The Ego Network of the Taliban on Social Media before and after Their Return to Power in Afghanistan

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Abstract

This study explored the ego network of the Taliban's most followed and most popular X/ Twitter account before and after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in mid-August 2021. A total of N = 1650 unique tweets were quantitatively content analyzed for topic, target, tone, and frame. Our findings showed significant differences in the topics, targets, tone, and framings of the tweets before and after the Taliban's return to power in the country, which suggest that the Taliban has shifted it discussions from war and former government to the Taliban as a government and international relations. The tone and frames of the posts or tweets also showed a significant shift from aggressive to neutral with frames of active agency.

Keywords: The Taliban; Afghanistan; X or Twitter; Ego network; Social media

Introduction

The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has made them one of the prominent topics of discussion on social media networks since mid-August 2021. For decades, the word "Taliban" has been associated with terrorism, killing, oppression of women, and 9/11. Yet the same group took control of Afghanistan at the end of the U.S. withdrawal from the country that ended two decades of democracy. The second Taliban regime is also called the Taliban 2.0, which is an improved version of the Taliban 1.0 that ruled during the second half of the 1990s. Unlike the Taliban 1.0 that banned the operation of almost all kinds of media in Afghanistan, the Taliban 2.0 have been using all kinds of media to communicate with their target audiences. Indeed, the Taliban has been taking advantage of social media platforms for more than a decade as its members have been active across all social media platforms mostly under pen names or names. The account of the Taliban's press office, Zabihullah Mujahid, has been its most popular social media account with more than 900 thousand followers. Since 2001 and the fall of the first Taliban regime, many individuals have been appointed as the spokespersons of the group all of whom have been known as Zabihullah Mujahid. This study explores the ego network of Zabihullah Mujahid on X/ Twitter in 2021. Using framing and social network analysis (SNA),

the purpose of this multimethod study is to examine how the Taliban uses social media to communicate its messages with the world. Our goal is to explore the Taliban's spokesperson's X use and how the operator(s) of this account associate(s) the Taliban with other people and issues around the world as an "insurgent" group vs. a government. Social network theory suggests that ego networks need to have a variety of relationships to have better access to resources and information In X, popular ego networks often follow fewer people while being followed by a large number of people, which means the ego (individual or entity) is only exposed to information from a small number of people while he/she/it spreads information to many more people. Mujahid is a good example of an ego network (in the context of Afghanistan) with about a million followers who only follows 136 individuals and entities. This study has merit, because it explores the social media use of the Taliban known as an insurgent group that has been involved in hundreds of suicide attacks, bombings, shootings, and oppression against women and minorities in the Afghanistan [1]. Furthermore, the Taliban and their supporters have been using these free platforms for years to spread their messages to both Afghans and the world. Furthermore, considering the Taliban's return to power after 20 years in Afghanistan, it is important to explore how the Taliban communicated with the world as an "insurgent" group vs. a government.

Literature Review

Social media have accelerated connections around the world. Using social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, people from all corners of the world share their thoughts and opinions to the rest of the world. Like the rest of the world, social media use has become a fundamental part of political communications in South Asia [2] From electoral campaigns to political diplomacy governments, politicians, and political parties use social media to spread their messages and connect with their target publics in the region [3,2]. In 2014, India was one of the first countries in South Asia where social media were used as political campaign tool [4]. Other countries in the region followed the trend and made social media a key element of their political communication [2,5,6]. Furthermore, social activists, reformists, and militant groups in South Asia have also relied on social media to communicate with the public and to mobilize people to support their causes [5]. Examples include organizations and groups of all kinds, including terrorists and militias that use social media platforms to channel their propaganda with their target audiences as well as the rest of the world to achieve their objectives [7,8]. Before the advent of social media, it was more difficult for militant groups and terrorist organizations to circulate their messages to mass audiences. They often recorded videos or tapes (after years or at least months), which were then distributed to the mass media that in turn published news stories on them. Social media are cheaper, easy to use, available everywhere, and faster than any other medium for militants and terrorists to use [7]. According to Hossain, social media have created the opportunity for terrorist groups to expand their influence beyond their limited physical space to the unlimited virtual world. Using these platforms, terrorist organizations have become more organized and dangerous to the rest of the world (Hossain, 2015) [7]. The Islamic States of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) went a step further and used social media platforms for recruiting and training people (including young women) from around the world most of whom traveled to Syria and joined the ISIS [7]. Al-Qaeda is another terrorist group that has used social media platforms for spreading propaganda, mobilizing, and recruiting [9]. The Taliban, known as a group of terrorists and which has been involved in the war in Afghanistan for more than 25 years and are now controlling the country, have been using social media to spread their messages across the world. Even though the Taliban are known as a group that eschews democracy and freedom of speech and press, most of their high-profile members have been active social media users with hundreds of thousands of followers [10]. During the first Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1995-2001), the Taliban shuttered the doors of almost all media outlets, in particular television, music, and cinema. However, after the fall of their regime in 2001, the Taliban have used online media, in particular social media, to inform their target audience about their activities, thoughts, and opinions [10-12]. Since its return in August 2021, the Taliban has propagated its strategies and worldview using all private and government-owned media in Afghanistan. The national Radio Television of Afghanistan (RTA) has even aired the Taliban videos of suicide bombings as an act of patriotism by the Taliban to overthrow the democratic regime and fight the foreign troops. There are reports about many killings, arrests, and persecutions of journalists and media workers in the country, even after mass evacuations of many media members from Afghanistan. Furthermore, censorship is widely imposed on media content inside Afghanistan that even TV hosts directly argue with their guests espousing anti-Taliban perspective. Despite having all the media outlets in their control in Afghanistan, the Taliban are using social media, such as X frequently. In these social media accounts, the Taliban openly talk about their ideologies, activities, as well as memories of the past 20 years of war and the suicide bombers (or "martyrs"). Zabihullah Mujahid is one of the most popular Taliban names on social media who has also been the Taliban's main spokesperson. According to some TV interviews with the current spokesperson of the Taliban (AKA Zabihullah Mujahid), he was born in Paktia Province in 1978. After finishing his elementary education in Afghanistan, he joined the Darul Uloom Haqqania in Pakistan, where he studied for 16 years. He joined the Taliban from the age of 16 and became their spokesperson 6 years after the former spokesperson's arrest In an interview, he said that he never met Mullah Mohmmad Omar, but mentioned that he has worked with Mullah Mansoor and Mullah Hibattullah. He can speak four languages, Dari, Pashto, Urdu, and Arabic and has been hacked 30 times on Twitter. He claims that he lived like an ordinary citizen during the former government and that nobody recognized him.

Ego Networks and Homophily on Social Media Networks

Ego network refers to a network that consists of one actor or ego connected to many actors or alters [13]. Each ego network is considered a world in which communication takes place between the ego and alters with ego being the key player or central character [14]. Based on existing literature, three factors make ego networks on social media more central and powerful. First, as power dynamics in online networks are similar to the ones in offline networks, the egos often have significantly more in-degree ties (in-coming ties) than out degree ties (out-going) [3,9,15]. In other words, power is unevenly distributed in social media networks, which means the egos have many more followers while following fewer people. These followers will be subjected to the ideas and perspectives of the egos significantly [16]. For example, Elan Musk is the most followed person on X (as of October 2023) with more than 161 million followers while following only 471 people. This means that Musk's posts will be visible to more than 161 million people directly on their X pages, most of whom he does not know. Second, studies have found high levels of homophily in online networks, which suggests people often follow those that are like them and produce and share information that is more consistent with their preexisting ideologies and opinions [9,16]. Such homophilous networking strengthens the ties and opinions of people who already know each other and are like-minded. Third, the algorithmic systems in social media networks further facilitate the opportunity for networking with like-minded [9]. people and following those we like. In other words, the algorithms in social media networks expose us to egos and communities that we often show interest in, and therefore, we further get stuck in the social bobbles that are like us. Zabihullah Mujahid's X account is another

example of an ego network on social media with more than 900 thousand follower who only follows 136 people (as of October 2023) (**Figure 1**). It is not clear whether this account is run by one person or many, but the content appears in four languages: Pashto, Dari/Farsi, English, and sometimes Arabic. This X account is the Taliban's most popular social media outlet with the highest number of followers. Based on a report, the Taliban used bots to boost their accounts' followers because most of the followers of their X accounts rarely tweeted (Najibullah, 2019) [17].

Framing Theory

Framing refers to the process of describing certain aspects of news issue with "keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols and visual images" (Entman, 1991, p.7). Frames are "situations that are built up in accordance with principles of organization, which govern events and our subjective involvement in them" (According to Goffman, 1974, p. 10). These frames make it difficult for a "typical inexpert audience" to make its own independent interpretations of the event (Entman, 1991, p. 8). In other words, frames consist of "importance, judgments, agency, identification, categorization and generalization" that cannot be easily detected by regular citizens (p. 25). In addition, the receivers might not have the same understanding of the messages as the senders think. Therefore, people often perceive the media frames based on their own cultural perceptions (Entman, 1993).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Since this is one of the first studies of the Taliban's social media content, we cannot hypothesize about the data; therefore, the following research questions are asked:

RQ1: How were the topics of discussion associated with the before and after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan?

RQ2: Who were the targets of discussions before and after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan?

RQ3: How was the tone of the Taliban's tweets associated with the before and after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan?

RQ4: How was the tone of the tweets associated with the topics of discussion in the Taliban's main spokesperson's Twitter account?

RQ5: How were the tweets framed in in relation to the before and after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan?

RQ6: How were the topics associated with frames in the Taliban's main spokesperson's Twitter account?

Methodology

Sample

The sample includes all tweets of Zabihullah Mujahed's X Account from April 14, 2021, to December 15, 2021 (a total of eight months). The study included two stages of analysis. First, using NodeXL Pro software program, the latest 3,200 posts (tweets) from Mujahed's X account were retrieved and cleaned. Since the same information was tweeted often in three languages (Pashto, Dari, and English) and sometimes in Arabic as well, we only selected the tweets in Pashto language, which reflected the highest number of tweets.

Measures

A sample of N = 1650, unique tweets were content analyzed for content type, topics of discussion, target, about, source of

Figure 1 The Ego Network of Zabihullah Mujahid on X or Twitter.

information, tone, and frame. Content type included text alone, text with links, link alone, retweet, and who is the subject of tweet [8]. The topic of discussion was defined as the main point of the tweet, which included, war, the Taliban, human rights and aids, international relations, and other. Target or about who included categories such as Afghanistan, former government (Afghan forces, police, civilians, government officials), the Taliban, foreign officials, and other. The tone of the tweets was categorized as soft, neutral, and aggressive. The frame consisted of threat [8] praise, passive, violence, active, condemn, and other.

Inter-Coder reliability

All the news headlines (N = 1650) were coded by the researcher. To ensure the inter-coder reliability, a second coder was trained and analyzed 10% (165) of the total sample as recommended by Wimmer and Dominic (2011). Cohen's Kappa analysis found high levels of agreement between the two coders, topic .901, tone .962, and frame .876.

Results

Only 1% of the Tweets were retweets and 99% of them were original posts with no mention of sources of information, which means the spokesperson was the primary source.

RQ1 asked how the topics of discussion before and after Taliban's takeover of power. A Chi-square analysis showed significant differences in the topics of discussion on the Taliban's spokesperson's X account before and after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan (χ2 = 641.603; df = 4; p < .001) (**Table 1**).

Before the takeover of Kabul, war was significantly discussed more than any other topic by the Taliban on X (83.6%) compared to after the takeover (15.7%). Topics around international relations (40.3%) and the Taliban (38.6) were significantly more emphasized after the Taliban's return to power compared to before the takeover (4.5% and 10.8%).

RQ2 asked about the targets of discussions before and after Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. There were significant differences in the targets of X discussions before and after the Taliban's takeover (χ2 = 603.691; df = 4; p < .001). As shown in **Table 2**, the Taliban's main X account targeted the former Afghan

Table 1: Topic of discussion on the Taliban's X account before and after returning to power.

Topic	Timeframe		Total
	Before	**After**	
War	1087	55	1142
	-83.60%	-15.70%	-69.20%
Taliban	141	135	276
	-10.80%	-38.60%	-16.70%
Human rights & aids	2	13	15
	-0.20%	-3.70%	-0.90%
International Relations	59	141	200
	-4.50%	-40.30%	-12.10%
Other	11	6	17
	-0.80%	-1.70%	-1.00%
Total	1300	350	1650
χ2 = 641.603; df = 4; p < .001			

government significantly more before the return of the Taliban (55/8%) than after (1.1%). The tweets significantly focused on the Taliban (50.9%) and foreign officials (44.3%) after the Taliban took power.

RQ3 was about the tone of the Taliban's tweets before and after their return to power in Afghanistan. Significant differences were found in the tone of tweets before and after the Taliban's return to power (χ2 = 563.415; df = 2; p < .001) (**Table 3**). The tone of the tweets was significantly more aggressive (47.6%) and soft (37.1%) before the Taliban's return than after (4.3% and 16.3). After the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, the tone of their tweets was significantly more neutral (79.4%) than before (15.3%) (**Table 3**).

RQ4 asked about the tone of the tweets associated with the topics of discussion. Significant differences were found in the tone of tweets based on topics of discussions (χ2 = 1132.610; df = 8; p < .001). Topics of human rights and aids (100%), international relations (91.5%), and the Taliban (79.3%) were significantly discussed more in neutral tones than war (4.1%). War was significantly discussed in more aggressive tone (54.0%) than humans rights and aids (0%), international relations (2.5%), and the Taliban (3.6%). Topics of war (41.9%) and the Taliban (17.0%) were significantly discussed with soft tones than human rights and aids (0%) and international relations (6.0%) (**Table 4**).

RQ5 was about the frames of tweets before and after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. We found significant differences in the framing of tweets before and after the Taliban's takeover

Table 2: Targets of discussions before and after Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

Target	Timeframe		Total
	Before	**After**	
Afghanistan	13	7	20
	-1.00%	-2.00%	-1.20%
Former government	725	4	729
	-55.80%	-1.10%	-44.20%
Taliban	519	178	697
	-39.90%	-50.90%	-42.20%
Foreign officials	40	155	195
	-3.10%	-44.30%	-11.80%
Other	3	6	9
	-0.20%	-1.70%	-0.50%
Total	1300	350	1650
χ2 = 603.691; df = 4; p < .001			

Table 3: Tone before and after Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

Tone	Timeframe		Total
	Before	**After**	
Soft	482	57	539
	-37.10%	-16.30%	-32.70%
Neutral	199	278	477
	-15.30%	-79.40%	-28.90%
Aggressive	619	15	634
	-47.60%	-4.30%	-38.40%
Total	1300	350	1650
χ2 = 1132.610; df = 8; p < .001			

Table 4: Tone of posts in relation to topics of discussions.

Tone	Topic					Total
	War	Taliban	Human rights & aids	International relations	Other	
Soft	478	47	0	12	2	539
	-41.90%	-17.00%	0.00%	-6.00%	-11.80%	-32.70%
Neutral	47	219	15	183	13	477
	-4.10%	-79.30%	-100.00%	-91.50%	-76.50%	-28.90%
Aggressive	617	10	0	5	2	634
	-54.00%	-3.60%	0.00%	-2.50%	-11.80%	-38.40%
Total	1142	276	15	200	17	1650
χ^2 = 1132.610; df = 8; p < .001						

Table 5: Frames before and after Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

Frame	Timeframe		Total
	Before	After	
Threat	**9**	**2**	**11**
	-0.70%	-0.60%	-0.70%
Praise	406	53	459
	-31.20%	-15.10%	-27.80%
Passive	476	19	495
	-36.60%	-5.40%	-30.00%
Violence	216	4	220
	-16.60%	-1.10%	-13.30%
Agency	110	262	372
	-8.50%	-74.90%	-22.50%
Condemn	83	10	93
	-6.40%	-2.90%	-5.60%
Total	1300	350	1650
χ^2 = 709.916; df = 5; p < .001			

Table 6: Frames of the posts in relation to topics of discussions.

Frames	Topic					Total
	War	Taliban	Human rights & aids	International relations	Other	
Threat	5	2	0	2	2	11
	-0.40%	-0.70%	0.00%	-1.00%	-11.80%	-0.70%
Praise	353	84	0	11	11	459
	-30.90%	-30.40%	0.00%	-5.50%	-64.70%	-27.80%
Passive	479	5	8	3	0	495
	-41.90%	-1.80%	(53.3	-1.50%	0.00%	-30.00%
Violence	217	3	0	0	0	220
	-19.00%	-1.10%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	-13.30%
Active	20	168	6	177	1	372
	-1.80%	-60.90%	-40.00%	-88.50%	-5.90%	-22.50%
Condemn	68	14	1	7	3	93
	-6.00%	-5.10%	-6.70%	-3.50%	-17.60%	-5.60%
Total	1142	276	15	200	17	1650
χ^2 = 1159.726; df = 20; p < .001						

of Afghanistan. Before the takeover of the country, the tweets contained more frames of passive (36.6%), praise (31.2%), and violence (16.6%) than after (5.4%, 15.1%, and 1.1%). After the takeover, the tweets had more frames of agency (74.9%). In other words, before returning to power, the Taliban's tweets used frames passiveness, for the Afghan soldiers getting defeated and killed by the Taliban, frames of praise for the Taliban's fighting, and frames of violence for anti-Taliban military operations. After taking power in Kabul, the Taliban's tweets contained frames of active agency to show them in support of a government and officials who were working to lead and control the country (**Table 5**).

RQ6 asked how the topics were associated with frames in the Taliban's main spokesperson's X account. We found significant differences in the frames of tweets based on the topic (χ^2 = 1159.726; df = 20; p < .001). Topics of international relations (88.5%) and the Taliban were framed significantly more as active as war (1.8%) and human rights and aids (40.0%). Topic of war significantly contained more frames of passive (41.9%) and praise (30.9%) than human rights and aids and international relations (**Table 6**).
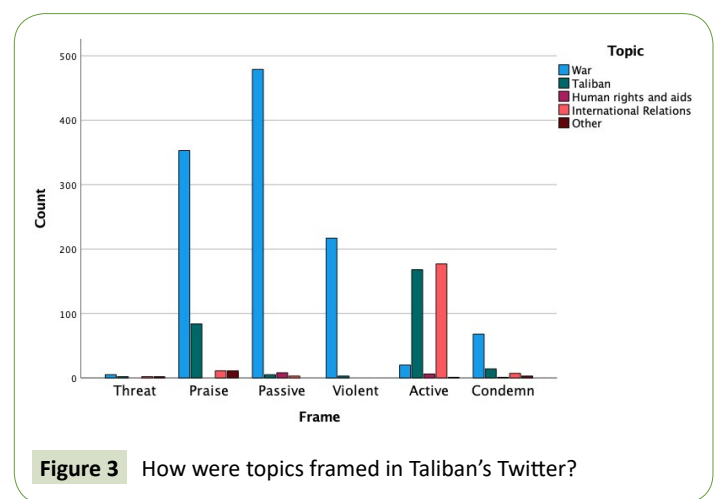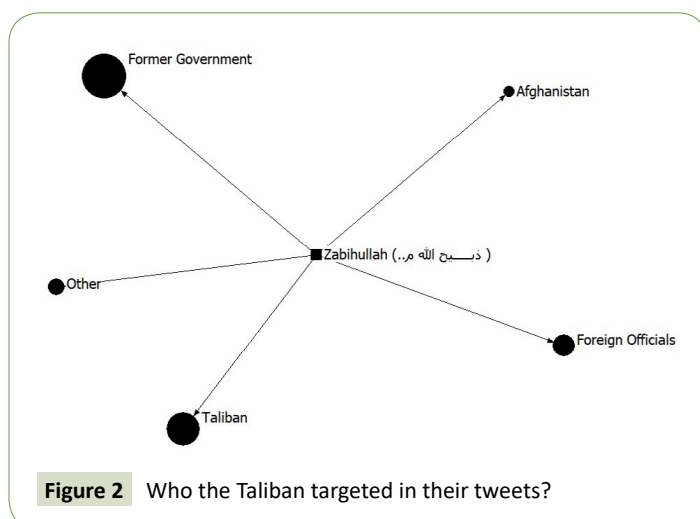
Discussion and Conclusion

The Taliban has been known for suppressing freedom of expression and of the press in Afghanistan for years [15,18]. Yet, members of the same group have been using social media to talk about their ideas and activities and communicate with their target audience [10,17]. Using social network analysis and framing, this study examined the most popular X or Twitter account of the Taliban for topics of discussion, tone, and frame before and after their takeover of Afghanistan. The main findings of the study are briefly discussed below. First, the Taliban is increasing its presence on social media as its prominent official accounts are nearing the numbers of followers of the previous Afghan government such as Ashraf Ghani (1.2 million followers) and Abdullah Abdullah (1 million followers. In other words, before the return of the Taliban to power, its most prominent X accounts had roughly 300 thousand followers. The rapid growth in the number of online followers shows an increase in the popularity of the Taliban's virtual ego networks in Afghanistan where people were scared to even hear the word "Taliban" two years ago. This also means that the messages of Mujahed now reach about a million X users directly [19,20]. Second, war was the most talked about topic before the Taliban's return to power on X. Before the takeover of power, the Taliban talked significantly about the former Afghan government. After the takeover, the tweets significantly focused on the Taliban and foreign officials. After the Taliban's return to power, the discussion shifted onto international relations and the Taliban because for this group the war officially ended in the country (**Figure 2**).The shift in the topics of discussion in the Taliban's main social media account makes sense because after years of war and guerrilla fighting and being known as the anti-government group, the Taliban acted like a government after the takeover of the government (**Figure 2**). Third, before the takeover of the country, the tone of the tweets was significantly more aggressive, and fewer tweets had soft and neutral tones. But after the takeover of power, the tone of tweets became significantly more neutral as the Taliban started its own government. Fourth, before the takeover of Kabul, the Taliban's tweets contained more passive frames and frames of praise and violence. After taking control of the country, the Taliban significantly used more frames of agency to illustrate its leadership and power. In the tweets after the county's takeover, the Taliban talked about its officials and how it handled the domestic issues and how it responded to international issues. Fifth, while war was discussed in more aggressive tone with frames of passiveness, praise, and violence, topics of international relations and the Taliban's topic was discussed in neutral tones with frames of active agency. In other words, the tweets on war were significantly more about the military operations of the former Afghan government. In that context, the military was framed as violent, wild, and "puppets of the foreigners" who were "killing innocent civilians." In contrast, the Taliban's attacks on the former Afghan government's military were praised as victory of the good vs. evil and the soldiers who died were framed as passive losers (**Figure 3**). In sum, the Taliban's tweets showed a shift in the topic, target, tone, and framing of their messages on Twitter after the takeover of power in Kabul on August 15, 2021. Before this date, the tweets were more about war and targeted the former Afghan government in aggressive tone with frames of violence and passiveness. However, the tweets after the country's takeover significantly discussed topics of the Taliban and international relations in neutral tones and with frames of active agency. These findings suggest that after decades of war, the Taliban are trying to change the narrative as leaders of the country and government officials, which is different from its image of an insurgent or terrorist-related group in the past.

Limitations

Despite the merits of the research, this study has some limitations. First, as the first study on Taliban's X, this study is not based on a strong body of research on this topic. Future research can further build on this research by exploring the topic with more hypotheses. Second, this study only analyzed a singular ego network of the Taliban. Future research can comparatively analyze ego networks of more Taliban members to find more patterns and complexities of their social media communications with the public.

Figure 2 Who the Taliban targeted in their tweets?

Figure 3 How were topics framed in Taliban's Twitter?

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