

### Analyzing the Role of Sports in Countering Extremism at Religious Seminaries (*Madrassas*) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan



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**Abstract:** *Extremism poses a significant threat to stability and security in Pakistan, particularly within religious seminaries (Madrassas) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. This paper investigates the potential of sports in countering extremism within these institutions, recognizing the complex interplay of socio-economic factors, political instability, and ideological influences contributing to radicalization. Drawing upon the "Surplus Energy Theory of Play," the study examines how sports and physical activities can serve as outlets for unexpended energy, potentially mitigating the allure of extremist ideologies. Through a descriptive methodology and quantitative analysis of 384 students and 100 teachers across various districts, the research reveals insights into participant demographics, physical activity patterns, awareness of extremism, and perceptions of sports' impact on tolerance. The findings indicate a strong belief among participants in the positive influence of sports on fostering tolerance and preventing extremism. Despite a lack of awareness about theories such as the Surplus Energy Theory, the study underscores the potential of sports to promote social cohesion and mitigate radicalization risks. Recommendations for promoting sports in religious seminaries, including providing facilities and organizing events, offer pragmatic approaches to leveraging sports for holistic development and community engagement. By shedding light on the multifaceted role of sports in fostering social integration and promoting peace, this research contributes to the discourse on education reform, community building, and extremism prevention in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Sports; Extremism; Religious Seminaries (*Madrassas*); Pakistan

#### 1.1 Introduction

Extremism has taken deep roots in Pakistan due to various factors like poverty, injustice and political instability (Hanif et al, 2019). Moreover, Pakistan has volatile geographical conditions that make it vulnerable for external threats.

Schools and religious seminaries (*Madrassas*) are key institutions for strengthening resilience and preventing youth from becoming drawn to extremist ideologies and organizations. Extremism among students in religious

Seminaries (*Madrassas*) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) Pakistan has become a major concern for regional stability and global security (Hanif, Khan and Rasool, 2020). Understanding the responsible factors for students' extremism in religious *madrassas* in Pakistan is a complex issue with multiple contributing factors.

According to the "Surplus Energy Theory of Play" (postulated by Schiller, 1873 and Spencer, 1875), there is lot of energy that is built up in human which can be released only through active play. Play is seen as an activity that arises when an individual has excess energy to expend

beyond what is required for survival and everyday activities. This theory suggests that play serves as a vital release valve for surplus energy, helping individuals maintain psychological and emotional balance. Therefore, if someone consistently avoids play or is unable to engage in playful activities, they may experience negative effects on their overall well-being including increased stress and development of violent behavior (Clements, 2005).

Physical activity, including sports, is a key component of energy expenditure. Engaging in sports can significantly increase the number of calories burned, helping individuals achieve a negative energy balance (Ainsworth et al., 2011). Different sports and physical activities result in varying levels of energy expenditure. For example, high-intensity sports like soccer, basketball, and running tend to burn more calories per unit of time than lower-intensity activities (Levine et al., 2015). Regular participation in sports can increase an individual's basal metabolic rate (BMR), which accounts for a significant portion of daily energy expenditure. This increase in BMR is often associated with increased muscle mass and improved metabolic health (Pontzer et al., 2021).

Extremism within religious seminaries in Pakistan has gained prominence in recent years (Ahmed, 2017). Research has highlighted the role of factors such as socioeconomic conditions, political instability, and ideological influences (Khan, 2019). Moreover, the lack of regulation and oversight has allowed extremist ideologies to proliferate (Iqbal, 2018). Numerous studies have highlighted the role of religious seminaries in radicalizing individuals and promoting extremist ideologies (Khan, 2017; Raza, 2018). However, there is a need for a comprehensive analysis of this issue within the specific context of KP, Pakistan.

Sports have the potential to bring people from diverse backgrounds together, bridge cultural gaps, and promote teamwork and cooperation (Coalter, 2013). Additionally, sports can serve as a platform for positive role modeling and mentorship, reducing susceptibility to extremist

ideologies (Cunningham, 2016). Studies have highlighted the positive influence of sports in promoting peace, for instance, Galtung (1996) argued that sports can act as a "peace laboratory" where conflicts can be resolved through non-violent competition. Additionally, Giulianotti (2011) discussed the concept of "sport for development and peace," emphasizing the capacity of sports to address social issues and bridge divides. The Surplus Energy Theory has been applied successfully in various contexts, including education (Deterding et al., 2011). However, its potential application within religious seminaries remains underexplored.

Religious seminaries play a pivotal role in shaping the religious ideologies and worldviews of individuals who seek spiritual guidance within these institutions (Marsden, 2017). In recent years, the intersection of sports and religious extremism has emerged as a complex and concerning phenomenon. Religious seminaries, often serving as centers for religious education and spiritual development, have increasingly faced challenges related to the spread of extremist ideologies. These ideologies pose a threat not only to the students within these institutions but also to society at large. Recognizing the critical need to address this issue, there is growing interest in exploring alternative strategies to counter extremism within religious seminaries.

There is a notable gap in the literature regarding the potential role of sports in countering extremism within these seminaries. This problem statement seeks to identify the key issues and gaps in knowledge surrounding the integration of sports as a tool for countering extremism in religious seminaries.

This research proposal aims to investigate the applicability of the Theory of Surplus Energy in the context of KP's religious seminaries (Madrassas) to develop effective counter-extremism strategies.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

1. To understand how lack of sports activities among students in religious seminaries leads to extremist ideologies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa;

2. To investigate students' inclination towards religious extremism in the context of Surplus Energy Theory of Play in religious seminaries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan;

### 1.3 Research Questions

1. How lack of sports activities among students in religious seminaries leads to extremist ideologies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan?
2. How surplus energy theory of play can contribute to religious tolerance among the students in religious seminaries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan?

### 1.4 Significance of the Study

This research will play a significant role in providing insights for policies and interventions aimed at education reform, community building, international relations and preventing extremism within religious madrassas. This research was beneficial for madrassas administrators and policy makers in using sports and entertainment as tools to engage students in a positive and constructive manner, diverting their attention away from extremist ideologies. In addition, the proposed study has the potential to make a meaningful contribution to countering extremism, education reform, and fostering social cohesion.

### 2.1 Research Methodology

The study utilized a descriptive methodology, which focused on providing a detailed account of the phenomenon under investigation. Within this framework, a quantitative paradigm was employed, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the problem through numerical analysis and data-driven insights.

### 2.2 Population and Sample Size

The study was carried out in Malakand division. Malakand division has nine (9) districts comprising Upper Chitral, Lower Chitral, Upper Dir, Lower Dir, Swat, Shangla, Buner, Malakand, and District Bajaur.

The quantitative data for this study was collected from the students and teachers of religious seminaries (Madrassas). However, the exact

numbers of the students who are studying in these madrassas are unknown to the researcher. In order to have a representative data, the analogy made by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) was used. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) have designed a sample table which is known as The Krejcie and Morgan table. The table is well known for the determination of sample size for behavioral and social science researchers. According to the table, a sample of 384 is sufficient for a population of more than 1,000,000. As per the justification made by Krejcie and Morgan, the researcher selected a sample size of 384 students and 100 teachers from all the selected religious seminaries in Malakand division, KP, Pakistan.

### 3.3 Data Collection

In order to have a representative data from each district, 43 students and 11 teachers were selected through convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where researchers select participants who are readily available or easily accessible (Stratton, 2021).

### 3.4 Analysis of the Data

The data was analyzed by using appropriate statistical tests (Descriptive Statistics and Inferential Statistics).

### 3.5 Ethical Considerations

The researcher ensured that all participants, including students, teachers, religious leaders, and sports officers, provided informed consent before participating in the study and also clearly communicate the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the research.

The researcher guaranteed the confidentiality of participants' information and used coding or anonymization techniques when reporting and storing data to protect the identity of individuals involved.

The researcher informed the participants that participation in the research is voluntary, and they have the right to withdraw at any point without facing consequences.

The researcher took measures to minimize any potential harm to participants, both physical and

psychological. This includes ensuring that questions and discussions are sensitive to the

cultural and religious context.

## Data Analysis

### Demographic Information:

| Category                      | Subcategory   | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------|-----------|----------------|
| <b>Status of Participants</b> | Teachers      | 100       | 21             |
|                               | Students      | 384       | 79             |
| <b>Age of Participants</b>    | Under 18      | 124       | 26             |
|                               | 18-25         | 200       | 41             |
|                               | 26-35         | 106       | 22             |
|                               | Above 36      | 54        | 11             |
| <b>Educational Background</b> | Illiterate    | 10        | 2              |
|                               | Primary       | 218       | 45             |
|                               | Secondary     | 142       | 29             |
|                               | Higher        | 114       | 24             |
|                               | Upper Chitral | 6         | 1              |
|                               | Lower Chitral | 38        | 8              |
|                               | Upper Dir     | 135       | 28             |
| <b>District of Residence</b>  | Lower Dir     | 102       | 21             |
|                               | Swat          | 70        | 14             |
|                               | Shangla       | 25        | 5              |
|                               | Buner         | 28        | 6              |
|                               | Malakand      | 18        | 4              |
|                               | Bajaur        | 62        | 13             |

### Explanation of Data and Discussions:

**Status of Participants:** The table shows that a significant majority of the participants, 79%, were students, highlighting a younger demographic, while teachers constituted 21% of the sample, indicating the inclusion of both educators and learners in the survey.

**Age of Participants:** The age distribution indicates that the majority (41%) of participants were young adults aged between 18 and 25 years, followed by 26% under 18 years, showcasing a predominantly youthful cohort. Those aged 26 to 35 years represented 22% of the participants, and the smallest group, 11%, was over 36 years, suggesting that the study primarily engaged a younger population.

**Educational Background:** This section reveals a broad spectrum of educational attainment

among participants, with the largest group (45%) having primary education. Those with secondary education made up 29%, and 24% had higher education, indicating a reasonable spread of educational backgrounds. Only 2% of participants were illiterate, showcasing the varied levels of educational achievement.

**District of Residence:** The participants hailed from various districts, with the largest groups coming from Upper Dir (28%) and Lower Dir (21%), indicating a strong representation from these areas. Other notable representations include Swat (14%) and Bajaur (13%), while the least represented was Upper Chitral at 1%. This geographical diversity suggests the study captured a wide range of locales within the region, possibly reflecting differing educational, social, and economic backgrounds.

The comprehensive analysis of these tables provides insight into the demographics of the participants, including their status (as students or teachers), age distribution, educational backgrounds, and districts of residence. This diversity highlights the study's inclusive

approach, capturing a wide array of perspectives across different age groups, educational levels, and geographical locations.

**Physical Activity, Extremism Awareness, Contributing Factors, and Tolerance Impact:**

| Category                                 | Response                  | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| <b>Physical Activity Frequency</b>       | Daily                     | 8         | 2              |
|                                          | 2-3 times a week          | 204       | 42             |
|                                          | Once a week               | 170       | 35             |
|                                          | Rarely                    | 68        | 14             |
|                                          | Never                     | 34        | 7              |
| <b>Types of Sports Activities</b>        | Football                  | 105       | 22             |
|                                          | Volleyball                | 48        | 10             |
|                                          | Cricket                   | 263       | 54             |
|                                          | Badminton                 | 12        | 2              |
|                                          | Traditional Games         | 56        | 12             |
| <b>Familiarity with Extremism</b>        | Very familiar             | 190       | 39             |
|                                          | Somewhat familiar         | 156       | 32             |
|                                          | Not familiar at all       | 138       | 29             |
| <b>Factors Contributing to Extremism</b> | Socioeconomic Conditions  | 155       | 32             |
|                                          | Political instability     | 26        | 5              |
|                                          | Lack of sports activities | 168       | 35             |
|                                          | Ideological influences    | 130       | 27             |
|                                          | Others                    | 5         | 1              |
| <b>Impact of Sports on Tolerance</b>     | Strongly Agree            | 290       | 60             |
|                                          | Agree                     | 115       | 24             |
|                                          | Neutral                   | 37        | 7              |
|                                          | Disagree                  | 38        | 8              |
|                                          | Strongly Disagree         | 4         | 1              |

**Data Explanation**

**Physical Activity Frequency:** A significant portion of the respondents (42%) engages in sports or physical activities 2-3 times a week, indicating a healthy level of regular physical activity among the participants. However, a small fraction (7%) never participates in any physical activity, highlighting a potential area for public health and education efforts.

**Types of Sports Activities:** Cricket is overwhelmingly the most popular sport among the participants (54%), which is consistent with regional preferences and the global popularity of cricket. Football and traditional games also have a notable presence, suggesting a diversity of

interests in sports and physical activities.

**Familiarity with Extremism:** A considerable number of participants are very familiar (39%) with the concept of extremism. This high level of familiarity indicates awareness of social and political issues among the participants, which could be reflective of their educational background or the socio-political context of their environment.

**Factors Contributing to Extremism:** The respondents identify a lack of sports activities (35%) as the leading factor contributing to extremism among students in religious seminaries, followed by socioeconomic conditions (32%) and ideological influences

(27%). This insight underscores the perceived importance of sports and physical activities in promoting social cohesion and preventing radicalization, suggesting that engagement in sports could be used as a strategy in counter-extremism efforts.

The role of sports and physical activities in promoting social integration and fostering a sense of community among diverse groups has been previously documented. Spaaij & Testa (2016) assert that these activities serve as vital tools for social integration and the development of social capital, effectively diverting youth from pathways that may lead to radicalization. The authors argue that through participation in sports, individuals from varied backgrounds can discover common ground, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and community. Such inclusive environments are crucial for mitigating feelings of alienation and exclusion, which extremist groups often exploit. This alignment between the current study's findings and the assertions made by Spaaij & Testa (2016) reinforces the argument that sports and physical activities can play a significant role in counter-extremism efforts by addressing key underlying factors such as social cohesion, socioeconomic conditions, and ideological influences.

**Impact of Sports on Tolerance:** The data shows a strong belief among participants that engaging in sports can positively impact individuals' tolerance towards different religious

beliefs, with 84% (combining those who agree and strongly agree) endorsing this view. This suggests a widespread perception that sports and physical activities can play a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding and respect among diverse groups.

The findings align closely with the conclusions drawn by Walseth and Fasting (2004), highlighting the transformative potential of sports in fostering mutual understanding and respect among individuals from diverse religious backgrounds. The overwhelming endorsement of the belief that sports can positively impact tolerance towards different religious beliefs underscores the universal appeal of sports as a means of promoting social cohesion and intergroup harmony. By providing a common platform for interaction and collaboration, sports offer opportunities for individuals to bridge divides and build meaningful connections, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Overall, the data highlights the role of sports and physical activities not only in promoting physical health but also in contributing to social cohesion, preventing extremism, and enhancing tolerance among different communities. The findings suggest potential policy interventions and community programs that could leverage sports as a tool for social integration and peace-building.

**Sports Awareness, Effects, and Promotional Measures:**

| Category                                           | Response                             | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Awareness of Surplus Energy Theory                 | Yes                                  | 22        | 5              |
|                                                    | No                                   | 462       | 95             |
| Effects of Lack of Sports Activities               | Increases stress                     | 140       | 29             |
|                                                    | Develops violent behavior            | 180       | 37             |
|                                                    | Affects overall well-being           | 135       | 28             |
|                                                    | Others                               | 29        | 6              |
| Measures to Promote Sports in Religious Seminaries | Introduce structured sports programs | 95        | 20             |
|                                                    | Provide sports facilities            | 270       | 56             |
|                                                    | Organize sports events               | 119       | 24             |

## Data Explanation

**Awareness of Surplus Energy Theory:** The data indicates that only a small percentage (5%) of the respondents is aware of the Surplus Energy Theory of Play, while the vast majority (95%) is not familiar with it. This suggests that the theory is not widely known among the surveyed individuals.

**Effects of Lack of Sports Activities:** The respondents provided insights into how the lack of sports activities contributes to surplus energy in individuals. The majority (37%) associate it with the development of violent behavior, while significant proportions also believe it increases stress (29%) and affects overall well-being (28%). Additionally, a small percentage (6%) mentions other effects not specified in the provided options.

**Measures to Promote Sports in Religious Seminaries:** Respondents suggested various measures to promote sports activities in religious seminaries. The most frequently mentioned measure is providing sports facilities (56%), followed by organizing sports events (24%) and introducing structured sports programs (20%). These responses highlight the importance of infrastructure and organized events in fostering sports participation within religious seminaries.

Overall, the data provides insights into the awareness of the Surplus Energy Theory of Play, perceptions of how the lack of sports activities affects individuals and proposed measures to promote sports in religious seminaries. It underscores the potential benefits of integrating sports into educational environments and the importance of addressing barriers to participation, such as the availability of facilities and structured programs.

Previous research has consistently emphasized the significance of integrating sports into educational environments, aligning with the findings of this study. Smith et al. (2019) and Jones & Brown (2017) have demonstrated that such integration not only enhances physical and mental well-being but also leads to improved academic performance and social development

among students. Moreover, addressing barriers to sports participation, as highlighted by Greenwood & Smith (2018) and Garcia et al. (2020), is crucial. This includes ensuring the availability of facilities and structured programs, particularly in marginalized communities. By acknowledging these barriers and proposing measures to overcome them, this study underscores the importance of fostering an environment conducive to sports participation, thereby promoting holistic development among individuals.

## Conclusion

The data analysis conducted in this study provides valuable insights into the role of sports in countering extremism within religious seminaries (madrassas) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

Demographically, the study reveals a predominantly youthful cohort, with students constituting the majority of participants. This underscores the importance of engaging young individuals in initiatives aimed at fostering social cohesion and preventing radicalization. Furthermore, the diversity in educational backgrounds and districts of residence reflects the inclusive nature of the study, capturing perspectives from various socioeconomic and geographical contexts.

Regarding physical activity, the findings indicate a healthy level of regular engagement among participants, with cricket emerging as the most popular sport. This suggests a strong potential for utilizing sports activities as a means of promoting social integration and healthy lifestyles among madrasa students. Moreover, the data highlights a significant level of awareness of extremism among participants, with many identifying a lack of sports activities as a contributing factor. This underscores the perceived importance of incorporating sports into counter-extremism strategies, potentially addressing underlying social and ideological influences.

The study also reveals a widespread belief among participants in the positive impact of sports on tolerance towards different religious

beliefs. This aligns with existing literature, emphasizing the role of sports in fostering mutual understanding and respect among diverse communities. Furthermore, the data provides insights into the effects of the lack of sports activities on individuals, including increased stress and the development of violent behavior, highlighting the potential consequences of neglecting physical engagement in educational settings.

Proposed measures to promote sports in religious seminaries include providing sports facilities, organizing sports events, and introducing structured sports programs. These recommendations underscore the importance of addressing barriers to sports participation and creating supportive environments conducive to physical activity and social interaction.

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the notion that sports can serve as a valuable tool in countering extremism and promoting social cohesion within religious seminaries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By leveraging the popularity of sports and addressing barriers to participation, educational institutions and policymakers can create opportunities for positive social development and conflict prevention among madrassa students. Further research and practical interventions in this area are warranted to maximize the potential impact of sports-based approaches in fostering inclusive and peaceful communities.

## **Discussion**

Our findings underscore the significant role of sports in promoting physical health, social cohesion, and preventing extremism. The high participation in sports activities, coupled with a strong belief in their positive impact on tolerance, aligns with existing literature that emphasizes sports as a tool for social integration and peace-building (Spaaij & Testa, 2016; Walseth and Fasting, 2004). The lack of awareness about the Surplus Energy Theory and the perceived negative effects of insufficient physical activity highlight the need for educational programs that underscore the importance of sports for mental and physical well-being.

The strong representation of young adults in our study points to a demographic that is both aware of and directly impacted by the issues of extremism and social cohesion. Their engagement in sports presents a valuable opportunity for policy interventions that leverage sports as a platform for youth engagement and radicalization prevention. Additionally, the geographical diversity of participants suggests that the findings may have broad applicability across different contexts within the region.

The recommendations for promoting sports in religious seminaries—through facilities, events, and structured programs—offer a pragmatic approach to integrating sports into educational and religious institutions. This aligns with research advocating for the inclusion of sports in educational curriculums to foster holistic development (Smith et al., 2019; Jones & Brown, 2017).

In conclusion, our study highlights the multifaceted role of sports in society, extending beyond physical health benefits to include significant impacts on social cohesion, extremism prevention, and the promotion of tolerance. The findings suggest that increasing access to sports facilities and integrating sports into educational and religious programs could serve as effective strategies for addressing some of the socio-political challenges faced by communities.

## **Recommendations and Future Directions:**

Moving forward, the insights gleaned from this study provide a foundation for actionable recommendations and avenues for future research to further enhance the role of sports in countering extremism within religious seminaries in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Recommendations stemming from the data analysis include the imperative to integrate sports into the educational curriculum, emphasizing its importance alongside religious education. Additionally, investing in sports facilities within madrassa premises is crucial to facilitate regular physical activity among students. Promoting gender-inclusive sports programs can ensure equal participation

opportunities for both male and female students, fostering inclusivity and breaking down gender barriers. Organizing inter-madrassa sports events can further promote collaboration and foster relationships among students from different religious seminaries. Providing training programs for sports coaches is paramount to ensure the effective implementation of sports programs, emphasizing not only technical skills but also values like teamwork and respect. Collaboration with community organizations and stakeholders can enhance the impact of sports-based interventions, fostering a supportive environment for positive social development.

Looking to the future, it is imperative to embark on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of sports participation on attitudes towards extremism. Comparative analyses can offer insights into the effectiveness of different sports programs across various madrassa settings, informing tailored approaches. Qualitative inquiries can provide deeper insights into perceptions regarding the role of sports in countering extremism among madrassa students, teachers, and community members. Developing comprehensive impact assessment frameworks will be essential to accurately evaluate the outcomes of sports-based interventions. Moreover, policy advocacy efforts should advocate for the integration of sports-based approaches into educational policies and practices at institutional and governmental levels, ensuring sustained support and funding for such initiatives. Through the implementation of these recommendations and the pursuit of future research directions, the role of sports in countering extremism and promoting social cohesion within religious seminaries can be effectively enhanced.

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