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**Examining the transition of hostility toward Muslims by the Extreme  
Buddhists Nationalism in Sri Lanka engaged by Social Media**

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## **Ackowlevement**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the complex interplay of historical tensions, socio-political dynamics, and the role of social media platforms in shaping intergroup relations in Sri Lanka, particularly focusing on the hostility directed towards Muslims by the majority Buddhist population.

Examining a range of data sources, including interviews with three organizations, discourse analysis, and socio-economic indicators, the study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted phenomenon of ethnic and religious discrimination in the country. By analyzing the ways in which social media influences perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, the research explores the mechanisms through which online platforms exacerbate or mitigate intergroup hostilities.

The findings highlight the challenges to promoting social cohesion and inclusivity in Sri Lankan society, which were discussed from historical and religious perspectives, as well as the impact of social media on exacerbating ethnic relations. Instead of focusing on the research examining the influence of social media engaging in ethnic and religious conflict, the findings suggest a strategy for hate speech. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities underlying intergroup dynamics and offers recommendations for fostering a more tolerant and harmonious social environment.

**Keywords:** intergroup hostility, Muslims, Buddhist hegemony, hate speech, social media

## Table of Contents

<b>Ackowlevement.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Problem statement.....	3
1.2 Motivation for the Study.....	7
1.3 Research Question.....	8
1.4 Significance of the Research.....	8
1.5 Structure of the Thesis.....	9
<b>2. Literature review.....</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	10
2.2 Status quo of Sri Lankan Society.....	10
2.3 Conflict History of Sri Lanka.....	11
2.3.1 Colonization and Pre-Civil War.....	12
2.3.2 During the Civil War.....	13
2.4 Circumstances of Muslims.....	13
2.4.1 Post-Civil War.....	14
2.4.2 Easter Sunday Attack.....	15
2.4.3 COVID-19 and Economic Crisis.....	15
<b>3. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks.....</b>	<b>17</b>
3.1 Introduction.....	17
3.2 General Features of Social Media.....	17
3.2.1 Spreading the Influence of Social Media.....	17
3.2.2 Definition of Hate Speech.....	21
3.2.3 Aim for Hate Speech.....	22
3.2.4 Contents of Hate Speech.....	23
3.3 Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech.....	25
3.4 Social Media in Sri Lanka.....	27
3.4.1 Trend of Social Media in Sri Lanka.....	27
3.4.2 Hate Speech Against Muslims.....	29
3.5 Theoretical Framework.....	31
3.5.1 Social Identity Theory.....	31
3.5.2 Echo Chamber Theory.....	34
<b>4. Methodology and Method.....</b>	<b>36</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	36
4.2 Research Design.....	36
4.2.1 Qualitative Research.....	37
4.2.2 Choice of Participants.....	37
4.3 Data Process.....	39

4.4 Data analysis.....	39
4.5 Research Consideration.....	40
4.5.1 Ethical Considerations.....	40
4.5.2 Reflexibility.....	41
4.6 Limitations.....	41
<b>5. Data Analysis.....</b>	<b>43</b>
5.1 Introduction.....	43
5.1.1 Discourse Analysis.....	43
5.2 Cause of the Transition Hostility.....	44
5.2.1 Targeting Violence toward Muslims.....	44
5.2.2 Role of the Government.....	45
5.2.3 Actors as Religious Leaders.....	46
5.3 Role of Social Media.....	46
5.3.1 Each Actor of Social Media Usage.....	46
5.3.2 Examples of Hate Speech.....	47
5.3.3 Hate Speech and Freedom of Expression.....	48
<b>6. Discussion.....</b>	<b>50</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	50
6.2 Target of violence toward Muslims.....	50
6.2.1 Historical Perspective and Colonial Legacy.....	50
6.2.2 Role of the Government.....	52
6.2.3 Religious Perspective.....	54
6.3 Role of Social Media.....	55
6.4 Strategy for Hate Speech.....	57
6.5 Hate Speech and Freedom of Expression.....	59
6.6 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies.....	62
6.7 Recommendations.....	62
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>64</b>
Reference.....	66
Appendix 1.....	71
Appendix 2.....	72
Appendix 3.....	79
Appendix 4.....	85

## **1. Introduction**

The proliferation of social media is a prominent aspect of globalization, transcending national boundaries and socio-economic status. Irrespective of wealth, gender, ethnic group, or poverty, people across the globe possess smartphones and actively utilize various social media platforms in the present world. The distinctive characteristics of social media include its ability to disseminate diverse news and messages from any corner of the world, regardless of geographical distance, and people can access information anytime they want by searching the keywords or happening to find it by chance while using the smartphone. Moreover, social media allows individuals to freely post content without formal media credentials, enabling widespread global dissemination of user-generated content. However, this feature also presents the risk of intentional misrepresentation or misinformation by certain individuals, leading to the potential misperception of specific individuals or groups. People who rely on using it tend to believe what such manipulated information mentions without examining the validity of the post. In many places, specifically in the young generation, there is a concern about Internet literacy, such as not posting dangerous content for specific people or groups and the necessity to analyze the information that users get from social media.

In Sri Lanka, despite a relatively low percentage of social media users compared to other regions such as eastern Asia (72%), northern Europe (83%), or northern America (73%) in 2022, with only 32% of the total population utilizing social media, over half of the population (66%) has access to the Internet (Digital 2023 Sri Lanka, 2023). The number of Internet and active social media users in Sri Lanka has steadily increased annually. This tendency can potentially influence the development of a sense of belonging to each ethnicity or religion. However, with the rise in internet users accessing social media, there has also been an increase in the dissemination of various posts that are sometimes intentionally manipulated. For some users, social media posts can be the only way to perceive information, or even though they have other media, such as TV or newspapers, they might not even scrutinize the facts of the issues. Considering the rise of usage of social media and its features, which spread information promptly regardless of the

validity of the information, it is essential to analyze how social media provides information in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic and religious country with a majority of Buddhists, known as Sinhala (75% compose its population), Hindus called Tamil (15%), Muslims who follow Islam (10%), and a few percent Christians (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). After its independence from the United Kingdom, Sri Lanka experienced a large civil war. The civil conflict between Sinhala and Tamil, who practiced Buddhism and Hinduism respectively, persisted 26 years from 1983 to 2009. The causes of the civil war were multifaceted, but many researchers examined one of the causes, frustrations among Sinhala stemming from the perceived favorable treatment and affluence of Tamils during colonial rule by the United Kingdom. After gaining independence in 1948, the Sinhala, as the majority ethnic group, attempted to control the government and implemented policies prioritizing Sinhala interests with the positions for administration and government, prioritizing enrollment for Sinhala students, and Sinhala language-only policy. This led to heightened frustration among Tamils, culminating in the formation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the eruption of civil war (Abdul Razak & Mohamed Saleem, 2022).

During the civil war, the antagonistic structure was primarily between Sinhala and Tamil, with Muslims partially involved on the side of Sinhala since the LTTE started to exclude Muslims and harass them. However, according to several authors, in the aftermath of the civil war, tensions between Sinhala and Muslims have increased (Abdul Razak & Mohamed Saleem, 2022; Razick et al, 2021). Instead of some possibilities for the increase of tensions between them, the cause of the transition was not examined enough. I assumed that online networks, with the emergence of social media, might have played a significant role in this process, arousal or transition of hostility toward Muslims since Islamic extremism, such as Al-Quida or Islamic State (IS), started their terrorist activities in many places, and many people witnessed tragic incidents around the world. Amidst growing distrust of Muslims, Sri Lanka experienced a tragic incident of suicide bombings targeting hotels and churches on April 21, 2019; the first such massive occurrence, after the end of the civil war, resulted in more than 250 victims (BBC News, 2019). Such extreme incidents with a huge number of victims obviously heightened their hostility against



Muslims. Nevertheless, as some researchers mentioned, there has already appeared suspicion or conflictual relation between Buddhists and Muslims.

Thus, this thesis will explore conflict relations in Sri Lanka after the civil war ended, especially focusing on the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims. During the civil war, the main conflict occurred between Sinhala and Tamil, but soon after the termination of the civil war, the target of violence or suspicion of Sinhala shifted toward Muslims. On the basis of conflict, the concept of ethnonationalism may be rooted in the government after acquiring independence and gaining power, as it can be seen as Sinhala only policy, potentially affecting general citizens. In addition, I assume social media highly influences or shapes public perceptions toward specific groups in the country with biased or misinformed posts. This manipulated information has the potential to divide group belongings. Hence, by analyzing the role of social media and its usage in the public and political sphere, which might promote ethnonationalism idea, the research will examine how social media engages in the transition of hostility against minority groups in the country.

In the methodology chapter, the researcher's position will be explicitly outlined, showing a neutral stance as an outsider. This approach involves an objective analysis of the issue, avoiding bias towards either Buddhist or Muslim perspectives. However, the thesis shows a critical stance towards the dissemination of hate speech. Being aware of the potential of social media platforms to foster peace, the thesis will introduce recommendations aimed at preventing hate speech at the end of the thesis. By preventing to spread of hate speech through these recommendations, the thesis seeks to promote the peace dimension of social media, aimed at the platforms' intended purpose to contribute to a more harmonious online environment.

## **1.1 Problem statement**

Sri Lanka, a country with a long history of colonial periods with religious and ethnic diversity, experienced significant demographic changes while they were ruled by imperials the Portuguese, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Tamil immigrants were sent to Sri Lanka to cultivate tea in the British colonial era (Frerks & Leeuwen, 2004). At the same time, Muslim merchants began settling in the country during the 16th and 17th centuries, leading to an increase in the Muslim population. However, after gaining

independence from colonial rule in 1948, tensions between Buddhists and Hindus escalated due to the implementation of a priority policy for Buddhists, ultimately resulting in a brutal civil war (Abdul Razak & Mohamed Saleem, 2022).

However, after the end of the civil war, Buddhists in Sri Lanka have shifted their focus towards targeting Muslims. This change in behavior could be attributed to fear and suspicion towards Muslims due to global events such as terrorism carried out by groups like the Islamic State or Al Qaeda in the 21st century. As a result, some individuals in Sri Lanka, especially Buddhists, have developed biased or discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims.

In the background of conflictual relations among citizens or developing hostility, the concept of ethnonationalism underlines Sri Lankan society, which is led by the government. Ethnonationalism refers to a form of nationalism where the nation is defined by shared ethnicity or cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of a common ancestry, language, or religion. The notion is seen as linked to a particular ethnic group, and membership in the society is based on belonging to that ethnic group. Ethnonationalism prioritizes the interests and rights of the dominant ethnic group over those of minority groups, leading to exclusionary policies and practices (Muller, 2008). In contrast, the major concept of nationalism, referred to as liberal or civic nationalism, defines the nation based on shared citizenship, values, and political institutions rather than ethnic or cultural characteristics. Civic nationalism focuses on equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities for all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity or cultural background (Tamir, 2019). While ethnonationalism can develop a sense of belonging and unity among members of the dominant ethnic group, it often leads to division, discrimination, and conflict with minority groups. On the contrary, civic nationalism promotes inclusivity, diversity, and unity based on common citizenship and shared democratic principles.

Having shared values among Sinhala and common enemies such as Muslims, social media might play a crucial role in exacerbating this situation because, firstly, any user can access information with photos and videos that show violent situations, which might evolve fear toward specific groups or individuals. Secondly, not as an information receiver but as an information contributor, unauthorized individuals intentionally post inflammatory content to incite hostility against a specific target without providing evidence or manipulated information. Moreover, these posts often highlight the extreme actions of

Muslims or take out unfamiliar practices with others, further fueling negative perceptions and discrimination against them.

While some Buddhists shifted their hostility toward Muslims with sometimes involving actual discriminatory actions such as attacking mosques or disturbing their business, on April 21, 2019, during the Easter holiday, Sri Lanka witnessed a horrific incident as suicide bomb attacks targeted several churches and hotels in Colombo, the capital city, and Batticaloa, located on the east coast. The attack resulted in the death of over 250 people and injured some 500, with the majority of victims being Buddhists (BBC, 2019). The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks, citing revenge for the Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand that occurred on March 15, 2019. Subsequently, nine perpetrators carried out suicide bomb attacks, and over the following three days, 60 individuals were arrested in connection with the incident (Al Jazeera, 2019).

In Sri Lanka, the tension between the Sinhala and Muslim communities had been escalating after the civil war. The suicide bomb attacks on hotels and churches on April 21st further exacerbated this hostility, leading to discrimination against Muslims by the Buddhist community, sometimes involving violent actions. It is evident that the terrorist attack, which resulted in the death of over 250 people, the majority of whom were Sinhala, fueled the hostility towards Muslims and committed some violent actions. However, even before the terrorist attack, some Buddhist communities had already begun targeting Muslims through discriminatory actions such as banning the burqa, spreading hate speech, oppressing Muslim businesses, attacking places of worship, and engaging in physical violence (Bartie & Taha 2019), while there were no such specific incidents reported from Muslims to Buddhists. This raises the question of how this hostility towards Muslims was generated, especially considering that only a decade had passed since the end of the civil war with another religious group, the Tamils.

In this thesis, the research aims to analyze conflict relations in a multi-ethnic country, especially the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims. In addition, the research assumes the role of social media, particularly hate speech, in generating hostility, specifically aggression towards minority groups. Some articles have reported an increase in aggressive actions by Buddhists against Muslims after the end of the civil war, with social media being intentionally used to incite hostility and suspicion toward Muslims (Long, 2016). Thus, this thesis seeks to examine the ethnic relations that fiercely heighten

the increased suspicion of minority groups in Sri Lanka, assuming a tendency to shift hostility or suspicion from one group (mainly Tamils) to Muslims. In addition to the transition of hostility, I will explore how social media influences this tendency as a tool to boost the situation.

On the other hand, some organizations may attempt to foster cooperation among people of different religions, aiming for a multi-ethnic state with positive relationships. Therefore, in order to avoid bias toward posts that escalate hostility against Muslims by Buddhists, the thesis will also examine positive attitudes toward minority groups in Sri Lanka or strategies to combat hate speech against hate speech contributors. By considering both positive and negative attitudes towards minority groups, this thesis will provide a comprehensive overview of the functions and influences of social media in Sri Lanka. However, to sublimate another cultural or regional context that spreading hate speech leads to actual discrimination, violence, and conflict, this research would relatively focus on the negative side of social media or hate speech to minority groups.

In order to analyze the study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with some organizations that aim to achieve ethnic harmony in Sri Lankan society. By conducting interviews, I first examine patterns and language in the discourse regarding ethnic relations in Sri Lanka (Drid, 2010). I will explore the factors that influence the antagonistic structure between ethnicities. In addition to discourse analysis focusing on the patterns in the conversation, the research will combine social circumstances or specific events that might enhance the trend of hostility, for example, the Easter Attack in 2019, COVID-19, which mainly spread globally in 2020, and the economic crisis occurred in 2022. Secondly, the thesis will provide the general trend of the influence of social media in Sri Lanka's current society for both positive and negative aspects and those who create hate speech and general users who receive information.

It is essential that interviews will be conducted by a researcher who comes from outside of their society. Even if some Sri Lankan people attempt to conduct interviews or research about the issue, as they belong to some ethnic groups, it might be challenging to ask about the opposite side's feelings due to the bias toward the other. However, the interviewer outside of the belongings could keep neutrality between Buddhists and Muslims because I do not have any preference for a specific religion or ethnic group. In

this regard, not only the interviews but also the research itself, I seek to examine the issue from an objective perspective.

Lastly, it is essential to note that the civil war in Sri Lanka, which was primarily fought against Hindus, took place mainly in the northern and eastern parts of the country where the majority of Hindus reside. The conflict involved the governmental military and the anti-governmental force known as LTTE. On the other hand, Muslims primarily live in the southern part of Sri Lanka, and the discrimination against them is perpetrated by extreme nationalist Buddhist groups, for example, Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). It is noteworthy that the targets of these discriminatory acts are not a specific group, such as LTTE or specific Muslim groups, but rather ordinary civilians. Because of the prominent feature of social media, which allows users to consume information wherever they live, the impact of social media spreads throughout society. Hence, it is crucial to recognize that the geographical areas and actors involved in discrimination against Muslims are distinct from those in the civil war against Hindus.

## **1.2 Motivation for the Study**

The decision to explore this theme was deeply influenced by my personal experiences during my volunteer work in Sri Lanka from October 2018 to April 2019, a period that coincided with the tragic Easter Sunday attacks. Prior to these events, I had already observed several opinions evolving suspicions about Muslims among some Buddhist neighbors in the community where I stayed. However, following the terrorist attacks, these sentiments of distrust and unease became more strengthened. The Muslim population residing in the central region of Sri Lanka, where I was based, often faced socio-economic challenges and lived in marginalized conditions. The religious demographic condition showed a typical total of Sri Lanka, indicating 75% Buddhists, 11% Hindus, and 13% Muslims, respectively (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). The discriminatory treatment and hostile attitudes directed towards Muslims, coupled with the attacks, compelled me to understand the roots of this hostility.

In addition to my personal experience during my time in Sri Lanka, I noticed that social media platforms like Facebook were pervasive among individuals of all ages, from young in their twenties to older individuals in their fifties. This widespread use of social media indicates its pervasive influence on shaping public perceptions and attitudes,

particularly towards minority groups. While discrimination against minorities may vary a multitude of factors, including historical grievances, economic disparities, religious differences, ethnic tensions, and gender biases, the emergence of social media as a potent tool for spreading misinformation and fostering bias is a relatively recent phenomenon. Given the global reach and impact of social media platforms, the proliferation of biased narratives and hate speech has become a concern not only in Sri Lanka but also in other regions worldwide. The feature of social media allows for the rapid dissemination of messages and the amplification of discriminatory attitudes, exacerbating intergroup tensions and perpetuating prejudice. Through my research, I sought to examine the origins of these prejudices and discriminatory behaviors, analyzing the underlying factors contributing to intergroup animosity within Sri Lankan society. In addition, the research seeks the role of social media in generating bias and hostility toward specific groups, recognizing the need for targeted strategies to counteract hate speech and promote inclusivity and tolerance in online spaces.

However, it is important to notice that while processing the literature review, I found that not all Buddhists had a radical ideology toward Muslims. Therefore, as the title shows, this research focuses on the specific Buddhists who have a radical ideology or violent attitude towards Muslims.

### **1.3 Research Question**

How did the extreme Buddhists transmit their hostility toward Muslims after the period of the civil war with the engagement of social media?

- a. What were the causes of the transition of hostility toward Muslims from extreme Buddhists?
- b. What were the roles of social media in engaging the situation to develop hostility toward a specific group?

### **1.4 Significance of the Research**

The significance of the study lies in its exploration of the multifaceted dynamics underlying hostility towards minority groups in Sri Lanka, particularly in the context of social media's influence. By examining the historical, socio-political, and technological

factors contributing to intergroup tensions, the study explores the complexities of ethnic relations in the country.

Moreover, understanding the root causes of discrimination and prejudice against minorities is crucial for fostering social cohesion and promoting inclusivity. By identifying the role of social media in exacerbating intergroup hostilities, the study analyzes the importance of addressing online hate speech to prevent misinformation as part of broader efforts to mitigate ethnic tensions.

### **1.5 Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis has seven chapters. Chapter one described the thesis with a brief introduction to both the conflictual situation in Sri Lanka and the trend of social media. Also, the motivation, problem statement, significance of study, and research questions are explained. Chapter two provides some literature reviews on the historical perspective from the colonial experience to the current situation involving the spread of COVID-19 and the economic crisis in 2022. Chapter three provides an overview of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks explaining the choices of theory and concepts examined in the thesis. Chapter four explains the methodological framework explaining the method of the research, participants, data collection, and data analysis. Reflection on the part of the research, ethical considerations, and limitations are also provided. Chapter five highlights findings from the main themes gathered with the data analysis in the research. Chapter six analyzes discussions on the findings using the existing literature, concepts, and theory in the research. Chapter Seven presents the conclusions of the thesis and the recommendations of the thesis.

In summary, I have introduced the research topic and motivation and outlined the research questions, aim, and relevance of the research. I will then move on to discuss the literature on conflictual relations in a multiethnic country from the perspective of history and the current situation.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores Sri Lanka's contemporary landscape and its historical roots of conflict between various religious and ethnic groups, including Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. Sri Lanka, regarded for its multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition, has a complex history shaped by centuries of colonial rule. Beginning with Portuguese and Dutch colonization in 1505 and acquiring its independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the nation remained the enduring impacts of colonialism long after gaining sovereignty. The legacy of colonization was a significant contributing factor to the cause of the civil war that raged between Buddhists and Hindus from 1983 to 2009. Despite the cessation of the civil war, Sri Lanka continues to face numerous challenges, including the Easter Sunday attack, the spreading COVID-19 pandemic, and a deepening economic crisis.

This thesis began with the formulation of a comprehensive project proposal. In the initial stages of research, some Excel sheets were prepared to comprehend the identified gaps and findings extracted from several scholarly articles. To provide transparent steps of the research process, this Excel sheet has been attached as an appendix. It is important to note that while these sheets were generated at the beginning of the research, not all the articles and findings mentioned in these sheets were incorporated into the final thesis. Most of the findings and articles were used in this thesis, while the criteria whether I included or excluded was to answer the research questions. This thesis primarily focuses on the relationship between Buddhists, especially those who have a radical ideology against minorities and Muslims. Therefore, some findings, for example, which mentioned relations with Hindus especially after the civil war ended were not used in this thesis. The Excel sheets were structured into three categories: examining conflictual relations in Sri Lanka, indicating the features of social media, and examining the phenomenon of hate speech.

### **2.2 Status quo of Sri Lankan Society**

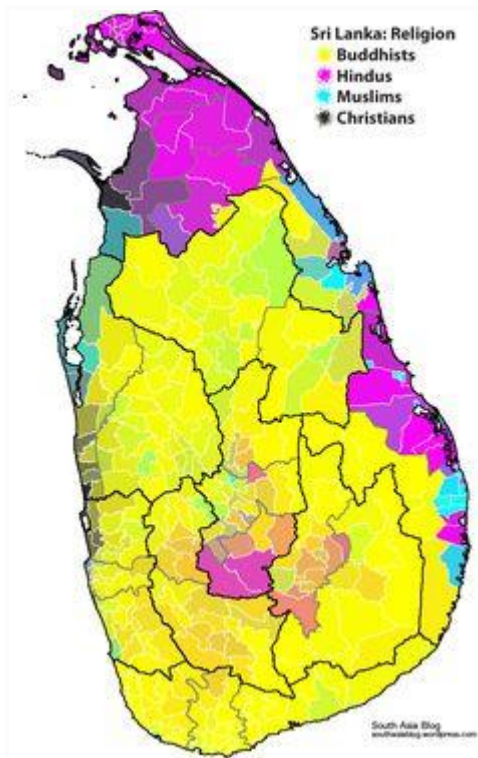
The current population of Sri Lanka consists of more than 20,000,000 in January 2024. This country is characterized by its diverse ethnic and religious composition. Among them, the largest ethnic group is called Sinhala, believing Buddhists, and it accounts for 70% of its population (Department of Census and Statics, 2012). The second largest group is



Hindus, categorized as Tamils, which includes Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils, constituting 15%. The Muslims in Sri Lanka constitute 10% of the population, and most of them speak Tamil (Department of Census and Statics, 2012).

Geographically, the residence of Sinhala and Muslims is divided; one, the Tamils, live in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, and the other, the Sinhala, occupy the rest of the country. In contrast to Sinhala and Tamil, Muslims have few districts in which the majority of residents are Muslims. One-third of the Muslim population lives in the place where mainly the Tamil population lives on the east coast, while the remaining two-thirds dwell in the urban centers of Sri Lanka's western and southern parts, predominantly a Sinhalese territory (Tshacher, 2018). Therefore, two sizeable religious groups or ethnicities are the dominant community in the country, while Muslims are a minority group in each district.

**Figure 1- Map of Sri Lanka**



Source: Lynch ([ANTHROPOLOGY OF ACCORD \(doctorpence.blogspot.com\)](http://anthropologyofaccord.blogspot.com))

### **2.3 Conflict History of Sri Lanka**

While this thesis does not mention the details of Sri Lanka's history, it offers a comprehensive understanding of the historical backdrop that highlights the tensions

between different ethnic groups. Sri Lanka has a rich and complex history marked by centuries of colonization, beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505, followed by the Dutch, and finally achieving independence from British colonial rule in 1948. The legacy of British colonization, particularly its governance policies, played a significant role in shaping the dynamics that led to the present conflict situation. Therefore, this section provides an exploration of the historical overview, with a focus on critical events such as the Civil War, to contextualize the ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka.

### **2.3.1 Colonization and Pre-Civil War**

Since the arrival of Sinhala and Sri Lankan Tamils is ambiguous (Anandakugan, 2021), the British colonial administration brought Tamils from India to work in the tea cultivation and rubber plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Frerks and Leeuwen, 2004). In order to manage the Island, these British colonists “fostered and emphasized a new concept of colonial identities, weakening the process of ethnic assimilation” (Razaak and Saleem, 2022, p.531). The new concept, which was a strategy to divide the communities and exploit and control resources in the colony, involved not only Sinhalese and Tamils but also Muslims. The interaction with Muslims began in pre-colonial history in the fourteenth century, settling and integrating several sectors such as local and international trade, defense, and diplomatic relationships (Razick et al., 2021).

During the colonization by the British, their administration centralized the state system, in which the Tamils ruled the political and professional areas. The legacy of the colonial period was regarded as favoritism toward Tamils (Frerks & Leeuwen, 2004; Bajoria, 2009). The situation left Sinhalese feeling isolated and oppressed; hence, by means of various legislative initiatives, they tried to gain power. One of the strategies was ‘the Sinhala Only Act’ in 1956, making Sinhala the official language of the country. In the 1970s, the government provided more educational opportunities for disadvantaged Sinhalese students, while Tamil students were regulated to university entry. Along with these policies, the Tamils were excluded from both the state and private sectors. Consequently, the unbalanced situation led to the emergence of small militant Tamil groups demanding a separate Tamil state (Razak & Saleem, 2022).

### **2.3.2 During the Civil War**

In 1983, the murder of thirteen Sinhalese soldiers by the group known as the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) resulted in riots toward Tamils in Colombo, leading to the destruction of Tamil homes and mass displacement. This pogrom toward Tamils provided an opportunity for militant Tamil groups to gain new supporters, while the US labeled the LTTE a terrorist group after they conducted terror tactics such as suicide bombers, leading to internationalized conflict with the escalation of the war (Razaak & Saleem, 2022, and Anandakuhan, 2021).

In 1987, Sri Lanka and India signed an accord to settle the conflict by sending the 'Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF)' to the north and east of Sri Lanka to disarm LTTE and to end the hostility. Once the LTTE agreed to hand over their weapons, however, they changed their attitude very soon (Frerks & Leeuwen, 2004). As a result, India turned to force to make the LTTE hand in their weapon; hence, LTTE perceived them as an opponent. IPKF was unable to end the conflict and instead began fighting with the LTTE (Bajoria, 2009). After the withdrawal of IPKF, the LTTE assassinated two world leaders; one was a former Indian prime minister in 1991 and a Sri Lankan president in 1993.

In the 2000s, several peace agreements were negotiated between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, which was proceeded by the Norwegian government. However, both the government and the rebels repeatedly violated the cease-fire agreements, which led to heavy clashes between the groups (Bajoria, 2009). Nevertheless, since the end of the cease-fire, the Sri Lankan military has been trying to root out the LTTE, and in 2009, the government declared that it had defeated the LTTE and ended the conflict (Bajoria, 2009). During the conflict, roughly 100,000 civilians and 50,000 militants died, and the mass population was forced to be displaced in and out of the country (The Asia Foundation, 2021).

### **2.4 Circumstances of Muslims**

Even following the end of the colonial period and the civil war, Sri Lanka continued to experience various conflicts. This chapter focuses on the post-civil war landscape, which has been marked by a series of significant incidents in Sri Lankan society. These include the Easter Sunday Attack, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent economic crisis that has plagued the nation. Through an examination of these events, this thesis provides

the ongoing challenges and complexities facing Sri Lankan society in the aftermath of the civil war.

#### **2.4.1 Post-Civil War**

During the British colonial era, two communities, Muslims and Buddhists, had a peaceful relationship through mutual cooperation and economic interaction. However, some anti-Muslim riots happened by mobs with the motivation of Buddhist nationalism (Aliff et al., 2015). The fundamental concept of nationalism of Sinhala-Buddhists was rooted in the “feeling of minority complexity of majority” (Abdul Razak & Mohamed Saleem, 2022, p.57), which implies a constant fear of controlling the Buddhist country by Muslims and Hindus. This nationalism intertwined with the anti-colonial movements of the British. Since the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism emerged, the fundamental belief anchored Sinhala Buddhist hegemony (Aliff et al., 2015).

Even though Muslims in Sri Lanka usually speak the same language as Tamils, Muslims supported the Sri Lankan state and security forces during the civil war (Razaak & Saleem, 2022). Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, Muslims were targeted by the LTTE, leading to massacres in the eastern province with about 150 deaths, and at least 75,000 were forced out from the LTTE territory (Aliff et al., 2015).

After the civil war ended, the extreme Buddhists targeted the Muslims again. In 2013, over 300 incidents have been reported about the case against Muslims (Aliff et al., 2015). One feature of conflict between Buddhists and Muslims is that before the civil war, the violence toward Muslims was conducted by mobs, while the violence was conducted by organized campaigns through extreme Sinhala Buddhist groups after the end of the war. These incidents include not only actual violence, such as attacking mosques, interrupting Muslim businesses, and mocking Muslim dress code, but also spreading the misunderstanding of Muslims to attempt to make other Sinhala avoid cultural and economic interactions (Razick et al., 2021). It is challenging to examine the link between the actual violence and spreading misinformation, but in the following chapter, the thesis will see some content expressing how Sinhalese see the mosques, Muslim attire, and cultural habitat.

One leading organization implementing an anti-Muslim campaign is called ‘Bodu Bala Sena (BBS),’ which means Buddhist Power Force, established in 2012 (Hertzberg,

2019). This organization attempts to establish a Buddhist society by expressing that the place of worship of Buddhism is under hardship and vulnerability, and it is necessary to take action to improve the condition (Bodu Bala Sena, n.d.). The organization is led by prominent monks who preach extreme anti-Muslim views, and a small number of whom have been involved in perpetrating acts of violence (Aliff et al., 2015). Because Sri Lanka is not only a multi-ethnic country but also citizens highly believe in their religion, the preaching by prominent monks influences their followers.

#### **2.4.2 Easter Sunday Attack**

On the 21 April 2019, Easter Sunday, multiple explosions happened at churches and hotels in Colombo, the western and the largest city in Sri Lanka, and in the eastern city of Batticaloa. The incident led to about 250 deaths and 500 wounded. These were the worst terrorist attacks to hit the island since the civil war ended (Razaak & Saleem, 2021). These explosions were committed by a local radical Islamic organization inspired by Islamic State (IS) with suicide bombs. The attack brought back not only the memory of violence but also new worries for the future, ten years after the end of the war with relative peace (Razaak & Saleem, 2021).

Soon after the suicide bombings, the local Muslim community and businesses experienced backlash from Sinhalese, which involved Muslim-owned property destruction and mosques in several places in the county, and a Muslim civilian was killed (Razaak & Saleem, 2021). Moreover, a senior Buddhist monk openly called for Sinhalese not to buy from Muslim shops. With the suspicion toward Muslims through social media and the word from Buddhist monks, some Muslim businesses have been demolished.

#### **2.4.3 COVID-19 and Economic Crisis**

One year after the Easter attack, similar feelings of difficulties hit the Muslim community due to the spreading of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) all over the world, even though the situation between Buddhists and Muslims has not improved. Because of the way of burial of dead bodies, the narratives that the Muslim community was barbaric and irresponsible community to spreading COVID-19 were disseminated through the racists (Razaak & Saleem, 2022). Cremation is the traditional method for Sinhala and Tamils; on the contrary, for Muslims, the traditional form of resting body is burial, and cremation of a dead body is forbidden. Nevertheless, the Sri Lankan government decided to cremate all the dead bodies

who were suspected to be infected by the virus regardless of ethnicity and religion. However, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), the guidelines for infection prevention and control for the safe management of a dead body in the context of COVID-19 permitted both burial and cremation to respect their tradition and religion, mentioning “there is a common assumption that people who died of a communicable disease should be cremated to prevent the spread of that disease; however, there is a lack of evidence to support it” (WHO, 2020).

Even though the Sri Lankan government did not release the ethnic ratio of COVID-19 deaths, one research showed Muslims shared 40% of the total COVID-19-related deaths (Razaak & Saleem, 2022). There is no clear analysis of why the rate of Muslims is that high. However, there are some reasons considered. First, the living conditions for Muslims in Sri Lanka are relatively vulnerable. Secondly, there is also suspicion that non-related COVID-19 deaths might be cremated, leading to an increase in the number of Muslims rate.

Due to the several bombings and the spread of COVID-19, Sri Lanka experienced a steep descent number of tourists, which Sri Lanka relied on their economy. Even before the country recovered from these situations, due to the combination of several factors, including high levels of public debt, foreign exchange shortages, inflation, and fiscal deficits, the country's economy has faced significant challenges in recent years. Because of an unstable economy, in early 2022, Sri Lanka started experiencing power cuts and shortages of daily necessities, such as fuel (Perera, 2023). As a result, civilians started to protest in the capital, Colombo, and the protests spread across the country. Consequently, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, at that time, fled to Singapore before his resignation. Leading its civilians to poverty or struggle with their daily lives, and the irresponsible attitude of the president made Sri Lankan citizens criticize the government. In order to prevent radicalization, police dealt with the demonstrations equipped with tear gas and water cannons to disperse the crowds, injuring at least 75 people (CNN World, 2022).

### **3. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the characteristics and utilization of social media platforms. Prior to the spreading of hate speech via social media, historical instances of disseminating negative narratives used about specific groups or ethnicities through propaganda, such as in Nazi Germany, the Rwandan genocide, and during World War II. In each of these cases, the dissemination of such narratives led to widespread victimization, fueled nationalism or identity politics, and legitimized violence against targeted groups or perceived enemies. The proliferation of such nationalist ideologies and the normalization of violence have been further amplified on a global scale through the widespread reach of social media platforms.

Furthermore, this thesis employs social identity theory to analyze group dynamics within a nation and assesses the influence of social media on these dynamics. Social identity theory examines group competition by categorizing between in-group and out-group. Additionally, the thesis applies echo-chamber theory, which highlights the impact of social media on users who consume information that aligns with their existing beliefs, potentially shaping public perspectives. This chapter provides an overview of the fundamental characteristics of social media and analyzes the concept of hate speech, analyzing its influence and the specific context of Sri Lanka.

#### **3.2 General Features of Social Media**

In this section, the research provides the concepts of social media and hate speech, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of these phenomena. The study begins by analyzing the general notion of social media and its role in information dissemination and acquisition. Subsequently, the thesis examines hate speech from various angles, seeking to identify its potential mechanisms of proliferation and impact on society.

##### **3.2.1 Spreading the Influence of Social Media**

The first social media appeared in 1997, called “Six Degrees. com”, which enables users to create profiles, comment on news, and exchange messages with other users. After the emergence of the first social media, due to further development, participants could share

information among themselves and allow friends to access their profiles (Walaa, 2019). As time passed, diverse social media applications were invented, for example, Facebook, X (former Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok. Each application is used for various purposes and has different functions and different target groups. When people use social media, it is a prerequisite that people need to access the internet. Therefore, even though there is a huge gap depending on the region, as far as people can access the Internet, they can use social media. However, regions such as Northern Europe and Northern America have fully adapted to the Internet; for instance, 97.4% and 92.0% of citizens can access the Internet as a percentage of the total population, respectively, while areas such as Middle Africa and Eastern Africa could access the Internet only 27.9% and 23.1% in the total population (DataReportal, 2023). In Internet-developed countries, people can access information not only from conventional mass media such as TV, newspapers, and radio but also from social media. On the contrary, in some less developed countries, people need to rely on traditional media, or citizens cannot even receive information in the first place. After the development of the Internet and the diversity of social media, some people have distanced themselves from traditional mass media.

The most distinctive feature of social media is the fast dissemination of information. Wherever people live, they can receive any kind of information from all over the world. It is sometimes quicker than local news outlets (Amedie, 2015). As social media users can post individually, information could be diverse and on a real-time basis. If users want to follow specific news or topics, they can reach the information by following hashtags that users use the exact words related to the specific topics. Moreover, when users search for a specific topic, social media applications learn about users' activity and provide recommendations, helping them discover new and relevant posts and content.

Since the thesis discussed the perspective of social media as an information receiver because of the promptness of information and function that users can follow particular topics and content, social media also has three features as information contributors that users can post whatever they want to express their opinion. Firstly, by providing some particular topics that many people are interested in, social media reinforces the value of brotherhood among users and promotes solidarity, cooperation, and assistance (Walaa, 2019). Hence, Walaa summarizes that using social media could acquire “the ability to create a relationship with surroundings and a sense of integration into a suitable moral



world” (2019, p1). Therefore, as some users post specific topics or values, social media can form a group for like-minded people to communicate together regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, age group, or wherever they live.

Secondly, as discussed already, developing social media borders on relations and communities in the online world. Social media “has removed communication barriers and created decentralized communication channel” (Amedie, 2015, p3). Before the emergence of social media, it was challenging to find like-minded people outside of their community. Even though people find someone, it takes time to send letters or costs a lot of international phone calls to communicate. People can use many social media platforms for free and send messages rapidly through the Internet.

Thirdly, the feature is not for the individual level, but organizations such as companies use social media for product marketing through advertising (Amedie, 2015) and administration, like the government informing their citizens, for example, the current situation or general prevention of COVID-19 during the pandemic. In some countries, religious organizations also use social media to disseminate their religious sermons or theological discussions. Therefore, if organizations that have some authorities post some specific topics, it could spread faster than individual posts and have more impact on civil society.

Because social media has developed, people can get more information from all over the world and make online communities that have the same interests and similar values. However, using social media creates new problems for users and the actual world for three points. But, before discussing the risks of social media, the thesis adds another feature of social media, which leads to both positive and negative impacts. That is, “once something is shared online, it can never be taken back; even if the post is deleted, it can still be found somewhere else on the web” (Amedie, 2015, p. 7). This feature influences the adverse effect as the first risk.

When someone shares posts, other users can save the specific posts on their devices. Therefore, even though social media companies recognize some posts as inappropriate post based on their policy and delete them so as not to be spread on the Internet, some other users repost them, and it would be a cat-mouse game forever. This strategy affects in especially negative ways, such as false information or hate speech.

When people look at some specific posts that attract users specifically, people tend to believe them regardless of the accuracy of the information. Once these posts spread to the Internet world, it would be difficult to delete them completely. Moreover, as long as people show some consent for specific posts, they are disseminated through simple actions, for example, 'like' or 'share,' leading to a myriad of users seeing them.

Secondly, because people spend a lot of time on social media, it leads to social isolation from their actual environment (Wala, 2019). This situation makes people depressed, and the symptom is called "Facebook depression." Facebook depression is not limited to Facebook; it could also apply to other social networking services. By using social media, some users can join online communities where people have the same interests, but the relationship is still superficial compared to the actual world (Amedie, 2015). And because these people have already relied on online connections, they become addicted to social media, leading to further social isolation from their communities and sometimes even their families. As far as they spend excessive time on social media, people have more opportunities to see negative content, affecting depression and anxiety. However, it is crucial that not all users would become "Facebook depression," but social media has a risk of being addictive, causing long-term emotional and psychological problems (Amedie, 2015).

Thirdly, social media sometimes connects to criminal activity and terrorism. As for criminal activity, some users humiliate someone who is the victim of malicious posts. There are two problems related to social media and hateful content. Firstly, many users who post about specific groups or individuals with humiliation can hide their identity (Amedie, 2015). Therefore, even though these posts are recognized as vicious posts, it is difficult to identify the exact user, or it takes time to conduct the investigation by monitoring social media platforms. While investigating, these negative posts could spread the online world, and finding the root post of specific topics would be much more challenging or impossible. Secondly, users create posts which involve negative context for specific groups or individuals, but they are sometimes not intentionally or consciously to harm someone. For some contributors, they refer to specific groups or individuals as humor to entertain their followers. However, some users who receive the specific post feel that they are humiliated by the post. Some users who receive the post seriously raise their anger, resulting in conflict between the contributor and receiver. This problem is complex

to solve for several reasons, for example, because of the difference in how the users feel about specific posts, defining between freedom of speech and spreading dangerous or hate posts, and providing internet literacy to prevent negative posts, especially those intending to harm someone.

As for terrorism, some terrorist organizations use social media to gather information, recruit members, seek fundraising, and spread their propaganda (Amedie, 2015). It connects to the second risk of social media, which is that excessive use of social media results in social isolation. These terrorist organizations use social media aimed at “impressionable young people - especially when the recruits are emotionally weak and hear about radicalization and recruitment” (Amedie, 2015, p.14). While people are isolated from their physical community and depressed, some terrorist organizations offer an opportunity for people to feel powerful and give them meaning in life. Islamic State uses social media effectively to recruit new members through their propaganda with the radical ideology of having a meaningful life, attracting youth. Even though young people do not join these groups, they could send money to the organizations, resulting in engaging activities. These organizations conduct terrorist activity not only in physical activities but also on the Internet. This is called cyber terrorism, which refers to the dissemination of false or compromising information. Because intentionally wrong information impacts the stock market, it results in economic turmoil (Amedie, 2015) and causes fear, disruption, and harm.

### **3.2.2 Definition of Hate Speech**

The definition of hate speech varies from country to country or organizations that deal with hate speech. Because the term ‘hate’ is ambiguous to define precisely, each country or organization defines itself of hate and tackles the problem. United Nations also admitted the controversial and disrupted term ‘hate,’ but they referred to hate speech as;

“any kind of communication in speech, writing, or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or group basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor.” (United Nations, n.d.)

Also, this thesis focuses on the use or spreading of hate speech on Facebook. The platform defines hate speech as “a direct attack against people on the basis of what they call protected characteristics, race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and serious disease” (Meta, 2023). Even though UN and Facebook policy details show different characteristics of people who would be the target of hate speech, their basic ideology of hate speech is attacking a specific group of people. Moreover, even though both organizations and companies mention ‘speech,’ both include actions such as behavior that attacks a person or group or direct attack against people. It implies the UN and Facebook’s Community Standards concern that hate speech not only stigmatizes the target group by implicitly ascribing to it regarded as undesirable on online platforms (Howard, 2019) but also influences real-world as direct violence in an offline environment.

Often, hate speech is targeting against minorities in areas where the majority has power or an authoritarian position. The target groups are to be seen as inferior to majority groups, and they legitimize discriminatory behavior by spreading hate speech toward myriad users of social media (Papcunova et al., 2023). Once some discriminatory opinion or image toward minority groups spread online platforms, it could be quickly disseminated in whole regions of the state or internationally.

### **3.2.3 Aim for Hate Speech**

When hate speech is created, it is not produced for personal motivation - of course, some of them are posted as an outlet for personal hate. However, whether consciously or unconsciously, posting hate speech has some aims to influence users, mainly the majority, who might be aggressors of discrimination. I could analyze the four aims of creating hate speech below;

- I . Create a sense of fear and exclusion amongst their communities, toxify public discourse, and motivate other forms of extremist and hateful behavior (Bertie & Taha, 2019)
- II . Inciting listeners to adopt hateful views (Howard, 2019)
- III. Influencing real-world action (Shilpa & Sanjana, 2014) and leading to discrimination (Papcunova et al., 2023, p2829)

IV. Building group solidarity by using the image showing minorities or outsiders attempting to offend the majority group, especially women and children (Shilpa & Sanjana, 2014).

Several authors point out some purposes for creating hate speech. From these aims, I can see three main features of hate speech. Firstly, hate speeches are used to make people feel fear or hostility toward specific target groups (Bertie & Taha, 2019). By viewing the particular image of a targeted group, people might believe what the post shows even though the image is misused. In this case, if some majority people do not interact with the minority group daily, they tend to believe as an object of fear, such as terrorists or invaders of the motherland majority people. In addition, if some majority people who are already suspicious of minority groups see some hate speech, they could solidify their ideas, changing their feelings from suspicious to hostile. By accumulating hostility, hate speech leads to actual violence and discrimination in real life, which is the second feature of hate speech. It is impossible that hate speech alone could cause some discriminatory incidents. However, hate speech could escalate the violence by showing the target as inferior to the majority or objects of fear that legitimizes the violence.

Lastly, by spreading hate speech, people who spread hateful content attempt to make the majority group gather. In this type of hate speech, people use images that the majority group needs to protect their group by portraying vulnerable members such as women and children. To manipulate the image that minority or outsiders offend these vulnerable people or their rights, the majority intends to build group solidarity. It includes barbaric features of the targeted group and enhances nationalism to protect their community (Shilpa & Sanjana, 2014).

### **3.2.4 Contents of Hate Speech**

In this paragraph, I will analyze the general content of hate speech. Some content is used consciously to fuel hostility toward a specific group or individual, while others are posted unconsciously, including a sense of humor. However, some users who are the target of particular posts might not understand the humor and feel discrimination or disrespect toward it. The content below is not independent but involves several features of content.

-denial of fundamental human rights (Papcunova et al., 2023, p,2833)

-promoting violent behavior (Papcunova et al., 2023, p,2833)

- negative stereotypes of a minority (Meta, 2023)
- manipulative texts/misinterpretation of the truth (Papcunova et al., 2023, p,2833)
- enhance nationalism (Shilpa & Sanjana, 2014)

Many hate speeches show the target group as inhuman. Because hate speech shows the target group is inferior to the majority group, they legitimate or encourage some violence toward those inhuman creatures. Or they describe the target group as barbarians and call for discriminative actions (Bertie & Taha, 2019). By showing the minority group as inhuman or barbarians, hate speech makes the majority group decrease the obstacle to conduct violence mentally. Even though some individuals from majority groups do not attack on their own, they would justify the violence to minority group members. Therefore, when some majority group people see the news about discrimination toward minorities, they might support the majority group, not victims such as minority groups. Moreover, when it comes to social media, majority groups intentionally ignore events of violence against minority groups and have instead only used examples of attacks on majority groups. This intentional information manipulation is called 'denialism' (Shilpa & Sanjana, 2014).

Some people might have no relation with a minority group of members where they live. However, by seeing the negative aspects of minority groups, they tend to believe what hate speech shows. Even though hate speech is used in manipulative texts or misinterpreting the truth, some people have no chance to confirm the truth, and as a result, they support hate speech. Some hate speech emphasizes differences between minority groups and other members of society, such as attribution to minority groups' strange or unusual practices (Bertie, 2019). This kind of hate speech might show the truth about minority groups, but it often exaggerates one aspect of the minority group, leading to misunderstandings of the minority.

In addition to spreading hate speech, these posts also include nationalism, which shows being proud of one's own religion (Long, 2021). It enhances the consciousness of the majority group that they are the defenders of their nation and consider protecting their nation from outsiders (Shilpa & Sanjana, 2014). It enhances the difference between the majority group - in group -, and the minority group - out group from many aspects, for example, religion, ethnicity, cultural differences, and the consciousness of the founder of their nation.

### **3.3 Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech**

When it comes to defining hate speech, it is often discussed the division between hate speech and freedom of expression. In civil society, citizens are allowed to express their opinions or thoughts without any intervention from other people, organizations, or states. Freedom of speech is seen as a fundamental right that guarantees an individual's ability to express their ideas. This fundamental right is stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Article 19 as

“everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (United Nations, n.d.)

Based on the Declaration, the African Charter, the European Convention, the American Convention, and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration also settled international standards regarding freedom of expression. Therefore, in many states, the law of freedom of expression is guaranteed to protect civilians' fundamental basic rights. However, the law implies the inclusiveness of moral rights (Howard, 2019). This assumes the speakers or information providers should consider responsible and respectful behavior toward others. The legal rights and moral ideals interconnect but do not precisely mirror each other (Howard, 2019), and the gap generates hate speech. While the states comply with legal rights for freedom of expression, speakers also follow moral rights. When the speech is out of the range of moral rights, the state criminalizes the person who provides the hateful information. In terms of social media, social media platforms recognize unacceptable posts based on their terms and conditions, delete specific posts, and sometimes ban accounts.

In addition, freedom of expression symbolizes the status of a democratic state. Under a democratic state, citizens should be protected to express their thoughts and beliefs without censorship and fear of retaliation. Some authors argue that in a democratic society, “we need free speech in order to engage in the enterprise of self-government” (Howard, 2019). That means citizens are allowed to discuss or criticize political matters, and this public discourse is protected by the government.

There are two matters regarding the freedom of expression. Firstly, even though citizens are allowed to express their ideas, citizens need to recognize the border between freedom of expression and hate speech. In many states, freedom of expression is guaranteed, but at the same time, states also restrict some expressions that relate to violence or threats toward others regarded as hate speech. For example, in Germany, the law restricts expression that offense the human dignity of others by insulting or maliciously defaming (Howard, 2019), and in Finland, the law criminalizes the use of racial, ethnic, and religious threats, slanders, and insults (Tsesis, 2023). In addition to the restriction of defaming others, spreading criminal content is seen as a threat. In this sense, political discussion about the government is engaged. However, when it comes to religious or ethnic matters, speakers need to care about content based on moral issues. Moreover, some specific individuals are not allowed to be discriminated against based on their political beliefs.

Secondly, even though the political discussion is engaged in democratic states and guaranteed as fundamental human rights, in autocratic regimes, the states “manipulate these laws to abusively rely on modern surveillance technologies to suppress communication essential to deliberative democracies for debate about political ideas” (Tsesis, 2023, p.32). Therefore, in autocratic states such as Russia or China, it leads to a great danger for speakers to express their negative emotions toward their government. However, these states also settled the law for hate speech that leads to extremism. For example, article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code states, “actions aimed at the incitement of hatred or enmity, or the abasement of the dignity of a person or a group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, or affiliation with any social group, in public or with the use of mass media, including the Internet” (Interfax, 2018). By examining the legal perspective of freedom of expression, I can see that the situation varies depending on the regime for political discussion. But in many states, there are laws that restrict hate speech, inciting or threatening specific groups or individuals based on specific categories. However, it is still challenging how the states or social media platforms define hate speech because incitement and hatred differ depending on the interpretation of the receivers.

Not only does the state have a law for hate speech, but each social media platform also configures the terms and conditions about how users should care about hate speech.



Based on the principle of terms and conditions, social networking platforms routinely ban aggressive users. Social network sites consider negative words as problematic because users rely on information from peers and think such information is relatively trustworthy (Antonetti & Crisafulli, 2021) when compared to conventional mass media. However, according to the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), after Elon Musk took over Twitter, which changed the name to 'X,' the number of posts using hateful language increased three times more than previous year (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2022). Despite Musk mentioning the decline of hate speech on the platform, the center claimed some accounts that were a violation of X's policies against hate speech remained active (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2023).

### **3.4 Social Media in Sri Lanka**

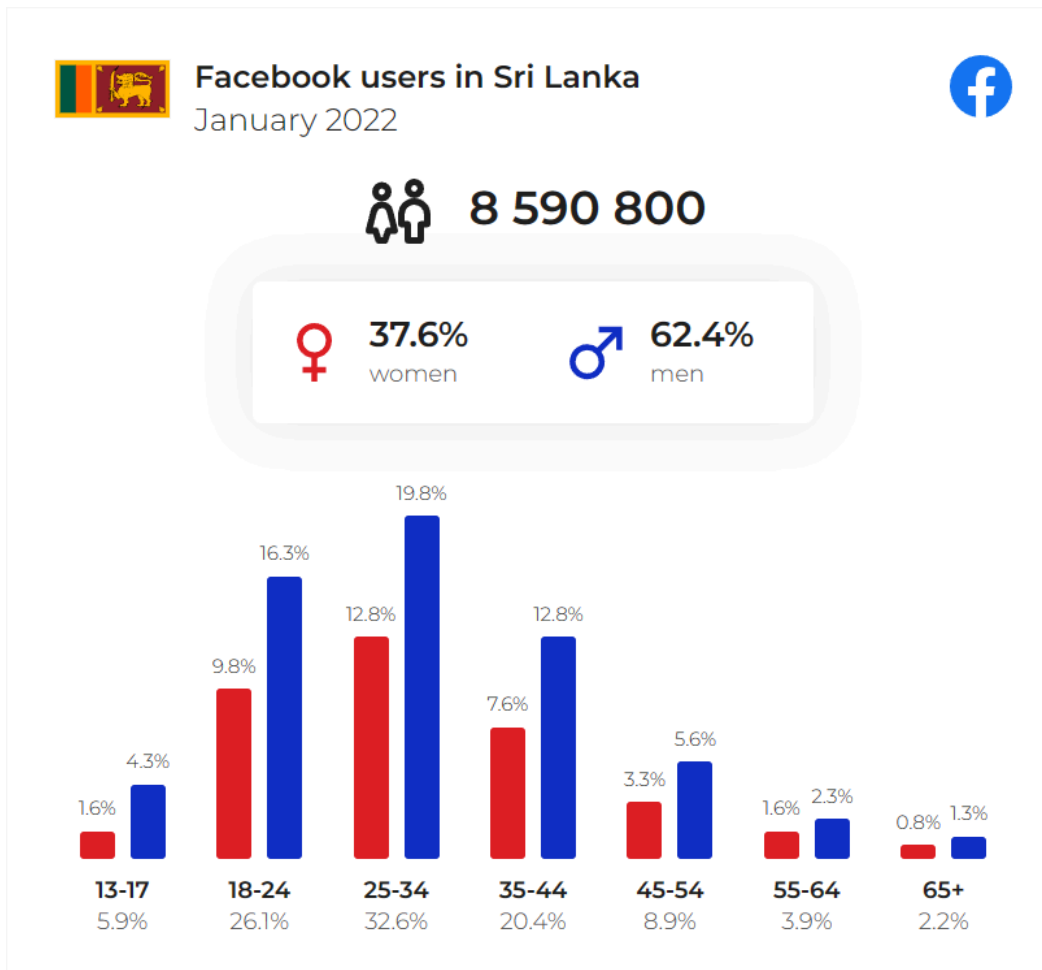
While the general terms of social media and hate speech have been discussed, this chapter focuses on the specific context of Sri Lanka. The first subsection examines the trends of social media within the country, providing its usage patterns and impact. Following this, the second subsection analyzes the negative side of social media dynamics, particularly concerning the dissemination of hate speech, with a specific emphasis on its targeting of the Muslim community. This chapter offers a nuanced understanding of how social media shapes intergroup dynamics and exacerbates tensions in Sri Lanka.

#### **3.4.1 Trend of Social Media in Sri Lanka**

In this section, the research specifies social media usage in Sri Lanka. As Internet use increases globally, the number of the Internet users in Sri Lanka has more than tripled over the past six years. In 2023, about 14.60 million people have access to the Internet, reaching 66.7% of the total population. In the past ten years, the number of Internet users has kept growing. According to data from January 2023, about half of Internet users use social media, indicating that 7.2 million people use social media in total and 33% of the total population (DataReportal, 2023). Among social media, Facebook is the most popular platform, and 6.55 million people had an account in January 2023. Furthermore, when we see more data published in October 2023, the number of Facebook accounts increased by an estimated 8.92 million, reaching more than 40% of its entire population (Napoleon Cat, 2023). Scrutinizing the accounts on social media, about 60% of accounts are created by males; on the contrary, 40% are occupied by females. People aged 25 to 34 are the largest

group, representing 32.6% of the total users. Also, people creating an account are young, indicating that 79% of users are between 18 and 44 years old (Napoleon Cat, 2023). The image below shows the usage of social media, showing the distinction between ages and gender.

**Figure 2- Facebook users in Sri Lanka**



Source: NapoleonCat ([Facebook users in Sri Lanka - January 2022 | NapoleonCat](#))

The percentage of access to the Internet and creating social media is relatively low compared to Western states, but it is essential to note that Sri Lankan people rely more on social media rather than conventional mass media. According to data, in the context of Sri Lanka, a significant proportion of internet users lean to social media platforms for accessing news and information; 90% of internet users in Sri Lanka use Facebook as a primary source of news and information, while 85% prefer YouTube. These figures substantially surpass the usage of more traditional news sources, including television

(74%), radio (34%), and newspapers (24%) respectively (OOSGA, 2023). The tendency on social media implies that Facebook plays a crucial role in spreading messages to Sri Lankan society.

In Sri Lankan society, Facebook keeps growing its number of users, and it will expand compared to other social media platforms. However, it is essential to note that TikTok, a short video-sharing social media platform, also spreads its members. This social media was established in 2017, newly developed in contrast to other social media. The dissemination of the user is rapid, and in 2023, the number of accounts is estimated at 3.5 million, indicating the second-largest social media platform following Facebook. Moreover, there is more tendency for the young age group to occupy its account, which shows 99.5% between 13 and 34 years old (Induruwage, 2023). From this data, it could be estimated that the impact of TikTok will be enhanced, especially for the younger age group.

### **3.4.2 Hate Speech Against Muslims**

After the civil war ended in 2009, the hate for Muslims increased, which coincided with the development of the Internet and the dissemination of social media. Some posts that target Muslims can include one of the Islamophobic activities, which is defined as “indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims” (Stewart, 2019, p.419). This discourse creates a sense of fear and exclusion amongst their communities, toxifies public opinion, and conducts hateful behavior (Vidgen, 2020). Because social media is spreading in Sri Lankan society and these posts relate to their daily life, hate speech is widely accepted in the communities. Hate speech is based on strong prejudice against Muslims, which describes them as barbarians and believing strange or unusual practices compared with ‘us’ (Vidgen, 2020); hate speech can be categorized into three kinds.

Firstly, Muslim institutions, such as mosques, are the target of hate speech and actual violence. From the perspective of extreme Sinhala Buddhists, the mosques are the signifier of intrusion into sovereign Sinhala space on the island (Stewart, 2019). They believe Muslims will take over the Buddhist nation, and Buddhists who sacred institutions, for example, temples and monasteries, are being eradicated. And the mosques are disgraced with disrespectful statements such as “mosques are the center of nurturing

terrorism in Sri Lanka” (Long, 2016). By creating fearful narratives, both symbols of invasion and suspicion of the fronts of terrorist operations, these mosques frequently become the target of violence and destruction by extreme Buddhists.

Secondly, Muslim attire and treatment toward women are displaced as fear and oppression for females. In Sri Lanka, many Muslim women wear the hijab, which is a headscarf, while a small number wear the Niqab, a full-face cover. Wearing these attires “make them more conspicuous in a crowd, inviting undue attention from troublemakers” (Long, 2016, p.49). Because other people can not see their faces, they feel fear for these women and connect them to terrorists or crime. On the one hand, Muslim attire is regarded as a symbol of danger; on the other hand, Muslim attire is treated as a signifier of female oppression (Stewart, 2019). By covering their faces, Muslim women are isolated from their social communities, and Islam claims ownership over women, keeping them confined in Muslim attire. Some extreme Buddhists claim that while “Islam is oppressive to women, they simultaneously degrade and insult Muslim women” (Stewart, 2019, p. 423) without assuming their context.

Thirdly, by showing the different and strange customs of Islam from the perspective of the majority group, people tend to believe that Muslim practices are cruel and fearful for Buddhists. One example is about halal food. The way of halal slaughter is deemed opposed to animal welfare rights, and it connects to the savage perspective about Muslims. In Sri Lanka, this assumption is used politically, resulting in the abolishment of halal certification. It means Muslims in Sri Lanka can not choose halal food (Aliff, 2015). Additionally, the discourse that indicates Muslims will take over a Buddhist country is often used by expressing the high birth rates and multiple marriages in the country (Aliff, 2015). In terms of multiple marriages, some hate speech combines the oppression of female human dignity.

In terms of freedom of expression and hate speech, the Constitution of Sri Lanka entitles every citizen to freedom of speech and expression, including publication (Article 14), as other nations guarantee. However, on some occasions, the government shuts down social media platforms. One case was when a spate of protests toward a specific group or religion spread throughout the country, the government forcibly shut down social media, which was being used to mobilize radicals throughout the country (Stewart, 2019). After the Easter Sunday attack happened in 2019, the government immediately shut down social

media, including WhatsApp and YouTube, and set a curfew to limit the movement of people. On the one hand, the government blocks social media to prevent further conflict between religions, but on the other hand, nowadays, Sri Lanka is confronted with an ongoing economic crisis. From the request of the Ministry of Defense, all social media platforms were blocked with the aim of preventing public protests against government corruption (International Federation of Journalists, 2023)

### **3.5 Theoretical Framework**

In this section, the research provides the theoretical framework to address the research questions. The first subsection explores the social identity theory, offering insights into its relevance for understanding intergroup dynamics within the Sri Lankan context. Subsequently, the echo chamber theory is introduced, indicating its implications for the influence of social media on these dynamics. By integrating these two theories and contextualizing them within the specific circumstances of Sri Lanka, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the relations between social identity, echo chamber, and intergroup relations in the country.

#### **3.5.1 Social Identity Theory**

When the conflict between groups was analyzed, social identity theory was applied to examine the issue. Individuals attempt to belong as group members based on their attributions, such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or religion, rather than distinct individuals (Gaertner et al., 2000). The set of self-categorization represented by similarities firmly attaches to their social category membership and associated identity (Hogg, 2016). This social group shares certain emotional and value significance, which provides “their members with a shared identity that prescribes and evaluates who they are, what they should believe and how they should behave” (Hogg, 2016, p.6). In-group membership decreases psychological distance within the group and enhances the arousal of empathy. These shared identities strengthen their bonds and start to compare with out-group members.

In any situation, when one group is developed by categorizing themselves as a group member, the group enhances their identity; at the same time, they recognize others as out-group members. Emerging two groups that both have a mutually exclusive goal that only one group can achieve at the expense of the other group (Hogg, 2016), these two

groups compete with each other in sometimes violent ways. When the competitive relation occurs between intergroup, in-group members produce in-group favoritism, in which group members see themselves and act preferably for their own interest. Then, as in-group favoritism grows more radically, the concept develops as ethnocentrism, which refers to a view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything (Hewstone & Cairns, 2001), while acts of discriminated behavior against the out-group members. Fundamental in-group favoritism perceives their practices as superior to those of the out-group, which justifies their attitudes.

Because both groups attempt to obtain favorable outcomes for themselves, the behaviors of the members of each group act realistically exclusive to the other group, enhancing the frustration toward the other. In realistic group conflict theory, if more than two groups have a common goal that requires cooperative relations, these groups will form a superordinate group to achieve the goal with interdependent relations. However, in many cases, groups compete for scarce resources (Hewstone & Cairns, 2001). Hence, the competitive relation between groups results in a win-lose or zero-sum with mutually negative feelings and stereotypes toward other members (Gaertner et al., 2000). Nevertheless, intergroup relations are influenced by status or power. Thus, in-group members who think of themselves as superior to the out-group and actually have the power to implement it can make prejudice or discriminate against the other group.

Social identity refers to collective individuals who share similar emotional and value significance in the group. Therefore, each member develops these identities or norms of the group. In addition, social norms are highly influenced by the person who has leadership rather than the person who is not a central figure of the group, which implies "they are assumed to be strongly identified with the group and thus trusted to be acting in the group's best interest" (Hogg, 2016, p.11). These members are expected to be prototypically centered and develop their identity clearly. Because these leaders have a central identity or norms regarding the group, their actions or ideologies are more influential and effective in determining the group's behavior than non-prototypical members within the group (Hogg, 2016).

When social identity is threatened by several aspects, in-group members will evoke negative emotions and attempt to escape from the feeling, reacting defensive actions with some strategies. The emotion develops two ways of strategy; on the one hand, people cope

with the issue, reducing negative feelings by directly resolving a threat at hand or by indirectly providing an alternative solution; on the other hand, the threat provokes an aversive state accompanied by antisocial behavior, such as hostility to out-groups and extremism (Luders et al., 2016). Nevertheless, these strategies are not always solved in negative ways or violated ways. In the case of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe, some might be motivated to help incoming refugees cope with their problems by providing them with language courses or job opportunities. However, many people in Europe also feel threatened by the influx of refugees, causing their familiar environment to be changed or influenced by these refugees (Luders et al., 2016)

Compared to prototypical members in the group, marginal members are not trusted and are treated unfavorably; however, these non-prototypical members sometimes fulfill important social change functions for the group. Such members often gather together collectively to act in unison, characterized as crowds. (Hogg, 2016). These crowds are “emotional, impulsive, unrefined, irresponsible, and easily manipulated” (La Macchia & Louis, 2016, p. 90). Because the crowd provides anonymity, it allows members to act unconsciously on antisocial motives, resulting in the rapid spread of behavior and motives. As for crowd behavior, unconsciousness and anonymity are essential points to discuss.

Firstly, since members act unconsciously, people of similar tendencies come together into crowds (La Macchia & Louis, 2016). Moreover, crowd behavior could be controlled and manipulated by authorities or people who have an influence on the group as they act for their own interests and rationale. Because of this idea, prototypical members use the crowd as a potential tool or weapon to develop their ideology as the same radical group combined with an explicit action that other in-group members can follow (Luders et al., 2016). Secondly, anonymity reduces participants' sense of themselves, weakening self-restraint against impulsive, irrational, and antisocial behavior (La Macchia & Louis, 2016). In this regard, the unconsciousness which can be easily manipulated, and anonymous members who do not feel responsibility for their own actions can lead to radicalization toward out-group members.

Inherently, all social conflicts are intergroup affairs, and the identities of the groups are involved and are shaped by the conflict (La Macchia & Louis, 2016). In this sense, group dynamics and behaviors influence whether political and societal movements behave

in peaceful inclusion, such as social integration within the group with cooperative relations or violent exclusion to achieve their goals by competing with out-group members.

### **3.5.2 Echo Chamber Theory**

In a situation in which in-group members are compared to out-group members, the role of social media influences the divide between groups. One prominent theory about the role of social media is called echo chamber theory, which refers to “users seek out ideologically similar content and associations... fostering opinion extremism through mutual reinforcement and isolating the network from ideologically non-congruent individuals and ideas (Wolfowicz, 2023, p.120). Once social media users find similar ideologies or ideas, they feel their statements, beliefs, and attitudes reinforce and increase their confidence in their behavior. Moreover, within the echo chamber, users encounter a constant stream of content that validates their worldview for each case. They also acquire a sense of solidarity with others who share the same values. On the contrary, developing solidarity and a sense of belonging through similar value contents leads to avoiding some contents that are opposite to their values (Cinelli et al., 2021).

While echo chamber theory relatively focuses on selective exposure for individuals, the same reign of media study, the so-called filter bubble theory, also emphasizes the narrowing of the viewpoint of users by social media platforms. The theory refers to the cumulative effects of personalization algorithms based on their profile and preferences (Wolfowicz, 2023). When some users tabbed some radical content, the user will automatically encounter similar content and recommendations, increasing the consumption and exposure of content analyzed by the algorithms. Gradually and unconsciously, the feed of users will be dominated by radical content, potentially leading towards radicalization (Wolfowicz, 2023).

Hence, as users keep encouraging radical content, such posts contribute to polarization, which deepens the ideological divides. Polarization first develops group solidarity and justifies their behavior, which leads to intensifying their attitudes, resulting in more extreme decisions (Wang et al., 2018). Secondly, the situation fosters misinformation spread (Cinelli et al., 2021). Since users find a large number of information on social media, it makes it difficult for users to verify the information, and individuals are highly likely to be influenced (Wang et al., 2018). It can also be said that a person’s



information is limited, but their feed is supported by individual algorithms based on their past search results or previously viewed similar content.

Thus, combining social identity theory and echo chamber theory could create a potential risk of becoming a vicious circle regarding inter-group relations. Unlike mass media, social media users can make news or post certain topics without a neutral perspective on the issues, and anonymously, some information is highly manipulated to be aimed at the interest of individuals, such as discrimination or exclusion for out-group members. Users who belong to a group have more opportunities to encounter certain posts from their worldview by their peers or sources who have similar tendencies and attitudes (Cinelli et al., 2021). Such a tendency affects the behavior of non-prototype members in the group. When people do not have enough information, they usually judge by observing and following others' behavior. When more and more people tend to believe their behavior, others are likely to follow (Wang et al., 2018). The situation can be analyzed in that they are reducing a sense of themselves and becoming crowds, which are irresponsible, impulsive, and emotional; in other words, the crowds can be manipulated easily. That enhances group polarization, and when polarization is high, misinformation quickly proliferates within the group (Cinelle et al., 2021).

To sum up, social identity theory and echo chamber theory play pivotal roles in understanding the conflict situation between Sinhala and Muslims in Sri Lanka. Social identity theory, focusing on intergroup relations, explains how individuals derive their sense of identity and belonging from their group memberships, leading to ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination. In the context of Sri Lanka, as Sinhala and Muslim have distinct social identities, this theory helps illuminate the dynamics of intergroup hostility and discrimination. Echo chamber theory, on the other hand, explains how individuals are exposed to information that reinforces their existing beliefs and attitudes, thereby creating ideological echo chambers that perpetuate polarization and exacerbate intergroup tensions. In the case of Sri Lanka, social media platforms act as echo chambers, amplifying hate speech and misinformation targeting Muslims, which in turn fuels intergroup conflict and perpetuates social divisions. Therefore, by applying social identity theory and echo chamber theory to the conflict between Sinhala and Muslims in Sri Lanka, this research aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms driving intergroup hostility and polarization.

## **4. Methodology and Method**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In order to examine the research question, I conducted semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis. The impact of social media or hate speech relies on the subjectivity of both the receiver and contributor. Some research gathered data, such as the number of hate speeches from a specific period, by developing code to detect the number of hate speeches. It is possible to identify the tendency of hate speech in particular periods or areas; however, the feature of hate speech is context or narrative-based, differentiating the meaning of these specific posts depending on the person. Nevertheless, some articles argued the violence toward specific groups changed from former enemy religious groups such as Hindus to new religious groups like Muslims.

Moreover, I also felt that Buddhists had suspicions toward Muslims while I lived in Sri Lanka. Because previous research and the motivation for this thesis started from the social atmosphere in Sri Lanka that discrimination or suspicion targeting Muslims after the post-civil war period, it could be valuable to conduct interviews with individuals or organizations who live in Sri Lanka. Conducting interviews with locals would give us insights to analyze the tendency of relation between social media and suspicion toward specific groups, sometimes evolving into actual violence.

As I mentioned in the literature review, first, I created some Excel sheets to identify the research findings from several articles. Through the preparation for writing the thesis by literature review, I decided to focus on how social media shapes public perception toward specific groups or individuals, particularly after the civil war ended. By conducting semi-structured interviews, I could analyze the discourse involving multifaceted factors, for example, historical and religious perspectives, connecting theories indicated in the previous chapter.

### **4.2 Research Design**

This chapter comprises two subsections. The first subsection provides the qualitative methods employed, detailing the primary data source and the process of data acquisition and analysis through semi-structured interviews. The second subsection outlines the

rationale behind the selection of participants for the interviews conducted as part of this thesis.

#### **4.2.1 Qualitative Research**

Semi-structured interviews could be applicable to grasp the social atmosphere and trend of shifting hostility. This method focused on subjectivity rather than objective data like numbers so that it could narrow down the depth and complexity of human behavior and the nuance of social phenomena. One of the features of semi-structured interviews was defined as open-ended questions that provided opportunities for interviewees to express their opinions freely. This aspect of research fits qualitative research in analyzing the impact of the issue, which influences people's minds or behaviors. I needed to create the interview guide to set the questions to identify the problem. Due to the flexibility of semi-structured interviews, I could ask the questions in depth and change the order of the questions in line with the conversation. It was also essential to analyze the trend of social media through an objective dataset, but by combining semi-structured interviews, the thesis could involve the social atmosphere toward minority groups in Sri Lanka.

#### **4.2.2 Choice of Participants**

Because this thesis focused on the impact of hate speech, I could analyze how hate speech influenced Sri Lankan society. Ideally, asking random people who believe Buddhists or Muslims could be reliable data, including their personal experiences connected with social media and actual circumstances. It has been noticed nowadays that when people are asked questions about the media in general, they link to social media. Moreover, they use social media not because it is important but because they just pick up the phones for their interval time, characterizing them as unimportant. (Bengtson & Johansson, 2022). Therefore, such random people might use social media as a pastime and not focus on or are not interested in hate speech. In this case, the interview would not be reliable.

On the other hand, social media could influence both positive and negative aspects, and some lead to hostility toward specific groups. Therefore, to analyze social media's influence on Sri Lankan society or individuals, it was necessary to ask people or organizations that relate to hate speech.

There were mainly two sides to hate speech: on the one hand, people or organizations that create hate speech, and on the other, actors who deal with hate speech. In this thesis, I focused on the latter for three reasons.

Firstly, asking the people who create and spread hate speech might put me at risk because some people creating hate speech might have extreme thoughts toward specific groups. As defined, hate speech encourages people to have violent actions toward particular individuals or groups. If the interviewer showed opposition to their idea, such as ethnic harmony during the interview, it could lead to some violent actions from the interviewees. I put my position a critical view toward hate speech; hence, it could happen that I retaliated against the idea that encouraged hate speech or permission of violence toward minority groups. One solution for this situation was conducting online interviews that could keep actual physical distance between interviewees and the interviewer. By avoiding physical contact through online interviews, physical violence could be prevented, but it still some issues in conducting the interview for the hate speech contributors.

Secondly, even though I conducted interviews online, there was also a risk of showing their strong ideology through the thesis. People or organizations creating hate speech had radical ideas for target groups, so that they might use strong statements toward specific groups during the interviews. Even if I took care of extreme statements from the interviews, the thesis might represent their ideology or hate for the target groups by publication. It could encourage or justify violence against these individuals and groups. To reduce the risk of encouragement of violence by exposing through open publication, the thesis avoided talking with people or organizations creating hate speech.

Lastly, the thesis would analyze the impact of social media, both positive and negative aspects. If the research focused on the person who created hate speech, the thesis would show only negative aspects, such as justification of discrimination for minority groups. However, by conducting interviews with people or organizations dealing with hate speech or the opposite position for the discrimination, the thesis could include not only the general trend of hate speech in Sri Lanka but also approaches for hate speech in addition to positive aspects of social media. Moreover, by introducing an approach to hate speech and the effectiveness of posts that show ethnic harmony, the thesis suggested the potential positive influence of social media.

### **4.3 Data Process**

Because it was necessary to conduct interviews with professionals, not random persons, and to prevent the risk of justification of violence, I found three organizations, one of them was an academic institution studying ethnic relations in Sri Lanka through Internet searching. One of the organizations was introduced by a colleague in the same course, the Master's Degree of Peace and Conflict Transformation, who came from Sri Lanka. Every organization focused on peace-building activities through a bottom-up approach, capacity-building, or non-violent conflict transformation, focusing on Sri Lanka.

The reasons for choosing the organizations were, firstly, other organizations were doing broader activities such as human rights or advocacy, relatively focused on the top-down approach, which encouraged administrations. In contrast, the activities of the picked organizations focused on the bottom-up approach with communicating and managing events with the local population. This research focused on the trend of hate speech in Sri Lanka; hence, the organizations that were connected to the local population might understand the individual level of impact of social media. Secondly, accessibility was essential to writing the master thesis, which had limited time until the submission. Arranging the schedule took time with an explanation of the research, especially from outsiders of the country. Nevertheless, by asking for cooperation with the colleague, he explained this research and connected the organization. Hence, I could access the organization with some rapport due to the introduction from the colleague. Moreover, each interview focused on the depth of social circumstance. Therefore, I narrowed the sampling organizations to three, which held activities or studied local level.

### **4.4 Data analysis**

In the data analysis process, I would conduct a discourse analysis that examines the narratives and stories based on the research questions and semi-structured interviews. I assumed there was a transition of conflict in Sri Lanka from Hindus to Muslims in some periods. Thus, through the interviews, this research would find one of the causes of the transition, such as the trend of social media, especially the negative impact on local citizens from the perspective of professionals about the situation of Sri Lanka. Because the interviewees were Sri Lankans, each individual might also have their personal opinions. Therefore, by conducting interviews, the research could acquire both opinions as a

professional organization dealing with ethnic harmony and as an individual experiencing the transition through their daily life.

## **4.5 Research Consideration**

This chapter is structured into two sections, each addressing ethical considerations and reflexivity within this thesis. The first section outlines the ethical considerations that proceed with the research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. Subsequently, the second section provides my reflexivity as a researcher in this issue, indicating the self-awareness, biases, and role in shaping the research process and outcomes.

### **4.5.1 Ethical Considerations**

When conducting interviews on sensitive issues, the safety of interviewees must be ensured. Because they worked in an organization whose activity was a bottom-up approach to peace-building for Sri Lanka, their stance may be neutral for any religion. However, the interviewer might encounter something special experience with a heavy grievance regarding religious conflicts when asking about their personal experiences. Moreover, some organizations have been settling in the same area where one of the explosions happened in Easter, Colombo; thus, I needed to take care of their atmosphere or pose during the interview. To respect their personal experience, the interview was ready to be suspended, or questions would be changed. On the other hand, the rights to freedom of speech and privacy of the interviewees must also be protected. Through the publishing of the master thesis, the interviewee should not risk their safety from some extreme organizations. Therefore, it was essential to ensure that the interviewees remained anonymous and could not be identified by anyone.

Moreover, before the research began, I had experience conducting semi-structured interviews in English and the interviewers' mother tongue. Hence, I could change or arrange questions flexibly during the conversation based on the experience. During the discussion and when feeling the interviewees' grievances, I would fix the content of the questions or finish the interviews when necessary.

#### **4.5.2 Reflexibility**

This research was conducted by those who come from outside of Sri Lanka. Therefore, the position of the research has been neutral between Buddhists and Muslims. One of the points of the research from an outsider indicated that I did not emotionally or culturally investigate the research question. I could analyze the narratives or nuances at a level of objectivity. In addition, even though I was not familiar with the local practices or perceptions, it could help reduce the bias in the research process. This research could analyze the issue of fewer assumptions or biases toward both Sinhala and Muslims.

However, this thesis would criticize those hate speeches that create polarization in the relationship between Buddhists and Muslims. Some hate speech contributors might argue that all people were guaranteed the freedom of speech, but the research critiques hate speech, which encourages violence or makes some people thread and disseminate misunderstanding toward specific groups. Through the fieldwork with semi-structured interviews, the thesis would suggest the potential influence of social media on ethnic harmony from below. Based on the condition that it was easy to access the organization and analyzing the impact of social media from below, the sample of the research was determined.

Overall, this research was deeply rooted in my personal experience while residing in Sri Lanka. During my time there, I encountered Buddhists who had suspicions toward Muslims, although I never encountered individuals with radical ideologies against Muslims. It is important to note why the research title focuses on extreme Buddhist discrimination against Muslims because this does not indicate that all Buddhists hold extremist views. In reality, only a minority of Buddhists hold extreme nationalist ideologies, which exacerbate tensions between communities. Therefore, this research aims to critique hate speech and extreme Buddhist nationalism, which contribute to the escalation of intergroup hostilities.

#### **4.6 Limitations**

Since the interview was conducted in several organizations aiming for qualitative research, it was challenging to generalize the opinion for the overall understanding of hate speech despite the organization knowing the issue well. Moreover, the research focused on the case of Sri Lanka. Hence, the situation about the relations with Muslims or minority

groups in other countries might be different. Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews were strong tools for understanding the nuance or the social atmosphere of the conflict situation or hostility, which highly relies on subjectivity. In this regard, this qualitative research would contribute to the transition of the social atmosphere beyond the dataset of hate speech posts indicated by numbers.

Although the colleague initially introduced me to an organization with which he had previous experience, I tried to reach out to multiple organizations to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Through online research focusing on organizations that contributed to peace-building from diverse perspectives, I identified approximately 50 relevant organizations. However, some of these organizations found it inactive or unrelated to the specific topic of my research. Consequently, I selected around ten organizations to contact, but unfortunately, I received responses from only two. This limited response might indicate that as an outsider to society, establishing trust with these organizations was challenging. Moreover, like many NGOs globally, these organizations likely faced resource shortages, including limited staff capacity, which may have affected to make them hesitate to cooperate with interviews.

As mentioned, it was difficult to find organizations that cooperated with the research; in addition, because I was an outsider to the country, it was challenging to build rapport with the participants during interviews. Establishing rapport was crucial for comprehending sensitive issues and understanding the transition of the social atmosphere through personal experiences. While the mother tongues of Buddhists and Muslims in Sri Lanka were Sinhala and Tamil, respectively, many interviewees were Sinhala speakers. As I could not speak their mother tongue frequently, interviews were conducted in English, meaning a potential language barrier. However, to mitigate this gap and attempt to gain trust, I initially introduced myself and explained the research purpose in Sinhala, recalling my previous experience working in Sri Lanka using the language. This approach facilitated smoother communication during interviews, mitigating the building of rapport.



## **5. Data Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, the fieldwork conducted through semi-structured interviews with several organizations serves as the foundation for analyzing contextual data through discourse analysis. The research focuses primarily on two key aspects of the issue at hand. Firstly, following the cessation of the civil war, the antagonistic dynamics shifted from the conflict between Sinhala and Tamils to that between Sinhala and Muslims. Thus, the analysis examines not only the socio-economic and political disparities but also the ideological shifts, such as the emergence of aspirations for a Buddhist sovereign state. Secondly, considering the widespread accessibility to information facilitated by technological advancements, particularly social media, the research explores how this influences power dynamics and discriminatory behavior toward Muslims. Through these lenses, the thesis aims to unravel the nuanced contextual meanings embedded within the social and cultural landscape of Sri Lanka.

#### **5.1.1 Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis serves as a qualitative research method that examines language, communication patterns, and underlying ideologies present in texts or spoken language. It involves systematically analyzing discourse content to uncover themes, meanings, and rhetorical strategies employed by individuals or groups. This analysis extends beyond the text itself to encompass the broader external environment, focusing on implied meanings and contextual nuances (Drid, 2010). In the context of investigating the transition of hostility toward Muslims by the majority group in Sri Lanka, discourse analysis entails a thorough examination of interviews conducted with various organizations. Researchers scrutinize not only the literal discourse but also examine the implicit messages conveyed and the overarching conversational dynamics. By identifying recurring themes, discursive patterns, and linguistic features, this approach explores how language, cultural assumptions, and significant events influence societal perceptions and contribute to the perpetuation of power dynamics.

The research involved collaboration with three organizations actively engaged in promoting ethnic harmony and studying ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. Due to the confidentiality of the semi-structured interviews, the comments from each organization are

anonymized as organizations A, B, and C in this thesis. This chapter centers on analyzing the discourse from each organization, with a primary focus on addressing two key questions. Firstly, it discusses how the majority group transitioned their hostility from Tamils to Muslims, exploring the underlying factors and dynamics involved in this shift. Secondly, the chapter examines the role of social media in shaping public perceptions and potentially inciting violent actions, aiming to uncover the mechanisms through which online platforms contribute to intergroup tensions and conflicts.

## **5.2 Cause of the Transition Hostility**

The primary focus of the research centers on understanding the complex dynamics of conflictual relations in Sri Lanka. The country's diverse ethnic composition, consisting of Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim communities, has historically led to tensions and conflicts. With Sinhala Buddhists comprising the majority of the population at 70%, there has been an effort by this group to assert and maintain their dominance and privilege in the post-independence era. The three organizations involved in the research, including an academy specializing in ethnic studies, have been actively promoting ethnic harmony and conducting studies in this field for over two decades. Throughout the interviews conducted with representatives from these organizations, differing perspectives and opposing ideas emerged, which will be mentioned in the subsequent discussion chapter, indicating the complexities and nuances of the issues.

### **5.2.1 Targeting Violence toward Muslims**

This thesis investigates the evolving dynamics of conflict between Buddhists and Muslims, primarily from the perspective of the Buddhist community. Throughout the interview process, I encountered divergent viewpoints regarding the transition of hostility toward Muslims. One organization emphasized a prevailing sentiment of inferiority among Buddhists, stating, "they feel they are mainly inferior in the county" (Organization A, personal communication, February 07, 2024). On the other hand, another organization highlighted that "there was a sense of triumphalism or sense of victory since soon after the war ended in 2009" (Organization B, personal communication, March 06, 2024). These differing perspectives underscore the complexity of the issue and warrant further examination and analysis.

The sentiments of inferiority and triumphalism stem from a pervasive fear among Buddhists of potential Muslim dominance in the future. This anxiety can be unpacked into two distinct concerns through dialogue. Firstly, there is a fear of demographic conquer by Muslims, as extreme Buddhists perceive a future threat indicated by the numerical superiority of both Tamil and Muslim minorities. Notably, both ethnic groups have significant ties to neighboring regions, with Tamils having a substantial population in South India's Tamil Nadu state and Muslims receiving support from Arab nations for religious infrastructure development, represented as religious schools or mosques (Organization B, 2024). Secondly, this fear is intertwined with historical colonial experiences, where the imposition of centralization, standardization, and homogenization by colonial rulers marginalized and assimilated Sinhalese identity. Post-independence, Sinhalese, empowered by victory in the civil war, have adopted strategies reminded of colonial tactics, perpetuating a cycle of assimilation and exclusion (Organization A, 2024). This complex social structure connected with historical legacies and contemporary anxieties underscores the nuanced nature of identity politics in Sri Lanka.

In addition to the prevailing sense of fear, the Sinhalese community held discontent rooted in linguistic differences. While Sinhalese predominantly communicate in Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims primarily communicate in Tamil. This linguistic distinction has fueled hostility toward the Tamil language itself among the Sinhalese population, irrespective of the individuals who speak it (Organization C, 2024).

### **5.2.2 Role of the Government**

Due to Sri Lanka's colonial history, which involved the adoption of strategies under British rule, coupled with the acquisition of power following the civil war and apprehensions regarding the increasing minority population, these legacies persist and continue to shape contemporary politics and ethnic relations. The government, largely led by political elites, utilizes this consolidated structure to serve its own interests (Organization C, 2024). Despite public sentiments aware of behavioral changes, civilians find themselves within a system that makes it difficult to change (Organization A, 2024). Consequently, some political figures subtly endorse attacks against minorities, particularly Muslims, as they advocate for the establishment of a Sinhala Buddhist State (Organization B, March 06, 2024). This stance influenced Sri Lankan society, leading to instances of anti-Muslim riots, with criticisms against the government for its perceived failure to prevent such violence.

### **5.2.3 Actors as Religious Leaders**

As previously discussed, the government has played a role in perpetuating discriminatory relations between the majority Sinhala population and minority groups like Tamils and Muslims. According to organizations, religious leaders have also been involved in inciting violence against these minority communities under the name of nationalism (Organization C, 2024). However, one organization highlighted that Buddhist monks appear to have a preference for Tamils over Muslims, as they perceive Buddhists and Hindus to share similar cultural practices, making integration seemingly easier (Organization A, 2024). Conversely, the same organization noted that “the cultural practices and food traditions of Muslims markedly differ from those of Hindus and Buddhists” (Organization A, February 07, 2024).

Not all Buddhist monks engaged in discriminatory actions against minorities. Even during the civil war, certain Buddhist monks actively protected Tamils. Thus, while some extreme Buddhist religious leaders promoted conflict and contributed to the turmoil in the country, others demonstrated compassion and courage by risking their lives to protect minority communities (Organization A, 2024). This complexity underscores the multifaceted nature of the issues in Sri Lanka, which are intertwined with political, religious, and historical factors.

### **5.3 Role of Social Media**

The second theme examines the impact of social media on Sri Lankan society. While two organizations were actively engaged in grassroots activities aimed at promoting ethnic harmony, the third organization was specifically focused on combating hate speech propagated through online platforms. During the interviews, it was observed that the respondents themselves were not part of the core demographic of social media users (aged 20-34), but their participants primarily targeted individuals within this age group. All organizations expressed concern about the increasing influence of social media and its potential repercussions on real-world behaviors.

#### **5.3.1 Each Actor of Social Media Usage**

In terms of social media usage, organizations highlighted two primary roles: the contributors who create hate speech and the general users who consume this information.

According to one organization, “During incidents of anti-Muslim riots, social media played a pivotal role, enabling radical groups to exploit online platforms to incite violence among the people” (Organization B, March 06, 2024). The organizations emphasized the significant correlation between anti-Muslim riots and social media, which not only perpetuate violence online but also spill over into offline actions, such as boycotting Muslim-owned businesses (Organization C, 2024).

The receivers, particularly the younger generation relying on social media, are surrounded by a surplus of information, often lacking the time processing to critically assess its accuracy or depth (Organization A, 2024). This over-reliance on digital platforms has replaced traditional methods of information gathering, such as face-to-face conversations and diverse viewpoints. With smartphones becoming an indispensable part of daily life, some young Sri Lankans find themselves constantly consumed by social media, potentially leading to a loss of individual autonomy and critical thinking skills (Organization A, 2024). Consequently, there is a tendency among this demographic to adopt biased perspectives, potentially perpetuating misinformation and reinforcing existing prejudices.

### **5.3.2 Examples of Hate Speech**

During the interviews, organizations provided instances of online violence targeting specific individuals or groups. While these examples were cited in detail, I refrained from requesting any personal or sensitive information, ensuring the confidentiality and privacy of the interviewees. Consequently, actual images or personal details will not be included in the thesis to uphold ethical consideration and protect the anonymity of those involved. Firstly;

An Islamic lady was a target of offline violence. In actual life, she comes from an elite Islamic family and works with other ethnic people. On the elite level with Tamil, Sinhala, and Muslims, the discrimination was much less. However, Some of the users posted so many things that disturbed her. She was deeply affected by these posts. She broke down into pieces because of simply Facebook. Even though I asked to stop looking at phones, she could not live without this (phone) (Organization A, February 07, 2024).

Finally, the woman managed to navigate through the issue. However, according to the organization's analysis, her youthfulness and sensitivity influenced her vulnerability to discouragement, impacting her mental well-being. Additionally, it is worth noting that while the example cited did not directly target a specific individual, it contributed to the perpetuation of prejudice against Muslims as a marginalized group, exacerbating tensions within society;

They (Muslims) are selling food or other substances that reduce the fertility of Sinhalese. So that Sinhalese will not be able to produce babies. And therefore, Muslims become a sort of majority (Organization B, March 06, 2024).

Such posts contribute to the formation of stereotypes among Sinhalese people regarding Muslims. Another instance of hate speech that escalated into real-life violence is illustrated by the following example;

There was an attack on a particular Muslim doctor, saying that he was sterilizing most of the Sinhala Buddhist women, cutting off the fallopian tubes so that they could not conceive and produce babies (Organization B, March 06, 2024).

This false hate speech exemplifies the intentional racism perpetuated by specific users on social media platforms (Organization B, 2024). They purposefully disseminate such divisive content, being fully aware of its impact which creates division between Buddhists and Muslims (Organization A, 2024). Thus, the role of social media is multifaceted, involving not only serious implications for those who receive such information, potentially leading to mental health disorders but also the propagation of hate speech that fosters stereotypes and targets specific individuals within the society.

### **5.3.3 Hate Speech and Freedom of Expression**

When examining the role of social media, researchers need to navigate the definition or distinction between hate speech and freedom of expression. All organizations acknowledge the fundamental right to freedom of expression, which should be upheld both on social media platforms and in mainstream media channels. However, the defining factor of hate speech lies in whether the speech derogates another religious or ethnic group or incites individuals or groups to violence (Organization B, 2024). Furthermore, other organizations elaborated on this point, noting that;

Most hate speech is intense to disgrace the target groups. Moreover, these posts are generated from a single source. Therefore, you could validate from fact-checking (Organization C, March 07, 2024)

In this context, hate speech often lacks substantiated sources or verifiable facts. It is crucial that the community guidelines of each online platform fulfill their obligation to remove such posts promptly (Organization B, 2024). Additionally, it is essential for these platforms to implement robust mechanisms for identifying and addressing hate speech to ensure a safer online environment for all users.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In the concluding section of the thesis, the research explores the components discussed throughout the study, including the social and historical context, theoretical framework, and discourse extracted from interviews. While the previous chapter explored the interview findings, it became evident that some organizations presented divergent perspectives on the issues, underscoring the complexity of the situation in Sri Lanka. These contradictions will be addressed as limitations in the ensuing discussion.

Firstly, the thesis analyzes the conflictual relationship between Buddhists and Muslims. Secondly, it examines the role and impact of social media, considering both contributors of hate speech and receivers who obtain information from social media platforms. Throughout the interviews, I encountered both commonalities and contradictions among respondents' perspectives, perceiving a thorough exploration of each viewpoint. In addressing the research questions, the thesis offers recommendations for future areas of study based on its findings.

### **6.2 Target of violence toward Muslims**

In this chapter, the thesis examines the multifaceted nature of conflictual relations, exploring various perspectives and the roles played by different actors, such as the government and religious leaders. Combining the data collected in the previous sections, including actual incidents and the theoretical framework, the discussion section provides a comprehensive understanding of ethnic, religious, and political dynamics within Sri Lanka.

#### **6.2.1 Historical Perspective and Colonial Legacy**

Since the end of the civil war, scholarly literature has highlighted a violent trend: an escalation in violence against Muslims in Sri Lanka, a variety of attitudes from offline attacks to organized hate campaigns. To contextualize this phenomenon, it is essential to consider Sri Lanka's colonial history. During British rule, Tamils from India were favored over the majority Sinhalese population, leading to resentment among the latter. This favoritism persisted even after independence, as the Sinhala-dominated government enacted policies prioritizing Sinhala language and academic opportunities, further



exacerbating ethnic divisions within society. Consequently, Sri Lanka became polarized, with clear distinctions between in-groups and out-groups, setting the stage for intergroup conflict and violence.

In addition to the Tamil population, Muslims also established their community in Sri Lanka primarily for trade purposes. However, this presence evoked apprehension among the Sinhalese, who feared the potential expansion of Muslim influence, particularly with support from neighboring countries. For instance, Tamils had strong ties to India, Sri Lanka's closest neighbor, while some Islamic nations provided financial aid for the construction of mosques and religious schools. Consequently, Sinhalese communities felt increasingly marginalized, triggering a sense of isolation and insecurity. According to social identity theory, such feelings of negative evaluation within the in-group can lead to intergroup competition as a means of asserting social status (Luders et al., 2016). Fueled by a fear of past colonial domination and apprehensions about future demographic shifts, the Sinhalese community sought to defend its identity through reactive defensive strategies (Luders et al., 2016).

That strategy eventually culminated in the implementation of the Sinhala priority policy, which exacerbated tensions and fueled a prolonged civil war. With the eventual defeat of the LTTE, the Sinhalese population experienced a heightened sense of triumphalism, further compounded by longstanding fears and perceptions of victory, which led to a shift in their target of violence toward Muslims (Organization B, 2024). In fact, even before the outbreak of the civil war, sporadic incidents of anti-Muslim sentiment were reported in certain regions. During the conflict with the Tamil population, the focus of the Sinhalese was primarily directed towards combatting the LTTE. Therefore, following the cessation of hostilities, the target of animosity did not shift but reemerged towards the Muslim community. This tendency was attributed to the categorization of Muslims as an out-group and the perceived threat that they posed to Sinhalese interests. Consequently, discriminatory actions intensified, leading to radicalization and instances of violence, resulting in loss of life in some cases.

In 2014, radical Buddhist groups staged demonstrations targeting Muslims, resulting in the deaths of four individuals and injuries to 80 others. The unrest persisted for two days, during which over 60 homes and businesses were set ablaze, and several mosques were vandalized (Al Jazeera, 2014). Similarly, in 2018, in the central region of Sri

Lanka, hundreds of predominantly Sinhala Buddhist men engaged in acts of vandalism and set fire to Muslim properties and businesses (Al Jazeera, 2018). This wave of violence killed three lives and left 20 others injured, prompting the imposition of a curfew and the declaration of a state of emergency by the president. Notably, prior to the outbreak of the civil war, instances of Buddhist-led riots targeting Tamils were recorded. However, following the cessation of hostilities, there was a notable escalation in violence against Muslims, with some incidents spiraling into large-scale riots. These incidents underscored the perceived failure of the government to prevent unrest and highlighted the role of social media in engaging in radicalization and instigating mob violence.

### **6.2.2 Role of the Government**

As indicated by interviews with multiple organizations, the government's historical approach and power dynamics have played a significant role in indicating an ethnonationalism agenda that exacerbates these tensions. Drawing from a strategy similar to divide and rule, the government's actions have perpetuated societal divisions, which have, in turn, influenced civilian perceptions. Notably, one organization highlighted that the government tacitly, not overtly, encourages radical groups like Bodu Bala Sena, whose ideologies run counter to those promoting ethnic harmony (Organization B, March 06, 2024). This tacit support of radical organizations highlights the complexities of governance in Sri Lanka and its implications for social cohesion.

Before the civil war, the Sri Lankan government's implementation of a Sinhala-only policy exacerbated tensions and fueled separatist sentiments among the Tamil population, ultimately contributing to the outbreak of conflict. In contrast, amidst the global spread of COVID-19, the Sri Lankan government mandated cremation for individuals who died or were suspected of having died from the virus, despite burial being a religious tradition in Muslim culture. This decision diverged from its previous policy of permitting both burial and cremation. Muslim groups, citing the burial practices allowed by over 185 countries even during the COVID (Amnesty International, 2021), criticized the government's stance on cremation.

Although the government did not explicitly enact discriminatory policies or display disrespect toward Muslim culture, the decision to enforce cremation for COVID-19 victims influenced ethnic groups. As Muslims opposed this policy due to their religious

beliefs, it highlighted a cultural divide within society. This disagreement or criticism toward the government may have fueled apprehension among Sinhala individuals, potentially exacerbating discriminatory attitudes toward Muslims. The government's stance on this issue has broader implications for cultural relations within society and can significantly impact interethnic and interreligious dynamics.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Muslims felt marginalized as the government enforced cremation practices that contradicted their religious beliefs. However, amidst this cultural neglect, organizations noted a shift in societal dynamics driven by the broader economic crisis. Sri Lanka faced severe economic challenges, leading to widespread dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the situation regardless of ethnicity. This discontent culminated in legal action, with the Sri Lankan Supreme Court holding former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and other political leaders accountable for economic mismanagement and fundamental human rights violations (BBC News, 2023). In response to these challenges, Sri Lankans from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds began to unite in their criticism of the government. This collaborative effort transcended traditional in-group and out-group dynamics, aligning various communities under a common goal of overcoming the economic crisis. Such collective action reflects the principles of social identity theory, where disparate groups form superordinate identities to achieve shared objectives (Tal-Or et al., 2002). Consequently, as societal focus shifted towards holding the government accountable and addressing economic issues, leading to some participants depicted instances of violence against Muslims decreased.

While politicians were held accountable for the economic crisis by the Supreme Court verdict, some organizations also scrutinized their potential involvement in the Easter Sunday attacks. However, despite suspicions raised by certain issues, no conclusive evidence has emerged linking suspected politicians directly to the tragic events of Easter Sunday. As I maintain a neutral position in my research, neither siding with the government nor with civilians, I will not take a stance on one side. Nevertheless, it is evident that the prevailing social climate in Sri Lanka is focused on navigating the challenges posed by the economic crisis. Moreover, there is a broader sense of skepticism among civilians toward the government's ability to address and rectify the economic challenges facing the nation.

### 6.2.3 Religious Perspective

Moreover, given the deeply connected religious beliefs and practices in Sri Lankan society, religious leaders play a significant influence over their followers and the broader community. As such, they are not only instrumental in shaping religious discourse but also in exacerbating divisions and inciting violence against Muslims. Their role in perpetuating tensions and fostering animosity towards minority groups cannot be overlooked.

Despite the claims of some extreme Buddhist monks that their actions are in the best interest of the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka, their rhetoric often utilizes religion as a means of expression (Juergensmeyer, 2018). These monks assert a right to govern the nation based on their interpretation of Buddhism, rooted in a historical narrative of domination by imperial colonizers and the indigenous ethnicity of Sri Lanka. However, within Sri Lankan society, monks play considerable political influence and are even relevant with militant figures, being able to mobilize resources and personnel to advance their agendas, sometimes resorting to violence (Hall, 2003). Furthermore, Hall highlights the challenge of distinguishing between religious and political matters, as the charismatic Buddhist monks blur the lines between the religious and political spheres.

In the context of social identity theory, individuals who represent the prototypical characteristics of a group, such as leadership figures or central members, hold a significant role in influencing group dynamics and behaviors. In Sri Lanka, religious leaders impact Sri Lankan society, particularly by agitating violence under the name of nationalism (Organization C, 2024). Their ideology “is amplified because they are assumed to be strongly identified with the group and are thus trusted to be acting in the group’s best interest and unlikely to the group harm” (Hogg, 2016, p.11). This phenomenon explains the potent combination of ideological messaging and actionable strategies employed by radical groups to further their objectives. Additionally, these extremist factions thrive on notions of superiority and the perpetuation of positive self-evaluation, which can fuel discriminatory behaviors and exacerbate intergroup tensions. Such radical ideologies are more effectively spread than groups that believe in equality (Luders et al., 2016).

To sum up, Sri Lanka's complex and conflict-ridden landscape is shaped by a myriad of intertwined factors, many of which stem from its colonial history. Under colonial rule, ethnic divisions were exacerbated, and certain groups were favored over

others. Following independence, the previously suppressed majority seized power, implementing policies that prioritized their own interests. This historical background, coupled with power dynamics, has fostered the creation of in-group and out-group dynamics. The Muslim community, in particular, has found itself involved in these ethnic tensions, especially in the aftermath of the civil war. In response to dominated experience and the growing influence of newcomers as perceived as threats, some extreme Buddhist groups have resorted to discriminatory actions. These groups, viewing themselves as higher-status, seek to protect their superiority and involve non-prototypical members to fulfill social change (Hogg, 2016). Furthermore, the proliferation of extremist ideologies, exacerbated by the amplifying effect of social media, has deepened ethnic divisions and perpetuated misinformation targeting minority communities.

### **6.3 Role of Social Media**

In this section, the thesis explores the multifaceted role of social media, examining both its central usage and the pervasive impact of hate speech within online spaces. Within the realm of social media, there exists a dichotomy between contributors, who actively generate and disseminate content, and receivers, who passively consume and engage with information circulating on these platforms.

It is challenging to establish a direct causal relationship between specific acts of violence and the influence of social media. However, there is convincing evidence to suggest that social media posts have contributed to several contentious issues, resulting in real-world violence. As illustrated in the previous chapter, the anti-Muslim riots of 2018 were partly fueled by hostile posts toward Muslims disseminated on platforms like Facebook. Following these incidents, Facebook conducted an investigation and acknowledged that "hate speech and rumors spread on the platform may have led to violence against Muslims" (Al Jazeera, 2020). Finally, Facebook apologized for the misuse of the platform. This acknowledgment indicates the significant role that online platforms can play in exacerbating social tensions and inciting violence. While this particular incident received attention and scrutiny, it is essential to recognize that many similar occurrences may go unreported or unaddressed, highlighting the pervasive nature of this issue in the digital age.

In the case of the 2018 incidents, social media platforms such as Facebook served as platforms for the dissemination of misinformation and content inciting violence against Muslims. Individuals who encountered these posts and empathized with their message may have been radicalized, perpetrating acts of violence. While the creators of these incited posts remain unidentified, it explains that marginalized members of the Buddhist community were influenced by such posts. These individuals likely encountered continuous hate speech and relevant content in their social media feeds, analyzed by algorithms tailored to individual preferences and past search results. These manipulated posts on social media platforms effectively weaponized marginalized members for the promotion of social change. It is crucial to note that this societal change operates at the regional or local level, exacerbating existing ethnic divisions and fostering increased polarization within communities.

The thesis analyzed the impact of social media on public behavior, particularly focusing on the perspective of the perpetrators or the majority population. However, it is equally important to examine how the target of violence or the minority group perceives hate speech within the digital realm. Given that the younger generation is heavily reliant on social media for their daily life, members of minority groups are more likely to encounter hate speech directed towards them. A case provided by one organization highlighted the detrimental effects of such online hostility, where a Muslim woman was subjected to hate speech and misinformation about her community. Despite attempts to disengage from social media by the organization, she found herself unable to separate from her phone, falling into a mental disorder. This phenomenon, often referred to as "Facebook depression," indicates the profound impact of online platforms on individual well-being and mental health. As outlined in the conceptual framework, prolonged exposure to hateful content can lead to social isolation and addiction to social media usage. While this organization shared a singular example, they also noted encountering numerous similar cases, indicating the pervasive nature of online hostility and its detrimental consequences. Therefore, it is possible that social media platforms not only facilitate the propagation of biased information and hate speech but also pose a significant risk of social and psychological harm to individuals who are exposed to such content.

To sum up, the current conflict in Sri Lanka is driven by multiple factors ranging from historical grievances to the pervasive influence of social media. Actors with

significant power, including the government and some extreme religious leaders, play a pivotal role in perpetuating the ethnonationalism agenda, further intensifying tensions. In some instances, the government has been accused of exploiting social media to combine it with the political sphere to regulate civilians' freedom of speech. Moreover, the government's failure to effectively regulate hate speech on social media has allowed extremist elements to amplify their messages of intolerance and incitement to violence. This attitude promotes extreme Buddhists to propagate ethnonationalism narratives and marginalizes minority groups, particularly Muslims. Consequently, the unchecked spread of ethnonationalist rhetoric on social media has deepened intergroup tensions and contributed to instances of communal violence and discrimination against minority groups in Sri Lanka. Thus, the intersection of ethnonationalism ideology and the role of the Sri Lankan government in the context of social media underscores the complex dynamics shaping intergroup relations and political discourse in the country.

However, it is essential to recognize that these attitudes are not solely propagated from the top down. The role of ordinary citizens who contribute to the spreading of hate speech shapes societal norms. This highlights the critical role of social media platforms, which, operating at grassroots levels, have the potential to either reinforce or mitigate ethnonationalistic ideologies through the dissemination of hate speech and other forms of rhetoric.

#### **6.4 Strategy for Hate Speech**

The discussion has examined Sri Lanka's historical experience of ethnic conflict, which was shaped by its colonial past and subsequent power dynamics within the nation. Moreover, the advent of new technology, particularly social media, has exacerbated the polarization between the majority and minority groups in the country. The postwar narrative has further solidified the perception of majority dominance over minorities, creating a fertile ground for extremist elements within the Buddhist community to engage in discriminatory behavior. These sentiments are often amplified through incited posts that remain unchecked on online platforms, fueling physical violence and social unrest. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, efforts to address these issues have been initiated at various levels, spanning from governmental initiatives to grassroots interventions aimed at fostering social cohesion and harmony.

Firstly, at the government level, strategies have been implemented to mitigate radical incidents and prevent social unrest. One such measure involves imposing curfews to prevent physical confrontations and restricting access to social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, which are often used to spread misinformation and incite violence. These measures are aimed at reducing contact on both offline and online platforms. However, it is worth noting that shutting down access to social media can also serve as a means for the government to control political discourse and suppress its citizen's opinions. During periods of political instability or social turmoil, similar tactics have been employed to limit the spread of information. Hence, the government applies this not only in the context of ethnic relations but also in political discussions among civilians.

Secondly, Facebook took steps to monitor and remove hate speech that incited violence against Muslim communities. Recognizing the role of online platforms in exacerbating tensions, Facebook acknowledged that some posts had contributed to violence against Muslims and committed to addressing the issue. However, it faced challenges in adequately monitoring content in local languages such as Sinhala, with only a limited number of individuals monitoring content in Sri Lanka's major language around the 2018 riots (Al Jazeera, 2020). To enhance its efforts to protect vulnerable groups in Sri Lanka, Facebook increased its staffing and installed detection technology specifically designed to identify and remove hate speech. These measures aimed to create a safer online environment and mitigate the spread of harmful content targeting minority communities.

Lastly, at the grassroots or NGO level, various organizations implemented strategies to address hate speech within their communities. For instance, one organization took a proactive approach by limiting participants' reliance on mobile phones and providing alternative activities to engage them. While the organization may seem extreme that the young generation always needs to grab their phone, it aimed to raise awareness among participants about the negative impact of excessive phone use and encourage them to find alternative ways to spend their time. Additionally, the organization monitored their social media accounts constantly, observing changes in language and attitudes over time. Through these efforts, the organization observed a gradual shift in the tone of their online interactions, indicating a reduction in hostile attitudes toward others (Organization A, 2024).



Another organization has implemented a fact-checking system on its platform to combat the spread of misinformation and hate speech. Fact-checking involves rigorous verification processes to ensure the accuracy and authenticity of the content shared. This includes evaluating the credibility of sources, examining supporting evidence, and cross-referencing information with reliable sources. The goal is to identify misleading or false information before it can proliferate. In addition to fact-checking, this organization also publishes counter-narratives to challenge and counter harmful narratives. Counter-narratives offer alternative perspectives that mitigate stereotypes and provide accurate information about misrepresented groups or individuals. By presenting a more nuanced and inclusive narrative, these counter-narratives aim to promote understanding, empathy, and unity within the community (Organization C, 2024).

Counter-narratives serve as a powerful tool in shaping discourse norms and influencing public opinion. They have the potential to mitigate the impact of hate speech by offering constructive alternatives that encourage critical thinking and empathy. By engaging with counter-narratives, individuals may reconsider their biases and stereotypes, contributing to a more tolerant and cohesive society (Obermaier et al., 2023).

One organization is not only focused on combating hate speech but also on promoting positive trends in social media. Recognizing the concept of echo chambers, they understand that fostering positive narratives, such as ethnic harmony, can contribute to improving the situation in Sri Lankan society. In contrast to the detrimental influence of social media, where terrorist groups like the Islamic State use platforms for recruitment and funding, resulting in tragic consequences, organization A seeks to counter this by cultivating narratives of hero and heroineship for peacebuilding. By highlighting individuals who can express peace and reconciliation, they attempt to inspire positive change at the grassroots level of society (Organization A, 2024).

Given the pervasive influence of social media on public discourse and perceptions, these narratives of heroes and heroines can serve as powerful tool for social transformation. By showing individuals who embody the values of tolerance, understanding, and cooperation, organization A hopes to shape the collective consciousness and awareness and foster a culture of peace and unity in Sri Lanka (Organization A, 2024).

## **6.5 Hate Speech and Freedom of Expression**

Finally, the thesis examines the nuanced distinction between hate speech and freedom of expression within the complex socio-political landscape of Sri Lanka. It highlights the importance of fundamental human rights, including the right to express opinions and ideas through various mediums, such as mass media and digital platforms. At its core, freedom of expression is a fundamental component of democratic societies, ensuring that individuals can voice their perspectives and contribute to public discourse. However, the distinction becomes blurred when certain information or social media posts are deliberately created to incite violence or perpetuate discriminatory behaviors targeting specific groups or individuals.

While freedom of expression is fundamental, governments must navigate the delicate balance between freedom of expression and mitigating the spread of hate speech that fuels division and conflict. This requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the underlying causes of hate speech while protecting individuals' rights to express themselves. In the context of Sri Lankan society, where ethnic tensions influence deeply, and historical tensions continue, the impact of inflammatory narrative can be particularly influential. One key aspect of this approach involves enacting and enforcing legislation that holds both individuals and online platforms accountable for spreading hate speech. By establishing clear legal frameworks and penalties for hate speech, governments can deter individuals and platforms from engaging in harmful behavior.

Furthermore, educational initiatives or NGOs play a crucial role in combating hate speech by promoting digital literacy and critical thinking skills among citizens. By empowering individuals to discern between credible information and hate speech, education can help society against the harmful effects of online extremism. Additionally, governments can collaborate with technology online platforms to develop and implement algorithms and tools that identify and mitigate the spread of hate speech on online platforms. By developing technology in this way, governments can effectively counter the echo chambers that amplify hate speech and contribute to polarization.

By adopting a proactive and multifaceted approach to addressing hate speech, governments can foster a more inclusive and respectful online environment. To guarantee fundamental principles of freedom of expression while combating the spread of hate

speech, governments can promote social cohesion and mitigate the risk of offline violence stemming from online extremism.

In Sri Lanka, interviewees reveal that certain social media users who propagate hate speech are aware of the immense impact of their online activities. Their motivations often involve exacerbating cultural and religious divides, with a particular emphasis on portraying Muslims in a negative perspective, exaggerating perceived differences in cultural practices between Muslims and Buddhists. Unlike traditional mass media, social media offers anonymity and a lack of validation requirements, making it easier for manipulated information to proliferate unchecked. This poses a significant risk, especially for the younger generation, who increasingly rely on social media as their primary source of information.

Compared to Western nations, Sri Lankan society exhibits a greater tendency to consume information through social media platforms rather than traditional mass media. Given this trend, it becomes imperative for both social media platforms and government authorities to exercise caution in monitoring and preventing the dissemination of hate speech online. In response to the anti-Muslim riots of 2018, the Sri Lankan government undertook measures to temporarily shut down social media platforms, recognizing the role they played in exacerbating tensions and inciting violence.

By implementing temporary social media shutdowns in the wake of violent incidents between ethnic groups, the government aims to mitigate the spread of hate speech and prevent further escalation of conflicts. Such interventions not only protect potential victims but also serve to prevent unnecessary arrests and wrongful accusations stemming from the rapid dissemination of inflammatory content online. Through these measures, authorities seek to maintain peace and stability within the country while simultaneously addressing the root causes of ethnic tensions exacerbated by online hate speech.

Nevertheless, in response to the economic crisis, the Sri Lankan government has conducted shutting down social media platforms as a political reason to prevent citizens from expressing criticism. This approach raises significant concerns regarding the violation of fundamental human rights, particularly the right to freedom of expression. Throughout the data collection process, all participants voiced strong criticisms of the Sri Lankan

government's actions, particularly its tendency to limit social media access, viewing it as a means to suppress opinion and evade accountability. Because of the strategy that is politically used, the civilians tend to associate its authority with traumatic incidents, such as the Easter Sunday attack, in spite of an unproved linkage between the authority and the incident. Consequently, the Sri Lankan case shows the delicate balance that governments must strike between maintaining social stability to prevent hate speech and civil liberties to express their opinions.

## **6.6 Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies**

During the interviews, participants showed different ideas, particularly regarding the prevalence and impact of hate speech directed at Muslims. Some organizations emphasized the consistent negative trends in hate speech targeting Muslims, asserting that such rhetoric significantly influences public perceptions. Conversely, other organizations mentioned that the peak of hate speech occurred several years ago and that the general public has since become more discerning, recognizing that hate speech is often politically motivated. Indeed, the multifaceted nature of social media contributes to the complexity of the issue, with factors such as gender, religion, social status, and age influencing individuals' experiences and interpretations of online content.

In addition to the diverse data of perspectives expressed by participants during the interviews, discourse analysis also examines the patterns and dynamics of discussion surrounding the issue. Through interviews conducted with representatives from three organizations, the research found a multifaceted understanding of the topic. However, given the limited scope of the data collected, it is essential to acknowledge the potential challenges associated with generalizing the research findings to broader contexts or populations.

Furthermore, the economic crisis that occurred in 2022 provides for future research exploration. Specifically, investigating how national-level economic challenges intersect with longstanding ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of intergroup relations. Moreover, considering the pervasive role of social media in shaping public discourse and perceptions, future studies may also seek to explore the ways in which online platforms influence ethnic relations, either by fostering unity or exacerbating divisions within the nation. By examining these interconnected factors,

researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play in Sri Lanka's sociopolitical landscape.

## **6.7 Recommendations**

The research discussed the findings and analyzed the issue, examining the sociopolitical landscape in Sri Lanka with conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Some recommendations will be provided here based on the findings, with insight into how to prevent the influence of hate speech. The study recommends that;

(a) Schools or NGOs implement comprehensive digital literacy programs that educate individuals, particularly youth, on how to critically evaluate information encountered on social media platforms. These programs should teach users how to identify misinformation, recognize biases, and verify the credibility of sources.

(b) Collaboration with social media platforms, the government develops and enforces robust policies and algorithms aimed at combating hate speech and misinformation. The government should work closely with these platforms to ensure the timely removal of harmful content and the implementation of proactive measures to prevent its dissemination.

(c) Because ethnic conflict occurs due to a lack of understanding of each other, foster interfaith dialogue and cooperation initiatives at the grassroots level to promote understanding, empathy, and tolerance among different religious communities. These initiatives can help reduce divides, mitigate stereotypes, and build trust and solidarity across religious lines.

(d) Each administration develops easy access to mental health treatment and supports victims, particularly individuals who have been targeted by hate speech or have experienced online harassment. Providing counseling and psychological assistance can help mitigate the negative impacts of online hate and promote resilience among affected individuals.

## 7. Conclusion

This research has provided significant insights into the multifaceted issue of hostility directed towards Muslims in Sri Lanka, a conflict that has persisted for approximately three decades since the civil war between Buddhists and Hindus. The research particularly analyzes how this hostility has evolved, with a focus on the role of social media in facilitating its transition among the majority group. By conducting a thorough analysis of diverse factors, including historical tensions, socio-political dynamics, and the influence of social media platforms, this study has explored the complexities underlying intergroup relations within the country.

Firstly, Sri Lanka experienced centuries of colonial domination by various foreign powers. During this period, colonial rulers implemented a divide-and-rule strategy, which exacerbated ethnic divisions by favoring certain groups over others. This policy resulted in the foundation for the social identity theory, which categorizes into in-groups and out-groups based on ethnicity. Following independence, the Sinhala majority acquired control of the country, but their dominance was accompanied by a fear of losing power to other ethnic groups, particularly Tamils advocating for separatism and Muslims, whose population was perceived as growing. The legacy of colonialism led to civil war and tragic incidents, further deepening the divide among different ethnic communities. In addition to colonial legacies, the government and religious leaders played pivotal roles in shaping ethnic relations. Prototypical members within these groups gained significant influence over their followers or non-prototypical members and were used for driving social change, sometimes exacerbating ethnic tensions.

Exploring the impact of social media on perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors has provided valuable insights into the complexities of intergroup dynamics in the digital age. While there is ongoing debate regarding the boundaries between hate speech and freedom of expression, it is clear that social media platforms play a significant role in shaping public discourse. One noteworthy aspect of online platforms is their algorithmic recommendation systems, which contribute to the echo chamber effect by exposing users to content that is relevant to their past views. Consequently, users may encounter a cycle of consuming content that reinforces their biases and prejudices. Anonymity is another key feature of social media that can contribute to the proliferation of hate speech. Due to the feature, some express extremist views or engage in harmful behavior without authenticity.

To address this issue, it is imperative for online platforms to enforce guidelines and actively monitor hate speech.

Lastly, the role of the government in addressing hate speech on social media is crucial, but it also has challenges. While governments have a responsibility to comply with freedom of expression, they must also take proactive steps to prevent the spread of harmful content that incites violence or discrimination. However, government's intervention in regulating social media platforms can be perceived as censorship and may lead to criticism of political manipulation. Considering the balance between protecting civil liberties and usage against hate speech remains a delicate task that requires careful consideration.

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## Appendix 1

### Questions of interview

- ① What are the activities of your organization in general?
  - ② Do you do any activity that relates to dealing with hate speech?
  - ③ What are the most significant challenges that your organization faces in its efforts to address hate speech?
  - ④ What emotions does hate speech evoke for you personally?
  - ⑤ To what extent do people encounter hate speech in your region or community in your experience?
  - ⑥ To what extent do people encounter posts that encourage Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in your region or community in your experience?
  - ⑦ How is the influence or spread of using TikTok for hate speech?
  - ⑧ Are there any notable differences in the themes or contents of hate speech today compared to earlier periods, such as before the Easter attack?
  - ⑨ Do you think the target of hate speech changed from Tamil to Muslim after the post-war period? If yes, why did the target of hate speech change?
  - ⑩ how do you see the interrelation between hate speech and freedom of expression?
  - ⑪ have you ever seen any example of social media content that leads to misinformation about Muslims?
  - ⑫ How do you think this social media content contributes to shaping public opinion and perspectives toward Muslims?
  - ⑬ Do you think this social media content contributes to real-world discrimination and prejudice against Muslims?
- (post about harmony as a multi-ethnic country)
- ⑭ Have you ever seen some images or pictures that encourage harmony within Sri Lanka?
  - ⑮ How do you think images like this contribute to shaping public opinion and perspectives toward Muslims?
  - ⑯ Do you think this social media content contributes to countering real-world discrimination against Muslims?
- ⑰ Is it something that you want to talk about?

## Appendix 2

### Overall findings about conflict in Sri Lanka

Method	Questionnaire, semi-structured interview (including online), examine social media	
Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government action or inaction leads to conflict and violence.</li> <li>• Buddhist majority has the desire to maintain their dominant position in society.</li> <li>• To be in a dominant position, some groups use cultural differences such as attire or beliefs of other religions between Sinhala and Muslims, escalating nationalism, and they spread the misperception via social media.</li> </ul>	
<b>Findings</b>	<b>Summarize</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Start discrimination	After the victory of the civil war in 2009, the target changed to Muslims.	Because Sinhala won the war, is there not (or less) hostility toward Tamil?
Actors of violence	Buddhist nationalist groups (Bodu Bala Sena, Sinhala Rawaya, or Rawana Balaya)	What are the differences between these groups? Are they only targeting Muslims?
Place of violence	Southern Sri Lanka, where Buddhists and Muslims live close together, and the Internet.	Because of terrorist attacks, does violence towards Muslims spread to other areas and escalate in the south?
Contents of violence	Make prejudice towards Muslims' attire, spread hate speech, oppressing Muslims' business, physical violence, and attack the place of worship.	Is there or how much relevant content toward another religious group?
Reason of racism	Sinhala (extreme Buddhists) are proud of their religion and their military.	Are there any posts that praise the military?
Social media	Several Facebook groups exist that post about the obsession with Muslims, opposition to the LTTE, and government cooperation with foreign investors.	Is there a relationship with nationalist groups? Which posts get people's attention the most?
Acts of authorities	The Sri Lankan government and police are reluctant to regulate these violent activities.	Are there any regulations that the government attempts to stop hate speech?

Article 1

Title	Anti-Muslim hate speech and displacement narratives; Case study from Sri Lanka and Australia		
Published	2019		
Author	James Stewart		
Nation	Australia		
Method	examined anti-Muslim social media groups on mainly Facebook		
Keywords	Related sentence	Comment	Page number
Social media	Abundance of anti-Muslim rhetoric on social media services. Muslims are subject to common street harassment and online abuse at a higher rate compared to other minority groups.	Why do Muslims have a higher rate of discrimination compared to other groups?	419
Facebook	Facebook is convenient to access anti-Muslim discourses because it's publicly accessible.		420
Examine Facebook	All groups share a speech secular obsession with attacking Muslims, which is often the chief topic for infographics.	The number of hate speeches decreases gradually (2012=82 posts, 2018=14 posts) Aftermath of the victory against Tamil?	420
Attacks in 2019	Expect another spike in anti-Muslim rhetoric; this would require further research and monitoring.	Can I continue to examine his research? -should examine the same method	422
Physical violence	Much of the physical violence against Muslims is a product of hateful sentiment being whipped up online.	Do ordinary people, not extreme nationalists, attack them? - How to define ordinal & nationalist?	422
Military	Nationalist groups celebrate the Sri Lankan military.		425
Displacement of the	The mosque is used as a signifier that it threatens to occupy sovereign Sinhala space on the island and is an offensive action against the spiritual	Does Sinhala feel the same threats against Tamil? Or is it over because of the	426

Sinhala area	importance of Buddhists. (narratives of displacement are used to justify nationalist agenda)	victory?	
What they do	Nativists do oppose Islam's physical presence symbolically, seeking to stop the erection of Muslim structures or opposing Muslim businesses.		429



Article 2

Title	Buddhist and Muslim Interaction in the Post-War of Sri Lanka		
Published	2021		
Author	Ahamed Sarjoon Razick, Iqbal Saujan, and Seyyath Mohammed Hakeema Beevi		
Nation	Sri Lanka		
Method	questionnaire and semi-structured interview		
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
After 2011	Muslims began to be marginalized by spreading misunderstandings and misperceptions about them, especially those who lived in Buddhist-populated areas.	Buddhist national group leads the campaign.	14
Social Interaction of Muslim	The word birr includes all the good things that a relationship should have and excludes all the bad aspects of the relationship. Birr is the foundation of the social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims.		15
Social Interaction of Buddhist	The main aim of Buddhism is to guide every human towards a noble life without harming other persons and cultivate human qualities in order to maintain human dignity.		16
Questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Most of the participants are aware that their neighbors are religiously diverse</li> <li>•Healthy relationships with no suspicious about other religious people</li> <li>•Majority of them had no idea about other religions or the teachings of faiths, and people do not make an effort to study and understand other religions.</li> </ul>	The questionnaire did not include Tamil. If they understand other religious faiths, can it prevent future extreme nationalists? -How to examine.	17-23
Multicultural society	It is essential to live in a multicultural environment to behave with an understanding of other religions.		21
Reason of racism	Racism is based on being proud of one's own religion while mocking others.	Are there more Sinhala-first posts than disgrading Muslims?	23

Article 3

Title	COVID-19: The Crossroads for Sinhala-Muslim Relations in Sri Lanka		
Published	2022		
Author	Mohamed Imtiyaz Abdul Razak and Amjad Mohamed Saleem		
Nation	Sri Lanka		
Method	Interview with Sinhala via Zoom		
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
During the civil war	Muslims supported the Sri Lankan state and defeated the LTTE.	What is the relationship between Sinhala and Muslims during the civil war?	529
Act of state	The reluctance of the state to bring to justice those responsible for hate speech.	Examine the government's policy on hate speech.	529
Violence from Muslims	Until the Easter Sunday attack (terror attack in 2019), Muslims had not engaged in violence against the state.	There were no incidents in Sinhala that had something 'revenge' against Muslims.	530
Sinhala nationalism	Under the colonial period, Tamils gained power and position in 1948. But, Sinhala attempts to regulate the position of Tamils in the 1970s.		532
Violence against Muslims	Mob attacks on places of worship, the killing of the clergy, and the proliferation of hate speech on social media, the Internet, and via audio-visual media, and targeting businesses.	What kind of hate speech was used? How do "ordinary people" feel that message?	533
Sinhala-Buddhist area	Sinhala-Buddhist forces have very good interactions with village-living poor Sinhala-Buddhists who are vulnerable, powerless, and more religious, including an 'awareness' program.	How do nationalists implement awareness programs?	534-535

Impression towards Muslim	Islamic clothes raise fear and panic, feeling Muslims want to keep the Sri Lankans divided.		535
Western media	Islam is seen as a religion of unintelligible crazed violence perpetrated by mass-murdering fanatics.	How do these biases be spread by mass media or social media?	537
COVID-19	Racism displayed in the media portrayed the Muslim community as a barbaric, unpatriotic, and irresponsible community that was responsible for the spread of COVID-19.		537

Article 4

Title	Post-War Conflict in Sri Lanka: Violence against Sri Lankan Muslims and Buddhist Hegemony		
Published	2015		
Author	Aliff, S. M.		
Nation	Sri Lanka		
Method			
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Target of violence	Tension between Sinhala and Muslims is emphasized where Muslims and Sinhala live close to each other, involving demonstrations and hate speech.	But not Christian or Tamil?	109
Act of government and police	The response from the government has been limited, and police have been inactive; there have been few arrests. (government act or inaction leads to conflict and violence)	How is the religious rate in the government and authorities such as the police?	110
Relation to Tamil	During the civil war, Muslims were targeted by LTTE, including the Muslim massacre.	What is the relationship between Tamil and Muslims?	112
Buddhist hegemonism	Sri Lanka has been reserved for Sinhalese, and minorities live there only because of Buddhist sufferance. (The Buddhist majority desires to maintain their dominant position in society. )	Most Buddhist Snhalase do not support hegemonism in all their activity (113)	113
Bias against Muslims	Extreme Buddhists believe that Muslims are Islamic fundamentalists and Islamic terrorists.	How do they believe without actual incident in Sri Lanka?	116
Multi societies	A very important aspect of multi-societies is religious tolerance.	How do other multicultural societies succeed in intolerance? Ex: Malaysia?	118
Nationalist relates religious	The nationalist groups enjoy the support and patronage of temples, and these temples are used for propaganda and recruitment.	How many such nationalist temples exist? What are the faiths of these temples?	121

### Appendix 3

#### Overall findings about hate speech

Method	Monitoring social media	
Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition of hate speech.</li> <li>• Distinction between freedom of expression and hate speech.</li> <li>• Role of counter-speech to provide facts with the validity of information.</li> </ul>	
<b>Findings</b>	<b>Summarize</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Definition of hate speech	Hate speech has several perspectives, referring to insulting or intimidating, encouraging exclusion, segregation, and calls for violence.	Need to examine hate speech in this thesis.
Counter speech	Lack of examination but providing a counter-narrative against hate speech.	How is counter-speech used in social media platforms?
Freedom of expression	Every citizen has the freedom of expression on any media platform	Examine the freedom of expression with the UN and Sri Lanka
Content of hate speech	Speech often relates to the concept of Islamophobia, which emphasizes one particular perspective of Islamic practices.	How do the contents be used? Need to examine them with some examples.
Regulate hate speech	In some countries, there is a law that restricts the spreading of hate speech.	Is there any global standard for preventing hate speech?

Article 1

Title	Impact and Dynamics of hate speech and Counter-speech Online		
Published	2015		
Author	Joshua Garland, Keyan Ghazi-Zahedi, Jean-Gabriel Young		
Nation	Germany		
Method	Monitoring Twitter for four years		
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Hate speech	Insulting or intimidating, encouraging exclusion, segregation, and calls for violence.	Define hate speech in this thesis.	1
Citizen-driven counter speech	Providing facts, pointing to logical inconsistencies in hateful messages, and supporting victims.	Examine the counter speech from the local level.	2
Effectiveness of counter speech	It was not well understood, and there was a lack of longitudinal, large-scale studies.	How can it be examined?	2
Reply trees	Identify root accounts of hate speech.		4
Classification	Need to recognize the hateful rhetoric, the counter-speech, and the neutral discourse.	There are some distinctions between hate counter and neutral speech.	5
Number of posts	Major events such as large-scale terrorist attacks coincide with deviations.	The Easter Sunday attack might enhance the number of hate speech.	13
Organized counter speech	Organized counter-speech contributes to a more balanced public discourse, leading to an increase in the effectiveness of their efforts if they participate in discussions in a coordinated way.		19

Article 2

Title	Hate speech operationalization: a preliminary examination of hate speech indicators and their structure		
Published	2021		
Author	Jana Papcunova et al.		
Nation	Slovakia		
Method			
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Definition of hate speech	Legal, lexical (vocabulary or dictionary), scientific and practical definitions.	Need to define hate speech.	2838
Legal definition	Violate existing legal norms and require government regulation messages that are shared, incite, promote or justify hatred and discrimination.	Need to examine the regulation of hate speech.	2838
Lexical definition	Messages that express hatred and encourage violence toward a specific group of people are defined by five online dictionaries.		2829
Scientific definition	1, directed at specific individuals or groups of individuals. 2, undesirable attributes. 3, leads to discrimination.		2829
Practical definition	Facebook defines "a direct attack against people on the basis of what they call protected characteristics."	Do they have a definition of hate speech?	2830
Indicators of hate speech	1, specific targets. 2, incite violence or hate. 3, attack or diminish. 4, expressed through humor.	Depending on the individual, the perception of the message varies.	2830
List of hate speech indicators	Denial of fundamental human rights, promoting violent behavior, ad hominin attacks, negative stereotypes of a minority, and manipulative texts/misinterpretation of the truth.	How are these hate speeches in Sri Lankan society?	2833
Cultural sensitivity	The cultural sensitivity of certain word usages (words that are problematic in some cultures but not in others) remains an open problem.	What are the cultural sensitivity of Muslims?	2837

Article 3

Title	Free speech and Hate speech		
Published	2019		
Author	Jeffrey W. Howard		
Nation	United Kingdom		
Method			
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Free speech	Free to express themselves and communicate with others.	What are the other definitions of free speech?	95
Hate speech	Germany's laws restrict expression, and New Zealand bans speech with threatening, insulting words to excite hostility.	What are the restrictions in Sri Lanka?	95
Definition of hate speech	1, directed against specified individuals or groups. 2, stigmatizes the target groups. 3, the legitimate object of hostility.	What kind of content is used against Muslims?	96



Article 4

Title	Detecting weak and strong Islamophobic hate speech on social media		
Published	2020		
Author	Bertie Vidgen and Taha Yasseri		
Nation			
Method			
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Hate speech	Hate speech receives attention from the government, Muslim community, academics, and the platform itself. (Twitter, 2018)	What is the strategy for hate speech on Facebook?	66
Islamophobia	Online Islamophobic hate speech inflicts harm and creates a sense of fear and exclusion in their community, toxifies public discourse, and motivates hateful behavior.	This concept could be combined with hate speech.	66
Definition of Islamophobia	Indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam and Muslims.		67
Strong Islamophobia	Describing Muslims as barbarians, calling for prejudicial actions, expressing negative emotions such as anger and distrust.	This could lead to physical violence.	69
Weak Islamophobia	Emphasizing Muslim strange or unusual practices and connections between a small subset of Muslims regarded as terrorists and all Muslims.	This notion could lead to shaping public perception.	70

Article 5

Title	Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Systematic Review and Critique		
Published	2021		
Author	Matamoros-Fernández, Ariadna ; Farkas, Johan		
Nation	Australia and Sweden		
Method			
Keywords	Related sentence	Comment	Page number
Racist speech	Racist speech thrives on social media, including the weaponization of memes and the use of fake identities to incite racist hatred.	Could it be the same between hate speech and racist speech?	206
Digital technologies	Social media reshape structural oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality.	Social media can be a new method that creates discrimination.	206

## Appendix 4

### Overall findings about social media

Method		
Theory	•Feature of media or social media, contributing to shaping public perception.	
Findings	Summarize	Comment
Feature of social media	Social media has both positive and negative effects on users.	Reveal the features and the effects of social media.
Disadvantage of social media	Addiction to social media, reducing physical connection, and remaining intentionally manipulated posts on the Internet.	Analyze each disadvantage for contributing real world.
Extreme use of social media	Some organizations or individuals use social media for their criminal or terrorist activity.	Does such radical use exist in Sri Lanka?
Feature of media in general	Media can draw the attention of the public to a certain issue, engaging people to think about the issue.	Can social media use this feature more intentionally with manipulated information?

Article 1

Title	The impact of social media on society		
Published	2015		
Author	Jacob Amedie		
Nation	Santa Clara University		
Method			
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Disadvantages of Social media	Foster a false sense of online connections and superficial friendships, addictive diminish interpersonal skills and tools for criminals.	Identify each disadvantage in the thesis.	4
Advantages of Social media	Removed communication barriers, created decentralized communication channels and marketing tools, and created awareness quicker than local news.	Crowdsourcing and crowd sleuthing.	1,5
Problem post	Once something is shared online, it can never be taken back; it can be found somewhere else on the web.	This means it is hard to completely delete such a specific post and affect it for a long time.	7
Criminal activities with Social media	Malicious and irresponsible people benefit from the freedom of social media to lie, attack, and hurt others, such as through cyberbullying and cyber terrorism, by hiding their identity.	Cyber terrorism refers to disseminating false or compromising information. (p.14)	11, 12
Social media and terrorism	Terrorists benefit from gathering information, recruiting members, and propaganda.	Are there any examples to show this risk of social media?	13

Article 2

Title	The negative effects of social media on the social identity of adolescents from the perspective of social work		
Published	2021		
Author			
Nation	Ajman University, Alman, United Arab Emirates		
Method			
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Advantage of Social media	Acquisition of the ability to create a relationship sense of integration into a suitable moral world.	Are there any examples to indicate the feature in Sri Lanka?	1
Beginning of Social media	Social media began in 1997, providing the opportunity for users to create profiles, comment on news, and exchange messages with other participants.	How does it change its usage or impact it day by day?	2
Risk of Social media	Threat and harassment through the dissemination of false information leads to more distractions, anxiety, lack of concentration, and dispersion.	Are there any differences depending on the age?	3, 13
Feature of Social media	Reinforced the value of brotherhood among citizens and promoted solidarity, cooperation, and assistance.	This could be related to social identity theory.	4

Article 3

Title	The agenda-setting function of mass media		
Published	1972		
Author	Maxwell E. Mccombs and Donald L. Shaw		
Nation	Oxford University		
Method			
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Related sentence</b>	<b>Comment</b>	<b>Page number</b>
Candidate	Candidates go before the people through the mass media rather than in person.	It could be Social Media rather than mass media	176
Mass media	Mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics.	Many have options to get information now, such as Social Media	176
Agenda setting theory	Mass media forces attention to a certain issue, building up public images of political figures. It makes people think about, know about, and feel about it.	Does social media have more of a feature to make people pay attention to a specific issue?	177
News media	News media do have a point of view, sometimes extreme bias.	Social media has more tendency to have extreme points of view.	184



