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Narratives of Cult-Like Political Allegiance and Engagement: A Qualitative Exploration of High-Control Political Identity

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Abstract: *This qualitative biographical study examines why political followers in Pakistan develop intense, unquestioning, and emotionally driven loyalty to their political leaders, similar to cult-like allegiance. Using semi-structured narrative interviews and Umberto Eco's (1995) concept of Ur-Fascism as a guiding framework, the study proposes four main themes: leader-centered devotion, ideological group identity and moral superiority, rejection of opposing views, and the idealization of the leader as the last hope. It also highlights how sacrifice, loyalty, suffering, and perceived persecution may be interpreted as signs of commitment to the political cause. The proposed coding framework, developed from 70 possible categories into 12 subthemes and four major themes, requires verification against the actual interview data. If confirmed, the findings would suggest that political loyalty is sustained not only by ideology but also by group identity and restricted information environments. The study further suggests that Eco's characteristics of Ur-Fascism apply only partially to the Pakistani context. It identifies civic education and political depolarization as potential policy approaches to addressing extreme political loyalty.*

Introduction

Narratives of Cult-Like Political Allegiance and Engagement

Politica loyalty is a riddle to psychologists if it becomes immune to evidence. In democracies or hybrid regimes, the observers describe that a significant section of the people start following a leader like a God. At times, they treat the leader not only as an idol but also, if he makes it clear, a symbol, and in other cases as someone with the highest authority. When the leader is criticized, followers tend to feel betrayed. Followers often become a social movement where they base their friendships, identity, moral words around the movement (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mason, 2018). Such behavior gets criticized as cult-like by the public. But the label is usually applied from the outside, to followers rather than with them. How followers themselves narrate their reasons are less known.

How do members of a movement explain to themselves why they felt that a leader initially possessed them, and what was it in the leader that made them give up loyalty without hesitation? What could possibly have happened when they began doubting?

Pakistan serves as a good example. South Asian political parties often revolve around individuals or families rather than programs (Chandra, 2016 for India; Talbot, 2009 for Pakistan). In fact, competition in politics now mostly takes place on social media. In such spaces, people with similar opinions often become isolated or form homogeneous groups, and shared opinions can be made to dominate a space (Cinelli et al., 2021). These conditions seem to naturally lead to identification with leaders, conformity, and animosity toward opponents. However, much of the psychological research on devotion and authoritarian attitudes has its roots in the West (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1996; Lifton, 1961), and its applicability in the context of Pakistan is largely untested.

Cult-Like Allegiance and Totalism

Lifiton (1961) was one of those authors who spoke most directly with the language of high-demand groups. He described the totalistic system to include total control of the environment, use of language heavily charged with meaning or symbolism (i.e., loaded language), and insistence upon purity in all things and at all times. Lalich (2004) explains how the obedience is experienced as free will by members in a closed system where the belief systems are tightly packed, charisma is the main authority, and transcendent purpose is shared between the members.

Charismatic leadership is grounded in followers' belief in the leader's exceptional personal qualities and not on established laws. The idea (Weber's theory that a person's authority comes mainly from personal qualities rather than rules) is that people follow charismatic leaders when they trust in their qualities rather than because there are rules.

Dominant personality factors like the authoritarian one (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemayer, 1996) are individualistic ways to devotion. But nowadays, it is recognized that there are many more reasons for people to commit and those are as important as personal characteristics.

Populism, Polarization, and Political Identity

Populism is commonly defined as a thin ideology that divides society into a pure people and a corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), and national populism has been linked to feelings of distrust, deprivation, destruction, and de-alignment (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Partisanship has also become a social identity, with dislike of out-partisans growing beyond disagreement over policy (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018), consistent with the social identity account of in-group favoritism (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Mechanisms of Deep Attachment

The identity fusion theory suggests that when a person's identification with a group and his or her identification as an individual are not distinct, it is very likely that a person would identify with a group or a leader and even take up very expensive or painful sacrifices on their behalf.

Uncertainty-identity theory posits that being uncertain about one self's characteristics can push oneself to find identification in a group or an individual that have distinct and hierarchical character and even more extreme in this direction would be the identification with an authoritarian leader (Hogg & Adelman, 2013).

The significance quest theory explains how the desire for mattering is connected to the movements that allow for the fulfillment of those desires by giving one a hero's role. Cognitive dissonance is a term used by a psychologist in 1957 to describe the mental discomfort experienced by one person who was deeply involved and after some information came to light which did not conform to a person's expectations and was a disconfirmation that made commitment even stronger. Festinger (1957) and Festinger et al.

(1956) documented that in such cases, believers may reinterpret their disbelief and disconfirmation ways in such a way that the commitment gets even deeper. On the other hand, the social intuitionist approach illustrates in Haidt (2001) how logic in such cases may be at the service of the emotion of loyalty.

Exit and Narrative

Breaking away from a committed group isn't often a simple one-shot choice.

A series of events and a slow change of one's attitude are probably at the heart of the matter. According to studies about leaving one's role, people go through stages of skepticism of the old role, pivotal moments, loss of old relationships, and a lengthy remembrance of one's former self to finally leave that group or role.

Narrativity is a key concept in the way of seeing oneself as a storyteller through one's life experiences. Thus, narrative is a good tool to not only join but also quit (Ebaugh, 1988). As it were, such reminiscing is considered part of one's identification process. People reshape their pasts and fit a life story narrative (Bruner, 1991: McAdams 2001).

The role of a narrative is therefore a powerful one that people can rely on to express what is going on with their identities through the time they spend at a place, a role or, for that matter, in any type of a group.

Theoretical Framework: Eco's Ur-Fascism

Eco (1995) identified 14 characteristics which recur in fascist and proto-fascist movements, including the cult of tradition, the rejection of modernism, regarding disagreement as an act of treason, fear of differences, fixation on a conspiracy, depiction of 'the enemy' as both powerful and vulnerable, the belittlement of the weak, the exaltation and glorification of death, choosing and favouring a particular sector or group of people to give them a voice, and Newspeak. Eco clarified that while these characteristics are listed in separate points, they don't necessarily form a coherent system; indeed, a single feature can be sufficient for fascism to crystallize or be cantered on that feature, and as a general rule, historians do not approve of going beyond the concept (Paxton, 2004). Thus, in the present context, these aspects have mainly the role of sensitizer concepts (Blumer, 1954), since they are a means of focusing attention and improving interview questions but they neither determine the sampling criteria nor decide the findings. Categories of the participant themselves take precedence and any aspects that either are not present or are present in an unfamiliar way are treated as discoveries.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore how cult-like political allegiance operates among political followers in Pakistan. Cult-like political allegiance is defined as intense, uncritical, and emotionally charged loyalty to a political leader or movement, resembling religious or cult behavior and characterized by dogmatism, conformity, and resistance to dissenting views (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). The term is descriptive, not diagnostic, and the study does not name or evaluate any party or leader. The central question was how individuals narrate their experience of allegiance and engagement in cult-like political movements in Pakistan. Five sub-questions asked (RQ1) how followers narrate developing loyalty, (RQ2) which psychosocial factors sustain allegiance, (RQ3) which factors challenge it, (RQ4) how conformity, dissent, and disillusionment are narrated, and (RQ5) how allegiance influences identity, relationships, and worldview.

Methodology

Design

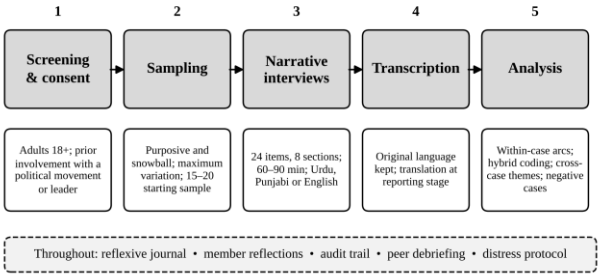
The research followed a qualitative narrative inquiry approach. In fact, this method suits well when a phenomenon. In line with this, there is a sequence of elements in the phenomenon under study that includes becoming, belonging, doubting, leaving, which also reflects changes in self or identity. The researchers maintained an interpretivist and constructionist framework. In a way, accounts are situated, co-constructed in the interview, shaped by hindsight, not as transparent accounts of events.

Participants and Sampling Plan

The study includes adults who are at least 18 years old and who respond "yes" to the screening question: "Have you ever been actively involved or strongly affiliated with a political movement or leader?''

We use the purposive and snowball methods to get a range as wide as possible in types of movements that members are currently following, their ages, gender, level of education, where they live, and whether they are completely committed, undecided, or disengaged. The sub-questions that deal with loyalty being maintained and loyalty being questioned need differences for them to be meaningful, so that is a main reason for seeking maximum variation (Malterud et al., 2016).

We think that an initial sample of about 15 to 20 people will be enough to start the process, but that will depend on how much information we gather and what kind of information (Malterud et al., 2016). Participants could be interviewed in Urdu, Punjabi, or English. We expect the final number of the interviewed respondents will be determined by how much information they provide.



Interview Protocol

Individual semi-structured interviews of 60 to 90 minutes, audio-recorded with consent, follow a 24-item protocol in eight sections: opening personal journey, belief and obedience, sense of belonging, enemies and conflict, leadership and authority, gender, power, and morality, reflection and disengagement, and closing. Prompts move from low-threat storytelling to sensitive topics and then to reflection. Items about what “followers” did let participants describe group norms at a distance before personalizing them, and yes/no items are opened with follow-ups such as “Can you tell me about a time when that happened?

Analysis and Data Status

To carry out the coding of the collected narratives and their reflexive themes, first the researchers have to immerse themselves completely in the recordings and transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Riessman, 2008).

Then each participant's journey from entry to exit or continuing to do it will be mapped separately. A combination of deductive and inductive coding will be carried out, and the codes that can be deduced from features given by Eco (1995) will be the deductive codes.

Next after that step comes the development of cross-thematic or inter-thematic theme development which shall include also the negative cases.

Lastly is the examination of each feature in the sense of how it is justified by the data either being weakly supported, or even unsupported by the data, or the context has changed the feature.

The transcripts do not go through any changes and keep the participants' original language, although the translation is done at the final writing phase along with the back-translation check of the most important text extracts.

What is presented below is the results of an initial analysis, i.e., a tentative framework of major themes. Seventy of the protocol's codes were divided into 12 sub-themes and 4 main themes. The narration of each theme, wherever it was available, was also made to reflect how each coding frame was constructed.

These narratives are examples illustrating the themes which were not directly taken from the participants' answers (quotations). There should only be a statement claiming that one is more than the other, which is not the case here, neither in frequency norprevalence.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Quality criteria follow Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Tracy (2010): member reflections, negative case analysis, thick description, an audit trail, and peer debriefing. A reflexive journal records the researcher's views and reactions, and description of accounts is kept separate from evaluation of them. Ethics board approval precedes any participant contact. Participants give informed, voluntary consent, may skip questions or withdraw, receive pseudonyms, and are told in advance about the limits of confidentiality. Leaders, organizations, and identifying details are generalized, data are encrypted, interviewers monitor distress and provide referral information, and reporting uses non-pathologizing language.

Results

The framework organizes 70 codes into 12 subordinate themes and four superordinate themes (Table 1). Labels for Themes 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10 are working labels proposed from the codes. Every narrative below is an illustrative exemplar written to demonstrate a theme, not a participant quotation. Themes 1, 7, 8, and 9 have no narrative yet, and no participant counts are reported.

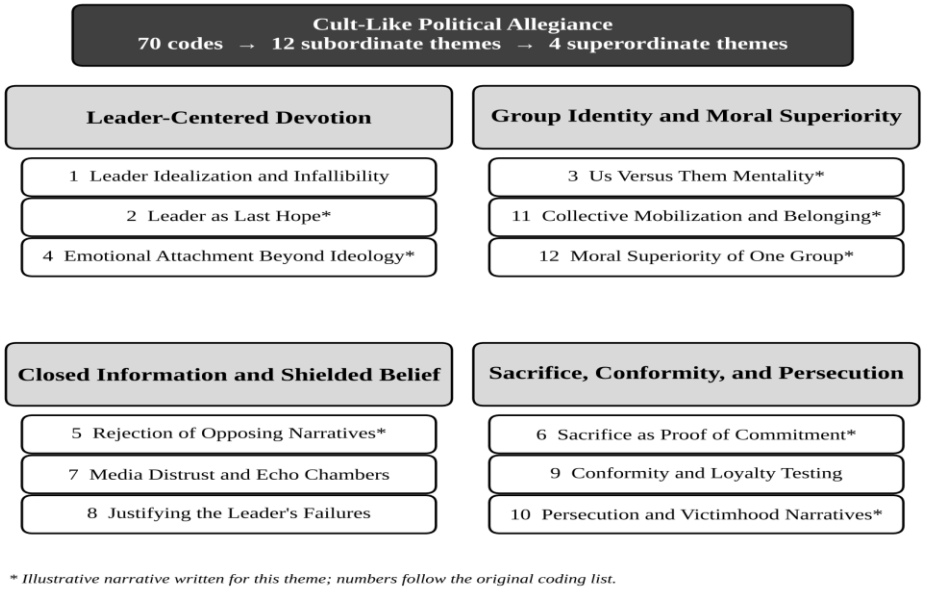
Table 1

Thematic Framework of Cult-Like Political Allegiance

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme	Codes
Leader-Centered Devotion	1. Leader Idealization and Infallibility	9
	2. Leader as Last Hope	5
	4. Emotional Attachment Beyond Political Ideology	6
Group Identity and Moral Superiority	3. Us Versus Them Mentality	7
	11. Collective Mobilization and Group Belonging	7
	12. Moral Superiority of One Political Group	4
Closed Information and Shielded Belief	5. Rejection of Opposing Political Narratives	5
	7. Media Distrust and Echo Chambers	5
	8. Justifying the Leader's Failures	3

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme	Codes
Sacrifice, Conformity, and Persecution	6. Sacrifice as Proof of Political Commitment	5
	9. Conformity and Loyalty Testing	7
	10. Persecution and Victimhood Narratives	7

Note. Codes = number of the 70 codes grouped under each subordinate theme. Theme numbers follow the original coding list.



** Illustrative narrative written for this theme; numbers follow the original coding list.*

Leader-Centered Devotion

This superordinate theme (RQ1, RQ2) concerns how the leader is idealized, relied on, and personally felt. *Leader idealization and infallibility* (nine codes, including leader worship, blind loyalty, and leader mythologization) describes a leader who is revered, symbolically elevated, and treated as beyond error, in line with Weber's (1947) account of charisma and Eco's (1995) heroism and selective populism. *Leader as last hope* (five codes) casts the leader as the only remaining option, with the country's future tied to his success:

Honestly, I don't see anyone else who can bring real change. We have tried so many people, but I feel this leader is our last hope. If he fails, I don't know what will happen to this country. (illustrative narrative)

Emotional attachment beyond political ideology (six codes) describes personal connection in which the leader's fortunes and insults are felt as one's own, a pattern consistent with identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012):

> It's not just about politics anymore. I feel personally connected to him. When something bad happens to him, it affects me, and when people insult him, I take it personally. (illustrative narrative)

Group Identity and Moral Superiority

This superordinate theme (RQ2, RQ5) concerns how the group defines itself against others. *Us versus them mentality* (seven codes, including opponent demonization, dehumanization, and political intolerance) fits social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), affective polarization (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), and Eco's fear of difference:

> People who support our leader understand the reality, but those who oppose him are either misinformed or have their own interests. It feels like we are fighting against everyone. (illustrative narrative)

Collective mobilization and group belonging (seven codes) describes shared events that create a feeling of family and strength:

> When we all gather for a political event, I feel like we are one family. People who have never met each other stand together for the same cause. That feeling gives me strength. (illustrative narrative)

Moral superiority of one political group (four codes) claims greater sincerity and higher purpose than other parties, a moralization that is compatible with intuitionist accounts of moral reasoning (Haidt, 2001):

> I feel our supporters genuinely want the country to improve. Other parties talk about the same things, but I don't feel they have the same sincerity. At least we believe in something bigger than ourselves. (illustrative narrative)

Closed Information and Shielded Belief

This superordinate theme (RQ2) concerns how belief is protected from correction. *Rejection of opposing political narratives* (five codes, including evidence rejection and ideological rigidity) dismisses opposing accounts in advance as agenda-driven:

> I don't even feel like listening to the other side anymore. Whatever they say, I feel there is some agenda behind it. I would rather trust what our own people say. (illustrative narrative)

Media distrust and echo chambers (five codes, including partisan media reliance, digital echo chambers, slogan repetition, and conspiracy beliefs) matches echo-chamber dynamics online (Cinelli et al., 2021) and Eco's obsession with a plot and Newspeak. *Justifying the leader's failures* (three codes: mistake justification, accountability double standards, and failure rationalization) is consistent with dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957). Neither has a narrative yet.

Sacrifice, Conformity, and Persecution

This superordinate theme (RQ4, RQ5) concerns what loyalty costs and how it is policed. *Sacrifice as proof of political commitment* (five codes, including family polarization and relationship strain) reads hardship as evidence of sincerity:

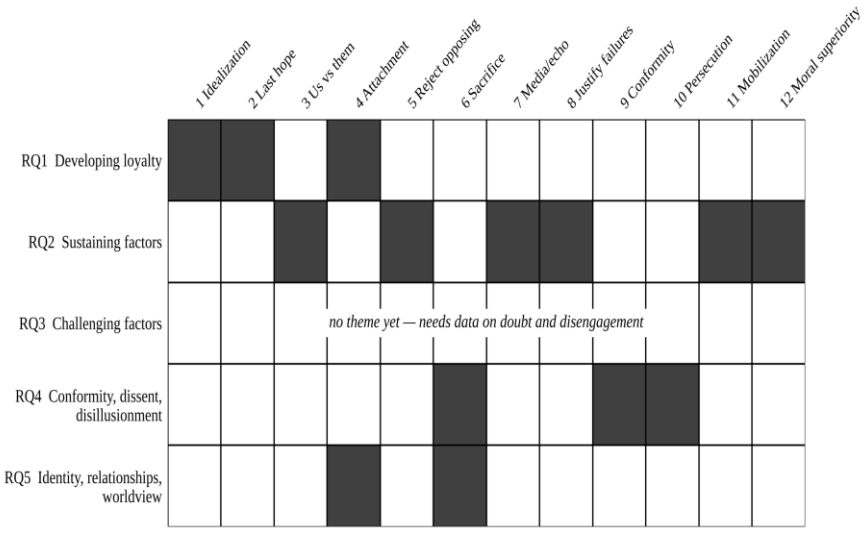
> We have faced so much criticism because of our political views, but we are still standing with our leader. To me, that shows how sincere we are. Supporting him is not always easy, but I think it is worth it. (illustrative narrative)

Conformity and loyalty testing (seven codes, including loyalty signaling, internal dissent suppression, and fear of rejection) corresponds to Eco's view of disagreement as treason, and has no narrative yet. *Persecution and victimhood narratives* (seven codes, including institutional distrust and electoral delegitimization) portray the leader and supporters as targets of powerful forces:

> Whenever our leader tries to speak up, something happens to stop him. It makes me feel that powerful people don't want him to succeed. Sometimes, I feel that even ordinary supporters are being targeted for standing with him. (illustrative narrative)

Coverage of the Research Questions

RQ1 is addressed by Themes 1, 2, and 4; RQ2 by Themes 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, and 12; RQ4 by Themes 6, 9, and 10; and RQ5 by Themes 4 and 6. RQ3 is not addressed, because no theme concerns doubt or disengagement, and RQ4 is covered for conformity and dissent but not for disillusionment. Interview data from the reflection and disengagement section of the protocol are needed to fill these gaps.



Filled cell = theme addresses the research question (provisional analyst mapping). RQ4 covers conformity and dissent, not disillusionment.

Discussion

The framework implies that, in the story, political loyalty resembles that of a cult and rests mainly on three interconnected factors. The first is a leader who has a heroic image and is emotionally connected to the people. The second is a community that sees itself as a morally superior group and defines its members in opposition to others. Third, and lastly, there is an atmosphere of ideas, values, or belief which prevents beliefs from being corrected by external criticism. These three elements can then be linked to other elements, such as sacrifice, pressure to conform, and stories about sufferings that make members feel more attached to these three factors, the leaders.

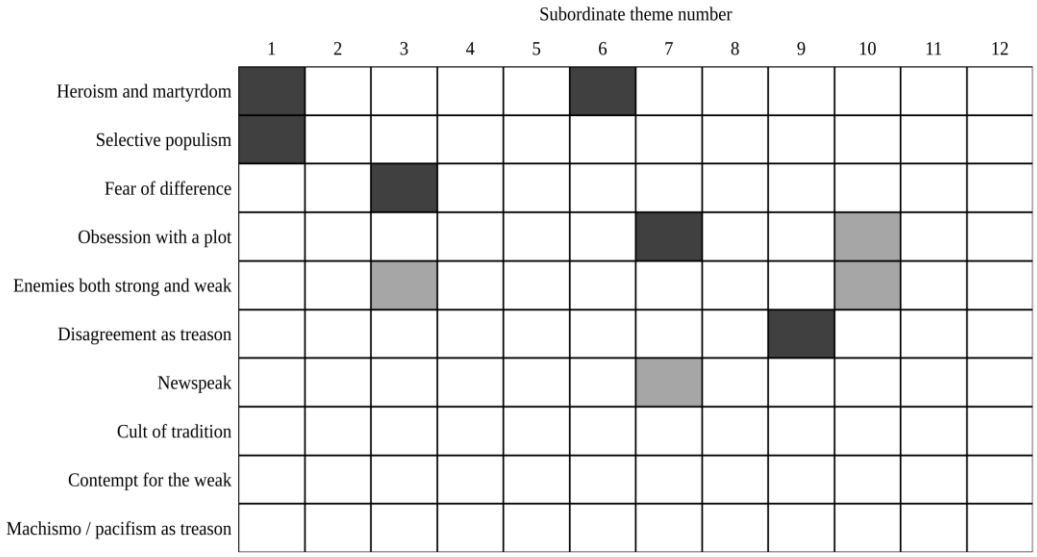
Since the narratives are fictional, these elements are hypotheses to be tested, not findings. The leader-dependent themes correspond nicely with the idea of charismatic authority (Weber, 1947) and identity fusion (Swann et al., 2012): feeling that the fortune of a leader is one's own fortune, thus, being wounded if the leader is insulted, and feeling criticized as aggression, not information. This situation is the "The Leader as a Last Hope" theme which is similar to some theories where a person's or a country's insecurity makes one want to hold onto a powerful leader (Hogg & Adelman, 2013).

The themes about the group align with the concepts of social identity and affective polarization study (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Mason, 2018). The information isolation themes coincide with dissonance reduction theories (Festinger, 1957; Festinger et al., 1956), which are used for coping with cognitive conflicts and echo-chamber phenomena (Cinelli et al., 2021). One sacrificing oneself is the only genuine way to show one's commitment that, according to significance quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2014), a hardship will convert loyalty into a proof of sincere and heroicactions.

Eco's (1995) features describe discourse more readily than attachment. Themes corresponding to Disagreement-as-treason, obsession-with-plot, enemies-as-strong-and-weak, heroism, and Newspeak are respectively mapped onto Eco's features 3, 6, 7, 9, and 10. Meanwhile, the theme of emotional attachment (4) is least aligned with Eco's features and explained better by identity fusion. Features regarding tradition, contempt for weaker, machismo, and pacifism treason are not yet presented. It is possible that some of these features are lacking, reshaped by the Pakistani context, or simply not activated. The sections of the protocol on gender, power, and morality should explore these features. As the current framework cannot but asks this transfer question whether eco's list applies to Pakistan.

Should interview data support this framework, it could bring several theoretical, methodological and practical aspects into play, by: Testing a European framework in a postcolonial setting, thereby enriching

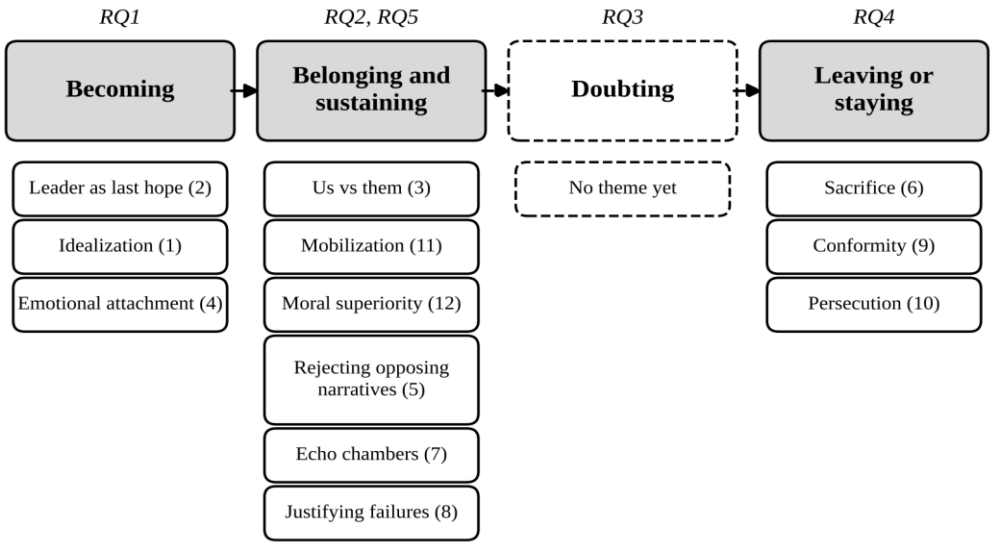
theory through the framework;Methodologically showing how narrative interviewing handles a sensitive and controversial topic;Informing civic education, media literacy, and depolarisation work at the level of practice besides giving guidance to counselors and educators who work with individuals coming out of high-controlgroups.



Dark = clear fit Grey = partial fit White = not represented. Rows 8–10 appear in no theme yet.
Theme 4 (emotional attachment) fits Eco least and is better explained by identity fusion. Provisional mapping; no data yet.

Limitations and Future Research

The main drawback to consider is that this model isn't based on the actual participants' experiences. The stories just depict, the concepts and work labels aren't proven yet, there is none of the themes that deal with doubt, dissatisfaction, or leaving, so RQ3 is still unknown. When you start getting the data a new set of limits will appear: recollection of episodes will be a combination of memory and imagination, non-random, snowball samples will be just a tiny fraction of the real population while perhaps those who were most devoted could be reluctant to open-up. Expecting social acceptance and avoiding political consequences may influence openness, language translation introduces another level of understanding, and the validity of Eco's evaluation system is disputable. Researchers should interview persons according to the protocol, code their responses separately from the existing frame or not use the existing frame at all if the data do not support the existing themes, they should also introduce the themes on doubt and disengagement.



Solid = themes with codes or illustrative narratives; dashed = not yet evidenced. Leaving or staying covers conformity and dissent but not disillusionment; interview data are needed for Doubting and for exit.

Conclusion

Cult-like political allegiance is easy to label and hard to understand. This article offers a provisional, testable account of how such allegiance might be narrated in Pakistan and a protocol for examining it with followers and former followers in their own words.

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