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Engaging English Speaking Facebook Users in an Anti-ISIS Awareness Campaign

Author Biography

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Abstract

This article reports on The International Center for Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE's) small-scale Facebook ad awareness campaigns ran between December 7, 2017 and December 31, 2017 in the United States, UK, Canada, and Australia. Two ICSVE-produced videos were used, namely The Promises of ad-Dawlah to Women, featuring the testimony of a Belgian female ISIS defector, and Today is the Female Slave Market in ad-Dawlah, featuring a Syrian male ISIS defector who witnessed the sexual enslavement of women by ISIS. The purpose of the campaign was to reach as many English-speaking individuals in U.S., UK, Canada, and Australia to drive engagement with the ICSVE-produced videos as well raise awareness about the dangers of joining or considering joining a violent extremist group like ISIS. The ad generated a reach of over 1 million and almost 604K video views. In addition to important engagement and awareness metrics, the qualitative impact analysis of generated comments was promising in terms of initiating important discussions on the dangers emanating from violent extremist groups like ISIS.

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INTRODUCTION

Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS/Daesh) became known for its unprecedented social media drive and recruitment on a twenty-four basis. Many of the thousands of the individuals from over 110 countries who joined the conflict zones in Iraq and Syria were recruited over social media networks and platforms. Despite losing its territory in Iraq, including much of Syria, the group continues to inspire homegrown and returnee foreign fighter attacks in the West and elsewhere. Its online propaganda on social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter, despite takedown policies, continues unabated, now using fleeting profiles but still successfully swarming those who show interest in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria (and beyond) and the jihadist cause with ISIS-related propaganda. In our interviews with a sample of over 100 ISIS defectors, prisoners, and returnees, we have learned about ISIS' strong media presence especially on Facebook, namely the presence of recruiters, ideologues, and ISIS-produced propaganda videos that continues even today, despite monitoring and takedown policies.

Western countries continue to be targets of high-end and high-volume ISIS-produced propaganda materials. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2012, 160 individuals in the United States were charged for ISIS-related terrorism offenses. A 2015 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report indicated the actual or attempted recruitment of over 200 individuals residing in the United States since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011. The authors' research indicates the prevalence of social media-based, as opposed to face-to-face, recruitment of individuals residing in the United States. Moreover, the most vulnerable to ISIS recruitment and seduction over the internet are U.S. male citizens, ages 18-20, though the most evidence suggests minor travelers as well. Evidence in UK, Canada, and Australia also suggests the vulnerability of young men and women to ISIS propaganda and recruitment.

This article reports on seven International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) produced Facebook ad awareness campaigns that ran between December 7, 2017 and December 31, 2017. Two of the ICSVE-produced videos, *The Promises of ad-Dawlah to Women* and *Today is the Female Slave Market in ad-Dawlah* were used in the campaign. The former features the testimony of a Belgian female ISIS defector who had taken her young son to live in ISIS territory whereas the latter a Syrian male ISIS defector who witnessed the sexual enslavement of women by ISIS. The purpose of these awareness campaigns was to reach as many English-speaking individuals in the United States, UK, Canada, and Australia (ages 13-50 in the U.S., Australia, UK, and Canada; 18 and over for the Slave

Market video) to drive engagement with the ICSVE-produced counter-narrative videos and raise awareness about the dangers of joining or considering joining a violent extremist group like ISIS. Two ads (one for each video) were used in every region, except for Australia, where we ran only one ad. In total, these Facebook ads generated a reach of 1,048,133 with 604K video views, which are further discussed in the ensuing sections.

CAMPAIGN TYPE

Awareness campaigns have historically been initiated to raise awareness about domestic abuse, depression, alcohol abuse, gender-based violence, and HIV prevention. They are used to 1) promote a cause, 2) raise awareness or knowledge about a pressing social issue, and 3) reach and target a specific audience to deliver a message that is specific, unique, and pertinent to the target group. Awareness campaigns are especially powerful if used for early detection and intervention. In other words, they are especially powerful if the goal is to explain what can be gained by changing a specific behavior as well as what can be lost by not doing so.

In the realm of counter-terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), awareness campaigns (for example, community, youth, and internet-based) are crucial to understanding how individuals may become radicalized and mobilized to violence. A U.S. Department of State led initiative, Peer2Peer (P2P), represents a series of examples of CVE awareness campaigns. In addition to raising awareness about violent extremism, the P2P initiative also serves as an important platform to discuss issues related to CVE. Similarly, Quilliam, a UK-based CVE organization, launched #NotAnotherBrother and # NousSommesUnis awareness campaigns to fight the appeal of violent extremism. The latter campaign involved the release of a short counter-narrative video in the immediate aftermath of the November 2015 Paris attacks to raise awareness about violent extremism and highlight the need for unity between the West and Muslims, whereas the former the use of a counter-narrative video released on YouTube to counter ISIS and other violent extremist groups' social media recruitment. In December 2017, the International Center for the Study of Violent extremism researchers launched a Facebook ad awareness campaign targeting Iraq, where Facebook remains the most widely used social media platform. The campaign led to 1.7 million views and hundreds of comments related to ISIS and counter-narrative message and strategy. Moreover, a group of former extremists created "Abdullah X," an online Muslim cartoon character who was initially attracted to violent extremist rhetoric

espoused by groups like ISIS. The awareness campaign specifically targeted young and disillusioned Muslims who might be attracted to violent extremist messages. Our concurrent brand awareness campaigns initiated in other parts of the world. We considered the potential of our target audience (U.S., UK, Canada, and Australia) to come into online contact and be influenced by terrorist groups like ISIS and the level of exposure to environments that are supportive of extremist ideologies and facilitate recruitment into terrorist organizations. Strictly speaking, in the context of the first category, the authors have documented cases of individuals from the West and Western Balkans whose radicalization was deeply augmented, and in some cases entirely supported, by their exposure to terrorist content via the internet. While the majority of Westerners are not at a high level of exposure to environments that are supportive of terrorist ideologies, there have been increasing political tensions and social divides between Muslims and non-Muslims since the emergence of ISIS. This creates hotbeds of discontent. This may also facilitate recruitment. As learned during our Breaking the ISIS Brand interviews, we also considered processes by which individuals come to embrace violence, namely from simple online search to seduction involving both online and face-to-face persuasion to engaging in violence (See diagram below). This is not to suggest, however, that the process of grooming potential recruits online should be attributed solely to ISIS. In line with selective exposure theory, individuals, which could also be applied in the case of ISIS supporters and sympathizers, are likely to seek information that is aligned with their core values and beliefs. Selective exposure in social media platforms and networks can also lead to “audience enclaves,” or when individuals with deeply held convictions separate themselves from offline communities and condition the behavior of their respective community. This could also increase the likelihood for online recruitment.

Figure 1. The process by which Individuals [Often] Come to Embrace Extremist Content Online.



While terrorist groups in the past have relied on traditional mass media to spread their message and garner support, ISIS' communication strategy differed in that it made use of the internet and social media to not only spread its message and garner support, but also to proselytize its followers. In discussing the relationship between social media and violent extremism, researchers have stressed the need to look at both the role of social media in facilitating spread of propaganda, support, and sympathy for ISIS and the effectiveness of social media, meaning the use of social media by violent extremist groups, in recruiting individuals online. For instance, some authors found a direct relationship between anti-Muslim rhetoric in Europe and the support and sympathy for ISIS on Twitter. Moreover, to build support, ISIS' social media strategy focused not only on influencing its followers but also its rivals and journalists. Research indicates that popular social media platforms and networking sites increase ISIS' reach and recruitment prospects, compared to "dark web" sites, for example, given the wide use of such platforms and the scale of extremist content consumption by users. Arguably, social media communication does play a significant role in providing support for violent extremism, though one must also consider different forms of online behaviors and offline events that can influence support for violent extremism.

Compared to our recent Facebook studies focused on reaching audiences that were already highly supportive of ISIS ideology and have progressed further in the grooming process, in this campaign consideration was given to individuals 13 and over who might be engaged with, or simply be exposed to, for the first time to extremist narratives online. This is crucial, as in the process, they may continue down the path of sustained engagement and exposure to violent narratives propagated by terrorist groups like ISIS. As ICSVE research indicates, it is on such platforms that they are likely to develop and form ideas. More importantly, it is on such platforms that they are likely to strike up relationships with terrorist recruiters who could lure them further along the terrorist pathway. Both prospects increase their susceptibility to violent ideologies and narratives, particularly in the wake of increasing tensions surrounding the conflicts in Iraq and Syria and/or Syrian/Iraqi conflicts in the West.

Lastly, although we assume that the majority among the targeted age group in this campaign do not favor extremist narratives or would succumb to such narratives, the campaign serves as an invaluable opportunity for such protected target groups to access resources that openly target terrorist groups like ISIS. They can also use these invaluable resources to protect their more vulnerable peers. Given the easy sharing

and distribution mechanisms available on social media, they can also use them to use to educate and target those who might be vulnerable to such extremist narratives. Our hope was that by increasing awareness of dangers of joining ISIS and similar terrorist groups in this population, such efforts would lead to relevant discussions on the topic. We also hoped to observe changes in attitude that we would be able to measure in comments, as well as to changes in offline, real world behaviors, which are beyond our ability to measure using Facebook data alone.

We chose demographic targeting based on location, age, and gender. We further narrowed our audience by interest categories that may indicate engagement with groups such as ISIS such as: Al-Hijrah, Salaf, Caliphate, Mosul, Fiqh, Sharia, Ar-Raqqah, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Al-Aqsa Mosque, Hijrah (Islam), Martyr, and Salafi movement. Ages targeted were set to 13-50 years old in the US, Australia, and Canada. In the UK, ages were set slightly older, at 18-50 for the *Promises* video and simply 18 and over for the *Slave Market* video.

Awareness metrics (reach, impressions, frequency, video views, and video retention), engagement metrics (clicks, likes, shares, and comments), and impact metrics (indicators of behavioral changes, metrics supportive of our ad, and comments) were applied as quantitative measures to analyze the data and comments were analyzed qualitatively to measure impacts of the awareness campaign.

METHODOLOGY

Awareness, engagement, and impact metrics were applied to analyze the data. The campaign evaluation was rooted in both quantitative and qualitative metrics and standards already established by industry best practices and the authors' research in conducting targeted interventions on social media platforms (See Table 1).

Table 1

AWARENESS (QUANTITATIVE) —The total number of individuals viewing the content. This also includes demographic data on target audience	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Reach” on Facebook and “Impressions” data on social media platforms
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach—number among the target audience who receive the impression of counternarratives on account screens.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impression frequency—the number of times target audience members access or see the counternarrative within a certain time.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video views—the number of times our counternarratives were watched or played.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewer retention rate—Length (or percentage) of the video watched. Important at revealing at what point in the video a viewer’s attention might have been lost.
ENGAGEMENT (QUANTITATIVE) —Volume and types of interaction with the counternarrative materials	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of times the video content shared
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video specific engagements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Viewer retention rate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of comments, link clicks, video “likes,” page “likes.”
COMMENTS (QUALITATIVE) —A form of engagement providing a clearer indication on how viewers responding to the counter-narratives.	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Supportive—comments in support of the video, characters featured in the video or the campaign in general.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Negative—comments expressing dislike towards the video, characters featured in the video or the campaign in general.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Misunderstood—comments (likely expressing negativity) due to misunderstanding content featured in the video.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Unrelated—comments that are unrelated to the video content, characters featured in the video, or the campaign in general. Spam content included as well.
IMPACT ANALYSIS —A measurable change in the target audience’s behavior, knowledge, and attitude that could be directly linked to the online intervention. This could be measured via both qualitative and quantitative methods, namely:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained engagements (for example, a user making more than one comment, an individual directly reaching the organization, and seeking direct treatment).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained engagement further divided into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Sustained constructive engagement (for example, a user commenting positively more than once to the video content, character featured in the video, or the campaign. It can be interpreted as engaging in critical thinking. ◦ Sustained antagonistic engagement (for example, a user commenting negatively or dismissing the content of the video the campaigners. It can be interpreted as raising doubts in the viewers’ mind.

AWARENESS METRICS

Geographic Location and Demographic Data

Geographic Location

Campaigns targeted predominantly English-speaking regions. The United States, The United Kingdom, and Canada all received two campaigns – one for each video. Australia received one campaign for the *Today is the Female Slave Market in ad-Dawlah* video. The United Kingdom received slightly more specific targeting, specifically in Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, London, and Manchester, primarily due to existing and potential spread of extremism in these areas. Cardiff was targeted in Wales for the same reasons.

Demographic Information

Across regions, 25-34-year-olds were the most reached group at 35 percent, followed by 18-24-year-olds at 28 percent and 35-44-year-olds at 22 percent. The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism's (ICSVE) goal was to influence young adults primarily since they are the most vulnerable to ISIS recruitment, which is in line with the campaign goals. At the tail ends of the age spectrum, people aged 45 and over made up 11 percent of overall reach, and 13-17-year-olds made up 4 percent. Interestingly, even though 13-17-year-olds made up only 4 percent overall, they made up 18 percent of the reach specific to Australia. Other ads, which included that age group, only had them make up less than 2 – 4 percent, so the Australia campaign was unique in its greater ability to connect with minors.

Video Views as of 03/22/2018

The ICSVE Facebook ads campaigns generated a reach of 1,048,133, with 604K video views. As we continue to experiment with these interventions in the future, we hope to further expand our reach, hone in our internet targeting, and increase the interest of our target audience, specifically among those who may be willing to act as influencers and magnify our impact. We also hope to reach to individuals that are more vulnerable and redirect them to our newly created website to engage in further discussion forums, watch additional videos, or gain access to other CVE-related resources and materials. This could serve to further expand and strengthen the line of communication with them and lead to greater prevention and intervention efforts. We will also attempt to generate

enticing leads from those among those who believe in, are convinced of our work, and wish to help in the fight against ISIS.

Today is the Female Slave Market in ad-Dawlah Total Views: 454K

Promises of ad-Dawlah to Women Total Views: 150K

Views include *both* videos that play due to the Facebook auto-play feature as well as due to clicks. In practice, given that Facebook videos often play automatically coupled with the fact that Facebook counts a view as any video watched for 3 seconds or more, any passive non-watching would be counted as a view. However, when the ad played automatically, the average watch time across campaigns was 12.92 percent (range of averages across campaigns = 7.04 – 17.98). This percentage is 27 seconds of 1 ad, and 19 seconds of the other, which suggests that even unintentional plays might have grabbed enough attention for viewers to see what the video was about before clicking away or stopping the ad. When users clicked our video to play, the average watch time across campaigns was 31.38 percent (range of averages across campaigns = 18.09 – 42.60).

A more specific breakdown of watch time by individual ad is listed at the end of this report.

Facebook Ad Access

More people viewed our ads on an iPhone (261,313 total) than on an Android smartphone (166,276 total). Although a desktop was the third most popular device to access our ads, it only accounted for 22,559 people. This compares differently from our campaign in Iraq for which Android was the predominant device in terms of accessing our videos. This data is crucial to further adjusting the targeting of our audience in terms of device and platform use.

ENGAGEMENT METRICS

In the previous section, we presented relevant metrics related to our video views. Awareness and engagement metrics such as viewer retention rate (percent watched) and viewer drop off rates are helpful in further adjusting our awareness campaigns. While the previous section served to mostly explain quantitative data related to our campaign, engagement metrics covered in this section offer a clearer indication as to *if* and *how* our Facebook ad resonated with our audience.

Together, the seven Facebook campaigns were responsible for 296,398 ICSVE page engagements, including 349 new ICSVE page likes. In addition to our directly targeted audience, 16,589 people came across the ad by “word-of-mouth” (the ad came up in their news feed as something a friend commented on/reacted to/shared,). Of this group, 1,488 clicked to visit the ICSVE Facebook page, or to comment on, share, or react to the ads. This was all simply thanks to the engagement of our initial viewers. As one user commented, “I don’t like x, but I will share x,” illustrating that even those disturbed by our content found it important enough to spread. In total there were:

- 3,302 shares
- 1,079 comments
- 3,247 reactions, including:
 - 1,663 likes
 - 903 angry reactions
 - 561 sad reactions
 - 58 wow reactions
 - 47 haha reactions
 - 22 love reactions

As the qualitative responses to our campaign ad will demonstrate in the ensuing sections, coupled with the data presented above, our Facebook ad campaigns have led to a number of emotional responses to our videos. However, we must be careful not to attribute certain user behavior online, the 1,663 likes in our case, for instance, as necessarily an indication of support for our campaign or videos. In other words, there might be among those who might have been motivated not by the content of our videos but rather morbid infatuation, curiosity, or many other factors.

Three of our Facebook ads generated a relevance score of 10, two generated scores of 9, and two generated relevance scores of eight, as calculated on a 1-10 scale. The higher the relevance score, the better in terms of how our audience is responding to our ad. According to Facebook, “a relevance score is calculated based on the positive and negative feedback we expect an ad to receive from its target audience. It denotes both actual feedback and expected feedback. It is calculated based on a number of factors, such as the positive vs. negative feedback it is expected to receive. To demonstrate, video views, shares, and likes to constitute positive indicators, whereas the number of times our ad

is hidden, or number of times someone clicks “I don’t want to see this” on our ad, represent negative indicators. Before a relevance score is generated, our ad must have been served or shown 500 times (for example, 500 impressions are received). The relevance score is especially important to better identify our target audiences and use it for our campaign optimization. That said the relevance score is used to measure *relevance* of a campaign and not the quality of campaign. In other words, it is generated based on interaction and interest in our campaign. Despite its limitations, it is especially useful in understanding whether our target audience is considering our campaign and whether it is engaging with it. Our high relevance scores make clear that we are garnering audience engagement.

Positive feedback and negative feedback were both reportedly “high” (out of the options “low,” “medium,” or “high”) for every single ad. This means many people were estimated to interact with our English-speaker targeted videos, but many people also chose not to view it. This is typical of all ICSVE ads, especially those that receive higher relevance scores of 8, 9, or 10. We will continue to aim for high relevance scores. That said, we would continue to reevaluate such scores depending on how well our campaigns are meeting our objectives of raising awareness about the dangers of joining ISIS. Moreover, it is not necessary to have high relevance scores as long as we meet expected campaign objectives of raising awareness about the dangers of joining ISIS. The following section contains a qualitative analysis of comments and discussions generated by our ads.

COMMENTS AND QUALITATIVE IMPACT ANALYSIS

Much of the data presented in the aforementioned sections were analyzed using descriptive quantitative methods. Comments to the counter-narrative videos were analyzed used sentiment analysis technique. While relatively under-utilized in studies involving Facebook and social media in general, sentiment analysis proved instrumental in examining the relationship and association between most recurring themes, as well as classifying them into certain categories. The data selection and analysis process in comment section included:

1. Exporting verbatim comments from the Facebook ad page and assigning corresponding IDs.
2. Counting the number of comments

3. Examining both manually and through use of sentiment analysis software (IntenCheck) responses and randomly reading 15 percent of them to get a sense of the themes that are likely to emerge.
4. Sorting out applicable comments and cleaning out unrelated and repetitive responses.
5. Coding and sorting out comments into respective groups
6. Presenting and discussing data

Below represents a sample IntenCheck software output that monitored 26 different categories (Seven group tones and communicative analysis) within comment section.

Figure 2. IntenCheck software output.



Table 2

ATTITUDE GROUP

Category	Grade	Value	Words	Highlighted Words
POSITIVE	LOW	6	102	able, above, acceptable, adequate, advantage, agreement, appreciation, beautiful, benefit, bett...
NEGATIVE	VERY HIGH	100	155	against, allegations, anger, appalled, archaic, arguments, ashamed, attack, backward, bad, barb...
STRONG	VERY LOW	0	133	able, act, adult, advantage, aggressive, agreement, army, assistance, attack, aware, benefit, b...
WEAK	LOW	16	41	admit, apologize, ashamed, bum, common, crawl, death, depression, desperate, die, disgrace, dis...
ACTIVE	VERY LOW	0	125	act, aggressive, alive, anger, argue, ask, assitance, attack, behavior, bet, better, bols...
PASSIVE	VERY LOW	0	117	accept, admit, agreement, allow, appreciation, ashamed, aware, become, been, being, belief, bel...

Sample Text Output Discussing Anti-ISIS Attitudes Using IntenCheck Software

“Those ISIS people are worse than any animals in the world. They are disbeliever and wrong do are. They are Devil or Satan. May ALLAH (GOD) destroy them or guide them toward right path. Ameen.” – U.S., *Slave Market*

“Barbaric savages I wouldn't piss on them if they was on fire [expletive] Isis” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Make sure the [expletive] stay where they are and stew in their own expletive. Good enough.” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Brainless cave bastards!” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Horrible, horrible creatures...”

Sample Text Output Highlighting Negative Attitudes Using IntenCheck Software

“By this video they try to justify what she has done by showing her naive but joining a **brutal** terrorist group by itself is a **crime against** humanity. If she was offered what she was promised, then she was going to continue supporting IS? No **sympathy** towards those [expletive] at all” -UK, *Promises*

Sample Text Output Highlighting Anger Using IntenCheck Software

“COMPLETELY **FAKE!** Islam doesn't promote anything like this. I am Muslim, I treat my mother, sister, and wife as my queens and that's what my holy book, the Quran teaches. As a Muslim I am **against** all this and it is obvious people that created this are further promoting their Islamophobic agenda onto others. Further, ISIS is to Islam as the KKK are to Christianity, no sane person would ask a KKK member about Christianity, and same goes with Muslims to ISIS. They are corrupt sects that **spew hate, anger** and have no intent but to create divisions amongst people» – U.S., *Slave Market*

Across all seven campaigns, there were 1,079 comments. About half (538) of these comments came from the UK *Slave Market* Campaign. Ads, which targeted Canada, received the least amount of comments for both videos.

However, when accounting for Reach, the ratio of people who saw the ads to people who commented is roughly the same across campaigns. Overall, the Slave Market video received more comments than the *Promises* video. Below is a more specific breakdown by campaign.

Table 3

UK, <i>Slave Market</i>:	538 comments (Original: 351, Replies: 187) -9 comments/10,000 people reached
Australia, <i>Slave Market</i>:	192 comments (Original: 127, Replies: 65) -17 comments/10,000 people reached
U.S., <i>Slave Market</i>:	133 comments (Original: 64, Replies: 69) -13 comments/10,000 people reached
Canada, <i>Slave Market</i>:	101 comments (Original: 59, Replies: 42) -14 comments/10,000 people reached
U.S., <i>Promises</i>:	48 comments (Original: 24, Replies: 24) -8 comments/10,000 people reached
UK, <i>Promises</i>:	37 comments (Original: 25, Replies: 12) -7 comments/10,000 people reached
Canada, <i>Promises</i>:	30 comments (Original: 20, Replies: 10) -8 comments/10,000 people reached

Generally, comments fell under three categories: anti-ISIS, anti-Islam, and defense of Islam. The categories also often overlapped, since commenters against Islam and commenters in defense of Islam were both anti-ISIS. Notably, there were no explicit pro-ISIS statements. (This compares differently to our ICSVE YouTube channel comments in which there are pro-ISIS statements made much more frequently and where it is possible to comment anonymously.) However, many commenters attempted to discredit ICSVE's videos. They claimed the videos were fake, the defectors were lying, and/or the videos were propaganda created to make Islam look bad. Though these comments might have been made by innocent individuals who felt the need to defend their religion, which they perceived to be under attack, the comments might also have been from ISIS supporters trying to discredit our videos. This is discussed in detail later in the report (see Regional Comment Trends section).

Below are some examples of the three larger categories: anti-ISIS, anti-Islam, and defense of Islam comments and opinions.

Anti-ISIS and "Supportive Category" - Comments in Support of the Video, Characters in the Video, or the Campaign in General

"Those ISIS people are worse than any animals in the world. They are disbeliever and wrong do are. They are Devil or Satan. May ALLAH (GOD) destroy them or guide them toward right path. Ameen." - US, *Slave Market*

“Horrible, horrible creatures! They are evil and treacherous” – UK
Slave Market

“Sick bastards” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Disgusting behavior and a complete mockery of the Islamic faith if they think this is acceptable” – UK, *Slave Market*

“What gives you the rights to take these women and use them as sexual slaves in a war? You are nothing but animals. You are not true Muslim people but you give your fellow Muslim people a bad name” – UK, *Slave Market*

Anti-Islam and “Misunderstood” Category—Comments Likely Expressing Negativity Due to Misunderstood Content Featured in the Video

“It’s a problem with Islam, not just ISIS” – US, *Promises*

“Eradicate Islam!”-Canada, *Slave Market*

“The true face of Islam” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Expletive Islam!” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Don’t you actually really know that Muslims really do use their children against anyone who opposes them....they strap bombs etc. on them so opponents have to be extremely cautious....their children have blown up soldiers in the past as well as themselves.”
– UK, *Slave Market*

“What the [expletive] are you talking about? THIS IS ISLAM. This is what they promote. Taking 9-year-old girls as their bride is widely accepted throughout this disturbed [expletive] up religion. No Muslim man respects their wife” – UK, *Slave Market*

*In response to comment separating ISIS from Islam: “Learn to take criticism...London attack in tube, British parliament knife attack, Paris attack, Barcelona attack, Dhaka attack, blasts in Syria, Iraq etc. name it are not committed by Hindus, Jain’s, Buddhist Sikhs, or by Christian. These are on records.” – UK, *Slave Market*

“You can see real Islam here” – Australia, *Slave Market*

Defense of Islam and “Negative Category” – Comments Expressing Dislike towards the Video, Characters Featured in the Video or the Campaign in General

“This is not Islam. They’re using the religion for their own benefit.” – US, *Slave Market*

“[...] there is no evidence that Muslim should kill another person or make women of their slave.” – Canada, *Slave Market*

“COMPLETELY FAKE!! Islam doesn’t promote anything like this. I am Muslim, I treat my mother, sister, and wife as my queens and that’s what my holy book, the Quran teaches. As a Muslim, I am against all this and it is obvious people that created this are further promoting their Islamophobic agenda onto others. Further, ISIS is to Islam as the KKK are to Christianity, no sane person would ask a KKK member about Christianity, and same goes with Muslims to ISIS. They are corrupt sects that spew hate, anger and have no intent but to create divisions amongst people.” – US, *Slave Market*

Female Focused and “Supportive” and “Negative” Category

Due to the focus of each ad – one about female enslavement and the other about the experience of a female defector – there were also many female-focused comments. This led to a trend of commenters engaging in culture wars in the comment section. Many commenters made remarks about Middle Eastern culture being generally oppressive of women. This claim was used as a way of explaining how ISIS members were able to justify their behavior.

“It is not acceptable, and it is archaic and barbaric that anyone in modern times is subjected to slavery. Those that still participate in this show themselves to be ignorant and less than human and as such do not deserve to survive. Cultures, religions and belief systems that think any subjection of others is acceptable should be wiped out and do not deserve a place in this world.”

*Response: “Like western pornographers? Lol

*Response: “I think you will find that pornography is worldwide and prolific in the East and in Asia, and not confined to the West. Most of it is also consensual with

payments and choices made. We however in the UK are dealing with a plethora of Muslim and Asian pedophile rings. Or I suppose you will deny this exists along with the culture of marrying off 8-year-old girls! Or the Saudi preference for young boys.” – UK, *Slave Market*

“It’s common sense to know that women are treated like gods in the Middle East.”

*Response: “And they aren’t there? Lol”

*Response: “They won’t be stoned to death for being raped... use that as a cornerstone for your argument and it gets easier from there.”

*Response: “Wow since you are compelled to speak what you have no idea about. Then. So, you are from Kentucky. And you are in a relationship.”

Several comment trends presented themselves according to video and region. *Today is the Female Slave Market Day in ad-Dawlah* and *Promises of ad-Dawlah* to Women garnered responses unique to their respective content, and some commenters had slightly different things to say depending on the social and political goings-on of the countries from whence they responded.

Comment Trends Specific to the Today is the Female Slave Market Day in ad-Dawlah video

The *Slave Market* ad provoked more disagreements and more emotionally charged language (mostly anger and disgust) than the *Promises* ad. In keeping with the female-focused comments, there was a small trend of commenters pointing out feminisms, particularly western feminism’s alleged failure to recognize or help the women who’d been enslaved by ISIS. The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) researchers noticed this trend last year as well when the same videos were shown to other English speakers, and some French speakers.

Examples:

“Where’s the feminists fighting for these girl’s equality?” – Australia, *Slave Market*

“Why aren’t all these feminists crying out about this instead of claiming sexual harassment every time a man looks in their direction” – UK, *Slave Market*

Additionally, many commenters were confused and upset by the fact that the defector emphasized the religion of the enslaved women. To the viewers, it appeared the defector used women’s Islamic status as the determining factor in whether mass rape and enslavement was acceptable. Commenters therefore concluded this meant the defector was fine with enslaving non-Muslim women.

“Negative Category” – Comments Expressing Dislike towards the Video, Characters Featured in the Video or the Campaign in General

“The guy seemed more upset that it was MUSLIM women being sold into slavery. I’m sure if it was some Christian or Jewish [expletive] he would have found that halal. What a disgusting ideology.” – Canada, *Slave Market*

“So... No one has a problem with them enslaving Jewish and Christian sex slaves... just the Muslims. I have no words.” – U.S., *Slave Market*

“He is questioning if Muslim women can be taken as slaves, if she’s non-Muslim, it’s cool though” – Canada, *Slave Market*

“Well he seemed to only have an issue with Muslim women being sex slaves. Not just because sex slaves in general is wrong. Wtf? Seriously?” – Australia, *Slave Market*

“He seemed only concerned that they were Muslim women. That’s troubling also. Nobody should be sold as a Slave. Sex or labor.” – Canada, *Slave Market*

“Notice he’s only if saying [sic] it’s not ok to have “Muslim women” as slaves. He doesn’t refer to all women in general.” – U.S., *Slave Market*

“I like how it was that they were Muslims he took issue with. It wasn’t that they were enslaving people. No, he felt bad only because they were Muslims.” – Canada, *Slave Market*

“Supportive Category”—Comments in Support of the Video, Characters in the Video, or the Campaign in General

“I just love how this guy telling the story proves that they don’t all believe this is the way of life “this isn’t right –Australia,” *Slave Market*

Comment Trends Specific to the Promises of Ad-Dawlah to Women Video

While the *Promises* ad also provoked some arguments in the comment section, most commenters agreed that the subject of the video – Laura Passoni – was in their opinions: unintelligent, laughable, and to be shown no sympathy. This was by far the greatest trend specific to this video. “Negative Category”—comments expressing dislike towards the video, characters featured in the video or the campaign in general

“That’s what you get for joining a terrorist organization, no sympathy whatsoever” – UK, *Promises*


“Traitor.” – Canada, *Promises*

“Oh, come on. My boyfriend dumped me, so my next logical step is to join ISIS?” – Canada *Promises*

“Hard to have sympathy for a moron.” – Canada, *Promises*

“What a [expletive] moron.” – U.S., *Promises*

“This woman is a lying piece of expletive! Trying to gain sympathy because she was caught out, she should receive a bullet to the head along with anyone else who returns from Syria/Iraq etc.” – UK, *Promises*

“By this video they try to justify what she has done by showing her naive but joining a brutal terrorist group by itself is a crime against humanity. If she was offered what she was promised, then she was going to continue supporting IS? No sympathy towards those beaches at all  ” – UK, *Promises*

“Why is she not in prison with [her husband]?” – Canada, *Promises*

There were some comments expressing sympathy or understanding. However, while there were more sympathetic comments for Laura than for the male defector in the *Slave Market* video, they were still sparse.

“Supportive Category”—Comments in Support of the Video, Characters in the Video, or the Campaign in General

*In response to someone insulting the defector’s intelligence:

“What part did you not understand when she said she was depressed and vulnerable?????” – Canada, *Promises*

“I feel what she saying let her man do four years get out and prove everybody wrong life’s f***** up a f*****-up Journey at times.... I believe her. we’ve all made f*****-up decisions in life...”S – U.S., *Promises*

Why Do the Two Videos Receive Different Reactions?

First, each video has a different focus. In *Promises of Ad-Dawlah to Women*, the defector spoke primarily of her own mistreatment by ISIS. Furthermore, her most emphasized suffering was because of being misled. In *Today is the Female Slave Market in Ad-Dawlah*, the defector discussed the mistreatment of slave women by ISIS, and the emphasis was on sexual enslavement – a circumstance graver and more graphic than what was discussed in *Promises*.

Second, each defector’s gender, ethnicity, and nationality must be taken into consideration. The defector in the *Slave Market* video was a Syrian (Arab) male. His ethnicity might have made it easier for the audience to view him as a representation of all Middle Eastern people and, therefore, Middle Eastern culture. Likewise, his gender (male) might have made it easier for the audience to view him as predatory or aggressive.

However, since the defector in the *Promises* video is a female, it might have been easier to perceive her as a “stupid” or “vulnerable” individual who was taken advantage of rather than mal-intended. Since these videos targeted the Western world (Australia included), Laura being white and European might have also prompted some cognitive dissonance in the viewers; it would be less upsetting to think of her as an unintelligent exception to – as opposed to a representation of – the population to which the audience otherwise belongs.

Regional Comment Trends

Both ICSVE videos were called propaganda by viewers across regions, but the UK dominated this trend overall. One possible reason for this is that

Muslims make up a greater percentage of the overall population in the UK (territories targeted) than in the US, Canada, or Australia. Arguably, Europe is also much closer to the Middle East and ISIS. Many propaganda-focused comments accused the videos of being intentional marketing against Islam, rather than against ISIS. This is contrary to ICSVE's objective of separating Islam from ISIS (hence the counter-narrative emphasis). This may also represent deep sensitivity among UK Muslims who have been subjected to UK Prevent policies for over a decade now as well as responses to videos made by Research Information Communication Unit (RICU) but thinly disguised as other entities productions which may make UK Muslims feel suspicious of counter-messaging and feel at times that they and their religion are under undue scrutiny and even attack. It is actually for this reason that ICSVE researchers decided early on to clearly brand their videos so there is no question of who the authors and sponsors of the messages are being put forward.

Such sentiments could also be attributed to the fact that most did not watch the videos to the end, therefore missing the message that ISIS is warping and abusing Islam and selling lies. Despite the defectors both saying ISIS was not practicing true Islam, viewers took to the comments to tell others not to believe the video. However, as mentioned, it is unclear whether these comments were made by innocents or by ISIS supporters trying to discredit ICSVE material. It would behoove ISIS recruiters to further the narrative that Western entities are trying to eradicate Islam by making the religion look bad, and to insist ICSVE videos are full of lies. If this is the case, ICSVE ads have successfully reached some of their target audience.

“Negative Category”—Comments Expressing Dislike towards the Video, Characters Featured in the Video or the Campaign in General

“Do not believe this propaganda bought and paid for by the west!
No Muslim would EVER condone this!” – UK, *Slave Market*

“A liar lies a lie. Lie lie lie” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Why was this video created and who is behind it? If we find out we would know the motives of supporting such a criminal like her making her look innocent.” – UK, *Promises*

“Why the expletive is this propaganda trash on my Facebook feed?” – Canada, *Slave Market*

The Canadian campaigns had a trend of comments criticizing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who pulled Canada out of the airstrike mission against ISIS, and is outspoken in his support and welcoming of Syrian war refugees.

Below are examples of comments against Trudeau:

“Keep the pieces of expletive in their own country and send Trudeau and his bum buddies there also” – Canada, *Slave Market*

*In response to a meme of Justin Trudeau: “By the way, he sell arms to Saudi Arabia in billions, which is given to ISIS, and used to bomb children’s of Yemen, the money is brought to Canada, the act was done by your great grandfathers with the indigenous and still doing it, you all are British refugees, so shut up, and stop giving arms and ammunitions to Saudi and Israeli regimes to create such monsters” – Canada, *Slave Market*

“And Trudo wants to give these animals a hug.” – Canada, *Slave Market*

“Hope every single one of those disgusting enslaving piles of expletive end up dying slowly and painfully and expletive Trudeau for accepting /rewarding this culture/ideology it makes me sick and filled with pity for those poor girls I can only hope some of them will taste real freedom asap.” – Canada, *Slave Market*

Additionally, the UK and Canada both presented a trend of comments expressing concern that Islam/ISIS/refugees were plaguing their countries. This was expressed as either fear that Muslims were going to take over, or frustration that they already had. The reason this, arguably, is not so much a trend for the US is likely because President Trump is conservative in his positions on refugees and immigrants, so much so that he proposed both the travel ban and “the wall.” In fact, some UK Facebook commenters even commended Trump. The reason this is not so much a trend for Australia is likely because Australia is farther away from the Middle East, and because Australia was the only region to be targeted with one video instead of two (therefore receiving only half as many opportunities for comments).

Examples:

*Sarcastically: “Truly beautiful part of a multicultural and diverse society I love it diversity is our greatest strength, and this is an insight into Europe in the next 30 years can’t wait” – UK, *Slave Market*

“And these are the people being welcomed into Europe” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Oh, great be Happening in England soon. There already walking about in England with bedsheets on there head . Same thing really.” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Our [expletive] politicians welcome these vermin with open arms hope DTRUMP tweets this then people will see what Islam’s about and our borders will close quicker than they do.” – UK, *Slave Market*

Noteworthy Comments

Lastly, there were some comments that stood out as being sympathetic in terms of trying to understand either the defectors or other commenters with different viewpoints by respectfully asking questions. They were a rare contrast to the majority of comments or conversations, which were filled with arguments, hatred, fear, defensiveness, shock, and disbelief.

“Supportive Category” – Comments in Support of the Video, Characters in the Video, or the Campaign in General

“We are British yes? Our nation’s army has done some terrible things, but we cannot say all British people are like that right? The crewmembers that did those things, claim to have done those things for survival right? Just like Libya, these are war torn nations and it is impossible for me to comprehend the things these guys are going through to make them react like this, there for I reserve judgment. I will Say this though, what all these war-torn nations have in common is the fact that our leaders have not provided adequate assistance to help them rebuild, there for again I say how do we cause the problem and then judge the people in the very problem which we, or our leaders rather, created?” – UK, *Slave Market*

“Naive and not educated because I really don’t get it how she could believe that she was going to have a better life in a country in war. Even for guys that join Isis I really don’t understand it . What is the reason? What is the purpose?” – U.S., *Promises*

“For all the white people out there, here you go. Especially Britain first you bastards!”

*Response: “Trust me, white people understand they are not the standard. It’s not us vs you, it’s us against extremism of all forms”

*Response: “you’re a good lad, you’re an exception. I’m on about the rest that think Isis are Muslims.”

*Response: “Well said both of yours” – UK, *Slave Market*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Similar to other awareness and brand raising campaigns, the purpose of our small-scale Facebook ad awareness campaigns was to shed light on dangers associated with joining terrorist groups like ISIS, as well as protect vulnerable potential recruits inside the United States, UK, Canada, and Australia from considering joining. Two ICSVE-produced videos were used in the campaigns, namely *The Promises of ad-Dawlah to Women*, which featured the testimony of a Belgian female ISIS defector, and *Today is the Female Slave Market* in ad-Dawlah, which featured a Syrian male ISIS defector who witnessed the sexual enslavement of women by ISIS. Our Facebook ad campaigns generated a reach of 1,048,133, with 604K video views.

In analyzing our data, we have attempted to apply a combination of awareness, engagement, and impact analysis metrics to discern the extent to which our interventions achieved its desired effect. As indicated in the paper, many discussed the message and the messaging strategy of our counter-narratives, as well as challenged extremist narratives of violent extremist groups like ISIS. Given the amount of comments generated and the fact that there are no established “best practices” in collecting and analyzing social media generated data, we decided to group them into certain categories and illustrate directly (select few) the nature of each.

We were able to find and present evidence that our viewers have thoughtfully engaged with the content of our videos, including initiated debates on women, role of gender in Islam, and other contentious socio-political issues that often influence and drive violent extremism. That said, the results generated represent a short-term measurement of the impact of our videos and only allow us to utilize such data to further improve our future targeting campaigns, namely by gaining an increased understanding of user behavior on Facebook and other social media platforms.

Although we can observe engagement with our counter-narratives, it is far more difficult to observe or report any direct cognitive shifts among those who support violent extremist ideologies. In discussing the role and effectiveness of counter-narratives in fighting violent extremism, some authors have observed, "It is possible that some of these counter-narrative videos have managed to dissuade individuals from joining or supporting extremist groups, but those users are simply not leaving comments like, "Great video, really changed my mind! That said, we hope that may in fact be occurring. The opinions and comments expressed in the campaign suggest the need to further expand our internet ad campaign and engage especially with those who may be willing to act as influencers and magnify the impact of our counternarratives.

ENDNOTES

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