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Social Media Campaigns Against Violent Extremism: A New Approach to Evaluating Video Storytelling

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In response to the threats posed by jihadist online propaganda, multiple countering violent extremism (CVE) campaigns were carried out with the goal of offering counter and alternative narratives able to contrast those of terrorist organizations. Although there is growing literature on the topic of how to build an effective CVE program, there is a lack of knowledge about how to evaluate a CVE online campaign. Drawing from recent research in the health domain and in the CVE field, I present a new evaluation approach that entails through a comparative analysis of multiple CVE campaigns and a qualitative inquiry focused on the case study #heartofdarkness (#hod). To achieve this, two combined methods were adopted: a revised version of the Message Sensation Value index used in antismoking campaigns analyses to measure the videos' appeal, and a set of focus groups aimed at collecting feedback on the videos' storytelling with a sample target of at-risk youths and expert stakeholders.

Keywords: social media campaign, storytelling, online violent extremism, countering narratives, online radicalization

The spread of violent jihadist propaganda online poses a challenging threat: Audiovisual online media in particular was identified as the privileged tool used by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) for disinformation, propaganda dissemination, and the recruitment of young European foreign fighters (Gendron, 2017; Klausen, 2015). The ISIS propaganda exploits multimodality as a strategic tool to engage different online audiences (Monaci, 2017; Winkler & Pieslak, 2019). Previous research concludes that the organization tends to exploit various elements—dynamic/static images, sonic elements, interactive and graphic features—to accomplish multiple purposes. Examples include the use of ultraviolent images to elevate the perceived emotional level of the group's threat (Molin Friis, 2015); infographics to establish their authority as a credible information source (Winkler, El Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2018), about-to-die images to transform the online environment into a terrorism site (Winkler, El Damanhoury, Dicker, & Lemieux, 2016), game and news broadcast aesthetics to broaden audience appeal (Ruston & Halverson, 2014). Along with the images, also music has been detected as a powerful means to engage online audience, especially in consideration of popular culture expressions such as rap

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(Conti, 2017). In response to this, different institutions are promoting online countering violent extremism (CVE) campaigns aimed at raising awareness on the phenomenon and at offering counternarratives able to contrast those of terrorist organizations while reinforcing positive values such as cultural and social integration among Muslims and non-Muslims in Western countries (The European Commission's Radicalization Awareness Network,[2] Institute for Strategic Dialogue[3]). This approach is premised on trying to win the battle of ideas and it can be achieved either by proposing counternarrative or alternative narrative campaigns. Counternarratives highlight what is wrong with extremist ideologies, challenge assumptions, expose fallacies, and dismantle associated conspiracy theories (Schmid, 2014). This involves creating and promoting narratives that stand in opposition to those presented by extremists and is intended to undermine extremist ideologies and to compete for the hearts and minds of potential recruits (Aldrich, 2014; Berger & Strathearn, 2013). Counterinitiatives may also take the form of alternative narratives: positive stories about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom, and democracy (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p. 5). Schmid (2014) maintains that alternative narratives should be able to bridge the "us versus them" divide that is fostered by extremists and bring people from all sides together. They should focus more on what we are for and less on what we are against. Nevertheless, the author states that the two communication strategies should be developed together:

> The counter-narrative has to aim at discrediting the exclusive narrative of al Qaeda. The alternative narrative, on the other hand, has to focus on the propagation of the West's own values. Both narratives—the counter-narrative and the alternative narrative—need to be pursued simultaneously. (Schmid, 2014, p. 31)

The need to adopt an integrated approach to CVE is further argued by Braddock and Horgan (2016) and Beutel et al. (2016), who present alternative narratives as complementary aspects of a broader countercommunication effort against ISIS's violent propaganda. Both alternative and counternarratives are to be considered as forms of governmental strategic communication: nevertheless, alternative narratives may be issued both by government and civil society activists and groups. Several studies recommend using "alternative narratives" developed locally rather than engaging directly with messages seen as extremist online (Winter & Bach-Lombardo, 2016), whereas Hemmingsen and Castro (2017) state that developing "voices of reason" (p. 42) could be a way of meeting the perceived grievances of at-risk youngsters. Alternative narratives were also at the core of Danish policies against violent radicalization in the Danish National Action Plan. The Danish government intervened either by blocking certain content and also by spreading alternative views via local civil society actors (Danish Ministry of Immigration, Integration and Housing, 2016, p. 29).

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[2] The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) brings together practitioners from around Europe working on the prevention of radicalization. The network is supported and funded by the European Commission–Directorate General in charge of the policy area "Migration and Home Affairs" (https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en).

[3] The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is a nongovernmental organization dedicated to powering new generations against hate and extremism. ISD delivers cutting-edge programs built from world-leading expertise in communications and technology, grassroots networks, knowledge and research, and policy advice (https://www.isdglobal.org/isdapproach/).

The #Heartofdarkness Video Campaign

Different institutions involved in CVE promoted the use of online videos, especially on social network sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, to disseminate their online campaigns. Among the representative case studies reviewed in the literature, there is a number of online campaigns such as Abdullah X,[4] Average Mohamed,[5] Extreme Dialogue[6] (Colliver & Davey, 2017, pp. 175–182; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, & RAN Centre of Excellence, 2015), or the Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narratives Project targeting Albanian-speaking Facebook users (Speckhard, Shajkovci, Bodo, & Fazliu, 2018). As highlighted in a previous analysis (Monaci, Mazza, & Taddeo, 2017, p. 226), the narrative strategies pursued by those campaigns refer to a set of goals combining both counter and alternative narratives such as showing Muslims opposition to ISIS, documenting the cruelty of ISIS through real testimonials, working on identity issues, involving parents to create an emotional recall, dismantling the warrior myths. All the campaigns analyzed were based on videos delivered through websites as well as through YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter. In some cases, the campaigns' storytelling involved a set of micronarratives based on the same character (Abdullah X, Average Mohammed) or a single-video issue focused on a group of people—most of the time the Muslim community (#inmyname,[7] #notinmyname[8])—or a set of video interviews, each recounting the experience of a former foreign fighter (Extreme Dialogue); all the campaigns had a young target as the alleged audience.

The #heartofdarkness (#hod) video campaign presents a set of alternative narratives aimed at offering a critical understanding of ISIS's rhetoric while reinforcing positive values such as cultural integration, friendship, and opportunities of self-expression safeguarded by the European democracies. The campaign has been launched in the context of the EU-funded research project SAFFRON (Semantic Analysis against Foreign Fighters Recruitment Online Networks)[9] involving different institutions (private ICT companies, a military academia and one university) in France, Italy, and Romania. Among the project objectives was the development of a social media campaign based on short videos aimed at contrasting ISIS's propaganda online. The campaign is addressed especially to at-risk young European Muslims with a special regard for second and third generation immigrants, political refugees, and individuals converted to the Muslim faith (Monaci et al., 2017). The goal of the #hod campaign is that of raising awareness on the main motivations exploited by ISIS's online narratives to engage young recruits in the terrorist organization.

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[4] Abdullah X is a video campaign released by an independent UK-based nongovernmental organization aimed at building critical thinking among young Muslims against the allure of violent extremism (http://www.abdullahx.com/what-i-do/).

[5] Average Mohammed is a video campaign released by a nonprofit organization based in the U.S. (https://averagemohamed.com/about-us.html).

[6] Extreme Dialogue addresses several forms of extremism through the video testimonies of "formers." The campaigns were released by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD; https://extremedialogue.org).

[7] Video released by the Islamic Community of Cuneo, Italy (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXoN4Zp4yHU).

[8] Video released by young British Muslims in the fight against ISIS (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAxIOC8Zisc).

[9] www.saffron-project.eu

The initiative is an upstream campaign: It is not meant to address a specific audience in a defined geographical area; rather, it addresses a broad online target on an international level (Tuck & Silverman, 2016, pp. 7–12).[10] The #hod campaign has a main website (see Figure 1),[11] a Facebook page,[12] and a Twitter account.[13] The campaign's alternative narrative is articulated in seven videos devoted to a topic or a radicalization motivation (e.g., discrimination, roles in society, media war).[14]

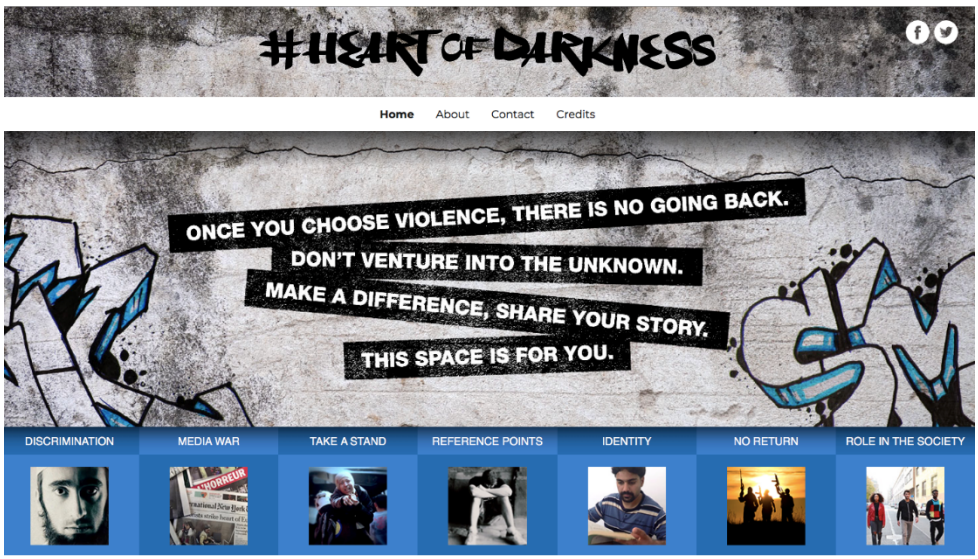

Figure 1. The #hod campaign homepage.

Each video is articulated in two micronarratives linked together through a hypertextual link on VIMEO.[15] The first video spot is devoted to storytelling the motivation for violence, and the second video presents a critical perspective of an expert or the contribution of a peer on that motivation. Thanks to this

[10] The #hod contents—videos, texts, posts, tweets—are available in English and French

[11] (www.theheartofdarkness.eu).

[12] https://www.facebook.com/heartofdarkness2017/

[13] https://twitter.com/HeartofDark2017

[14] Those motivations have been defined thanks to a qualitative and participatory research approach: In the first phase of the SAFFRON project (2016), a set of five focus groups involving both expert stakeholders (scholars, journalists, practitioners, religious authorities) and at-risk youngsters (n = 47) were put together to discuss the motivations for violent radicalization among youngsters and the related narratives exploited by ISIS to recruit them. The focus groups helped the research team to break down the storytelling and also to give insight into what an online campaign should look like to involve its would-be foreign fighters target audience.

[15] The online video platform has been selected for its functionalities and, in particular, for the opportunity to connect two subsequent videos through an hypertextual link. The platform has been used as a private repository and is not indexed in the main search engines. The #hod videos are available through the campaign website.

dialectic storytelling, the campaign wants to integrate the subjective experiences related to some kind of offense or disadvantage, within a social system exemplified by the different testimonials, in which it is however possible to find a solution or a different perspective. Moreover, dialectic storytelling serves the purpose of engaging young users online. Online videos are for fast consumption (boyd, 2007; Paccagnella & Vellar, 2016): The youth's attention span is low, especially on social network sites. In consideration of this, we articulated each video on VIMEO into two intertwined parts: The first sensational part is meant to trigger the attention of online users through audiovisual effects and catchy dialogues, and then entice them, once engaged, to follow on with the second part devoted to the alternative narrative messages.

In consideration of the spreading of extremist audiovisual propaganda, multiple CVE initiatives have been used to counteract the increasing threat posed by terrorist organizations. Following the initial emergency, however, a demand for a more comprehensive knowledge about how to evaluate such CVE initiatives arises. In this article I want to present an original contribution to the topic of evaluating a CVE campaign with a focus on the #hod experience. Before that, I will present a review about the most recent approaches to CVE communication, with the aim of highlighting a set of shortcomings and potential new approaches to the problem.

The Analysis of CVE Campaigns: Limits and New Approaches

In recent years, different scholars wrote about the topic of how to build an effective CVE program in relation to different kinds of extremism (e.g., jihadist, supremacist, ecoterrorist). The United States Agency for International Development (Aldrich, 2014) primarily addressed contextual factors to understand the specific dynamics of the radicalization process. Braddock and Horgan (2016) provided a detailed description of how to develop counternarratives, while Briggs and Feve (2013) concentrated on the issuers of CVE, distinguishing between government and nongovernment actors in providing counternarratives. Stevens and Neumann (2009) primarily looked at the different types of approaches that may be used in an online context, distinguishing between positive and negative approaches, that is, the difference between removing and blocking online content versus providing content that counters radical perspectives, respectively. Together, these four approaches complement one another, providing a set of guidelines for developing a CVE program. Davies, Neudecker, Ouellet, Bouchard, and Ducol (2016) merged those different approaches into an integrated model of analysis and they applied it to a set of six CVE online campaigns. Their analysis referred to four indicators: (1) whether the campaign took into consideration contextual factors such as ideology, at-risk targets, social processes, and drivers; (2) the issuer of the campaign (government or other reliable issuers); (3) the media (online or off-line); (4) the positiveness or negativity of the message, where positiveness describes information and education-oriented actions, as well as those aimed at presenting alternative views, while negativeness refers to a censorship approach aimed at removing all the content related to violent extremism arguments.

Another approach to evaluating CVE campaigns would be that of using social media metrics. It is basically a quantitative measurement that involves metrics such as "reach," "impression," and "engagement": Reach refers to the number of users who have come across particular content on Facebook, YouTube or Twitter; an impression is the total number of circumstances where the content has been shown on a social timeline; and engagement looks at how people interact with the content they see on a social

platform and it involves actions such as like, share, retweet.[16] This approach was used, for example, by the Canadian community-based online campaign Stories of Resilience; the social media content reached 160,000 single users (Macnair & Frank, 2017).

These two approaches could be positively integrated to carry out the campaign content evaluation even though they both present some limitations: Davies et al.'s (2016) analysis is primarily based on the campaign's general features, whereas social media metrics focus solely on the quantitative data related to user interaction, offering a superficial representation of the campaign communication.

Moreover, it is important to stress that a CVE program should be evaluated before its public release and not after its online dissemination: That would help to avoid unexpected or even counterpropaganda effects.[17]

Learning From Health Communication Campaigns

The abovementioned research leaves different questions unanswered, especially about how to evaluate the communication of a CVE initiative. A first question refers to the media appeal with respect to the targeted audience. As a dimension of analysis, Davies et al.'s (2016) model takes into consideration the presence of online or off-line contents, but it does not consider the formal features of the contents. On the contrary, feedback on the media's formal features (e.g., the use of stills rather than moving images, the use of textual rather than audiovisual contents, the use of sound effects) would be extremely important to understand the media effect on its target. Researchers in the health communication domain, for example, have tried to identify what kind of appeal and types of messages audiences prefer, which campaigns they remember, and what they find effective. They identified several features to the messages that are effective in antismoking and other health campaigns, including the Message Sensation Value (MSV) index. Palmgreen et al. (1991) define MSV as the degree to which formal and content audiovisual features of a televised message elicit sensory, affective, and arousal responses. Features that researchers identify as triggers include powerful sounds and visual effects: suspenseful or intense music, multiple cuts and edits, unusual lighting and camera angles, zooms, or close-ups (Stephenson, 2003). Through extensive research on more than 850 YouTube antismoking videos, Paek, Kim, and Hove (2010) found that there is a positive correlation between the MSV of the videos and the level of interaction between the online users and the YouTube videos. Moreover, the MSV categories related to the videos' formal features—sound and visual effects—could be analyzed independently from the specific video contents. This would suggest that those categories could be positively exploited to analyze the video appeal of different awareness campaigns: antismoking, antialcohol, or even, as in our case, antiextremist violence campaigns.

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[16] https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media_reach

[17] The United States government funded social media campaign Think Again, Turn Away has been publicly critiqued for not only being ineffective but also for providing a platform for terrorist groups to legitimize their organization, with individual members engaging in direct, open debates with government actors. For a broader discussion on countereffects, see Hemmingsen and Castro (2017).

The Internet and social media open up a new field of exploration in relation to sensational[18] content and their persuasion potential. Attention is commonly considered a scarcity among the younger audience: Content is meant to be shared, reposted, retweeted, and so on rather than just stuck on one page (Anderson & Jingjing, 2018; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2018). In this context, sensational videos on YouTube may represent effective triggers to involving youngsters and also to stimulating further cognitive involvement on different kinds of topics.

Learning From Social Media Storytelling

Another limit of the existing approach to the CVE campaign evaluation relates to the storytelling. Notwithstanding the growing attention devoted to digital storytelling and propaganda on behalf of the CVE scholars, the social media potential related to "how to develop an effective campaign" remains a topic which needs further investigation. Social network sites such as Facebook and YouTube are an overwhelming field of experimentation—especially among youths—in terms of communication expressiveness, performance, and socialization (boyd & Ellison 2007; Lambert, 2013; Miller, 2014). Nevertheless, content spreadability (Jenkins et al., 2018) should not be underestimated. This concept refers to a fundamental dimension of social media storytelling—*narrative virality*—which is achieved by exploiting user engagement (Liu, Lu, & Wang, 2017; Segarra-Saavedra & Hidalgo-Mari, 2018). Spreadable content is the kind of content that turns out to be "productive": It can initiate a positive process of circulation, sharing, and reelaboration among the online audiences. However, it seems oversimplistic to relate spreadability to quantitative metrics (i.e., number of impressions, likes). Spreadability should be also connected to the genre of the content—some genres such as parody or humor could be more "spreadable" than others—and to the kind of issuers portrayed in the social network videos. Moreover, online videos could be more or less appealing depending on the main characters or testimonials involved. Recently, the microcelebrity phenomenon on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram reveals that storytelling could be more successful when a young individual is involved as the main issuer, either as a real or a fictional testimonial (Senft, 2013). This enhances the opportunity for self-identification, recognition, and also for community building with other peers. In consideration of that, a more refined evaluation of social media storytelling should be envisaged, especially when online contents are delivered on sensitive topics or one's with an ethical purpose (Papacharissi, Lashley, & Creech, 2017). Such evaluation should integrate the quantitative metrics analysis with a qualitative inquiry aimed at identifying the narrative elements which resonate the most with the message displayed and the audience addressed.

Method: Evaluating the #hod Communication

Drawing from the research in the health-communication domain and the limits in the present CVE research, a new evaluation approach was deployed to assess the #hod communication. Between February and June 2018, the campaign underwent a validation process that ended before releasing the campaign publicly online. The evaluation focused on the MSV of the videos produced as well as on the alternative narrative storytelling deployed to contrast the jihadist propaganda. Two combined analysis methods were used: a revised version of the index used by Paek et al. (2010) to quantitatively measure the #hod videos'

[18] The term refers to online contents appealing to sensations and emotions.

MSV in terms of formal features (i.e., visual and sound effects) in comparison to other similar CVE online campaigns, and a qualitative inquiry aimed at collecting the target feedback on the MSV index identified and on the #hod social media storytelling.

Measuring the MSV of the #hod Videos

As mentioned previously, MSV can be defined as the degree to which formal and content audiovisual features of a televised message elicit sensory, affective, and arousal responses. The indicator was successfully used to evaluate TV adverts and campaigns; more recently, it was applied to YouTube video analysis in the health-communication field. To measure the impact of the #hod videos, we used the MSV index in comparison with other online projects sharing similar objectives. In the field of CVE initiatives, we chose some campaigns that had been previously analyzed (Monaci et al., 2017), and among them we selected a sample with some characteristics in common:

1. They are upstream campaigns: They are not meant to address a specific audience in a defined area but rather address a very broad youth target on an international level.
2. They are based on videos.
3. The videos are conceived to be published online.

In consideration of these criteria, we measured the MSV index of the #hod (Table 1) and Abdullah X (Table 2) campaign videos as they appeared on their website, as well as that of Average Mohamed (Table 3): We analyzed 17 videos of Abdullah X (*Media, Caliphs' Words, Propaganda, Media Hysteria, Abode of Dunya, Dodgy Dawah Syndrome, House Muslim VS Field M., Message to Muslim Youth, Journey Through Mankind 1, Journey through Mankind 2, #CharlieHebdo, Allah or Illuminati, Islamophobia, Islamism, Motives Behind Actions, Muslim on Syria*); seven videos of Average Mohamed (*A Muslim in the West, Be Like Aisha, Identity in Islam, Islam Against Slavery, The Bullet or the Ballot, SAVE the World, Car Homicide and Islam*), and seven videos of #hod (*Discrimination, Media War, Take a Stand, Reference Points, Identity, No Return, A New World*). All presented an alternative narrative communication and, like the #hod campaign, their targeted audience was Western youths.

The formal and content audiovisual features considered by the MSV index were coded in our evaluation following the method used by Paek et al. (2010) and adjusted to our evaluation approach. As mentioned previously, the MSV index was used to measure the videos' impact through their formal features, whereas the alternative narrative strategy was evaluated thanks to a qualitative inquiry. As a result, the MSV index used basically focused on the formal features (visual and sound) to assess the sensational value of the video messages. As introduced earlier, the theoretical premise is that the MSV categories related to the videos' formal features (sound and visual effects) can be analyzed independently from the specific video messages; this implies that those categories can be positively used to analyze the #hod videos, even if they focus on CVE rather than on antismoking contents. As a result, the MSV encompassed two categories and nine items: the visual category includes the number of cuts, visual effects, slow motion, bold or unusual colors, and intense imagery. The audio category includes sound saturation, background music, loud or fast music, and sound effects. Each item, except the number of the video-editing cuts, was coded as either 1 (present) or 0 (absent). The number of cuts was coded as either 0 (if 0–6 cuts were present), 1 (7–14 cuts),

or 2 (more than 15 cuts). Coded values for the nine elements were summed to create an MSV Index from 0 to 10 (0 being low and 10 being high). The following list describes in detail the variables used in the analysis of the different video campaigns:

1. Video and images category

    - Number of cuts: the number of times the camera cuts from one visual scene to the next. Converted to low (0–6), moderate (7–14), and high (more than 15) levels and coded as 0, 1, or 2.
    - Visual effects: anything beyond the range of human ability involving special visual effects.
    - Slow motion: the slowing of real-life action through technical intervention.
    - Bold or unusual colors: unusual colors outside the range of colors normally perceived in real life (Figure 2).
    - Intense images: intense or horrifying images, including needles going into arms, guns pointed at heads, or death (Figure 3).

2. Audio and music category

    - Sound saturation: background sound throughout the video clip, including street noise or other sounds, rather than a person simply talking throughout the video clip.
    - Background music: music to accompany the dialogue or action of the video clip.
    - Loud or fast music: the use of loud (compared with other sounds in the video clip) and fast (more than 120 beats per minute) music throughout the video clip.
    - Sound effects: unusual sounds (that could not have occurred in real life) heard in the video clip, including gongs and other noises.

According to these parameters, we analyzed the MSV of each video of #hod, Abdullah X and Average Mohammed campaign: we coded respectively 7, 17, 7 videos available on the campaigns' websites. Subsequently, we added up the average value of each parameter to get a comprehensive MSV of the whole campaign. As a final step, we compared the MSV value of the #hod videos with those of the other two campaigns analyzed. Furthermore, to ensure the reliability of the quantitative analysis, the coder conducted another coding of 25% of the data: She analyzed two videos of #hod (*Media War, No Return*), four videos of Abdullah X (*Propaganda, Islamism, Islamophobia, Abode of Dunya*), and two videos of Average Mohamed (*Be Like Aisha, Identity in Islam*). The percentage agreement with the original coding was about 95%.

Table 1. Heart of Darkness MSV.

	Title of Video							
	Discrimination	*Media War*	*Take a Stand*	*Reference Points*	*Identity*	*No Return*	*A New World*	Average
Video/Image								
Number of cuts	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	1.7143
Visual effects	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Slow motion	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.2857
Bold or unusual colors	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Intense images	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0.5714
Audio/music								
Sound saturation	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Background music	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Loud/fast music	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Sound effects	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0.8571
MSV	9	9	9	9	8	8	6	8.4286

Figure 2. Bold and unusual colors in the* Media War *video, #hod.

Table 2. Abdullah X MSV.

	Title of Video																	
	Media	*Caliphs' Words*	*Propaganda*	*Media Hysteria*	*Abode of Duna*	*Dodgy Dawayh Syndrome*	*House Muslim VS Field M.*	*Message to Muslim Youth*	*Journey Through Mankind 1*	*JTM 2*	*#CharlieHebdo*	*Allah or Illuminati*	*Knowing Your Place*	*Islamophobia*	*Islamism*	*Motives Behind Actions*	*Muslim on Syria*	Average
Video/Image																		
Number of cuts	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.1176
Visual effects	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Slow motion	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bold or unusual colors	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Intense images	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.1176
Audio/ music																		
Sound saturation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	0.4118
Background music	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0.1765
Loud/fast music	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sound effects	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
MSV	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	6	3	5	5	4	4	5	4	3.8235

Table 3. Average Mohamed MSV.

	Title of Video							
	A Muslim in the West	*Be Like Aisha*	*Identity in Islam*	*Islam Against Slavery*	*The Bullet or the Ballot*	*SAVE the World*	*Car Homicide and Islam*	Average
Video/Image								
Number of cuts	2	2	1	2	2	0	0	1.2857
Visual effects	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Slow motion	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bold or unusual colors	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Intense images	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0.5714
Audio/music								
Sound saturation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0.1429
Background music	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0.1429
Loud/fast music	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sound effects	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
MSV	6	5	4	6	8	4	3	5.1429

Figure 3. Intense images in* Islam Against Slavery *video, Average Mohamed.

MSV Analysis Results

As highlighted previously, the MSV indicator has been successfully developed to classify the appeal of broadcast awareness video campaigns on substance abuse. The basic idea is that high MSV values, corresponding to a high level of sensationalism due to music, special effects, or colors, characterize a greater involvement of the viewers—especially youngsters—because they could stimulate the processes and the cognitive response. As a result, the CVE videos analyzed very different values in terms of visual and sound impact.

In relation to the #hod campaign, the collected data show the video consistency, especially in terms of use of colors, editing rhythm, and special effects. Clip links and framing within the campaign are particularly important for coherence. The sound elements also have excellent results and homogeneity; the rap video *A New World* differs from the others because it is based on an original authored song and therefore has a different audio setting.[19] The only parameter below average is the slow motion one, but this is due to a stylistic choice: It can be integrated if it is functional to the storytelling. By adding up the means of each parameter, we can estimate the total MSV value of 8.4286. Considering that the maximum value obtainable is 10, we can state that it is a very high level. Moreover, the magnitude of this parameter is scalable and applicable to any video campaign: We are now able to directly compare different campaigns in terms of sensational impact.

Abdullah X is a YouTube video series presenting the reflections of a fictional character—Abdullah X—who represent a former foreign fighter who left Syria to return to his home country. The campaign addresses young would-be foreign fighters in Europe, offering them insightful views related to critical issues such as freedom of speech, faith, friendship, and loyalty. The videos are in 2-D animation, but often lack dynamism: Many of them focus solely on the main character speaking and on sound elements. By summing the means of each parameter, we can estimate a total MSV value of 3.8235. Considering this parameter on a scale from 0–10, we can state that it is a rather low value and definitely lower than the MSV of our reference campaign #hod

The Average Mohamed campaign is articulated on a website, and its videos are also posted on a YouTube channel. The topics discussed are similar to those of Abdullah X, but here they are described through strong images lightened by the graphic style. At the end of each video, the protagonist, along with other characters, sends the same positive claim. This project, like the previous one, uses animated graphics, but in a more varied and lively way. The audio dimension is underdeveloped, as in the former sample. By adding up the means of each parameter we can estimate a total MSV value of 5.1429. We can consider this MSV value to be in the average, but it is still lower than #hod's.

In consideration of the data collected, is it possible to assess the MSV of #hod as the highest: The #hod videos are quantitatively more impactful in terms of their formal features compared with the other CVE initiatives analyzed. Drawing from this quantitative measure, we presented the collected results to a sample target of expert stakeholders as well as to a group of at-risk youths to collect their individual opinions about the MSV quantitative indicator. As mentioned before, the evaluation approach intended to also

[19] The rap song *A New World* was written and recorded by the Italian rapper Marco Zuliani ("ZULI").

combine qualitative feedback from a target sample with the participatory approach deployed in the different phases of the campaign design and implementation. The qualitative feedback provided useful insights on the second aspect of the communication strategy: the #hod storytelling.

Evaluating the Feedback of the Sample Target on the MSV and #hod Storytelling

As highlighted elsewhere (Monaci et al., 2017), the entire design process, which led to the definition of the video contents, was inspired by a qualitative and participatory design approach. Participatory design is a design thinking method that includes the final target, through qualitative methods, in a metareflexive analysis about the present and future: People are asked not only to express their opinions and beliefs about what actually is the present but also to think about how the future could be, by designing products, services, or experiences. It can be considered a qualitative ethnographic analysis with a predictive aim (Taddeo, 2011). In the first phase of the SAFFRON project (2016), a set of five focus groups involving both expert stakeholders (scholars, journalists, practitioners, religious authorities, etc.) and at-risk youngsters were put together to explore and to map the motivations for violent radicalization among youngsters and the related narratives exploited by ISIS to recruit them. In 2016, a total of 47 subjects gave their opinions about how an online campaign should look like to involve the targeted audience of would-be foreign fighters. As a result, the research team designed and produced the video campaign #hod, by drawing from the opinions, suggestions and practical advice collected from the sample. To evaluate the outcome of such a participatory effort, we adopted the same qualitative approach this time involving a subgroup of the original sample.

The Sample Target of the #hod Campaign

Between April and May 2018, we involved a selected sample of youngsters (See Figure 4) in Turin and Grenoble (n = 18; three female, 15 male, age range: 17–32 years) and experts (See Figure 5) on an international level (n = 8): two Imams, four experts in the field of security and jihadist radicalization (professionals and academics), and two cultural mediators belonging to the civil society associations involved in the project. As in 2016, the youth sample had been chosen according to the foreign fighter sociodemographic profile identified in the previous research phase and, in particular, based on the fact that they were second- or third-generation immigrants from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, or political refugees from Chechnya, or European-born citizens converted to the Muslim faith, or European university students, or secondary school students. As in 2016, the selected sample was identified thanks to the support of the three associations that proposed a group of young individuals as at-risk subjects already in the first phase.[20] With regard to the experts' sample, the subjects had already been involved in the SAFFRON project in the role of advisors or consultants in the domain of the religious issues related to the phenomenon. Figures 3 and 4 present the general profile of the two samples involved.

[20] The associations involved are COREIS—Turin (Religious Community of Converts to Islam); ASAI—Turin (Association of Intercultural Entertainment); Le Plateau Mistral—Grenoble (Centre for Cultural Encounter).

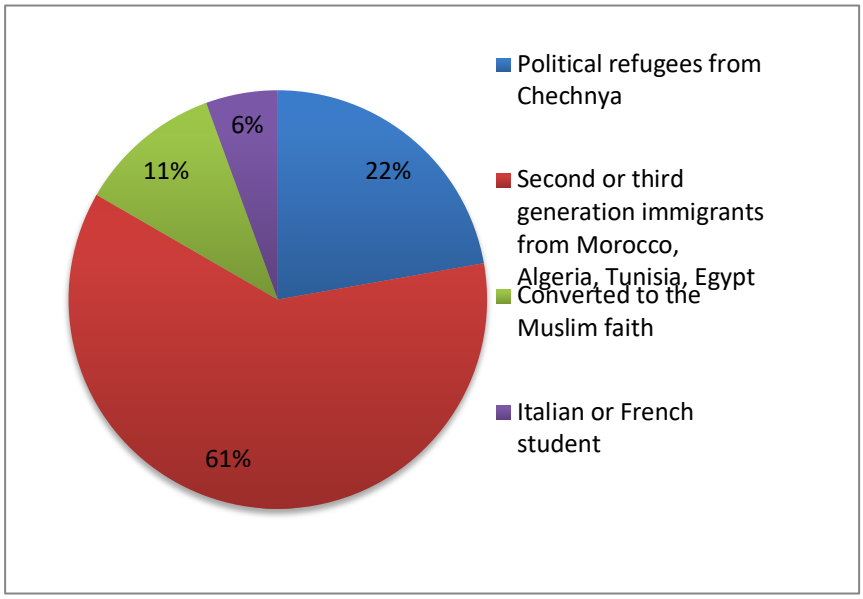

Figure 4. Youth sample profile (n = 18).

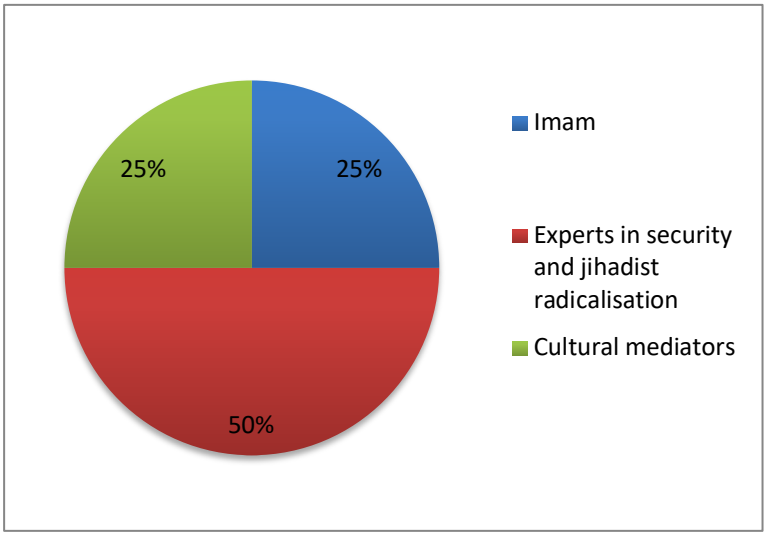

Figure 5. The experts' sample (n = 8).

Focus Group Activities

In line with the participatory approach already implemented in the design phase, we organized three focus groups. The first focus group was held in Turin, Italy, and involved eight individuals (five male, three female, age range: 17–31 years): two Italian-born citizens converted to the Muslim faith, five second-generation immigrants from Morocco and Egypt, and one Italian secondary school student. The second focus group was held in Grenoble, France, and involved 10 youngsters (males, age range 18–32 years): four political refugees from Chechnya, five second-generation immigrants from Tunisia and Algeria, and one French university student. The third focus was held on Skype connecting seven experts (males): two Imams, three experts, and two cultural mediators in Grenoble. The focus groups were articulated similarly, following three stages:

1. Presentation of the #hod videos on the campaign website.
2. Presentation of the MSV analysis results related to the different CVE video campaigns.
3. Roundtable moderated by the research team on the following topics: the MSV of the #hod videos according to their individual perceptions; their opinions about the storytelling in terms of video duration, narrative style, fictional characters, testimonials involved also in consideration of their future publication on Facebook and Twitter. Subsequently, a considerable amount of time was devoted to collecting the sample opinions about the dialectic storytelling: Do they consider it effective to deploy a credible alternative narrative able to contrast that of ISIS in relation to the foreign fighter phenomenon?

Focus Group Results Analysis

As highlighted above, the #hod MSV is significantly high: The sensational impact of the videos expressed through intense images and audiovisual effects is quantitatively more significant for #hod than for the other CVE campaigns analyzed. Along with the quantitative indicator, our focus groups wanted to investigate more qualitatively whether the higher MSV would resonate with the perception of our sample target of youths and experts. In relation with the sound and visual categories, the feedback of the youngsters was positive, even if some of the interviewees described the initial introductory phrases—presented both in audio and textual form—as not very engaging:

"Great quality videos, graphics . . . audio, images, good technique" (U., second gen., male, 23).

"When there's the reader at the beginning and at the end, maybe the voice seems a bit too . . . I mean it seems like the PC reading a text, it's not that touching" (G., second gen., female, 19).

Moreover, we wanted to verify if the high MSV would support or rather overshadow the alternative narrative messages of the videos. As a result, the sample appreciated the emotional impact of music, considered as an effective way to develop a counterpropaganda message. The experts also expressed positive feedback about the intensity of the videos and the aim of the message:

"To be effective, a counterpropaganda must be able to speak to people's hearts. Emotional content is preferable. For example, music. The video spot with the RAP is very effective for this reason" (J., second gen., male, 26).

"They're very high-quality videos and they carry a strong message. . . . The one about media war is really emotionally strong" (G., expert in security, male, 29).

With reference to the storytelling and the real or fictional characters portrayed in the videos, we identified a general consensus among the youths of the story and the experiences represented by young individuals—Muslims, converts, or refugees—who offered an immediate means of identification and recognition.

"Videos that present testimonies of young people are very effective. Young people must be able to identify themselves in video messages. 'Recognize yourself' is considered the most effective narrative strategy" (M., second gen., female, 17).

Nevertheless, someone complained about the fact that, given #hod's goal, the campaign did not involve any religious authority:

"The contents and the videos are effective for a European target. There's a problem of reliance for anyone who is not a European citizen. It would be appropriate to involve a recognized authority in delivering the message" (U., second gen., male, 23).

The last phase of the focus group was devoted to analyzing the videos dialectic storytelling and its efficacy to present a significant alternative narrative. On the topic of discrimination, for example, the first video describes the fictional experience of Omar, a taxi driver in Barcelona, who suffers several discrimination related to his traditional Muslim appearance (djellaba, long beard, etc.). The video highlights Omar's anger and concerns related to his job: customers avoid hiring his cab and he is also forced to leave his gym because of complaints put forward by the other members. This first video sensationalizes Omar's growing frustration and the appeal of ISIS arguments as a subtle form of revenge (Figure 6).

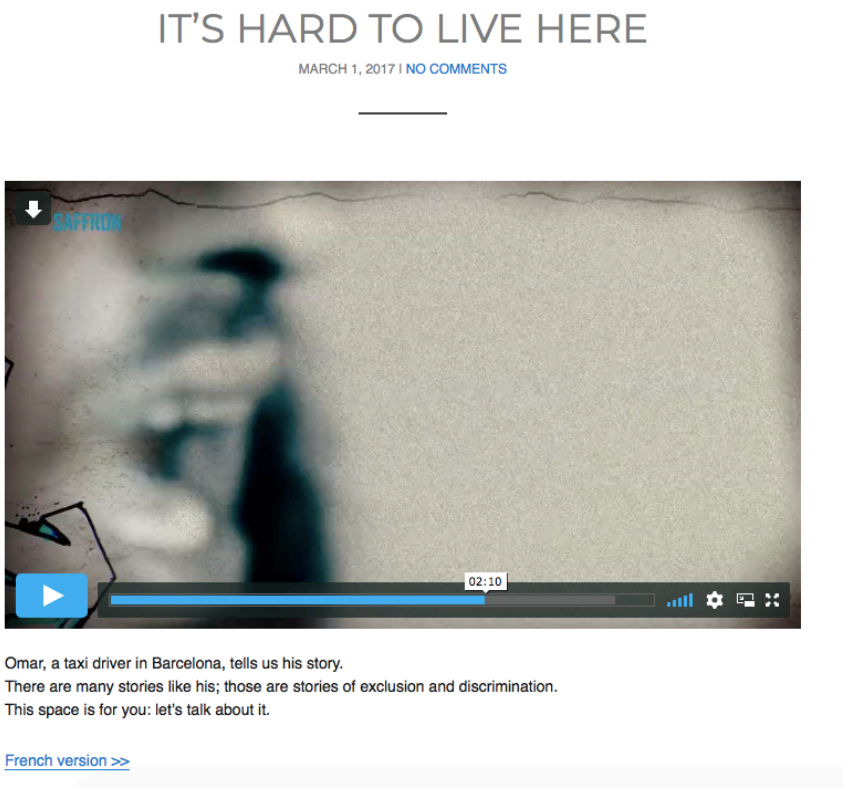

Figure 6. Omar's growing anger in the discrimination video.
Source*: https://player.vimeo.com/video/269595369*

The storytelling climaxes with Omar's desire to join the brothers in Syria as the ultimate response to the discrimination suffered at home. After this first engaging sequence, a second linked video follows, presenting a different perspective on Discrimination: A young representative of the Balun Mondial association[21] recounts the opportunities and the potentials of football as a means for social and cultural integration among different nationalities, religions, educational backgrounds and so on.

[21] Balun Mundial is a nonprofit organization based in Turin, Italy, that uses sport as a tool for empowering individuals and communities against different forms of discrimination (www.balunmondial.it).

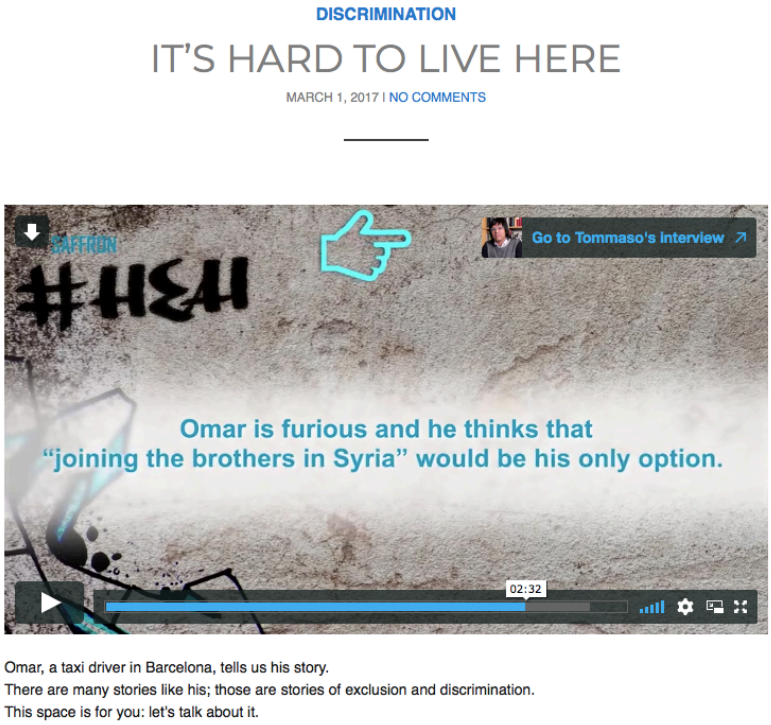

Figure 7. The hypertextual link to the second video.
Source*: https://player.vimeo.com/video/268580855*

Through the Balun Mondial experience, the video wishes to offer an alternative perspective on the discrimination issues experienced by many young refugees and immigrants in Europe: it is not meant as a solution, but as a realistic and reasonable narrative which shows concrete opportunities for integration, social bonding and cultural exchange (Figure 7). As a result, the #hod alternative narrative communication evolves around this dialectic storytelling. The first part is meant to tell a story, an individual experience—fictional or real—that many youngsters can easily identify with; the second part tends to involve society as a whole—through the contributions of academics and practitioners—and aims to offer a different critical perspective to the motivations leading to violent radicalization. The sample appreciated the two videos linking to one another with their different style and emotional impact: They considered them as functional to address different type of audience with different degree of attention and commitment to the content. In addition, the explanatory sentences which anticipated and concluded the videos were considered as useful aids for content fruition. In general, the dialectic storytelling had been considered effective both to deliver the alternative narrative's ethical messages and to engage youths online. The involvement of real testimonials and young peers has been highly appreciated as a successful way to trigger the identification and recognition of individuals:

"It's well explained. You have the message and then the explanation of the message. . . . In this way people can watch the first video and then leave the page while the others who didn't get the meaning may keep on watching the second part to understand the message better" (J., political refugee., male, 19).

"If I see a 15 minutes preachy content on YouTube I won't watch it entirely, but if I see just a first part of 4 minutes, . . . well after that I'm more keen on seeing also the preachy part" (J., political refugee, male, 17).

"It's a real alternative narrative" (F., cultural mediator, male, 37).

"I liked the informal tone of the videos mixed with the academic style of some experts. It resonates with multiple voices and social backgrounds" (M., cultural mediator, male, 24).

Conclusions

This article presents a new potential approach to evaluating CVE storytelling. This involved two main dimensions—the formal features and the storytelling of the videos—in a mixed-method approach based on a quantitative indicator, the MSV, and a qualitative participatory inquiry. This combined method highlighted positive feedback in relation to #hod, both when measured through the MSV quantitative index and when analyzed through a qualitative approach. However, the MSV quantitative approach presents some shortcomings: The topics related to the two categories (visual and audio) are coded by a simple 1 versus 0 value, referring to their presence or absence in the videos analyzed. This approach, based on Paek et al.'s (2010) model, considers the presence, for example, of horrifying images (needles, blood, etc.), as a positive measure per se of the image intensity. That turns out to be a kind of "self -referencing" coding approach and it lacks the reliability provided by an intercode measurement comparison. To provide a more reliable measurement, further researchers should then code topics such as intensity and vividness through a more extensive intercode comparison.

With regard to the storytelling, the qualitative inquiry emphasized the subjective perceptions of #hod's alleged audience: This should be enhanced, not overshadowed, by the media's sensational features. In other terms, the MSV alone might not be a significant indicator of successful communication. The MSV should also be verified and debated empirically to assess its value with regard to the storytelling strategy and its envisaged audience. In this regard, #hod was appreciated as a "subject centered" campaign that places the young individuals at the center of the narratives; this helped the sample target to identify with the issuers of the messages. Moreover, the sample appreciated how the two videos linked to one another with their different styles and emotional impact; they considered them to be functional to address different types of audience with varying degrees of attention and commitment to the content. Attention is a scarcity on social network sites: This makes it more difficult to suggest online ethical messages that require time and a cognitive effort on behalf of the viewer. A possible solution could be to introduce very short awareness videos as Web interstitials—that is to say, sponsored adverts inserted for 15 seconds at the beginning of popular videos on YouTube.[22] Interstitials force users to watch the awareness-raising messages before the

[22] https://www.marketingterms.com/dictionary/interstitial/

videos they choose. This could be one way to present CVE messages to be considered, as it may catch the attention of youngsters, even for a short period of time.

In consideration of the limited sample and the focus on the #hod campaign, it is difficult to generalize our results on a theoretical level; nevertheless, our qualitative work shows that the high MSV of the #hod videos could be positively related to the efficacy of the storytelling perceived by the focus group's sample. Further research should also expand the scope of this analysis to include other extremisms such as ecoterrorism, far-right extremism, and so on, with a broader comparative approach, including multiple online initiatives, available also in languages other than English, and a wider sample on a global level.

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