because it is the structure of the available, visible, and emotionally convincing explanations that affects perception, if there is no direct influence.

P4 reported that when they saw a clear process, local setting or a recognizable beneficiary in the short social-media content, this led to more positive youth engagement. When the participant was shown information about scholarships, technical courses, business opportunities, and completed facilities, these were more likely to generate questions and sharing by participants in their youth. On the other hand, much slicker advertising with no local information was deemed more dismissible as advertising. P4's findings indicate that positive attitude toward China is better kept alive when information is credible and locally-based rather than continual accentuations of positive attitudes (Vignettes 4: P4-Social Media Content Creator).

4.4. Reframing China through the Lens of Separatist and Terrorist-Linked Narratives

The fourth theme was about the reinterpretation of China in the separatist and terrorist digital narratives. The participants spoke of a reoccurring frame in which China's status from a development partner is shifted to a larger narrative of resource exploitation, political exclusion, demographic anxiety, cultural sacrifice and external domination. This is the process of reframing that is important. Participants had no idea that they would have to give up all their positive attitudes towards development and then embrace an extreme narrative. Instead, an existing issue, such as work or fishing, access, displacement, or unequal benefit can be chosen and then hyped up to include a wider moral frame on who owns resources, who gets the benefit and who has to pay the cost. Once the issue is integrated into a common narrative of victimhood and/or exploitation, development related to China can be re-framed accordingly. Then the persuasive effect is achieved by the narrative linkage, whereby a tangible complaint provides experiential relevance and the broader construction provides meaning and an identity-based explanation and attribution of responsibility. This is a reason for this, that when the dispute is not on a fact, but on the moral implication which is inserted in a fact.

P11 outlined a repeating narrative shift in which a valid complaint regarding jobs, fisheries or access is woven into a much bigger laundry list of China-related development that is designed to displace local communities. The participant was able to differentiate between concerns that could be addressed through evidence – and – policy response, and totalizing claims – making anything concerning development an instance of external exploitation. P11 suggested that the original concern were swept aside and this could lead to an "information vacuum" where the more extreme version were more readily spread. The account suggests that local grievances are the beginnings of extreme narratives that increasingly become persuasive when they are extended to a given narrative of collective victimhood (Vignettes 5: P11- Civil Society Worker).

4.5. Emotional Amplification, Repetition and Network Effects

The fifth theme was emotional amplification. Anger and humiliation, fear and grief and even the sense of disrespect were more easily spread online than technical explanations,

journalists and researchers said. No one objected that emotional content is necessarily bogus. Instead, they stressed the importance emotions play in the sequence of what information is noticed, shared and interpreted. Shocking clips, historical photographs and short quotations and allegations may be circulated before contextual information and/or verification is available. How this works in the accounts is an important temporal mechanism: the first emotionally coherent explanation of an incident can be used as a benchmark to evaluate later information. If a series of events are talked about in isolation as part of a single pattern of injustice, then an initial reaction to an event might be translated into a larger political message. If the anger or solidarity is expressed via social sharing, then there's a second layer of influence, as it signals to others that the person is a member of that group. Emotional salience and the presence of likes can therefore enhance attention to a narrative, and the social cost of challenging it in a like-minded network.

After an incident involving violence or politics, P1 stated this to be a window of high risk for information. According to the participant it is possible for video snippets, historical photos, snarky quotes, rumors and rumors to spread around in the loop until journalists or institutions have determined what has actually happened. P1 noted that it is youths who share this kind of content in an attempt to show solidarity or feel. The danger, in this story, lies when it becomes clear that partisan accounts make highly uncertain, or even disjointed, content more and more into one grievance narrative and make uncertainty become a conspiracy-proof. The vignette thus highlights vulnerabilities in the digital information environment as speed and emotional intensity (Vignettes 6: P1- Journalist).

The following point, which was covered in P13's account, was more about repetition and network effects. The participant explained that a user, who reads various accounts that share similar political interests, might be confronted with the same claim as a clip, graphic, slogan, thread, translated post and comment video. The crux is to not just see the claim repeated in numerous places. Repeated passages from seemingly independent sources may be read as in independent confirmation to give what is essentially visibility without verification. Each encounter in turn makes for familiarity, and interpretations that are familiar can start to seem normal in a specific network, even if evidence proves disputed. Social endorsement is given to repetitions by peer reactions (likes, comments, reposts and supportive commentary). The participant thus explained the process of influence as a gradual change, rather than an immediate change: while changing one's attitude after a single post is unlikely to happen, it can occur after repeated exposure in a socially homogeneous information environment, in which multiple exposures can cause the range of interpretations that feel common or legitimate to narrow. This discovery offers a more specific account of how the dynamics of the platforms might be conducive to growing more absolute interpretations and does not require the platform to automatically radicalize users.

4.6. Difference between Peaceful Nationalism and Violent Extremism

The sixth theme was a separation between peaceful political expression, and extremist communication. All the participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of the Baloch identity, cultural pride, criticism against the state, criticism against CPEC and the advocacy of rights not being automatically considered as terrorism. It is also in this sense that this distinction elucidates the process of digital influence. A sense of belonging, dignity and a language for talking about injustice can be offered by identity related material, without recommending violence. The analytical threshold that was found in the interviews was the transition from criticism or expression of identity within a critique, to glorification, justification, encouragement or normalization of violence towards civilians, workers, public institutions or development activity. The reasons given by participants were that such a shift in movement can happen when there is a progressing absoluteness of a grievance, when peaceful solutions are either stigmatized as irrelevant or as a betrayal, and when violence is interpreted as a moral duty. Meanwhile, they have raised the alarm that peaceful nationalism

could be characterized as extremism, which would then cultivate a sense of alienation and lowering trust among people, and thus facilitating the presentation of more radical versions as plausible. The finding thus indicates that resilience must be grounded in keeping it legitimate to have space for identity and dissent, and to look at the communicative moves that lead to the normalization of violence in particular.

The cultural pages of youthful nationalists were discussed in P9, where the issues raised related to poetry, music, history and issues related to Balochi nationals. As for some connected accounts that later be more political, the participant indicated that this should not be interpreted as evidence of radicalization; cultural interest or peaceful nationalism should not be interpreted as evidence of radicalization. P9 identified the warning signs of a normalization of dehumanization/violence and the depiction of peaceful alternatives as betrayal that begin in an information environment. This account demonstrates the importance of prevention being targeted as it is a source of dignity and resilience for a culture, while blanket suspicions foster more alienation (Vignettes 8: P9- Social Researcher).

4.7. Understanding Unmet Expectations and the Development Gaps Exploitation

Another theme was unsatisified expectations. Negative narratives were continually associated with the visible disconnection between promises and outcomes, and the persuasive opportunity that these provided to the negative narratives. Positive development communication can increase the bar for future experiences: the expectations are particularly important. When expectations are high and the time to delivery is long, when access procedures are not clear, when job opportunities are thought to be few, or when benefits are not clearly communicated, there is an explanatory gap and disappointment occurs. Participants noted that neglecting to implement these projects could lead to the use of such extremist/separatist stories to establish a bigger narrative that all development language is misleading or foreign, and thus fail to serve their own interests. That's not the mechanism on which the idea of a direct relationship between disappointment and extremism is based. Instead, disappointment provides a valid raw material from which it is possible to choose, abstract and then combine to a comprehensive narrative. In contrast, if delays to, and eligibility for, and local hiring and actual outcomes are reported transparently, the information vacuum in which such generalization becomes more possible will be lessened. This relates development performance to the digital credibility environment.

P15 talked about the youth training opportunities that are openly advertised but not connected to the employer or employment. The participant noted that when training is offered to youth, they think they have received good news at first but then feel let down when it doesn't get them a job. P15 says extremist groups take advantage of that "disconnect" by suggesting that development language is a no-go because such efforts have failed or have been poorly developed. The participant thus highlighted the value of the skills that employers provide, and the need to select, follow-up and report on achieved employment opportunities, rather than only promoting the skills. (Vignettes 9: P15- Development Practitioner).

4.8. Peaceful Grievance, Digital Resilience, and Credibility among Youth

Participants came up with the following conditions of resilience: there are local visible benefits, the information is credible and arrives at an opportune time, media literacy, trusted local intermediaries, and a legitimate place for peaceful grievance. None of the individual conditions was deemed to be alone, adequate. Based on their experiences, they believe resilience should be viewed as a way of interpreting and not just ignoring negative content. Young users can more easily defeat the manipulative framing if they have the ability to compare a claim with observable evidence, consult more than one source, differentiate an emotional appeal from being able to verify a claim with evidence, and voice legitimate concerns without finding them stigmatized. The conditions also effect each other. When communication is absent from the delivery, it's easy to label it as propaganda; when

development occurs without transparent communication, there's room for rumours; when there is no media literacy without trusted sources to validate information, users have limited credible material on which to base grievance narratives; and when there is security responses without peaceful channels for complaints, it can reinforce the very distrust on which grievance narratives are built. Thus, the influence process detailed in the preceding themes is reversible: that is, if the evidence is credible, then networks will be more diverse; if there is a grievance, it can be voiced peacefully; if there are development claims, they will correspond with experience; and repeated exposure to an extreme frame is less likely to become the only plausible interpretation.

P6 identified resilient young social media users as being able to compare statements, check dates, sources, differentiate peaceful criticism from advocating for violence and link social media stories with real events. The participant noted that a young person is very positive regarding China, but also want to see local jobs, responsibility for the environment, fair development and transparency in the governance. P6 saw that it is better to have development optimism and critical media competence than to have unquestioning loyalty. This account reflects the study's overall sense that it is possible to have a legitimate and local voice and scrutiny, while supporting China (Vignettes 10: P6- Educator & Youth Observer).

In the summary, the interviews align with the first research question, indicating that participants' attitude toward youth are mostly positive, development-oriented and future-oriented toward China. Assistance, infrastructure, CPEC, employment prospects, education, connectivity, peace and prosperity were related to China and when development had local salience the association was stronger while with divergent expectations/experiences it was less. The second research question is not just answered by the identification of themes (such as grievance, identity, emotion or misinformation) it is also answered by how the themes were linked by the participants. Their accounts reveal a series of conditions: a pre-existing concern or expectation sets the context in which they can discuss the issue; digital actors choose which elements to include and how to shape it, adding emotional content which raises visibility and gets the issue on the agenda; repetition and peers' endorsement raise familiarity and perceived consensus; the user trusts the frame, and judges it based on his/her own personal experience and access to other frames. This may lead to reinforcement of a previous belief, reinterpretation or skepticism or resistance to China-related development. Influencing was thus designated cumulative and conditional and not automatic. It was stronger in areas where grievances, distrust, gaps in information and homogeneous networks come together and weaker when the benefits are visible, credible local information is available, and there is a diversity of information sources and media literacy.

5. Discussion

The results corroborate with previous empirical studies that found that perceived development benefit leads to higher support for CPEC but brings in a more specific communication aspect to the analysis. Kanwal et al (2019) and Kanwal et al (2020) demonstrate that there is a relationship between perceived positive impacts, personal benefits and community outcomes, with support. The relationship that is discussed in the present interviews can be understood as an understanding of the development benefits as not only economic outcomes, but also as credibility cues in a social-media environment. A scholarship, job pathway, road, service/business opportunity provides evidence that can be assessed by the users to judge the competing claims about China and CPEC. Positive attitudes are more than just the outcome of positive messages, in that sense. Their reinforcement occurs when mediated claims are confirmed with experience, and they are susceptible when mediated claims do not match up with experience. From the benefit leads to support' principle, this adds a communication mechanism of benefit leads to which digital interpretation is credible (Kanwal et al., 2019; Kanwal et al., 2020).

It also corresponds with the findings of Qianqian and Yijun (2020) who identified progress, support, benefit, prosperity, improvement and economic boost as the positive Pakistani portrayal of CPEC. Participants' descriptions of the perceptions of the youth included the same vocabulary. But this is an added caveat in the current study: all positive framing isn't created equal. The participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of information that is local and verifiable. This indicates that there is a differences between the message positivity and the credibility of the message. A strong, positive message can have a smaller impact if it fails to provide a user with a useful answer to his or her questions, but a modest message with a known beneficiary, clear eligibility process or a finished local project can be more effective. It thus relies on the relevance of the evidence a young user considers as relevant to his/her environment, or not (Qianqian & Yijun, 2020; Mahmood et al., 2022).

The interviews also do not help to pass a simple and positive judgment on CPEC. Research in Gawadar and coastal Balochistan reveals that infrastructure can be accepted and participation, livelihood impacts and benefits can be debated. This separation also came through in the interviews: some support China but are not happy with how it is being implemented. This co-presence is at the heart of comprehending digital influence as it is the area of interpretive competition. Those who are concerned about China-Pakistan cooperation, but discontented with the local employment are neither on the pro-China nor on the anti-China side. The definition of that discontent can vary according to the frame that they face and its believability. The problem can be seen as an implementation gap that can be rectified by a development-oriented account, or as evidence of structural exploitation by a grievance-oriented account. Hence, in this present analysis it is shifted from the attitude labelling to the framing process whereby the practical concerns are given to broader political meaning (Shahrukh et al., 2020; Ali & Sanauddin, 2022).

This is in line with Abb's (2023) centre-periphery analysis and broader thinking by Abb, Boni and Karrar (2024) that CPEC is more than a top-down project, but an interactive political process. The interview evidence suggests that the image of China is mediated by the provincial institutions, the labour markets, security practices and through the encounters of everyday life. These interfaces are the basis of the social-media narratives. Positive messages become more evident when they can be situated in transparent local institutions and opportunities are made visible. The negative interpretations gain locally recognizable material when they are opaque or when promised opportunities are inaccessible. This is why communication strategy is not enough to make the perception – the quality of the communication implementation and institutional experiences users have when interpreting what they see on the platform also play part roles in the production of the perception of the mentioned narratives (Abb, 2023; Abb et al., 2024).

The second key discovery relates to the use of grievance, victimhood frames and identity and extraction frames in separatist digital communication. This aligns well with Inam et al. (2024), who find that human-rights claims, enforced disappearances, oppression, ethnic discrimination, socioeconomic issues, CPEC, China and cultural identity in Baloch separatist communication on X aligns with this study's finding; and with Ijaz (2025) who states that the victimhood, state repression, cultural legitimacy, and transnational solidarity are seen in the Baloch separatist communication on X. The value of the current interview analysis is to demonstrate how the participants imagine these frames relating to an audience which might already have ideas of hope for development as well as frustrations. The persuasive process is thus not started with an uninformed or completely antagonistic audience. It starts with fuzzy experiences which can have multiple interpretations. Grievance centred communications are effective if they draw out a specific concern, make it part of a bigger shared narrative, name the parties to blame and keep repeating the interpretation. This mechanism is the reason for

the contestation not only over facts but how facts are structured into a coherent account of development, identity and justice (Inam et al., 2024; Ijaz, 2025).

What also stood out was the finding that the content of videos from extremist groups frequently did not actually start off with calls for violence rather it began with contentious grievances. This is also consistent with research into online radicalization. However, Conway (2017) cautions against Internet as the direct cause, and advocates for consideration of context and individual pathways. Basit (2019) highlights the significance, belonging and ideological meaning while Hanfi (2022) has talked about propaganda and digital networks in Pakistan. This more conservative description is corroborated by the interviews. Participants spoke about a process of increment, where grievance makes the message salient, identity provides a sense of we to give the message a sense of collective meaning, emotional framing makes the message stand out, repeated circulation makes it familiar and peer endorsement makes the interpretation feel like a 'socially validated' interpretation. This process can only take its way toward more and more 'absolute' or violence normalizing narratives in specific conditions. The study does not, therefore, suggest that there is a linear process from one post to radicalization. It proposes a series of reinforcing conditions in which more extreme interpretations may be more plausible to use for the users (Basit, 2019; Conway, 2017; Hanfi, 2022).

This is corroborated by research on platform dynamics from other countries. The homogeneous information communities reported by Del Vicario et al. (2016), echo chambers reported by Cinelli et al. (2021), and the speedup of network segregation caused by social influence and unfollowing reported by Sasahara et al. (2021) are all examples of such phenomena. The general meaning is given locally specific meaning in the interviews. Repetition was not just defined as repetition in terms of number, but as convincing repetition—that is, the same story in various ways and on various occasions can feel like a consensus. The more homogeneous the network of a user the less clear alternate explanations become at the same time. The total effect is an imbalance in exposure with exceptionally low exposures of competing frames, and repeatedly high exposures in one frame. This more precisely accounts for the influence of social media beyond the simple assertion that social media influences opinion: it influences the informational environment in which plausibility is assessed, while other factors, such as user choice and offline grievances continue to be important (Del Vicario et al., 2016; Cinelli et al., 2021; Sasahara et al., 2021).

Another mechanism is the emotional aspect of the interviews. Brady et al. (2021) show that there is a social reinforcement for expressing moral outrage, Iandoli et al. (2021) link the social media debate with polarization, and Bakir and McStay (2018) focus on the economy of emotion in misleading content. Participants' accounts indicate that emotion can impact attention and interpretation. When users post an angry, grieving or humiliated post, they are more likely to post, and can help users apply the same moral to a different incident. If students see that others are emotionally reacting to these expressions, a sense of belonging is also communicated. This shows that emotion does not drive extremism, but that during times of crisis, grievance-based frames can gain a leg up on more technical and/or uncertain explanations. It is more powerful when the emotional content is repeatedly associated with older grievances, and when a transient event gets "packaged" into a long-lasting worldview (Brady et al., 2021; Iandoli et al., 2021; Bakir & McStay, 2018).

One of the issues in the literature is which to consider social media as a catalyst for extremism. However, the current evidence is inconclusive and should be interpreted with caution and in a conditional manner. Digital environments were always mentioned as amplifiers and organizers of meaning and not as causes. Political grievances, institutional trust and credibility, peer networks, local experience and information sources will all have an impact on whether a given frame is accepted or not, and exposure is an important factor because it can make a frame more visible and familiar. This is also one of the reasons why the

same material can impact the different youth in different ways. It may be more difficult to challenge a frame that can be backed up from a multitude of resources, or that is not in conflict with one's local experience, and more easy to challenge a frame that is faced with unresolved charges and is supported by a homogeneous network. The study provides a nuanced understanding of susceptibility, while refraining from making an internet or platform causality claim or blaming ethnicity, consistent with Conway's (2017) caution against overstating Internet causality and Muhammad et al.'s (2025) call for culturally responsive responses.

Empirically and analytically, the fact that cultural identity has to be detached from violent extremism is important. Balochi language, music, poetry, history and peaceful nationalism can be a source of belonging, cultural dignity without any connotation of support for violence. Inam et al. (2024) demonstrate that cultural identity seems to be part of separatist communication, but identity themes do not necessarily constitute radicalization. The interviews rather call for a study of the changing nature of the communicative function of the content, from one of identity, grievance and peaceful means of solution to one of dehumanization of opponents, denial of the legitimacy of peaceful means of solution, glorification of violence, and/or incitement to violence. In this context, the focus on ethically based counter-extremism, as emphasized by Henschke and Reed (2021) is important. A response that bans all critical and/or nationalist expression, or reduces it to extremism, can reinforce grievance narratives that involve feelings of exclusion and/or repression. A more precise analytical threshold allows for legitimate discussion on the specific frames that normalize violence of which attention should be paid to (Henschke & Reed, 2021; Inam et al., 2024).

The positive-China finding has policy implications both in terms of the strength and the conditionality of the positive-China finding. As long as development communication starts from a broadly positive perspective, its task cannot be put as generating more positive messages. The more important requirement is for credibility: connecting claims to the observable results. There are scholarships, apprenticeships, local procurement, infrastructure, business opportunities and open and transparent project information to support young users as they can compare them with competing narratives. This is important because, as per the analysis of interviews, perceived influence is through credibility judgments. If users have been able to come up with specific counterexamples of the global value of development, then a negative claim becomes less convincing; if they can't, then the positive claim is less convincing. Communication is thus not a standalone policy area, but rather is dependent on other policy areas, such as implementation (Kanwal et al., 2019; Kanwal et al., 2020).

The second implication is with regard to locally mediated communication. Based on participant vignettes, there are differences in audience reaction to various types of message sources in the provinces. But the information from known local commentators, scholars, business people, scholars or trusted youth producers could be more readily judged since the source and the context would be known. Another advantage of local mediation is the ability to ask questions, correct and acknowledge issues; this brings institutional claims closer to what actually occurs in everyday life. This is essential as it will be important to avoid reinforcing suspicion by failing to acknowledge what is seen as a challenge. Therefore, credible communication goes beyond the information for the good but also the explanations regarding limitations/delays and uncertainties are transparent. This study reveals a mechanism that interrupts this information vacuum, wherein more absolute grievance narratives can be the most easily available explanation (Zoppolato & Boni, 2025; Zain et al., 2020).

Another implication of the third is that media literacy is a process of interpretation. Participants' accounts indicate that practical habits are important components of resilience, and include: confirming dates and source, comparing multiple versions of the same event, looking for missing context, differentiating evidence from emotional assertion and reaching

out to people beyond one's immediate network for information. These practices are significant as familiarity, repetition and apparent consensus are considered to be a component of the identified influence process. Verification delays the process by putting evidence out of sight of the observer: Diversity in the sources also helps to minimize the probability that one of the interpretive frames will seem to be the only possible explanation. The goal is not to train young people in what they should think or say, or which political stance they should support, but to develop their skills to make sense of conflicting claims – positive, critical and grievance claims – by drawing on evidence (Cinelli et al., 2021; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Henschke & Reed, 2021).

The fourth implication is in terms of speed and credibility in times of crisis. The journalist vignette highlighted the aftermath of a violent or political event as a time ripe for rumours and recycled images, de-contextualized clips and emotionally coherent but unproven explanations. If this kind of material has been passed back and forth a number of times, then subsequent correction might need to beat an already well-known and accepted interpretation. Institutions and trusted media must communicate rapidly, and differentiate between facts, and uncertainty. The statement of what is not known can be a boost to credibility, rather than a detriment, since it will not lead to a loss of reputation if the claims later prove to be incorrect. Correcting information in a timely fashion, providing supporting evidence, and making visible changes in information can help shorten the time frame during which one-sided explanations become the norm (Brady et al., 2021; Del Vicario et al., 2016).

The research is based on interview evidence but the shortcomings of this should be noted. Indicative purposeful sampling of 17 youth who were informed observers was done instead of random or representative sampling of Balochistan youth. The attitudes mentioned are therefore not direct measures of the attitudes of youth, but rather notes made by professionals working with youth regarding their attitudes, past exposures or behavioural changes. The study can reveal the occurrence of perceived mechanisms of youth culture - such as grievance framing, emotional amplification, repetition, peer reinforcement or credibility judgments - but not how often they are used in the youth culture or whether exposure to a specific information post led to a specific perceived change in attitudes. Other aspects of professional identity can influence what the participants notice, such as journalists' interest in flows of information, educators' interest in flows of learning and verification, development practitioners' focus on opportunity and implementation, and researchers' focus on identity or platform dynamics. These restrictions are not meant to lessen the usefulness of convergence for analysis of roles but set the boundaries for inferring. The mechanisms identified here should be tested directly with young users in the future, using either interviews or surveys, as well as digital diaries or longitudinal designs that will allow for the comparison of patterns of platform use, trust, grievance, source diversity and attitude change over time.

6. Conclusion

This study took two questions as its focus: What is the perception of Baloch youth about the understandings of China in the social media platforms and how the digital space is used by the separatist and/or terrorist actors to instigate extremist sentiment? The general opinion of the participants was that the attitude of the young people towards China was positive, pragmatic and development-oriented. CPEC, infrastructure, education, technology, employment, connectivity, peace, prosperity and opportunity of future were connected to China. But the analysis reveals, this positivity is not always the case. It is stronger when claims of development match visible local benefits, and clear pathways to opportunity, and it is more susceptible to competing interpretations when benefits and opportunities are not realized or information is not clear or institutional trust is low. The principal contribution of the study is not only that the youth's attitudes are positive towards China, but that their attitudes are constantly negotiated between claimed contentions in mediated representations and experienced contentions in local contexts.

A multi-layered account of digital influence is used to tackle the second question. The narratives of these participants indicate that there is a pattern of social media exposure leading to extremism, not a straight line that leads directly to extremism. Issues are made salient through existing grievances or expectations; digital actors choose and construct salient issues as narratives of victimhood, extraction, exclusion, cultural threat or external control; emotionally charged content is picked up and shared; more it circulates, more familiar it becomes and more accepted is its supposed consensus; more familiar and accepted is the supposed consensus, more it is considered as a frame that is judged by users' institutional trust and local experience, or access to other content. In a context of unsolved grievance, low trust, lack of information, homogeneous networks, more and more absolute interpretations are becoming more plausible. The same narratives are more likely to be called into question or resisted if visible benefits, credible information, diverse sources and trusted local intermediaries and media skills are present. The study thus challenges the automatic-radicalization assumption and the merging of the Baloch identity and/or peaceful criticism with terrorism.

The overall conclusion is that the promotion of positive attitudes – and the positive sustainable attitude – is not a task that can be accomplished simply by flooding the masses with messages. The key connecting element of development experience and digital interpretation is credibility. Development actors should ensure benefits are made visible locally, link skills programmes with employment opportunities and realistic opportunities, increase the visibility of clear education and business opportunities, clearly communicate how development projects are implemented and address legitimate concerns. It is important to teach media literacy in terms of verification and comparison of sources and the identification of emotional or de-contextualized framing. Communication is also important in a timely manner during crises when uncertainty makes for an advantage for rapidly circulating narratives. Simultaneously, legitimate criticism and peaceful grievance must be allowed to be expressed, and not being expressed can contribute to trust issues and further underpin the interpretive foundations on which extreme narratives thrive. On this perspective, the study reveals that the influence of social media in Balochistan is a conditional effect in the context of digital framing, emotion, repetition, peer networks, institutional trust and lived development experiences, not the mere exposure.

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