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The Use of Counter Narratives as a Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) Communications-Based Measure: A Study of Muslim-American Undergraduate Students in Universities and Colleges in California

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ABSTRACT

THE USE OF COUNTER NARRATIVES AS A PREVENTION AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM (P/CVE) COMMUNICATIONS-BASED MEASURE: A STUDY OF MUSLIM-AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES IN CALIFORNIA

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The purpose of this study is to contribute to efforts on countering violent extremism and radicalization. This research study measured attitudes towards violent extremist groups and the appeal of violent extremist ideologies among Muslim-American undergraduate students in universities and colleges in California. The target sample group for the study was drawn from Muslim-American undergraduate students from a university and community college within the state. The sample constituted 20 participants, comprised of four focus groups with 5 student respondents each. The researcher used the nomination process to identify participants from the target population. As part of the study's methodology, a counter-narrative video from The International Center for the Studies of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) was given to the study participants and their responses recorded. The study findings show that the participants had little knowledge of terror organizations, appreciated the dangers of radicalization, and saw the necessity of counternarratives in countering radicalization. After watching the counternarrative video, the participants identified its effectiveness in portraying the negativity of the VE group in question. The findings demonstrate use of counternarratives could be effective in combating radicalization and sensitizing young people against VE involvement.

Keywords: terrorism, counter-narratives, extremism, counter violent extremism, insurgence, radicalization

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since September 11, 2001, the public's awareness of efforts to counter violent extremism has increased. Words such as violent extremism, homegrown terrorism, and terror cells have become part of the common language on the nightly news and in popular discourse. The events of September 11, 2001 remain vivid in the memory of many Americans because it tremendously affected every aspect of life. Since 9/11, the United States and other countries affected by terrorism continue to seek effective approaches of preventing further attacks. For many scholars, including McBride (2011), terrorism is an ideological problem that must be tackled using ideological solutions as opposed to the military-based approaches that have dominated most of security spending in the US. Given that youth and young adults are more vulnerable to radicalized messaging and recruitment, it is essential to focus interventions on those who engage most with youth who are at risk to participate in violent extremism. Greater vigilance is needed in our communities to help individuals in the realm of preventative efforts. The purpose of this study is to contribute to efforts to counter violent extremism and radicalization. This research study explored attitudes towards violent extremist groups and the appeal of violent extremist ideologies among Muslim-American undergraduate students in Universities and colleges in California.

Today, the threat of terrorism remains high as America's continued involvement in Iraq and Syria against ISIS/ISIL and other insurgence groups renders the US vulnerable to retaliatory terrorist attacks (Heydemann, 2014). The 9/11 attack inspired significant overhauls in the security apparatus of the United States, including. Despite these changes, the US remains a target for terrorist organizations. The understanding of *terrorism as an ideology* is therefore important in informing further changes designed to solve the problem of terrorism and insurgence in

general (Gunaratna, 2006). In this context, this study seeks to explore the use of counter narratives in preventing the effects of violent extremism in America. According to Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski (2017), words such as violent extremism, homegrown terrorism, and terror cells have become normalized language in mainstream media. The multidimensional effect of the media in preventing and propagating extremist ideologies is one piece of evidence supporting the understanding of terrorism as a construct of ideology.

There are a number of factors and pressures that are perceived to serve as precipitators for violent extremism. According to Heydemann (2014), these pressures include: "social marginalization and fragmentation, poorly governed or ungoverned areas; government repression and human rights violations; endemic corruption and elite impunity…cultural threat perceptions…access to material resources, and social status among others" (p. 2). Examining the factors that cause terrorism or which may subject particular populations to terrorism and radicalization is critically important. This is a subject of interest to this research because the same way that radicalization changes the attitude, behavior and belief system of targeted individuals, is the same way counter-narrative methodology employed by this research seeks to prevent radicalization.

Background of the Study

According to Smith and Zeigler (2017), terrorism is a social problem that has existed for a long time. On September 11, 2001, the United States suffered what remains to be the most destructive terrorist attacks within its borders. An inquiry into this particular attack unraveled the rigorous planning that took place years before the day of the attack. While America's first response targeted its security framework and intelligence systems, it was evident that the attack was an ideology that had been perceived years before (Hoffman, 2002). After the 9/11 attacks,

counterterrorism became a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. In response to the global war on terror, the U.S. has engaged military action and authorized the use of force in a number of countries that have been havens for terrorist organizations (Fink, 2014). Iraq and Afghanistan became the most targeted nations following the investigation that revealed the identities of the attackers.

For the purpose of this research, there is need to conceptualize the war on terror as a global threat by virtue of the similarities in terrorist activities and threats faced by other nations in South Asia, North Africa, Trans-Saharan Africa, Middle East, and East Africa among other regions (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2006). In what Snow (2011) refers to as the "information war", since September 11, 2001, public awareness of efforts to counter violent extremism has increased. This is because the government recognizes the important role played by the public in forging a culture of public vigilance and response towards potential attacks. This particular attack is clear evidence that aggression as employed by the military actions of the U.S. against terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria is problematic because it attracts similar approaches in the form of retaliatory attacks. There is a need for a more comprehensive approach that view the terrorism as a social problem (Boyns & Ballard, 2004). This study and others like it investigate alternative solutions to the threat of terrorism, and they are inspired by the failures of the current approaches employed by the United States and other nations combating terrorism. ISIL is the current face of terrorism and is an organization that attributes its success to media-based propaganda and the popularization of an ideology that helps it recruit fighters (Gömöri, 2015). This shows that terrorism has also evolved – a realization that necessitates a change of strategy when combating terrorism.

One of the methods of combating terrorism is the use of narratives that oppose terrorism. There are three major types of narratives. The first is alternative narratives, which refer to the content that promotes social values, tolerance of diverse peoples and their views, freedom, democracy, and openness. According to Silverman et al. (2016), this type of counternarratives provides "a positive alternative to extremist propaganda," which encourages the consumers to appreciate the values and principles being promoted. The second type is counternarratives, which are the narratives that directly counter violent extremist (VE) messages. Gemmerli (2015) explained two further types off counternarratives – direct counter-narratives and critical reflection. Direct counter-narratives are the category which squares up to the ideology and lifestyle of extremism (Garry et al., 2020). Critical reflection enhances the individuals' digital competence to diminish their perception of the attractiveness of extremism (Gemmerli, 2015). The final type of narratives includes the strategic communications from the government, which provides the government policy on terrorism and misinformation.

The rise of American extremism in the age of social media makes young undergraduates the most viable targets for extremist ideologies (Kurzman, 2017). This justifies the choice of an undergraduate student population in universities and colleges in California for this study. Furthermore, there are various categories of leaders in community college and university settings who will benefit from the research into the use of counternarratives to combat terrorism among the undergraduate student population. The first category includes the diversity officers on campuses, whose major roles are to lead diversity initiatives to promote more inclusive environments on campus (Grim et al., 2019). These officers will benefit from the findings through the use of the research findings to execute student diversity initiatives while dispelling the rise of terrorism.

The second category of leaders are the student affairs professionals, who are usually tasked with the role of reaching out and engaging students on activities on campus, fostering racial inclusivity, and providing supportive environments for minority students (Arroyo et al., 2017). These professionals could use the information from the research to engage students on issues regarding extremism and to sensitize them against radicalization. The third category of leaders counseling and psychological services professionals on campus, who provide preventive interventions and provide management services for various mental illnesses (Nash et al., 2017). These professionals could use counternarratives to provide appropriate counseling against radicalization to encourage tolerance and inclusivity. The last category of campus leaders are the university police, who provide protection for the campuses and the people on them. As Dresser (2019) explained, in the process of gathering intelligence regarding radicalization and terrorism on campus, the police can also use counternarratives to combat the process of radicalization among the students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of counter-narratives in counteracting the appeal of violent extremist ideologies that target students in Universities and colleges in California. I conduct a comprehensive literature review in what counter-narratives are and their effect on different people. A counter-narrative video from an organization called the International Center for the Studies of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) was be used as part of the focus group discussions with a sample population of Muslim-American undergraduate students at two universities and two community colleges in California. The objective of this study is to advance knowledge on the potential of counter-narratives in combating terrorism. By choosing a

research population in the United States, this study seeks to address contextualized ideologies of extremism that are directed towards the young Muslim population in the country.

Research Questions

The following research question was pursued by this study: How do Muslim American undergraduate students describe the effectiveness of counternarrative videos for curbing recruitment to violent extremism?

Significance

This study seeks to establish a niche within the solution framework for terrorism in the United States and other parts of the world. Since 9/11, studies on terrorism and national security have increased as scholars utilize the research platform to examine approaches, theoretical models that are geared towards improving knowledge on the subject and more importantly, delivering a solution for the global threat that terrorism presents. According to Gaibulloev and Sandler (2019), research since 9/11 has contributed to a better understanding of what terrorism is and potential approaches to addressing the problem. Therefore, the professional contribution that this research seeks to make is to reinforce the importance and effectiveness of counter-narratives in combating extremism. In essence, this research will not only demonstrate how counternarratives can be implemented in student populations to counter the effect of extremism, but also add to the knowledge available about terrorism.

The results of this study will be of great value to the government because it will feed into current efforts by the government to promote a sociocultural environment that cushions young Americans from extremism. While the United States has not suffered a similar attack as the 9/11, the effect of radicalization has introduced lone wolf terrorism in America (Hamm & Spaaij, 2015). The advent of this type of terrorism makes radicalization a much greater threat to the

United States than any other organized terrorist activity. As highlighted by Spaaij and Hamm (2015), it widens the scope of who can be targeted to accomplish the objectives of these terrorist organizations and what opportunities for attack exist. Therefore, the findings of the study will inform policy changes at the government level to create and aggressively push counternarrative content in the targeted proactive communication strategy that the government will adopt. Moreover, the findings of the study will inform the strategy that the government and higher education institutions will create to meet the narrative needs of each segment of the targeted population.

A significant proportion of research work on terrorism is reactive as opposed to proactive. This is reflective of an existing gap in research and knowledge about the cycle of terrorism that would help in preventing and mitigating its effects. Contemporary scholars must invest time and effort in proactive approaches to terrorism because it helps to prevent instead of mitigating effects of terrorism. This research assumes a proactive approach in inspiring action from the government to promote the use of counter-narratives in preventing radicalization and terrorism. As a result, the findings of this study will be strategic in guiding institutions of higher education, government agencies, and civil society to develop prevention and intervention counter narratives designed to curb violent extremism.

Overview of the Methodology

The research captured the thoughts, emotions, feelings, and feedback from participants and give them a chance to have discussions that are relevant to the research question. The most appropriate data collection methodology that establishes a platform for the accomplishment of these objectives is the use focus groups. According to Denscombe (2007), “a focus group consists of a small group of people, usually between six and nine in number, who are brought

together by a trained moderator (the researcher) to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic" (p. 115). The proposed study employed focus groups with representatives of the target student population. The first step in this study involved a comprehensive literature review to establish context for this study within the research gap that exists in proactive approaches to preventing terrorism and insurgence in general. The literature review provides a detailed analysis of various counter-narratives. The proposed study will establish a platform of interaction for participants within the focus groups. The participants were exposed to the counter narratives and their responses to the narratives were evaluated.

The sample group for this research was drawn from a population of Muslim American students in California. The simple random sampling strategy was used to select participants from the identified population of Muslim American students. This sampling strategy is effective if the targeted population is sectioned as required to ensure that all participants randomly selected from a given section exhibit the required characteristics. In this case, American Muslims are the subject of radicalization and extremist campaigns by terrorist organizations as a result of their religious alignment. In fact, Lyons-Padilla and colleagues highlight that Muslim immigrants in the United States are at a great risk of marginalization and radicalization (Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq, & Van Egmond, 2015). In recognition of this fact, this research identified a student population, section the population based on religion, and use a random sampling technique to identify candidates for the focus groups. Due to the distribution of Muslim minorities in California, this research study targeted multiple institutions of higher learning to achieve the generalization required to make this study valuable and applicable in other settings.

Data collected from this study was used to compare reactions, beliefs, and attitudes before, during, and after the participants have been exposed to the counter-narrative videos and

ISIS-produced recruitment videos. Evaluating the attitudes and beliefs of the participants beforehand was very important in initializing the research. It is important to ensure that the selected participants have no previous contact with terrorist organizations or that they have not been radicalized. Prior engagement with radical or extremist media content can have an impact on attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, this study made note of these exposures in the first data collection procedure as this was used to make comparisons with participant reactions, beliefs and attitudes after being exposed to the counter-narratives video. The final data collection process sought to ascertain the residual effect of the counter-narrative videos on the beliefs and attitudes of the participants. In essence, this research investigated the very first phase of radicalization trajectory as discussed by Klausen, Libretti, Hung, and Jayasumana (2018). It is from these exposures that terrorist organizations are able to radicalize young Muslim Americans, therefore, understanding the influence process as objectified in this study will help in solving the problem from its roots.

Delimitations

The participants in this study included male and female students who voluntarily provided their perspectives on radicalization, recruitment to ISIS and counter-narratives. The influence process involves an array of reactions and interactions that take place before an exposure translates to violent behavior are known. The study cannot expose the underlying influences that may explain the relationship between exposure to counter-narratives or recruitment videos and extremist behavior. As a result of this inability to link the two variables, this research employs a number of assumptions regarding the radicalization process. The pathways to radicalization as captured by research on terrorism are characterized by assumptions that weaken the models used (Borum, 2017). Secondly, the implications of a given exposure on

attitude and belief is a gradual process, which may depend on personality and age among other factors. This means that the effect of the counter-narrative video on one participant may differ with that of another participant. However, given that the development of attitudes and beliefs take variable amounts of time, this research is at a disadvantage because all participants were subjected to similar timelines of recording their reactions and emotional changes.

According to Lind (2017), attitude change is a transition that takes varied amounts of time depending on personality, nature of stimuli and intent. This means that it is possible for an individual to resist the changes and responses targeted in this research. Furthermore, this study relies on observable responses as well as those that can be communicated by the participants. However, given that these are indicators that can be manipulated by the individuals themselves, the reliability of participant responses was one of the delimitations of this study. There is no way that this research can account for the truthfulness of participant submissions regarding how the videos influenced their attitudes, beliefs and resolutions. The probability of deception by research participants is a potential limitation of this study because data collection is dependent on the responses provided by the participants (Resnik & McCann, 2015).

Definition of Key Terms

Counter-Narrative. A message designed to counter extremist propaganda by deconstructing and delegitimizing narratives created and used by terrorist organizations to recruit and radicalize people.

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). As postulated by Fink (2014), it "entails a broader range of prevention efforts including initiatives by social workers, educators, and development actors, which traditional security actors may not consider in relation to counterterrorism" (p. 6).

International Center for the Studies of Violent Extremism (ICSVE). As highlighted in its website, ICSVE is an "action based, interdisciplinary, research center working on psychosocial, cultural, political, economic, ideological, and technological topics impacting global peace and security" (ICSVE, 2019).

Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). An established terrorist organization, based in Syria and parts of Iraq, that employs propaganda videos and videos of beheadings and other forms of execution to influence extremist reactions from radicalized individuals.

Non-Violent Extremists. Radicalized individuals who advance their perceptions, viewpoints, and ideologies through non-violent strategies.

Radicalization. Consistent with the highlights of Schuurman and Taylor (2018, p. 9), radicalization is defined as, "the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and extremist ideologies associated with terrorist groups."

Terrorism. According to Ruby (2002, p. 1) and in reference to Title 22 of the U.S. Code, terrorism is defined as "politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."

Violent Extremists. Radicalized individuals who are willing to engage in violent acts, provide material support for acts of terrorism, or to abet terrorism through non-intervention.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Terrorism, with its far-reaching effects including the loss of lives and wealth, has grown to be a major concern around the world. In the United States, the events following the 9/11 attacks have contributed to the understanding of terrorist ideologies and the extremist views that drive individuals to launch attacks. Gaibulloev and Sandler (2019) underscore some of the lessons that the government has learned from the events leading up to and after the 9/11 attacks. One of the lessons that have arisen following the conduction of research into terrorism is the usefulness of counter-narratives in fighting terrorism (Belanger et al., 2020), A narrative is a convincing storyline that elaborates an event or an idea with such authority that the audience can make inferences from it (Garry et al., 2020). Thus, by definition, counter-narratives refer to the messages that provide "a positive alternative to extremist propaganda," with the ultimate aim of deconstructing extremist views within a population (Silverman et al., 2016).

Counter-narratives become essential because of the existing volumes of extremist propaganda already in circulation over the Internet and other media outlets. Speckhard and Shajkovci (2018) explain that jihadist groups and other extremists have mounted several social media campaigns and have used various platforms to spread terrorist propaganda to recruit new members or to garner support for their activities. The strategy has been widely accepted and used in diverse systems, with governments, policymakers, and other international organizations championing for their use in countering extremism especially among the youth (Hemmingsen & Castro, 2017). The effectiveness of this strategy makes it a viable option for countering the effects of extremism among college-going students, who are widely targeted by terrorist organizations. Counterterrorism can especially be useful in the fight against lone-wolf terrorism, which has gained popularity and has led to the public murder of hundreds of Americans in the

post-9/11 era (Hamm & Spaaij, 2015). This literature review explores current perspectives of the youth on terrorism, the concept of counter-narratives, and how it can be beneficial to combating radicalization, extremism, and terrorism perpetrated by the youth who are registered for undergraduate degree programs.

Susceptibility of the Youth and Undergraduate Students to Radicalization

Radicalization, which is the process through which individuals gain extremist views and ideologies on political, social, and religious matters, occurs gradually with far-reaching effects (Reynolds & Tuck, 2016). From an examination of the prospects of radicalization among Pakistani youth, Yusuf (2011) reports how militant outfits made inroads into the country after the 9/11 attacks, with the result being the increase in the number of individuals with extremist and pro-violent ideologies. The author mentions that the occurrence of various events at both the national and international scene contribute to the regression towards radical Islamic ideology (Yusuf, 2011). The population that is particularly targeted by pro-violent and extremist groups are the young, particularly those aged below 24 years (Helmus et al., 2020). In the American context, most of the individuals that are enrolled for undergraduate programs belong to this age bracket. While radicalization does not only result from Muslim extremism – the radicalization of American youth has contributed to the rise of lone-wolf terrorism in the country (Hamm & Spaaij, 2015) – some of the most active groups in radicalizing the youth are the Muslims who use their extremist ideologies to promote violence and intolerance against certain members of society (Yusuf, 2011). Therefore, Muslim youth are, in most cases, the targets of radical militant groups.

Influential Factors in Undergraduate Student Radicalization

There are various mechanisms through which radical groups exploit the vulnerability of youth. Yusuf (2011) explains two mechanisms: supply-side and demand-side dimensions. On the supply side, the author explains that the vulnerable individuals are "pushed" towards radicalization whereas, on the demand side, they get "pulled" in by the presence of militant groups that have causes that they can easily join (Yusuf, 2011). The "push" factors include the failure to develop a sense of inequality from a socioeconomic perspective, a positive religious identity, the formation of beliefs and convictions regarding the violent extremist cause or the passionate support for specific movements, and the existence of a perceived spiritual call to eliminate immorality from the world.

In a study investigating the radicalization of Dutch Muslim youth, Doosje, Loseman, and Bos (2013) explain the three major factors that enable the radicalization process. The factors include individuals' personal uncertainties, the perception of injustice in society – such as the mistreatment of Muslims, and a perceived group threat (Doosje, Loseman, & Bos, 2013). The examples of perceptions that arise from the push factors include the feeling of being disconnected from society, the perception of the superiority of Islam above all other religions, or the perception that the established government authorities are illegitimate. One of the major driving factors influencing immigrants' radicalization process is the feeling of being marginalized and having no sense of belonging. According to Lyons-Padilla et al. (2015), the cultural identity of an individual plays a crucial role in their radicalization. From a study of immigrants from the Middle East and other Islam-dominant countries who have settled in the US and Europe, the authors find that the immigrants who re unable to identify with either their heritage culture or the culture in their country of residence have a feeling of marginalization and

insignificance (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015). Radicalism, then, grants them a sense of purpose and gives them some meaning, making them susceptible to recruitment. Thus, individuals who demonstrate any of these factors, with the right societal exposure, can be easily swayed into joining the radical movements. The common means of societal exposure are education-based messages in school or religious organizations, sharing on family gatherings, and social interactions on matters that promote or sympathize with radical ideologies.

The "pull" factors entail the presence of bodies or organizations through which the individuals – especially youth – can let out their frustrations or ideologies that result from the push factors (Yusuf, 2011). The author explains that the supply side factors alone do not lead to radical activities such as terrorist attacks, but the presence of an enabling environment (the demand side) that actuates them to engage in terrorist activities. For instance, the presence of a gang in the neighborhood can make a youth facing economic challenges to be radicalized enough to join and participate in criminal activities (Speckhard et al., 2019). Similarly, the presence of Muslim terror organizations can provide susceptible youth with an incentive to join violent extremism, allowing their radical perceptions to inspire them to the commitment of violent activities. Yom and Sammour (2017), when investigating the social and political dimensions of radicalization in Jordan, note that the existence of radical Islamist discourse and the Islamic State in the country is a major factor behind the radicalization of many youth.

It is, however, noteworthy that there are youth who do not become radicalized even when they are exposed to the push and pull factors. Borum (2017) explains that different pathways can lead to radicalization. At the same time, different persons having a common pathway and exposed to similar factors can have different perspectives in the long run (Borum, 2017). Therefore, there is no single influential factor that can be used to explain why individuals

become radicalized. Thus, inasmuch as environmental factors play a vital role in the radicalization process, the mindset of the particular individual plays the biggest role. For instance, Jasko, LaFree, and Kruglanski (2017) explain how an individual's loss of significance or self-worth can contribute to their radicalization process. The loss of significance might arise due to social rejection, failure to make desired achievements in life, or abuse from other parties (Jasko, LaFree, & Kruglanski, 2017). Such factors can lead an individual to attempt to restore significance by resorting to extreme methods or becoming radicalized. Therefore, anti-radicalization efforts that target the person's psychological well-being, belief system, worldview, and ideologies could be the most effective means of preventing radicalization (Helmus & Klein, 2018).

Youth Susceptibility to Radicalization

The youth are particularly susceptible to the supply-side and demand-side factors that enhance radicalization. Raza (2018) investigates the case of the youth living in one of the districts in Pakistan. His findings indicate that the youth are the most affected group in the Dera Ismail Khan district in the country in matters radicalization, violence, and sectarianism as compared to other members of society (Raza, 2018). This particular community has a unique set of circumstances that led to the rise of radicalization among its youth. Its peace and diversity were disturbed when the area experienced the arrival of internally displaced persons from other regions of the country due to the War on Terror and the Waziristan operations. Local politicians then took advantage of the circumstances to spread religious and sectarian ideologies to the members of the general public, leading many youths to join the bandwagon of aggrieved members of the district who resorted to extremist ideologies. The case of the Dera Ismail Khan

district paints a picture of the social, political, and economic reasons in the youth's environment that may lead them to radicalization.

The susceptibility of the youth, however, is not limited to the particular district in Pakistan alone. Yom and Sammour (2017) explain that one of the leading factors behind this susceptibility is the sense of disconnect from the reigning powers. For instance, in the case of Jordan, the youth feel the weight of economic deprivation and low education, and thus have little to no emotional attachment to their identity with Jordan and perceive that they have little stakes in the political order of the country (Yom & Sammour, 2017). This distant feeling affects youth in diverse other places, including Pakistan (Yusuf, 2011). Aoun (2016) explains some of the reasons that researchers found to be influential in radicalizing Lebanese people after the country's civil war had ended.

Aoun (2016) explains that there was a general feeling of disenfranchisement among the Lebanese population even in the period when the country enjoyed relative peace, with social and economic factors contributing to this state of affairs. Apart from the disenfranchisement, the Lebanese also experienced a perceived lack of equity and justice in the government's handling of its populace along with a decay of authority (Aoun, 2016). Thus, like in Jordan, the population had a general feeling of disconnect from the ruling government, and the strong radical movements increased the susceptibility of Lebanese youth to join extremist organizations. Therefore, the political alternative that they can subscribe to is ideologically "weak," making them easily subscribe to the radical ideologies especially because the push and pull factors interact strongly (Yom & Sammour, 2017). Thus, the strategy that can best tame the radicalization arising from weak sociopolitical systems hinges on aggressive political

engagement of the youth to provide them with an alternative to extremist ideologies (Garry et al., 2020).

At the international front, the youth are still highly vulnerable to radicalization and the growth of political or religious extremism. Gereluk and Titus (2018) explain that the radicalization of the youth and their subscription to extremism and terrorism remain to be one of the most divisive international discourse topics to date. The authors explain that the stereotypic association of people from specific regions of the world or religious persuasions with terrorism and radicalism does not paint the entire picture of the process of radicalization and the targets of extremist groups (Gereluk & Titus, 2018). Rather, they give several examples of Canadian citizens – not immigrants – born and raised in the country who became radicalized and joined militant groups to undertake terrorist activities. From these examples, the common trend that they observe is that most of the recruits to radical organizations are youth or school-going individuals who are not necessarily immigrants into the countries where they become radicalized (Gereluk & Titus, 2018). Thus, from these authors' understanding, schools and institutions of higher learning should take an active role in countering radicalization and finding educational methods to tame the process.

Radicalization, which is the process through which individuals grow more extremist, does not involve the commitment of violence. Rather, the radical mindset can lead the youth to commit acts of violence, which is terrorism (Gereluk & Titus, 2018). Thus, as Hamm and Spaaij (2015) explain, the radicalization process begins with the individual's personal and political complaints receiving the sympathy of online supporters, thereby creating an enabling environment for them to increasingly develop extremist views. The individual then identifies with an enabling group or event, and only needs a trigger for them to engage in terrorist activity

(Hamm & Spaaij, 2015). It is through this process that lone-wolf terrorists are raised. From research, the common factors that contribute to their radicalization include unemployment, low educational attainment levels, and mental illnesses. These factors emphasize the point that the youth, who also suffer from socioeconomic issues such as unemployment and a distant feeling from the ruling authorities, are susceptible to radicalization, which can eventually lead them undertaking terrorist activities (Helmus et al., 2020).

Attitudes Towards Extremism Among Muslim Youth

The Muslim youth in Europe and America, particularly those pursuing undergraduate degree programs, have different attitudes towards radicalization and extremism. Van Bergen, Feddes, Doosje, and Pels (2015) investigate the identity factors that shape the attitudes of Dutch Muslim youth of Moroccan or Turkish descent. From their findings, the authors discover that those who felt more connected to fellow Muslim youth and less connected to the Dutch society had more elevated feelings of in-group superiority (van Bergen et al., 2015). Furthermore, the researchers discovered that the youth who had perceptions of in-group superiority were more willing to support the use of violence to defend their fellow Muslims from the same group and had positive attitudes towards the use of violence to defend Islam. The Turkish-Dutch youth who had a sense of collective relative deprivation also had positive attitudes towards the use of violence to defend fellow Turkish-Dutch persons (van Bergen et al., 2015). Van Bergen et al. (2015) also report that a sense of in-group connectedness, as opposed to connectedness to Dutch society, was associated with more willingness to use violence to defend fellow Muslim-Dutch community members. Therefore, the dynamics of the Muslim groups play a huge role in shaping the attitudes towards the use of violence to defend the group or their religion (Speckhard et al.,

2019). Moreover, from this understanding, it is highly likely that Muslim immigrants in Europe and North America have the same attitudes toward the use of violence.

The attitudes of the Muslim youth in these regions also depend on their circumstances. Ellis et al. (2016) conducted a study of Somali refugees in the United States and Canada to investigate how psychosocial factors influence their behavior and attitude. From the research results, the authors report that the youthful refugees who did not support violence or violent extremism were either civically engaged or disengaged. The disengaged people were not in active pursuit of change or rebellion against the social norms (Ellis et al., 2016). This category of individuals shows a general indifference to the occurrences around them. The engaged youth include those who actively support political and social change efforts but through constructive methods such as dialogues or peaceful demonstrations. They generally abhorred the use of violence and did not actively participate in undesirable activities such as delinquency or gang involvement (Ellis et al., 2016). These two categories formed the majority of the surveyed individuals. Therefore, there is a category of Muslim American youth who have a negative attitude towards violence and the use of violent extremism to defend their religion or communities. From Ellis et al.'s (2016) study, there are still refugees who supported the use of both violent and non-violent means to champion for social change or defend their religion. There are still those who highly supported violent extremism but were neither engaged in constructive or destructive behaviors.

The relatively few Muslim immigrants in Western countries who support the use of violence and violent extremism and are highly susceptible to radicalization endure a number of socioeconomic issues. Rahimi and Graumans (2015) explain the major factors that promote attitudes that support violence. Some of the factors include poverty or low economic status,

unemployment, social marginalization, weak identities with present communities or threatened identities with preferred cultures and communities, and a missing connection with their native culture (Rahimi & Graumans, 2015). These reasons correspond to Aoun's (2016) explanation that disenfranchisement is a major socioeconomic factor that contributes to radicalization and attitudes in support of violence or violent extremism. They are also in accord with Yom & Sammour's (2017) explanation that weak ideologies contribute to the support of extremism and radicalization. The findings that Rahimi and Graumans (2015) present also emphasize Lyons-Padilla et al.'s (2015) discovery that Muslim Americans who feel marginalized and insignificant are highly likely to become radicalized to the point of engaging in suicide missions. Furthermore, the reasons agree with Verkuyten's (2018) understanding that the Muslims in Europe who have feelings of uncertainty and perceive injustice and hostility toward their culture and religion are more susceptible to radicalization. Therefore, Rahimi and Graumans (2015) arrive at the understanding that cultural integration goes a long way in promoting a sense of belonging and eliminating the support for terrorism.

In a study of Muslims in Canada, MacDonald (2015) explores the efforts that the country's government have made to integrate Muslims into the mainstream culture, the degree to which non-Muslim Canadians show Islamophobia, and the extent to which Muslims in the country might have a sense of disenfranchisement which normally increases their vulnerability to radicalization. From the study findings, the author reports that Muslim Canadians have developed a collective identity, which undermines the feeling of disenfranchisement and makes the Muslim community effective in preventing radicalization (MacDonald, 2015). However, as Egger and Magni-Berton (2019) explain, Muslims who feel like they are a minority group are more likely to justify terrorism and can be a negative influence towards the fight against

radicalization. Still, Muslims that deem religion highly important are more likely to stand against radicalization and extremist views (Egger & Magni-Berton, 2019). Therefore, the Muslim community in Western cultures can actively participate in the fight against radicalization by promoting positive narratives.

Counter-Narratives in Combating Terrorism

Terrorist Narratives

Before analyzing the effectiveness of counter-narratives in combating radicalization, it is important to provide an exposition of the elements of extremists' ideologies that can easily sway Arabs and Muslims or their sympathizers. Leuprecht et al. (2009) explain various elements of the Jihadist narrative that are widely accepted among Muslims. The first of these ideologies is the general understanding that Islam, as a religion, is being unjustly attacked by the West. Many Muslims around the world believe that the Global War on Terror is a war against Islam as a religion, with American Muslims increasingly believing that the U.S.'s fight on terrorism is actually a war on Islam (Leuprecht et al., 2009). Reporting on a survey conducted involving Muslims in the UK, Leuprecht et al. (2009) explain that more than half of the individuals polled believe that the goals of the fight against terrorism are hostile to Islam. The same sentiments exist among Muslims living in Indonesia, Egypt, and other Muslim countries. Consequently, the anti-Western rhetoric augurs well with a lot of Arabs and Muslims who see Westerners as more of a threat than an ally. Morgan (2016) terms this opposition to Islam by Westerners and, by extension, several other countries in the world that support the war on terror, as Islamophobia. In the definition, Morgan (2016) specifies that the opposition is from a dislike of Islam or Muslims or general prejudice against the religion and its adherents.

The second ideology of the Jihadist narrative that gets the support of many Arabs and Muslims is the desire to defend Islam against this attack by the West and non-Muslims (Leuprecht et al., 2009). Many people who sympathize with this ideology believe that Islamophobia threatens the religion and should be fought to preserve the moral values and beliefs that Islam teaches. They generally have the understanding that Islam is under attack. Consequently, since many Arabs and Muslims are easily swayed by the Jihadist narrative that calls for support against the West and Islamophobia, it is easy for terrorist groups who begin their narratives with these perspectives to obtain sympathy from many Arab and Muslim quarters. However, Leuprecht et al. (2009) explain that the latter do not necessarily agree with two main elements of the Jihadist narrative. The first element is the belief that terrorism is a just approach to defend Islam against the attack from the West. The second element of the narrative that does not generate a lot of support from Arabs and Muslims around the world is the idea that Muslims have a duty to support the terrorist activities that defend their religion (Leuprecht et al, 2009). As a result, it is only a small percentage of Muslims living in Western countries who conform to the radical and extremist understanding of the use of violence to fight anti-Islamic sentiments. However, many Muslims sympathize with the first two ideologies of the Jihadist narrative.

The understanding of different elements of the Jihadist narrative helps in shaping counter-narratives that target individuals based on their sympathy, support, or activism against the West and Islamophobia. Leuprecht et al. (2009) provide four premises upon which counter-narratives should be constructed. The first premise is that the perception that the war on terror is a war on Islam is wrong. Such a counter-narrative can go a long way in spreading the message that the war against terror is primarily aimed at restoring peace in the world that has been

plagued by countless terror attacks after 9/11. However, Leuprecht et al. (2009) explain that this counter-narrative can be difficult to create given that there are Western troops deployed in various Muslim countries in the war against terror. The authors then propose a second premise for the formulation of counter-narratives: countering the perception that extremist Muslim terrorists are actively defending Islam (Leuprecht et al, 2009). This premise is based on the fact that a majority of Muslims do not support terrorism as a legitimate effort for defending the religion. The third premise that Leuprecht et al. (2009) propose counters the perception that terrorist attacks against non-Muslim civilians launched in the name of defending Islam are legitimate acts of war. The premised is based on the fact that there are a few Muslims who believe that terrorist activities are genuine acts of war. Finally, Leuprecht et al. (2009) propose the premise that counter-narratives should oppose the perception that Muslims of regular standing have a duty to support terrorists.

Counternarratives

In a policy brief for efforts to fight radicalization in online platforms, Gemmerli (2015) identifies three major categories of counter-narratives that the government could adopt. The categories he defines include direct counter-narratives, positive alternatives, and critical reflection (Gemmerli, 2015). Direct counter-narratives are the category which squares up to the ideology and lifestyle of extremism (Garry et al., 2020). For instance, the U.S. Department of State's Think Again Turn Away campaign is a direct counter-narrative approach which illuminates the mistakes that terror organizations have made and present an analysis of the testimonies by defectors to portray violent extremism as a negative and ill-thought strategy (Gemmerli, 2015). The second approach to counter-narratives is the use of positive alternatives, which elucidate the importance of moderation. This approach promotes the alternatives to

extremist religious views and radicalization by painting an attractive picture of moderate ideologies, non-extremist leisure activities, and promoting solidarity based on common goals and shared values (Gemmerli, 2015). This strategy influences the youth and other members of society who appreciate such ideas to adopt positive alternatives instead of falling back to religious or ideological extremism in fighting radicalization.

The third approach that Gemmerli (2015) explains is the improvement of digital competences, which focus on young people's ability to critically review information to diminish the attractiveness of extremism. Governments and other anti-terrorist organizations can use this approach to build a society of democratic digital citizens who critically evaluate the information they come across from different media outlets to choose the side that provides the soundest ideas or has the best effects on the community. Carthy, Doody, O'Hara, and Sarma (2018) explain that this approach helps the target audience make better and informed decisions when they encounter extremist propaganda by looking into the rationale and validity of violent actions. Furthermore, such an investigative approach can be used in research to discredit inaccurate historical narratives (Carthy et al., 2018).

Various scholars have proposed the use of counter-narratives in the fight against radicalization. Carthy et al. (2018) explain that counter-narratives that give people alternative social constructions to those by extremists directly challenge the themes anchored in extremist narratives. Such counter-narratives deconstruct and demystify Jihadist narratives based on, among others, the premises that Leuprecht et al. (2009) propose. For instance, Carthy et al. (2018) report how the 'Shared Values' initiative after the 9/11 attacks built on the counter-narrative that the war on terrorism is not a war on Islam by portraying the happy lives that American Muslims live in the US without persecution or discrimination. Another counter-

narrative initiative that builds on the premise is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's (OSCE) promotion of interfaith dialogue by using counter-narratives that show the acceptance of Muslims in European societies. Carthy et al. (2018) then show how counter-narratives can be successful in combating radicalization through the persuasive power that influences the attitudes and behavior of the target audience.

There are is a need for counter-narratives in the American context. Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) explain that the success of jihadist propagandists in sharing their narratives through their aggressive Internet communication and one-on-one encounters with non-members calls for the implementation of counter-narratives as a preventive measure against radicalization. The authors explain that the content of the counter-narratives should be designed in a suitable manner to address the grievances and motivations that could inspire susceptible individuals to listen and believe the extremist propaganda (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018). The programmers can identify specific target audiences to provide relevant messages to them. For instance, one of the audiences that the authors identify are the individuals who are already accessing and consuming the material that extremist groups share through various media channels. Alternatively, the programmers can develop counter-narratives that are suitable for the general public. However, such general messages might not be as effective as targeted messages. Still, Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) conclude that counter-narrative efforts play a significant role in reducing the appeal that violent extremist groups have on the youth.

Effectiveness of Counternarratives

Counter-narratives can especially be fruitful in the information age where there is widespread and far-reaching use of social media. Van Eerten, Doosje, Konijin, de Graaf, and de Goede (2019) give a report on the use of counter-narratives in preventing the radicalization of

social media users and de-radicalizing individuals who have joined radical terrorist groups or have subscribed to extremist ideologies. The authors investigate the process of radicalization, the potential for de-radicalization, and the use of counter-narratives to reverse radicalization and to de-radicalize individuals. Based on the understanding of these processes, they then investigate the efficacy of using counter-narratives to aid in preventing radicalization or de-radicalizing extremist individuals on social media. For a counter-narrative campaign to be effective, van Eerten et al. (2019) suggest that it should start with the conduction of in-depth research and elaborate planning to ensure that the identified audience is reached with an appropriate program.

In the design of an effective campaign, the programmers should hinge their decisions on the understanding of core underlying theories when understanding the causes, determinants, mechanisms, and the particular elements to include in the program (van Eerten et al., 2019). Thorough knowledge of the particular audience is necessary for the program to be effective and for the proper segmentation of the audience to categories that can respond to different counter-narrative approaches. Furthermore, an effective counter-narrative program is based on the comprehensive knowledge of the themes and layers of the extremists' narratives (Speckhard et al., 2019) This knowledge identifies the political, moral, religious, and psychological dimensions that the extremists develop in their narratives, analyzes the legal implications of the narratives, then informs the development of a meaningful counter-narrative that addresses each element that might strike a chord with the target audience (van Eerten et al., 2019). The programmers should further analyze the resources at their disposal, decide on the one that can easily reach the target audience, and design the program that can be suitably delivered using the available resources. Finally, the programmers can continuously evaluate the effectiveness of the program through its

course by using tools and techniques adopted by governments and institutions which have selected counter-narratives as their anti-radicalization efforts.

The Demerits of Counternarratives

Despite the wide support that they have received from many agencies, counter-narratives have received their share of criticisms based on scholarly reports and research findings. Hemmingsen and Castro (2017) provide the conclusion that there is no evidence to support the effectiveness of counter-narratives in stopping the spread of terrorist propaganda and halting the momentum of terrorist activities. They arrive at the conclusion based on their analysis of Denmark's plan for countering and preventing radicalization and extremist thinking through counter-narrative initiatives. Based on their study on the campaigns, the authors report that the use of counter-narrative is a reactive approach that affirms the terms that terrorists and radical groups lay down, which leads to a reinforcement of the narratives that the anti-terrorism agencies are seeking to eliminate (Hemmingsen & Castro, 2017). Its use as a reactive strategy might fail in de-radicalizing individuals who already subscribe to the extremist views and in preventing the target audience from accepting the radicalization messages from violent terrorists.

Furthermore, the authors report that the propagandists, including al-Qaeda and ISIL target and attract only few individuals, meaning that the widespread use of counter-narratives, such as at the national level, produce a "scattergun" effect where well-meaning and innocent individuals become aware of the actual radical narratives and may end up choosing to side with the terrorists (Hemmingsen & Castro, 2017). Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) agree with this perspective, indicating that most of the counter-narrative efforts do not have the capacity to reach the desired audiences like the narratives and propaganda that extremist groups share. For instance, the authors mention that ISIS has the ability to directly and promptly communicate with

those who engage in their narratives, which most of the counter-narrative campaigns do not have (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018). Moreover, Hemmingsen and Castro (2017) mention that it is difficult to understand the target audience that the terrorist groups reach and attract with their narratives, making it difficult to implement effective counter-narratives that reach the target audiences. The authors then conclude that the conduction of counter-narrative campaigns can produce side-effects that far outweigh the benefits that they offer to counter-terrorism.

Carthy et al. (2018) also describe the demerits that they find with counter-narratives. The first of these is that the persuasion behind counter-narratives gives the audience a chance to consider several sides to the specific narrative. The critical thinking approach that Gemmerli (2015) explains especially give the audience the chance to analyze multiple perspectives of the narratives they receive, giving the chance to make a free choice between radicalization and anti-terrorist perspectives. Carthy et al. (2018) expound this demerit by analyzing how the discrepancy models cause a reduction in the ability of individuals to change their beliefs on a specific ideology. Thus, the use of counter-narratives that target youth who are on the brink of becoming radicalized may prove to be ineffective. Furthermore, since counter-narratives can either be response-changing or response-reinforcing, it is also highly likely that counter-narratives might reinforce the current beliefs that the targeted audience have – either for or against radical Islam and terrorism.

Gaps in Research on Countering Violent Extremism

From the literature, one of the themes that arise is the fact that Muslims living in Western countries or countries that have adopted Western culture have varying attitudes on radicalization and violent extremism. Most of the studies focus on the investigation of the attitudes of young Muslims in Europe whereas one study investigates the attitudes that Somali refugees living in

Canada have on the same issue. However, there are no studies that examine the attitudes of Muslim Americans on radicalization and violent extremism or, generally, the attitudes of American youth on the issue. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this research gap. Future studies on radicalization and violent extremism in the US should also investigate these attitudes because they have a huge influence on the success of radicalization and the commission of violent extremist acts by this class of Americans.

There are only a few studies that explore the effectiveness of counter-narratives in preventing radicalization or deradicalizing individuals with extremist ideologies in the American context. The studies on counter-narratives so far concentrate on the successes and failures of the strategy in various European and Middle East countries. However, researchers have not investigated how the counter-narratives that the American government or other organizations in the country have undertaken have fared in terms of preventing radicalization or deradicalizing individuals. For instance, it is only Carthy et al. (2018) that make mention of the context of the USA in the application of counter-narratives, but their study is not a full investigation of the extent to which counter-narratives affect American youth.

Summary

Terrorism, especially in the post-9/11 world, has become rampant in diverse places around the world. They range from lone-wolf attacks to organized violent attacks perpetrated by recognized bodies such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State movements. One common thing about terrorists is the extremist ideas that inspire them to resort to violence as a means of achieving their purposes. The process through which they gain these extremist ideas prior to engaging in violent extremist activities is known as radicalization. The literature reveals that extremist groups

produce well-fashioned messages and propaganda that they sell to susceptible individuals, in the process radicalizing them to the extent of supporting violent extremism.

The people who are most vulnerable to the radicalization process are the youth, especially those aged 24 years and below. Thus, the extremist groups make concerted efforts targeting this population. The youth's vulnerability hinges on factors ranging from socioeconomic status, inequality, religious beliefs, and psychological state to the presence of appealing avenues for channeling frustration. In terms of religion, people who feel that their religion is being discriminated against are susceptible to developing radical thoughts against those who do not belong to the same religion, especially Islam. Moreover, individuals who feel culturally disconnected from the communities where they live are susceptible to radicalization especially if they find a sense of belonging with people who share the views. The sociopolitical issues in society simply add fuel to the grievances that such individuals may have, giving them a reason to pursue radical ideologies.

Yet, despite the vulnerability, there are youth who do not give occasion to extremist narratives and, despite the push and pull factors surrounding them, do not engage the radical thinking. Among these are Muslim youth living in Western cultures. Cultural connection with their immediate environment is one of the major determining factors behind their resistance to radicalization. Still, the literature reveals that there are, indeed, some Muslim youth who support violent extremism or might engage in violent acts to defend their religion and their culture. The fact that they exist shows the necessity of implementing strategies to prevent radicalization. One such strategy that many scholars propose is the use of counter-narratives. The literature shows that this approach has been used by governments, international organizations, and other peace agencies to varying degrees of success. The success of counter-narratives depends on the plans

that the programmers hatch, their understanding of the target audience, the development of messages suitable to the target audience, and their understanding of the extremist narratives to develop effective counter-narratives. However, some scholars demonstrate the dangers that exist with the use of counter-narratives. Thus, there should be more research on other methods of preventing radicalization and deradicalizing affected individuals.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The chapter discusses the methodology that was used in this study. The chapter is structured into different sections with each discussing various aspects of the methodology to be employed by the researcher in answering the research question. An overview of the research design is provided along with the population and sample of the research, the procedures for sampling, data collection methods, data analysis, validation of findings, study limitations and a concluding summary of the chapter.

Purpose statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the use of counter-narratives in refuting the appeal of violent extremist perceptions using a sample of Muslim-American students in two universities and two community colleges. Through a comprehensive review of past literature, the researcher seeks to elucidate counter-narratives and their impact on various individuals. The study aims at advancing the awareness on counter-narratives as a possible approach to dealing with the problem of terrorism. The researcher seeks to address the contextualized ideologies of extremism in the United States.

Research Question

This research seeks to answer the following research question: How do Muslim American undergraduate students describe the effectiveness of counter-narratives videos for curbing recruitment to violent extremism?

Research Design

This study aims to capture the live feelings, emotions, thoughts, feedback, and provide the participants with room for discussions. In that regard, the most relevant approach of collecting data and developing a platform that accomplishes the aforementioned objectives constitutes the use of focus groups. Kitzinger (1995), defined focus groups as a technique that involves the use of comprehensive group interviews where the respondents are chosen for being purposive – despite not necessarily being representative – sampling of a particular population and being focused on a certain topic. On the other hand, Denscombe (2007) defined focus groups to encompass a number of individuals, normally between 4 and 9, assembled by the researcher with the aim of exploring perceptions, attitudes, and ideas regarding the topic under consideration. The current study was based on this definition and used focus groups from individuals emanating from the target population of students. The study seeks to develop four focus groups, two at each of the colleges: 2 for universities and 2 for community colleges. Each of the focus groups had 5 student respondents who were suitable for successful deliberations on the subject.

According to Carey (2016) participants in a focus group research methodology are selected on the basis of what their perspectives on the topic would be. In addition, the selection criterion is influenced by age range and shared socio-characteristics among the participants. The participants in this study have to be able to comfortably talk to the interviewer and each other

regarding the topic of research. This strategy of selection is linked to the notion of "applicability" where the participants are chosen based on their knowledge of the topic being studied (Carey, 2016).

Focus group research methodology is distinct in that through its group dynamics, the range and type of data collected via the social interactions of the participants in the group are in-depth and rich compare to those collected though one-to-one interviews (Graneheim, Lindgren, & Lundman, 2017). The approach provides information regarding an array of feelings and ideas possessed by individuals in relation to the topic of investigation. It also illuminates the variations in the perspectives between groups of participants. Focus groups provide the researcher with the capability of capturing deeper information economically. Compared to interviews, focus groups are cheaper and offer the primary benefits of non-verbal communication and group interaction. Through group interactions, the members of the group may make connections to different concepts that may not happen in individual interviews. Based on the non-verbal reaction to the topic of study, the researcher has the luxury of capturing firsthand and unbiased data. Based on the objectives of this study, focus groups provide the researcher with the most favorable approach to the data required.

Research Paradigm

Terrorism, like many other sociopolitical problems, has through the years been understood, researched, and analyzed using various strategies. In that regard, critical theory is the research paradigm chosen for this study. A critical paradigm focuses on social justice issues and problems and seeks to address specific social, political, and economic issues that have over time led to social conflict, struggle, oppression and unequal power structure (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Because this study seeks to contribute to efforts on countering violent extremism and

radicalization in the United States, it is important to measure attitudes towards violent extremist groups and the appeal of violent extremist ideologies among Muslim-American undergraduate students. By doing so, a transformative approach to radicalization and counterterrorism can be adequately determined. Largely, this research paradigm is dialectical and dialogic in nature because it requires the researcher to engage the participants in designing a sustainable solution on counterterrorism efforts.

Transactional epistemology was the framework that guided the sampling and data collection processes. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) also indicate that transactional or subjectivist epistemology assumes that the researcher interacts with the research participants with the aim of understanding and collecting accurate data. Using focus groups, the researcher had a direct connection with the participants in order to bring to light existing attitudes, beliefs, and actions on radicalization and terrorism. Primarily, the researchers in this approach acts as the facilitator as well as the instigator. By using this paradigm, the main aim of the research study was not to only explain and understand counterterrorism efforts, but also to change the currents situation.

Sample and Site Selection

The target sample group for this study was drawn from Muslim-American undergraduate students from two universities and community colleges in California. The sample constituted 20 participants, four focus groups with 5 student respondents each. The researcher used a nomination process to identify participants from the target population. Nomination of participants is important for this research because it ensures that the participants selected understand the magnitude of the issue and are willing to answer all questions without any form of bias. According to Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq, and Van Egmond (2015), in the United States, Muslim immigrants are highly at the risk of being radicalized and

marginalized. Based on this, the current study identifies the male Muslim-American undergraduate students from universities in California. Candidates for the focus groups from this population were selected on the basis of purposeful sampling. Granting the distribution of Muslim American throughout California, the study targets a number of higher learning institutions so as to ensure the necessary generalization is achieved. This ensured that this study is both valuable and its findings applicable to different settings.

Context Selection

Today, more than 50,000 Muslim Americans live in San Diego County with more than 15,000 being Somalis. In this regard, San Diego has had a history of radicalization, including being home to one of the 9-11 hijackers. Also, Anwar al-Awlaki, an internationally known terrorist killed in a drone strike, was a San Diego Imam who actively radicalized American youth. The region is also suitable because recently, the office of the Southern District of California US Attorney's office prosecuted four Somali community immigrants for providing material support to al Shabaab (United States Department of Justice, 2013). Also, in 2014, Douglas McArthur McCain, a former City College student, left San Diego, became an ISIS foreign fighter and died in Syria. His brother has since been indicted for making false statements to law enforcement. San Diego is also suitable for this study because it is one of the largest Somali communities in the country, and many young Somalis are vulnerable to the social media recruiting tactics used by terrorist organizations. Put simply, San Diego is chosen because it has the second largest Muslim population in California and one of the largest Muslim populations in the United States.

Site Selection

The two universities and two community colleges were selected because they have a large Muslim student population and a large international student population from Muslim majority countries. The universities and colleges are also suitable because they have active Muslim student organizations such as the Somali Student Association and the Middle East Student Association. These universities and colleges are also suitable because these students have faced hate crimes and negative stereotypical climate on campus which can make them venerable to recruitment. Most importantly, these institutions have low income and first-generation college students.

Sampling and Nomination of Participants

The current study employed convenience or purposive sampling to identify focus group participants. In this form of sampling, the nature of the population is defined – Muslim American undergraduate students in California. The participants of the focus groups were selected from a university and a community college in California. The researcher worked alongside a number of organizations on and off campus to recommend the student participants. These organizations are trusted partners in working with Muslim students in San Diego and included the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the Somali Student Association (SSA), university or college student centers (cultural centers, resources centers), Somali Family Services (SFS), Somali Bantu Association of America (SBAOA), and Local Mosques in San Diego.

The participants identified for the study came from wealth of diverse backgrounds. The diversity was both geographical and cultural, with most of the participants originating from the Middle East, East Africa, and North Africa. Thus, they were mostly ethnically considered to be Asian or Pacific Islanders and Black or African American. The participants also either had

immigrant or refugee backgrounds, further signifying their diversity based on the countries of origin or nationality.

The data collected from the focus group discussions was employed in the comparison of feedbacks, views and attitudes before, during and after exposing the respondents to the counter-narrative videos along with the ISIS-fashioned videos of recruitment. Therefore, assessing the respondents' attitudes and beliefs before conducting the focus group discussions was crucial in setting the study. As such, it was important to ascertain that the selected participants have no previous contact with terrorist organizations and that they have not experienced any form of radicalization. This is because past engagement with radical or extremist media content may influence participants' attitudes and beliefs and thus affect the data collected. I then employed purposeful sampling in selecting respondents from recommended student participants by the aforementioned organizations. The selected participants were informed on the objectives and nature of the research after which they were invited to Focus group discussions. All the selected respondents were given written information regarding the research after which their written consent was obtained.

Focus Group

The focus group protocol is designed to provide the researcher the critical steps they need to fulfil and conduct successful focus group. The focus group protocol consists of these following steps; Gather a focus group, introduce yourself, and the study, and Gain informed consent in writing from all participants. Show counternarrative video number one then give all participants the questions in writing and let them answer it stopping at the end of the first video questions. Next, I started a discussion of the video, record all comments with age and gender of person if possible. I recorded in writing or by filming the comments as well as using a paper and

pencil questionnaire allows us to get answers from everyone not just the vocal ones and tabulate and compare across samples.

Focus Group Setting

The focus group sessions were conducted to allow the participants to be at ease and facilitate an open and fruitful discussion. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the sessions were held virtually. Every participant joined the conference call that the researcher hosted upon the agreed time as scheduled.

Interview Protocol

A comprehensive interview protocol was used to conduct interviews with participants (Appendix). The protocol is written in English as the focus group interviews was conducted in English language. As in Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig's (2007) study, I also developed probing questions to explore the live thoughts, feelings, emotions, and feedback of the respondents regarding the topic of research. The protocol has open-ended questions relating to the wide-ranging subject areas of radicalization, extremism and terrorism. This study also used national and international experts on the issues of terrorism who helped in regulating and overseeing the use of narrative videos safely. These experts also moderated the conversation in focus groups as well as provide legal consultation on various issues.

Data Collection

The focus group discussions were held at virtually, allowing the participants to join the meetings from the comfort of their residences. The discussion sessions were approximately two hours long where an experienced moderator guided the participants in discussing as the researcher monitors, observes, and records the reactions of the respondents to the video administered. The moderator followed a standard protocol of introducing the purpose of the

focus group, facilitating the introductions of the participants, definition of the desire group interaction, and asking the main questions as well as probes. Before the discussions start, the respondents were made aware that all the data collected through the focus group discussions was confidential and was thus encouraged to honestly and openly air their responses and attitudes towards the topic of study. The data was progressively collected and recorded through writing and audiotaping as the respondents engage with the video that was administered by the researcher. In this study, a single counternarrative video was shown to each focus group. The researcher recorded the Zoom call sessions to capture the contributions from all the participants. Their reactions were noted by the researcher and the process of influence of the counter-narrative videos as well as ISIS-produced recruitment videos be monitored. Through the interviewer protocol and probe, the researcher sought to establish the residual impact of the counter-narrative videos on the attitudes and beliefs of the respondents. Essentially, the researcher looked to investigate the initial radicalization trajectory as Klausen, Libretti, Hung, and Jayasumana (2018) discussed.

The focus group sessions were conducted over the Zoom videoconferencing platform, which gives room for the recording of meeting proceedings. Therefore, the group discussion sessions were audiotaped following acceptance by the respondents. The recordings of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim in consultation with transcription experts. The transcripts and interviewer protocol were reviewed for accuracy by the focus group moderator. The transcripts were reviewed by means of an open-coding process. In this way, there were no preconceived notions regarding the potential codes or themes being forced on the structure of coding. As attitudes, beliefs, and feedbacks were observed and recorded, the researcher classified them into groups where a code book was developed. The code book was then employed in coding the

transcripts from the recordings of the focus group discussions. Two individuals were involved in coding the transcripts who met afterwards to establish a consensus of the coding after they independently conduct the coding. The coding of the transcripts helped in establishing emergent themes from the focus group discussion data.

To elicit candid responses from the participants the researcher took some measures to make sure that the participants in the study were not overly sensitized. The measures included sticking to the data collection protocols when engaging with the participants and limiting explanations to only the details necessary for answering questions as they appeared in the protocols. The researcher also avoided prompting the participants to respond in a certain way to the questions. The questions in the instruments were designed not to lead participants in any direction, because this approach would have skewed the findings and introduced bias to the findings. The questions were just general themes of questions to get a basic understanding of their thoughts and knowledge of extremist groups and the role of counternarratives. Every participant was then free to provide responses based on their understanding of the questions. Finally, the researcher took an extra step in consulting with professionals in the field and organizations such as the American Counter terrorism and Targeting Resilience Institute (ACTRI) to make sure that the questionnaires were unbiased and not leading towards any direction.

Data Analysis

An inductive analysis approach was employed in analyzing the coded transcripts. The reasons for employing an inductive approach to data analysis includes to condense the raw transcript data into a summary format, to pinpoint clear connections between the objectives of the research and the summary outcomes obtained from the raw transcript data, and to develop a

structure of underlying framework of attitudes and beliefs evident in the transcript data. According to Carey and Asbury (2016), the general inductive approach to data analysis offers an easy to use and systematic array of processes for assessing qualitative data that results in valid and reliable findings.

There are multiple analytic principles that underpin the use of an inductive approach to the analysis of qualitative data. First, the analysis of raw data was based on the assessment of the study objectives that identify the topics and domains to be examined. The analysis is conducted by means of multiple readings along with interpretations of the information collected. Despite the results being influenced by the research objectives and questions that the researcher seeks to answer, the results of the study arose directly from raw data analysis and not from prior models or expectations. As such, the assessment of the research objectives offered a relevant domain for carrying out the analysis and not a set of anticipations regarding specific outcomes. Second, the basic mode of data analysis constitutes the development of groups from the data collected into a framework or model. This framework comprises key processes and themes that were identified and developed by the evaluator in the process of coding. Third, the findings are derived from a number of interpretations developed from the raw information by the interrater coding the data. Predictably, the findings of the research are based on the experiences and assumptions of the individuals involved in conducting the research and doing the analysis of the resulting data. For the study outcomes to be viable, the evaluator needs to decide the more important and less relevant aspects of the raw data. Fourth, different evaluators may lead to differing findings with no overlapping components. Lastly, the reliability of the results from the inductive analysis may be evaluated by means of similar techniques as those employed in other forms of qualitative analysis.

The inductive analysis approach that was employed resulted in a framework that summarizes the transcript data. Processes and themes emerging from the analysis were coded and categorized based on five important features: First, a category label which constitutes a short phrase or word that is used in referring to the category. Often, category labels carry an inherent meaning that may reflect the particular features of a particular cohort. Second, a category description which encompasses a depiction of what each category means including the scope, key features, and limitations. Third, data or text related to the category that includes examples of coded text illustrating the perspectives and meanings associated with each category. Fourth, links that indicate the relationships between categories. Where categories are arranged in hierarchical system, links indicate subordinated, superordinate, and parallel categories. Fifth, a model type embedding the category which indicates if the category system is incorporated in a framework, model or theory (Mihas, 2019). Examples of frameworks in this context include open network, temporal sequence, and causal network.

Subjectivity, Credibility & Trustworthiness

As a person who is directly or indirectly affected by these issues of terrorism, I have a strong desire to find sustainable solutions. In that regard, my inquisitiveness and professional quest to understand the manifestation of terrorism radicalization and the psychology behind the recruitment of individuals to join extremist groups is the biggest element of my personality that is relevant in this case. Most importantly, in my previous experience as a Senior Community Engagement Coordinator for the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention, I have been involved in most of these issues and I understand the magnitude of videos in recruitment of insurgents. Additionally, I serve as the Director of Strategic Initiatives and Community Programming at the American Counterterrorism Targeting

and Resilience Institute where I lead the institutions efforts in counternarrative to violent extremism and recruitment.

It is generally accepted that most qualitative studies, credibility and trustworthiness perhaps are the most pervasive attributes of a researcher that determine the validity of the results. In this case, my previous experience as a Senior Community Engagement Coordinator for the Department of Homeland Security, Office of Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention makes me trustworthy and credible to undertake this sensitive study. My trustworthiness to conduct this study is also contributed by my role as a community leader, co-founder, and CEO of a community-based non-profit organization that works with vulnerable youth in Somalia and other parts of East Africa that are affected by insurgency. Additionally, I serve as the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Alliant International University, and previously served as the Associate Chief Diversity Officer at San Diego State University, in both of these capacities I have lead the institutions diversity strategic planning and campus climate which includes combating all forms of violent extremism.Therefore, I believe that my credibility and trustworthiness gave me the necessary platform to get valid and reliable responses from the focus groups that comprehensively informed this topic.

Limitations

The focus group method has a number of limitations which might emerge in the study. Focus group discussions have the limitation of the tendency of particular types of socially accepted perceptions to emerge and for particular respondents to dominate the discussions. The discussions needed to be conducted in an ample atmosphere for all the respondents to comfortably and honestly air their opinions. The participants were assembled a single conference call where they were prepared prior to the discussions on the topic of the study rather than

meeting them at their usual universities. This posed the risk of introducing respondent biases and expectations creating strategic biases in the group. The researcher may also be faced by the uncertainty and unpredictability of the movement patterns as well as the participation of the respondents. The number of focus groups was limited by the need for an experienced moderator which poses extra expenses for the researcher. A skilled moderator constitutes a vital component of the success of focus group discussions. In addition, it is important that the moderator be present in the discussions and engage fully in the process to ensure the viability of the data collected in the process. As such, it was important for the researcher to seek and recruit a moderator with the expertise and experience to moderate successful focus group discussions. This came at an extra cost.

This study was also affected by explicit and implicit responses. Explicit responses are conscious, verbalized responses to counternarratives, VE group propaganda, and many other contentious topics. Some explicit responses led to adverse reactions on the part of participants. Implicit responses, on the other hand, are unconscious, non-verbalized, "real-time" responses to counternarratives, propaganda videos, and other terrorism-related material. Regardless, this study acknowledged that topics on VE propaganda and terrorism should be approached with caution because of the individual-level bias associated with it.

Summary

In this chapter, the research methodology to be employed in the study has been discussed. The purpose of the study and the research questions were restated in building the foundation to

discussing the approach employed in data collection. Focus group discussions research design was employed in the collection of data. The approach is relevant to the study as it sought to capture the live feelings, emotions, thoughts, feedback and provide the participants with room for discussions. Purposeful sampling procedure was used in the selection of focus group participants from Muslim American undergraduate students from San Diego. The participants were selected from a university and community college in San Diego. The researcher administered counternarrative and ISIS produced videos in carrying out the research. Data was progressively collected and recorded using the interview protocol and audio recorders. Inductive data analysis was employed in the analysis of data based on its relevance to the kind of raw information collected through focus group discussions. A number of limitations was anticipated by the researcher in using Focus group discussions including the tendency of some participants and particular socially accepted notions to dominate the discussions.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Participants

The study was conducted through four focus group meetings – two each for a local community college and a university. The participants identified for the study came from a wealth of diverse backgrounds. The diversity was both geographical and cultural, with most of the participants originating from the Middle East, East Africa, and North Africa. Thus, they were mostly ethnically considered to be Asian or Pacific Islanders and Black or African American. The participants also either had immigrant or refugee backgrounds, further signifying their diversity based on the countries of origin or nationality. The participants who took part in the focus groups had different demographic profiles in terms of age, gender, educational attainment, current economic status, and ethnicity. They all subscribed to the Muslim faith and were all under 30 years of age. The first focus group from the university had five participants with ages ranging between 20 and 23 years with a mean of 21.6 years, three of whom were male. All of them had high school diploma as their highest educational attainment at the time of the research, and all of them reported to have been of the lower or poor economic status. Four of the participants were Black/African American in terms of ethnicity, with only one being an Asian/Pacific Islander. Table 1 presents the summary of the participants' demographic profiles.

Table 1

Demographic profile for the first university focus group.

	Age	Gender	Education	Economic Status	Ethnicity	Religion
FG1 – Participant 1	22	Male	High school	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG1 – Participant 2	21	Male	High school	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG1 – Participant 3	20	Male	High school	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG1 – Participant 4	22	Female	High school	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam

FG1 – Participant 5	23	Female	High school	Lower/poor	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam

The participants in the second focus group at the university were more diverse than those of the first group. Their ages ranged from 22 to 26, making it the group with the oldest participant, and the mean age being 23.8 years. It is notable that the oldest participant had a bachelor's degree as her highest educational attainment at the time of the research. Three of the participants had attended some college whereas one had an associate degree. The group had three female members. Four of the participants reported being in the lower or poor economic status, with only one stating that his status was the middle-income level. In terms of ethnicity, two of the participants were Black or African American, and the rest were Asian or Pacific Islanders. Table 2 summarizes this data.

Table 2

Demographic profile for the second university focus group.

	Age	Gender	Education	Economic Status	Ethnicity	Religion
FG2 – Participant 1	22	Male	Some college	Middle income	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam
FG2 – Participant 2	25	Male	Associate degree	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG2 – Participant 3	23	Female	Some college	Lower/poor	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam
FG2 – Participant 4	26	Female	Bachelor's degree	Lower/poor	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam
FG2 – Participant 5	23	Female	Some college	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam

The participants from the community college also belonged to the same age bracket as those in the university. In the first community college focus group, the ages of the participants ranged between 21 and 24 with a mean of 22.2 years, and two of them were male. Only one participant had a certificate from some college at the time, with the rest having high school

diplomas as their highest educational attainments at the time. Two of the participants belonged to the middle-income economic status, with the rest admitting to being of the lower or poor economic status. One participant was an Asian or Pacific Islander, and the rest were Black or African American. Table 3 summarizes these details.

Table 3

Demographic profile for the first community college focus group.

	Age	Gender	Education	Economic Status	Ethnicity	Religion
FG1 – Participant 1	22	Male	Some college	Middle income	Black/African American	Islam
FG1 – Participant 2	21	Male	High school	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG1 – Participant 3	21	Female	High school	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG1 – Participant 4	24	Female	High school	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG1 – Participant 5	23	Female	High school	Middle income	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam

The second focus group from the community college had the youngest participant at 19 years of age, with the oldest being 24, and the mean age being 22.2. Four of the participants were male, making it the focus group with the least gender diversity. Of the five members, two had high school diplomas as the highest educational attainment, two had some college certificates, and one had an associate degree. The group had four members from the lower or poor economic status, with the other member being from the middle-income category. Three of the participants were Asian or Pacific Islanders, with the rest being Black or African American. Table 4 summarizes the demographic data from the participants.

Table 4

Demographic profile for the second community college focus group.

	Age	Gender	Education	Economic Status	Ethnicity	Religion
FG2 – Participant 1	24	Male	Associate degree	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG2 – Participant 2	20	Female	Some college	Lower/poor	Black/African American	Islam
FG2 – Participant 3	19	Male	High school	Lower/poor	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam
FG2 – Participant 4	23	Male	Some college	Middle income	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam
FG2 – Participant 5	24	Male	High school	Lower/poor	Asian/Pacific Islander	Islam

ISIS, al Shabaab, and al Qaeda usually targets these demographics of young people for recruitment and radicalization to violent extremism. They were in either the community college or the local university, with the highest educational attainment among them being a bachelor's degree. The participants were also from two of the ethnic minority groups in the US – Black or Asian. All the participants were from either middle-income or lower or poor economic backgrounds. The economic background is a point of vulnerability since issues such as economic exclusion, unemployment, and limitations to upward mobility are some of the driving forces behind feelings of alienation and frustration, making the individuals susceptible to radicalization by violent extremist groups. Therefore, the opinions they would give and their responses to the questionnaires are critical to the understanding of the effectiveness of counternarratives because they belong to the population mostly targeted for radicalization by the violent extremists.

The study was conducted with the participants drawn from a local community college and at a university. Originally, the focus group meetings were supposed to occur in person at various places within the participants' campuses, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ensuing restrictions, and the CDC policy for the protection of the participants, it occurred online via Zoom. Therefore, the two types of institution presented the suitable geographical locations where the researcher could find participants from the target population – Muslim American undergraduate students. The availability of undergraduate students made it easy to draw a sample from the institutions for inclusion in the focus groups.

Findings

The research question that the focus groups sought to answer was, "How do Muslim American undergraduate students describe the effectiveness of counter-narrative videos for curbing recruitment to violent extremism?" The research occurred through the performance of participant surveys to obtain the thoughts of the participants on violent extremism, counternarratives, and counternarrative videos. Afterwards, the participants took part in the focus group discussions after which they shared their thoughts on a specific counternarrative video and the impact it had on them. This section discusses the findings from the survey and focus group discussions.

Themes from Participant Surveys

The pre-test questionnaire revealed a lot about the participants' opinions on the nature of violent extremist and terror groups including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al Qaeda, and al Shabaab. It also gave insight into the participants' thoughts and opinions on the process of radicalization, the roles that videos and online propaganda play in the radicalization of the youth, and the possibility of using counternarratives to stem the tide of radicalization. These elements

are the first themes that arise from the pre-test and post-test questionnaires. Another emerging theme is the thoughts that they had after watching the video *Rewards of Joining the Islamic State* by Abu Ghazwan, a defector of ISIS. This section explores the survey responses to four areas: knowledge of terror organizations, comments on radicalization, and the role of videos, propaganda, and counternarratives.

Knowledge of Terror Organizations

Table 5

Community college focus groups' opinions on terror organizations.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Highest; 1: Lowest)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
High knowledge of VE and terrorist groups in general	2	4	2	3		1		
Groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab are terror organizations	7						1	9
One can understand why some justify belonging to such organizations	2	3	5	1		1		
Groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab are engaged in violence	7							10
Someone who has returned from ISIS, al Shabaab, or al Qaeda can be believed	1	6		3		1		

To address the question of the effectiveness of counter-narrative videos for curbing recruitment to violent extremism, one section of the survey included items about their knowledge terror organizations. Participants responded to a survey instrument with a section that included items about their knowledge of violent extremist organizations in a Likert scale (1 = "not at all"; 7 = "very much." The participants had varied opinions on the existence of terror organizations and their understanding of such organizations. Most participants did not have knowledge about violent extremist organizations, except one or two were more informed about the organizations. Asked whether they had a high knowledge of the violent extremist and terrorist groups in

general, four people from the community college focus groups said they had no knowledge of organizations such as al Qaeda and al Shabaab. Two participants said they had little or no knowledge, and one had some knowledge on the item. The finding is indicative of the degree of detachment that many of the participants had from such organizations and their low level of awareness of the groups, their activities, and the programs they run. However, on the question of whether groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab are terror organizations, the overwhelming majority agreed – with nine out of 10 agreeing "very much" that the identified groups conduct terrorist activities. The one respondent agreed "much" with the idea.

The participants were also asked if they could understand when some people sometimes justify living in and being active members of groups like ISIS and al Shabaab. Three participants said they do not understand at all, five said they do not understand, and one indicated that he or she could slightly understand such justifications. On the next question, all the ten participants very much agreed that the mentioned groups are engaged in violence. The final question under this theme was whether the participants would believe someone who has just returned from any of the mentioned groups. A vast majority – six – said they would not at all believe in such a person, three indicated that they would show some level of disbelief, while one showed the possibility of believing such a person. Table 5 summarizes the indications that the participants made on the Likert scale on these questions about terror organizations.

The focus groups at the university showed different opinions on terror organizations as compared to their counterparts at the community college. In their ratings of the knowledge of the VE and terror groups, two of the participants gave responses indicating that they had no knowledge of such groups. Three indicated that they had little or no knowledge of such groups, while four individuals gave neutral responses, suggesting that they had no clear stance on the

knowledge of such groups. Only one person suggested having some knowledge of the groups from the university focus groups. Despite a majority of the participants reporting that they had little or no knowledge of the extremist groups, eight of them indicated the belief that such groups could very much be described as terrorist organizations. Two of them indicated a great degree of agreement with the thought that ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab are all terrorist organizations. Their responses point to the notion that despite the lack of in-depth knowledge of the groups and how they operate, the participants understood that such groups promote terror in their ranks.

Justifications for Joining Extremist Groups

Table 6

University focus groups' opinions on terror organizations.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Highest; 1: Lowest)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
High knowledge of VE and terrorist groups in general	2	2	3		4	1		
Groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab are terror organizations	7						2	8
One can understand why some justify belonging to such organizations	2	3	3	2	2			
Groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab are engaged in violence	7							10
Someone who has returned from ISIS, al Shabaab, or al Qaeda can be believed	1	5		1	2	2		

A section of the survey also assessed participants' degree of understanding of the justifications for joining terror organizations and whether it is easy for them to believe an individual who had been part of a terror organization. The participants' responses on whether they can understand when some people justify living inside any of the groups mentioned showed that a majority of them do not understand such justifications. Only two of the participants stayed neutral on the subject and the rest giving negative responses. In a demonstration of the support to

the question on whether ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab are all terrorist organizations, the respondents overwhelmingly stated that the groups are engaged in violence. This indication showed that all the participants agreed that the groups are violent terrorist organizations. The respondents then gave an indication that believing someone who has come from such a group – such as a defector – would be difficult. Five out of them said that they would not believe such a person at all, with two giving a neutral stance on the issue and two others indicating that they are likely to believe such a person. From among the university students, therefore, the trend is that most individuals would find it hard to believe an ex-member of any of the VE groups would. Table 6 summarizes their opinions and tabulates the Likert scale scores.

Comments on Radicalization

Table 7

Community college focus groups' opinions on radicalization.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Highest; 1: Lowest)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Radicalization to violent extremist groups is a big problem	6					4	5	1
Young people are very vulnerable to radicalization	5				1	6	3	
Watching extremist videos and propaganda increases the risk of radicalization	6					2	6	2

Table 8

University focus groups' opinions on radicalization.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Highest; 1: Lowest)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Radicalization to violent extremist groups is a big problem	7				1	1		8
Young people are very vulnerable to radicalization	7				2	2		6
Watching extremist videos and propaganda increases the risk of radicalization	7				1	2	1	6

To address the question of the effectiveness of counter-narrative videos for curbing recruitment to violent extremism, the next section of the survey included items about their ideas about radicalization. Radicalization is one of the means through which the VE groups and terrorist organizations inspire other individuals to adopt ideas that make them supportive of the groups' activities. The focus group participants had various opinions on the process of radicalization as displayed by their responses to three major questions. Tables 7 and 8 summarize the findings from both focus groups on the three questions. The first question asked the participants if they believed that radicalization to violent extremist groups was a real problem to society. Among the focus group participants from the community college, only one confidently asserted that radicalization is very much a problem in present society. Five others thought that radicalization is "much" of a problem to modern society, with the rest identifying some problem with radicalization. The indication is that while the participants all agreed to the fact that radicalization is a problem in society, many of them did not believe it was a very serious problem. The university students, on the other hand, had more participants indicating that the problem was real in modern society. Eight of them answered that radicalization was very much a problem, one stayed neutral, and the other participant indicated that there was some problem with radicalization. Thus, the university students acknowledge the threat that radicalization poses to human communities around the world as compared to their counterparts from the community college.

The second item under the theme of radicalization asked if young people are vulnerable to becoming radicalized by the identified VE and terrorist groups. The participants from both institutions gave indications that there is a degree of vulnerability to radicalization among the

youth. Among the community college participants, one individual indicated a neutral stance on the question, while six gave a score that depicted that the mentioned population is slightly vulnerable to radicalization. Three others responded that young people are vulnerable to the process, but none of the participants thought that the age group was very much vulnerable. Thus, even though the trend in thinking was that there is a degree of vulnerability to radicalization, the majority of the participants did not give it as much weight as their counterparts in the university. On the same question, six of the university students in the focus groups indicated that young people are very much vulnerable to radicalization by the identified organizations. Two of them remained neutral on the question, but two others responded that there is a degree of vulnerability among the young people. The findings were indicative of the idea that university students think that the youth are very much in danger of heeding to the messages that the VE and terrorist groups spread.

The third item under the theme inquired from the participants if they believed that those who watch extremist videos and online propaganda are at risk of becoming radical or extreme. The participants from the two institutions had markedly different responses to this question as was the case with the second item. Among the community college participants, only two believed that watching extremist videos and propaganda can very much increase the risk of radicalization. Six others indicated that there is a significant level of risk, and the rest responded that there is a slight risk of radicalization from the consumption of propaganda and extremist media. In contrast, the university students mostly supported the idea that consuming such content is very risky for individuals. Six of them responded that the level of risk was “very much,” one responded by indicating that there was “much” risk, while two others indicated that the risk was only slight. The response from one of the participants was neutral. The trend from the institution

showed that the participants view the content that violent extremist groups share to be risky and likely to lead to radicalization. Fewer participants from the community college share a similar belief or opinion on the role of extremist media on the risk of radicalization.

The Role of Videos, Propaganda, and Counternarratives

To address the question of the effectiveness of counter-narrative videos for curbing recruitment to violent extremism, the next section of the survey included items about the opinions of the participants on online videos, online propaganda, and counternarratives, with the questions including an inquiry into whether they have interacted with such content before. The participants from both institutions gave the opinions that online videos have an influence on radicalization and that counternarrative videos could work in countering this influence. The summary of the questions and the Likert scores by the participants is presented in Tables 9 and 10.

Table 9

Community college focus groups' opinions on videos, online propaganda, and counternarratives.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Highest; 1: Lowest)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
I have sometimes watched online videos from ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab	1	10						
There should be videos and materials to combat VE groups	6					2	3	5
VE group propaganda has more influence on others than me	5				2	3	2	3
VE group recruitment efforts can succeed on others rather than me	5				2	3	2	3
I am less exposed to VE recruitment and propaganda than others	6				2	2	2	4
Counternarrative videos will influence others more than me	6				1	3	2	4
I am ready to share anti-ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab messages on social media	4	1	1	2	2	1	1	2

Table 10

University focus groups' opinions on videos, online propaganda, and counternarratives.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Highest; 1: Lowest)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
I have sometimes watched online videos from ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab	1	8		2				
There should be videos and materials to combat VE groups	7				2	1		7
VE group propaganda has more influence on others than me	7	1			2	1	1	5
VE group recruitment efforts can succeed on others rather than me	7				2		1	7
I am less exposed to VE recruitment and propaganda than others	6				2	2	1	5
Counternarrative videos will influence others more than me	7				2		2	6
I am ready to share anti-ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab messages on social media	2	4	2		1	2		1

The first item sought to uncover whether the participants had, at any point in their lives, watched the online videos that groups such as ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab occasionally share. From the college focus groups, the response was that none of the participants had ever watched such videos. The number was slightly fewer from the university focus groups, with eight of the participants having never watched such videos. However, two university focus group participants had no certainty as to whether they had not watched such videos, as indicated by their responses with a score of 3 on the Likert scale. The trend in responses still shows that most of the participants have not interacted with the video content from the VE and terrorist organizations online.

The second item inquired if the participants believed that there is a need for videos to combat the VE groups. The trend in the responses from the community college participants indicated support for the use of such videos and materials to combat the organizations. The

university students showed a stronger support for the use of the videos and materials. The consensus from the majority of both community college and university participants, though, was that the dissemination of videos and other online materials is of necessity in combating the spread of such group's propaganda and teachings among various targeted groups. Five of the community college respondents believed "very much" in the need for such content, three others said that there was much need, and the remaining two responded that there was some need of the materials and content. More participants from the university focus groups classified the need of the anti-VE group content to be "very much," with seven of them giving this response on the Likert score. One of them then claimed that there was some need as indicated by the score of 5, while the rest gave a neutral score on the question.

The third item investigated how the participants perceived the influence of VE extremist group propaganda as shared by ISIS, al Shabaab, and al Qaeda. The question asked if they believed that such propaganda would have more influence on others than it would on them. Most of the participants agreed to the belief that the influence of the propaganda was stronger on other people. From the community college focus groups, three individuals agreed with a "very much" score, two indicated much belief in the influence of propaganda on others, and three others some belief. Only two indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed, giving a neutral response on the question. The response distribution was slightly different among the university focus group participants. Five participants agreed that the propaganda has "very much" influence on others rather than themselves, only one indicated that the influence was "much," and only one showed that there was some influence. Two others neither agreed nor disagreed with the assertion, while one person responded with "not at all" on the question, indicating that they did not think that such content would have more influence on others than themselves. The responses that the

majority of the participants gave indicated that they perceived themselves to be less vulnerable to the influence of VE propaganda than the general population.

The fourth item was related to the third, with its emphasis on the degree of success that the recruitment efforts by VE groups would have on the respondent. The question also asked if the participants thought that the efforts would succeed on others more than themselves. The community college participants responded in a similar pattern to the response they gave on the third question. Among them, three individuals agreed with a "very much" score, two agreed "much," and three others had some level of agreement. The responses from the university focus group participants were markedly different from those of their counterparts from the community college and from those they gave in the previous question. Seven of them indicated that the recruitment efforts could very much succeed on other individuals rather than themselves, while one should that such efforts could succeed much on other individuals. Two others neither agreed with the assertion nor disagreed. The trend from their responses, however, was that the recruitment efforts would be more effective on other individuals. The findings were also indicative of the general notion that the recruitment efforts that ISIS, al Qaeda, al Shabaab, and other VE groups conduct can be successful on many populations.

The fifth related item concentrated on the exposure of the tertiary students to VE propaganda and recruitment efforts. It asked the participants if they thought they were less exposed to these efforts than others from the general population. The responses showed a similar trend among the community college participants as was with their responses to the two previous questions. The slight difference was that four individuals agreed "very much," two agreed "much", two others had some agreement, and two others held a neutral stance on the assertion. Among the university students, the responses on the Likert scale were similar to those observed

in the third item. Five participants asserted that they are “very much” less exposed to the VE propaganda as compared to others, only one gave answered with “much” on the question, and two indicated that they were less exposed than others. Two others neither agreed nor disagreed with the assertion. From the two institutions, the observable trend in thought is that the members of the general public are more exposed to the propaganda and recruitment efforts by terrorist organizations.

The sixth item focused on the influence and effectiveness of counternarratives, especially on others as compared to the participants. It assessed whether the participants believed that counternarratives will have a greater influence on others rather than themselves. As was the case with the previous three questions, the consensus among the community college focus group members was that the counternarratives would influence others more than themselves. Only one person from both focus groups gave a neutral response, while three participants indicated that the videos could have some influence on others and two indicated that the counternarratives could have much influence. The number of participants who responded that the counternarratives would “very much” influence others was four, which was significantly high. From the university focus groups, the overwhelming majority indicated that the counternarratives’ influence on others would be stronger, with six participants selecting the “very much” option and two others having a response corresponding to “much.” Only two participants had neutral responses to the question. In their assertions, the participants pointed to the belief that counternarrative media content could be of great influence in stemming the tide of radicalization by VE and terrorist groups.

The final item under the theme concentrated on the readiness of the participants to share messages opposing ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab on their social media accounts. From the

responses given in the pre-test questionnaire, many participants are not ready to use their social media presence to share anti-terror organization messages. From the community college focus groups, only two individuals were very much willing to share such content, while one was "much" willing and another one showing some level of willingness. Two participants neither agreed to sharing such content nor declining to share it. One responded that they could not share the content at all, another one indicated that they could not, and two others responded with a simple no. Thus, the trend from the community college participants was that there is no consensus on the use of personal social media accounts to share anti-ISIS, al Qaeda, or al Shabaab messages. The university focus group participants, on the other hand, were more against the use of personal social media accounts to share such content. Four of them said they would not share such messages on their social media accounts at all, while two said they would not share them. Only one remained neutral on the question, and two gave a slight indication that they would be willing to use their social media accounts for anti-VE messaging. However, one participant was very much willing to share such content. Therefore, there was an observable trend against the use of personal social media accounts to spread messages against the VE and terrorist groups.

Themes from Focus Group Discussions

After the participants completed the survey, they participated in focus group discussions. There were four focus groups in total – two each from the university and the community college, with each group comprising five members. The focus group meetings occurred through Zoom, the video communication application, in compliance with the regulations for limiting physical assemblies during the COVID-19 pandemic. In each focus group meeting, the convener played

the “Rewards of Joining the Islamic State” video, and then allowed the participants to give their thoughts using a set of guided questions.

Participants’ Thoughts on the “Rewards of Joining the Islamic State” video.

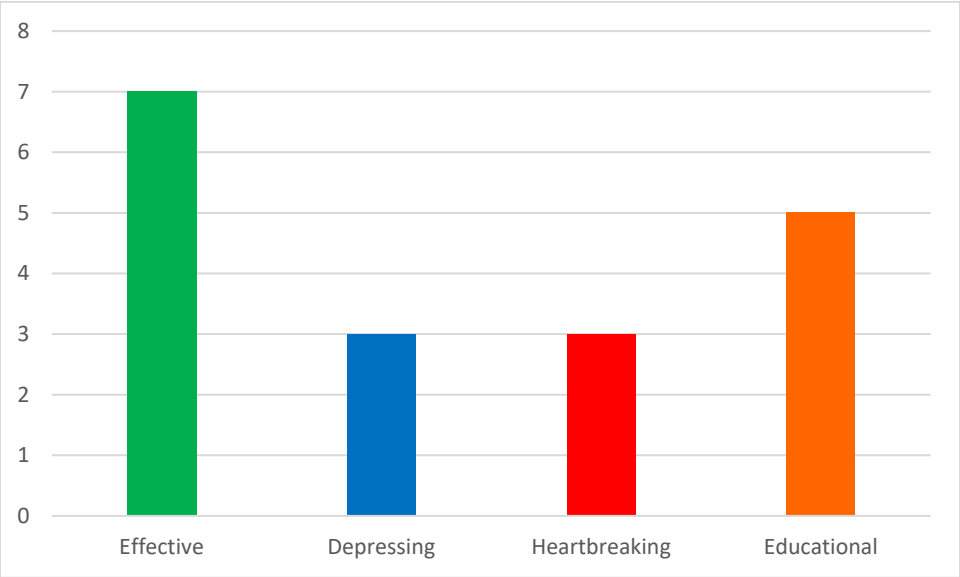

Figure 1

Community college students' thoughts.

The reactions to the video from the community college participants were consistent among the participants with two major reactions to the video. Figure 1 summarizes the weights of the thoughts on the video from the participants who were drawn from the community college. In most instances, the participants found the video to be informative (7 times) and effective (5 times). Three minor reactions from the participants indicated that the video was educational, while one participant also found it depressing and another found it to be heartbreaking. The majority of the participants, therefore, appreciate the content of the video and its eye-opening nature. A 24-year female started off the conversation by sharing, “I think this video was very *effective* in sending a message to everyone who thinks joining ISIS is cool or doing the right thing” [FG1-1]. This sentiment was echoed by her peer at the community college who added, “I

found it to many things, but I would also say education adding to my colleague's remarks. It is *educating* people of what you are going to be task in doing when you join such groups." Another "I think it's effective, educational, informative, and also heartbreaking especially hearing and seeing all the violence."

v

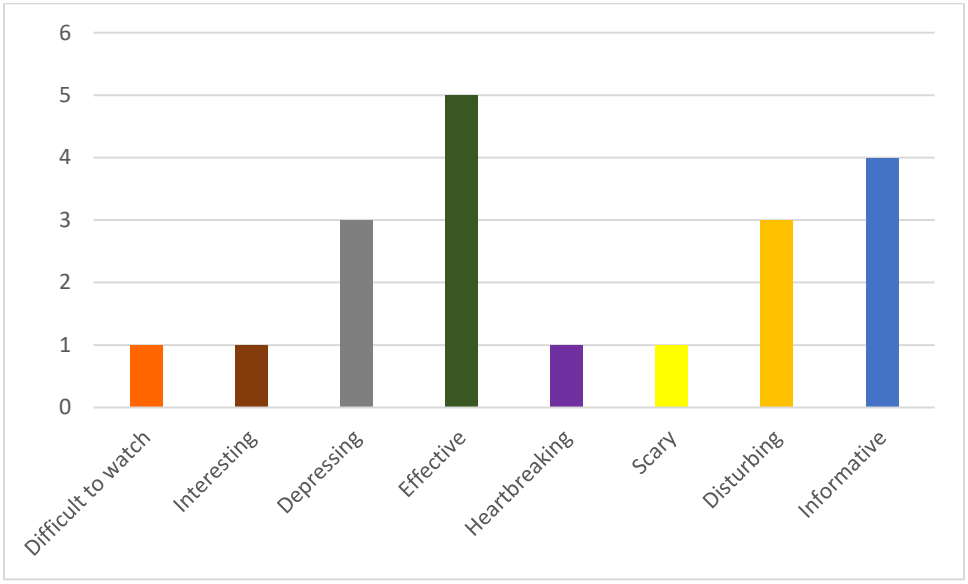

Figure 2

University students' thoughts on video.

The reactions to the video from the university participants were more diverse. There were more instances where the participants felt that the video was informative (4 occasions). It is notable that many of the participants felt that the video was depressing (3 occasions) and disturbing to watch (3 occasions). One participant felt heartbroken after watching the video, one felt that it was scary to watch, another one found it difficult to watch, and one participant admitted that it was interesting to watch. These diverse perspectives paint the picture of how such videos affect the audience differently. One participant started off by stating that, "I thought this video was disturbing." In a different opinion, another participant explained that, "this video was many things but for me it was very informative." Agreeing on the point of the video's

informative nature, another participant gave a slightly different opinion by saying that "it was informative and heartbreaking to see and hear all the tragedy." One explained that "it was informative and heartbreaking to see and hear all the tragedy." Another participant found the video to be "difficult to watch in many ways, depressing and informative as well." One participant said that "this was very scary to me," but there was a contrasting opinion from another participant who said that "I found this video was very effective in sharing with people that joining ISIS is a bad idea." Figure 2 shows a summary of the thoughts that the university students had after watching the video.

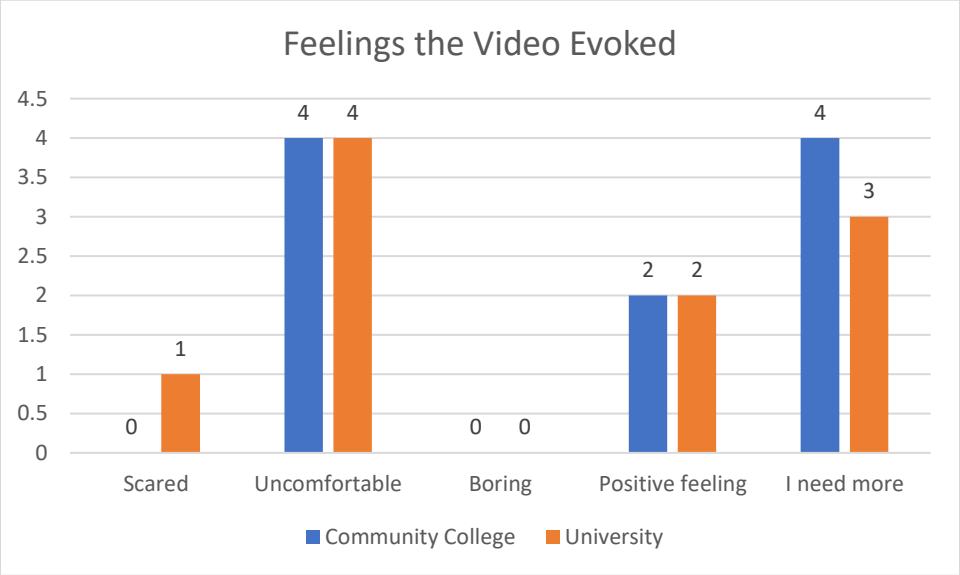

Figure 3

Distribution of feelings that the video evoked among participants.

Both sets of participants – from the community college and the university, had a similar trend in the emotional reactions to the video. Only one person from both groups felt scared by the video. The participant explained that "this video once again was scary; I personally do not like seeing violent images or hearing scary horror stories." Four participants from each type of institution then felt uncomfortable after watching the video, showing that such videos might be

repulsive to some audiences. Speaking as one of those who found the video to be repulsive, one participant said, “I would say uncomfortable, the violence is crazy, and he probably did more harm he does not know about.” None of the participants felt that the video was boring to them. The number of individuals who got a positive feeling from watching the video was equally low, with two individuals from each institution admitting a positive feeling. One of them explained that, “to me it was positive because he is taking the time to educate people about what he did and how it has affected him personally and his family. Plus, he is concerned about his afterlife and how God will hold him accountable.” Finally, four individuals from the community college felt that they would like to see more of this kind of video as compared to only three from the university. One of them admitted, “I would like to see more of these kinds of videos as it is important for young people to hear real life experiences of terrorist and ISIS members. This could help them change their mind.” Figure 3 shows a bar graph summarizing these findings from the survey of participants.

The Video and its Impacts

Table 11

University students' responses on the effects of the video.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Very much; 1: Not at all)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Abu Ghazwan is who he says he is	7				1			9
Abu Ghazwan is exaggerating his experience	1	5	1	3	1			
Abu Ghazwan is currently suffering psychologically from his involvement with ISIS	7				2	1	1	6
Video affects participant’s opinion on how they feel about ISIS	7		1			1		8
Video could convince someone not to join ISIS	7						3	7
Video can lead to radicalization and recruitment of people to ISIS	2	4	2	2	1	1		
Defector is rationalizing and excusing his involvement with ISIS	1	5	2	3				
The defector is not taking personal responsibility	1	5	2	3				

The video's message is that "ISIS is bad"	7	10

The participants had varying responses to the video, the role that Abu Ghazwan played in it, and the impact it would have on radicalization and involvement with ISIS. The majority of the participants – nine in 10 – accepted that Abu Ghazwan did not lie about his identity, with another majority denying that Abu Ghazwan was exaggerating his experience as part of ISIS. Six of the participants believed that Ghazwan was currently suffering very much from his involvement with ISIS, with only two presenting neutral responses on the point. Furthermore, on the item on how they feel about ISIS after watching the video, most of the participants (eight) said that the video very much affected their opinion on the group. Only one indicated that the video did not affect their opinion. All the participants agreed that the video could convince someone not to join ISIS, as indicated by seven responding with "very much."

The participants, however, had varying thoughts on whether the video could lead to radicalization and encourage someone to join ISIS. Four individuals said it could not lead to radicalization at all, while two opined that it could barely lead to radicalization, and another two had some degree of agreement that it could not lead to radicalization. One person remained neutral, but another participant indicated that the video could likely contribute to radicalization. All the participants, however, responded that the defector was not rationalizing and excusing his involvement with ISIS, or not taking personal responsibility for his involvement, though with varying degrees as summarized in Table 11. Finally, all the participants agreed that the message of the video was that "ISIS is bad." Their thoughts reflect how a member of the general public – of similar ethnic background, religion, and belief system – would respond to such a video. Table 11 presents a summary of their thoughts and opinions as expressed through the Likert scale.

Table 12

Community college students' responses on the effects of the video.

	Median	Likert Scale (7: Very much; 1: Not at all)						
Opinion		**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Abu Ghazwan is who he says he is	6					3	2	5
Abu Ghazwan is exaggerating his experience	2	3	3	4				
Abu Ghazwan is currently suffering psychologically from his involvement with ISIS	6					3	4	3
Video affects participant's opinion on how they feel about ISIS	7					2	2	6
Video could convince someone not to join ISIS	6					4	5	1
Video can lead to radicalization and recruitment of people to ISIS	2	3	5	2				
Defector is rationalizing and excusing his involvement with ISIS	1	5	5					
The defector is not taking personal responsibility	1	6	4					
The video's message is that "ISIS is bad"	7						1	9

The participants from the community college also showed diverse interpretation of the video and the role of the proponent. Even though they mostly agreed that Ghazwan was not lying about his identity, their level of agreement was not unanimous, with only five participants responding with a "very much" score. They also all believed that Ghazwan was not exaggerating his experience, though with differing Likert scores as shown in Table 12. Similarly, a majority of the participants agreed that the defector is suffering psychologically from the involvement with ISIS, with no one giving a negative response or staying neutral on the question. The participants also responded that the video affected how they feel about ISIS, with six showing that the effect was "very much." On the follow-up questions, one respondent said that the video "shows people that they are killing people, and Muslims should not kill anyone – it is against our values." Another admitted that "I just dislike them more." Another participant explained that the video "has really changed my views on ISIS because the news really does not show the other side of

the story were people share with us their horrific experience inside. So, this was some good inside story that shows us how people get trapped inside these terrorist ideologies and groups." Another participant who had a change in feelings after watching the video said, "I always hated terrorist organizations that make our religion look bad but watching this video kind of changed how I feel about their sometime justification for doing what they do. These guys are all evil they should be destroyed."

On the question of whether the video could convince someone not to join ISIS, the participants agreed that it could, though only one strongly believed so, with five giving their belief a score of 6 and four giving it a score of 5. The participants also thought that the video could not lead to radicalization and recruitment to ISIS, though with varying scores. Similarly, all the participants disagreed with the notions that the defector was rationalizing and excusing his involvement with ISIS or that he was not taking personal responsibility. Finally, all of them agreed that the video communicated the message that ISIS is bad. Table 12 presents the score of the responses that the participants gave on the questionnaire.

Prior Interactions with Counternarrative Videos

One of the survey items asked the participants if they had ever seen other similar counternarrative videos. Among the participants in the two community college focus groups, only one in 10 had seen similar counternarrative videos. The same observation was visible in the questionnaire responses from the participants in the university focus groups. Therefore, out of 20 participants, only two had priorly interacted with counternarrative videos. The finding indicates the need for a more robust distribution of the anti-VE and terrorist group videos and materials to educate more individuals about radicalization and the impacts that such groups have on society.

Figure 4 shows the proportion of participants who had not watched counternarrative videos before.

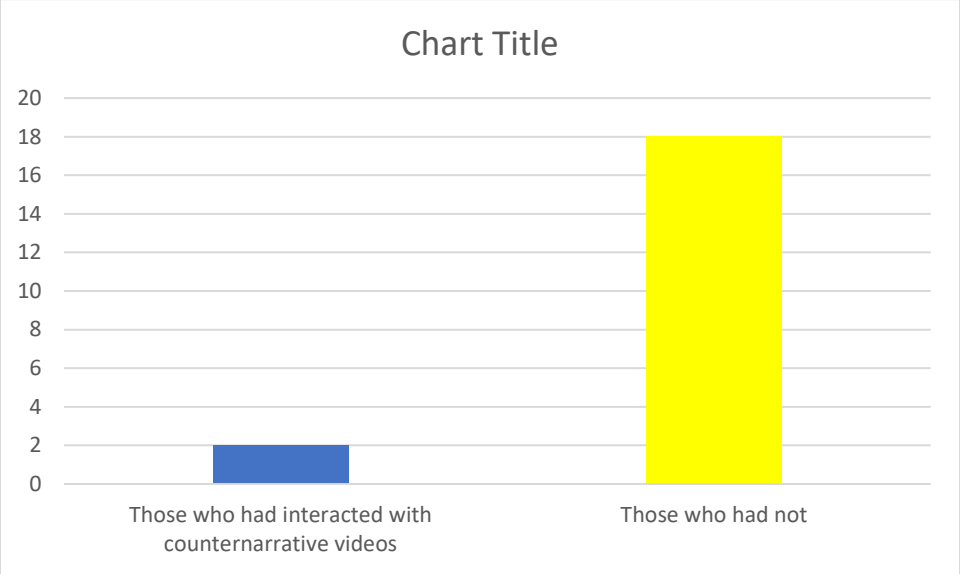

Figure 4

Proportion that has interacted with counternarrative videos.

Themes from the Post-Test Survey

Materials to Combat VE Groups

After watching Abu Ghazwan's video, most of the respondents agree "very much" that there should be videos and materials to combat the violent extremist groups such as ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab. Among the community college participants, nine out of them gave the "very much" response, with only one giving a response of "much" on the item. This was a stark change from the pre-test questionnaire, where only five students indicated "very much," three responded with "much," and two had some agreement with the need for videos and materials. The same trend was visible among the university students, who also had the same number of agreements on the "very much" option. The change points to the change in opinion after interacting with the video, indicating that young people are more likely to support the spread of

messages against the VE and terrorist organizations once they are exposed to counterterrorism content. The graph in figure 5 shows the responses by the community college participants on the question, which is similar to that obtained from among university students.

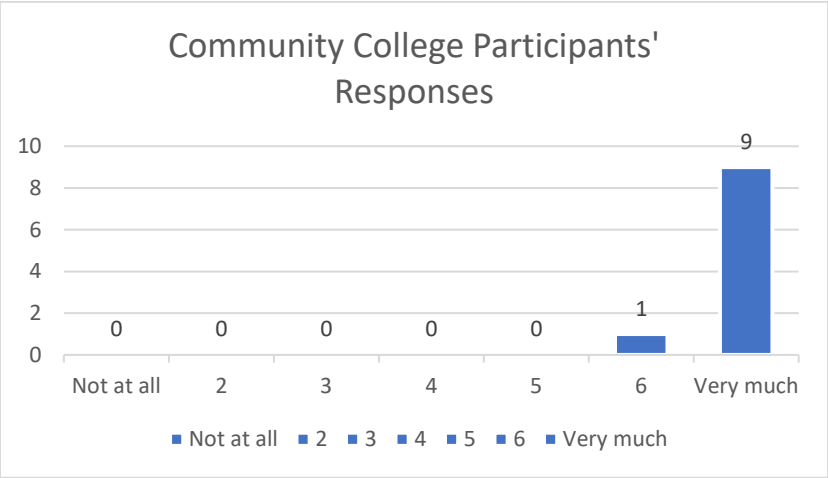

Figure 5

Responses on the need for counternarrative materials.

Influence of Counternarrative Videos on Others

Another area in which there was a notable change in opinion among the participants after they watched the Abu Ghazwan video was on their perception of how such videos could influence other people. From the community college focus groups, the number of individuals who stated that the influence was “very much” decreased from four to two, while the number which indicated that the influence was “much” increased from two to six, and the persons who had some agreement reduced from three to two. No participant gave a neutral response after watching the video. The sentimental changes seemed to reflect an acceptance of the idea that such videos could be more influential on both the participants and other populations.

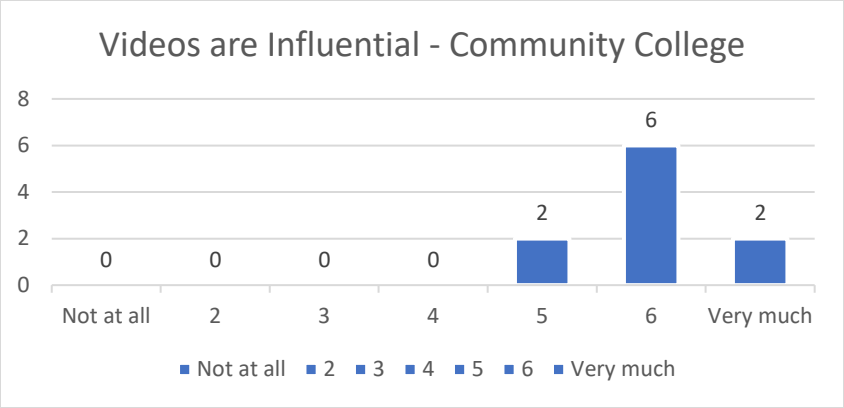

Figure 6

College students' responses on whether videos could influence others.

The response from the university students, however, did not deviate much from their pre-test responses on the question. After the test, only three of them agreed "very much" that a video such as the one they had watched could influence others greater than it does to them. Two participants gave the level of influence of the videos on others an indicator of "much," while three others said that there was some level of influence. One person notably remained neutral on the question, with another one saying the video could not influence others more than them. The observable trend in the participants' responses did not change much after they watched the video, suggesting that their thoughts on the videos' influence on themselves remained the same. Figure 7 presents a graph that summarizes the distribution of the Likert scale scores on the question.

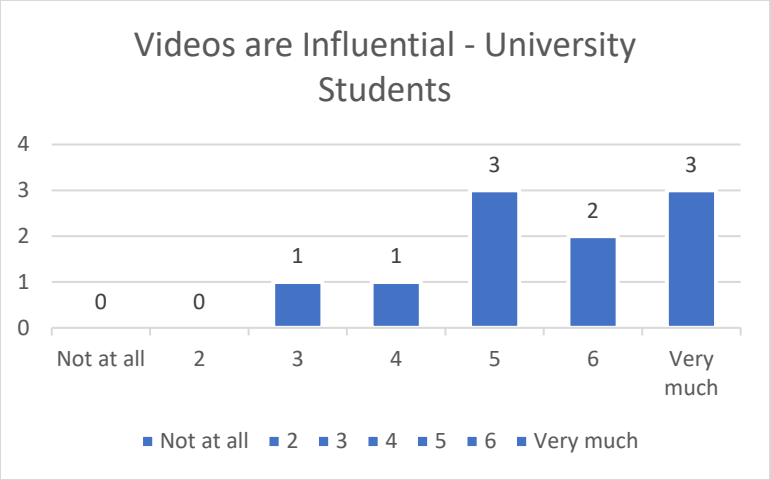

Figure 7

University students' responses on whether videos could influence others.

Sharing anti-VE Group Messages on Social Media

The likelihood of the participants to share anti-ISIS, al Qaeda, or al Shabaab videos increased after they watched Abu Ghazwan's video. Among the college focus groups, the number of participants who could "very much" share the content on their social media platforms remained at two, those who could contemplate sharing such content increased from one to two, and those with a neutral stance increased to three. The number of participants who could not share such anti-VE group materials remained at three, even though the score improved to a value of three, which is closer to the likelihood of sharing the content. One of the focus group participants from the community college further acknowledged the work of counter-messaging. In the additional comment section, the participant stated that "this was powerful. Thank you for doing the work of counter-messaging (with a smile)." Figure 8 summarizes the frequency distribution for the Likert scores by participants from the community college.

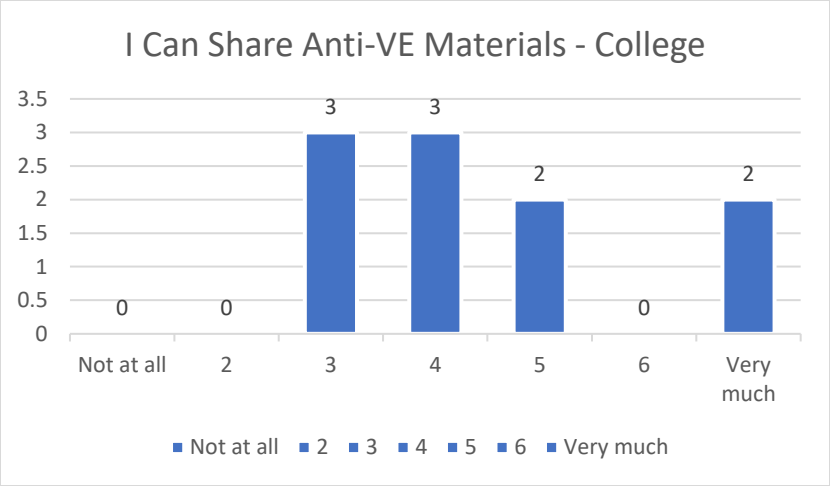

Figure 8

Community college participants' likelihood of sharing anti-VE content on social media.

Among the university students, the number of participants who showed a willingness to use their social media accounts to share anti-ISIS, al Qaeda, or al Shabaab messages increased. Those who could “very much” share such content on their social media pages increased from one to three, one more person showed that there was much the likelihood of sharing the content, but those showed some likelihood of sharing such content two in number. In total six persons were willing to share content against the terrorist organizations through their online platforms. Only one person remained neutral on the issue, and three others were reluctant to use their private online channels to share anti-terrorist messages. Figure 9 breaks down the distribution of the Likert scale scores on the question.

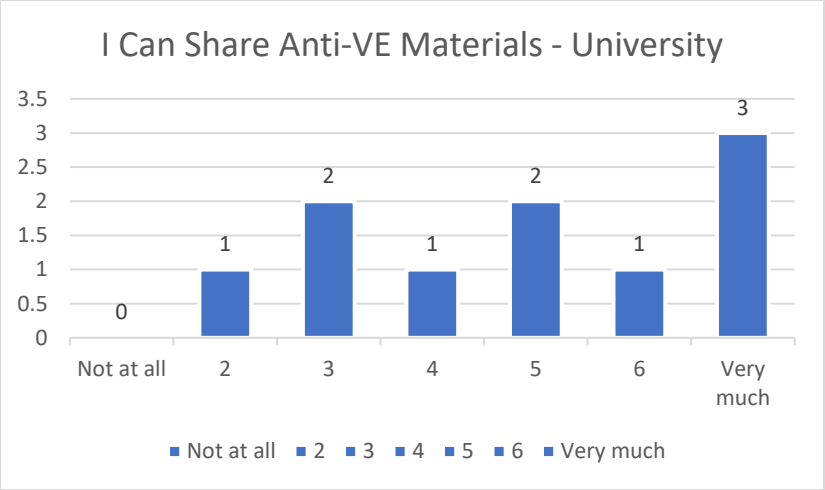

Figure 9

Community college participants' likelihood of sharing anti-VE content on social media.

Summary

The study took place in two institutions where the target population – Muslim undergraduate students – was available and easily accessible. The pre-test questionnaires administered to the participants at the two locations revealed that despite their religious affiliations, they had different opinions on the terror organizations, the process of radicalization, how videos and online propaganda can play a role in radicalization, and the potential for using counternarrative content to combat the groups and their radicalization agenda. During the focus group meetings, the participants watched the video on the "Rewards of Joining the Islamic State" and gave their reactions to its content, including their thoughts on Abu Ghazwan, how the video affected their thinking, and whether they had come across such videos before. The post-test questionnaires then revealed how their perspectives had changed after watching the video and taking part in the focus group discussions. The changes in opinion revolved around the place of videos and other materials to combat the VE groups, how counternarrative videos influence other individuals, and the readiness of the target population to share anti-VE messages on their social media accounts.

From the pre-test questionnaires, many of the participants reported that they had little knowledge about the VE groups and terror organizations, with only 10% having some level of knowledge about the organizations. All the participants, however, considered ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab to be terror organizations that are engaged in violence. The majority of the participants could not understand when some people could justify living in such terror organizations, with only five percent of them admitting to some level of understanding of such justifications. Many of the participants then admitted that they would not believe someone who just returned from any of the mentioned terrorist organizations, with only 15% indicating that they could believe such a person. 95% of the participants agreed that radicalization to such groups is a huge problem in society and that watching extremist videos and online propaganda aids the process, and 85% of them indicated that young people are the ones who are most vulnerable.

During the focus group discussions when participants watched the video, most participants found the video to be informative, effective, depressing, disturbing, educational, heartbreaking, scary, interesting, or difficult to watch. In their reactions, many of the participants were either uncomfortable (40%) with the video or needed to see more of such content (35%), with one being scared of the video (5%) and four others (20%) having positive feelings about it. Many participants believed Abu Ghazwan's identity and honesty about his experience, and that he was suffering psychologically from his experience. Most participants also thought that the video could convince someone not to join ISIS and that the message it communicates is that "ISIS is bad." Few participants thought that the video could lead to radicalization (5%), and none thought that the defector was rationalizing his involvement and not taking responsibility for his

actions. 90% of the participants then saw the need for such videos and counternarrative materials.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of counter-narratives in counteracting the appeal of violent extremist ideologies that target students in Universities and colleges in California. The objective was to advance knowledge on the potential of counter-narratives in combating terrorism. By choosing a research population in the United States, this study sought to address contextualized ideologies of extremism that are directed towards the young Muslim populations in the country. Through an exploration of the participants' opinions, thoughts, and feelings about a counternarrative video, the study identified the common themes that the target population identified with as far as radicalization and countering it is concerned.

Summary of Major Findings

The questionnaires that the participants took prior to the focus group sessions revealed telling information about their knowledge of VE groups or terror organizations, the process of radicalization, and the effects that counternarratives would have on stemming the tide of radicalization. The participants had little knowledge of the VE groups or terror organizations, but considered ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab to be terrorist groups that perpetrate violence. The majority of the participants could not understand why some people justify belonging to such groups. Moreover, most of them explained that it would be hard for them to believe a defector who had been involved with any of the organizations, casting doubts on the extent to which they would trust the testimony of such a defector. On the theme of radicalization, a huge majority of the respondents believed that it is a significant problem in society and that individuals who interact with videos and online propaganda shared by the VE groups or terror organizations are

vulnerable to the process. Most of the participants also believed that it is young people who are most vulnerable to radicalization.

The focus group discussions included a session of watching a counternarrative video in which an ex-ISIS member recounted his experiences and expressed the trauma he faces. In the discussions, different participants admitted that the video was informative, effective, depressing, disturbing, educational, heartbreaking, scary, interesting, or difficult to watch. The emotional reactions that different participants had after watching the video included discomfort, being scared, having positive feelings, and desiring to watch similar videos. From the questionnaires administered during the discussions, the participants expressed their belief in the identity of the defector, his honesty, and the fact that that he was experiencing psychological suffering. The participants all agreed that the video could convince an individual not to join ISIS because its message was that "ISIS is bad," but one thought that it could lead someone to radicalization. Finally, the participants believed that in the fight against radicalization and terrorism, there is a need for counternarrative videos. From the post-test questionnaires, the participants provided more support for the need for counternarrative videos and admitted that the videos are very influential. After watching the video, their likelihood of sharing such content on social media also increased.

Discussion of Major Findings

These findings provide major talking points on the place of counternarratives in the fight against violent extremist groups. They explain the thoughts that run through the minds of a group of young adults with regards to terror organizations and their radicalization strategies. The target group also gave its opinions on counternarratives after getting exposed to an example of such a video in the fight against radicalization. This section begins with an analysis of their

demographic characteristics before delving into the themes that emerged from the pre-test and post-test questionnaires as well as the focus group discussions.

Demographics

The participants in the study were young adults who are currently enrolled in two types of higher education institutions – a university and a community college. Their ages ranged from 19 to 26 years, corresponding to the age group and category of individuals that are particularly a target for many violent extremist groups – Muslim youth in higher education institutions. Sugihartati et al. (2020) investigated the susceptibility of young adults in various universities in Indonesia to radicalization and found out that many university students within the identified age range are active consumers of radical content. Some students among the study participants became active in accessing, reading, and generating information on radicalization, and even spread the information on various social media platforms (Sugihartati et al., 2020). Yom and Sammour (2017), in an article on the *CTC Sentinel*, similarly acknowledged that young people between the ages of 14 and 29 are highly susceptible to radicalization, especially in Jordan. Yusuf (2011) reported that pro-violent and extremist groups usually target young people below 24 years old. The demographic profile of the participants in the present study, therefore, corresponds to that of the group that various violent extremist groups usually target with their radical messages and online propaganda.

Furthermore, a majority of the participants were from lower or poor economic status and were either African Americans or Asians/Pacific Islanders. These characteristics mean that they are part of some of the minority groups in the US, which are also targeted by radical extremists. The article by Sugihartati et al. (2020) reported that in Western Europe, the members of the Muslim community who were associated with radicalization had feelings of alienation. Some

young people also become radicalized because of socioeconomic issues (Sugihartati et al., 2020). Therefore, the present study concentrated on the individuals that fall in these categories – minority groups of low socioeconomic status who might or might not have feelings of alienation – to investigate how young Muslim adults in US higher education systems would think about radicalization and counterterrorism. Even though it is impossible to generalize the response of different youth in different geographical regions to radical content, the opinions that this category of young adults gave provided insight into how best to appeal to their colleagues in the US and similar social environments with anti-violent extremist messages and counternarrative materials.

Knowledge of Terror Organizations

The knowledge of terror organizations is a reflection of the awareness that people have about the existence of such organizations and what their operations are. Among the study participants, there was a low knowledge about violent extremist and terrorist groups in general, signifying that they had little awareness about such groups. This finding implies that young Muslims in US higher education settings do not have adequate knowledge about the operations of groups like ISIS, al Shabaab, or al Qaeda. In contrast, young adults in Muslim countries in the Middle East or Indo-Pacific regions are highly knowledgeable about the groups, with some of them even consuming radicalization materials from the groups. For instance, radical groups in countries like Indonesia frequently produce and share social media content targeting the youth, such that the target populations have an awareness of their existence and activities (Sugihartati et al., 2020). Consequently, to combat the radicalization of Muslim youth in American higher education institutions, raising awareness about the groups that lead radicalization efforts would

be of help in getting them to know about the groups, their operations, and why they should be stopped.

Despite the little knowledge about VE and terrorist organizations, the participants considered groups like ISIS, al Shabaab, and al Qaeda as terror organizations. The participants also agreed that this type of group is engaged in violence, meaning that their actions hurt other individuals. The findings indicate that there is a general awareness about the impacts that the groups have on society – propagating terrorism and violence. The sentiments they expressed show support for the efforts to counter the actions of these groups as a means of enhancing societal peace and harmonious coexistence. It is not surprising, therefore, that the participants did not support the justifications that some individuals make for belonging to such organizations. In their responses to the item on the justification, most of the participants indicated that they could not understand why some individuals might justify membership in the organizations, demonstrating that they could not find reasons why people subscribe to violent extremism or radicalization.

Similarly, the majority of the university and community college students who filled the questionnaires concluded that they could not believe an individual who has returned from any of the identified VE groups. The implication is that it is difficult for this category of students to trust an individual who had ever been part of a VE or terrorist group, which could be a stumbling block for the use of counternarratives involving ex-members. Many of the participants need a lot of convincing before they can trust what an ex-member says. In the fight against radicalization and belonging to terrorist organizations, the messages targeting this category of youth should have minimal testimony from individuals who were once members of ISIS, al Qaeda, al Shabaab, or any other VE organization.

Radicalization

Radicalization was one of the commonly occurring themes in the pre-test questionnaires that the students filled. Radicalization enables the VE and terror organization to convince their targets that the cause for which the organizations are fighting are justifiable on religious grounds, leading them to adopt ideas that are in support of terrorist activities. Yusuf (2011) explained that extremist groups promote violence and intolerance against certain members of society through the spread of extremist ideology. Most of the participants in the study agreed with the statement that radicalization to VE groups is a big problem in society. Their sentiments echo those of the governments, organizations, and individuals that fight against VE groups – that radicalization is a problem that needs to be dealt with. Yom and Sammour (2017) identified radicalization as a danger because the extremist teachings inspire the disenfranchised youth to join terrorist organizations. Similarly, Yusuf (2011) explained that the violence and intolerance resulting from radicalization are dangerous to society. In the US, radicalization has contributed to the rise of lone-wolf terrorism (Hamm & Spaaij, 2015). The participant responses are in support of this message, with the view that countering terrorism requires dealing with the problem of radicalization. The findings imply that Muslim students in American institutions recognize the problem that radicalization poses.

Still sticking with the issue of radicalization, there was a slight difference between the opinions of the community college students from their university counterparts in terms of the vulnerability of young adults to radicalization. The majority of the university students strongly believed that young people are vulnerable to radicalization, as compared to the majority of community college students who had some belief that the youth are especially susceptible to radicalization. The sentiments of the university students seem to agree more strongly with

existing research on the vulnerability of the youth – including the assertions from Yom and Sammour (2017) which place individuals aged between 14 and 29 at high risk and Sugihartati et al. (2020) who identified higher education students to be highly vulnerable. Their sentiments also agreed with the findings that Raza (2018) made from an investigation of Pakistani youth – that they are highly susceptible to radicalization and sectarianism. The college students, on the other hand, had sentiments that did not agree completely with the available evidence on the vulnerability of young people to radicalization. The implication is that students in the community college need more sensitization on the danger that radicalization poses to young people.

The risk of radicalization is high among the individuals who watch extremist videos or consume online propaganda. Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) explained that the extremist and terrorist groups have a direct reach to their target audiences with the content they share, increasing the risk of radicalization among the targets. From the study, a majority of the university students agreed with this assertion by expressing the belief that extremist videos and online propaganda were very dangerous to their consumers because they increase the risk of radicalization. Among the community college students, the consensus was that the content produces a high risk of radicalization among the consumers, as opposed to the very high risk that the university students reported. All the participants – except one – agreed that there was a level of risk attached to the consumption of extremist videos and online propaganda. The findings agree with other evidence available in the existing literature on the risk associated with online extremist propaganda. For instance, Gömöri (2015) explains that media-based propaganda has been a powerful tool behind the successful popularization of extremist ideology. The fact that the university and community college students in the US identify the risk associated with extremist videos and online propaganda shows that there needs to be a stop to the spread of such videos

among young adults. Any efforts that will succeed in minimizing the exposure of youth and young adults to extremist propaganda and media content will, therefore, help reduce the risk of radicalization or popularization of extremist ideology.

The Place of Counternarratives Amidst Radical Videos and Propaganda

Counternarratives, and their potential for preventing radicalization and opposing extremist narratives, have been explored in existing literature (Leuprecht et al., 2009; Gemmerli, 2015; Carthy et al., 2018; Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2018). The participants from community colleges and universities first indicated that they have not watched online videos that ISIS, al Qaeda, or al Shabaab have shared. The finding goes on to demonstrate that they have not been exposed to the primary means through which the groups conduct radicalization campaigns. It further demonstrates that there is a low spread of extremist propaganda among higher education students in the US, particularly among those who are Muslim. Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) indicated that the groups prefer direct communication to their target audiences, and the finding that American students are not highly exposed to the content they share is a good sign that they have not concentrated their efforts in American institutions. The finding also implies that Muslim students in American universities and community colleges are at low risk of consuming content by VE and terror groups and becoming radicalized.

The survey also investigated the perception of the influence that VE propaganda has on other individuals. The majority of the university and community college participants indicated that propaganda influences other people more than it does to them. Four participants – two from each type of institution – gave neutral responses on the item, indicating that the propaganda could influence others as much as it can influence them. The findings indicate that the propaganda that VE groups use through their targeted communication is very influential and can

lead to radicalization. As Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) reported, the direct communication of the propaganda could have serious impacts on the audience's understanding of the narratives that the organizations promote. The findings imply that the spread of online propaganda produces more influence on other individuals who do not belong to the demographic profile of the participants – such as Muslim youth and young adults in other countries, who are not in college or university, or who have been exposed to the messages from the VE groups.

Furthermore, the participants reported that they are less exposed to the VE propaganda and recruitment efforts than others. Even though a total of four participants – two from each institution – had neutral responses on the item, the majority indicated that the exposure to the recruitment efforts and online propaganda is low among higher education students in the US. The participants gave similar responses on the item inquiring if the recruitment efforts can work on others rather than themselves. As Yom and Sammour (2017) explained, the existence of extremist Islamist discourse in an environment exposes the youth to extremist propaganda, which is a major contributor towards radicalization. Since the participants from the community college and the university indicate that they are less exposed to such content, the finding implies that there is a limited discourse on extremist Islamic beliefs in their environments. The findings also imply that other individuals in different contexts from the Muslims in American higher education settings are more exposed to the VE propaganda and recruitment efforts. From the participants' views, the recruitment efforts have a high likelihood of succeeding on other individuals rather than themselves. According to Raza (2018), the recruitment into radical extremist groups is high among youth in environments that have been exposed to terrorist activities, sectarian rhetoric, and violence. The implication is that the efforts to overcome the spread of propaganda and to

promote peace and diversity in US higher learning environments are working, which calls for more of such strategies to minimize the exposure to VE propaganda and recruitment efforts.

Despite having not interacted with the videos and online propaganda emanating from VE and terror groups, the majority of students from both the community college and the university agreed that there is a need for videos and materials to combat the groups. Only two students from the university focus groups had a neutral stance on the item. The findings indicate the high level of support for the use of counternarrative videos and other materials as a means of combating the influence, spread, and appeal of VE groups among their target audiences. The findings are in support of literature sources that indicate the need for content to fight against the groups, such as Carthy et al.'s (2018) explanation of the role of counternarratives in directly challenging extremist narratives. Even though the participants did not provide specific types of videos and materials to share, their support for combating VE groups indicates the need for using counternarratives as a preventive measure against radicalization, an assertion which Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) made from their study. These findings imply that Muslim students in American higher education systems are in support of the use of digital content to prevent radicalization and to fight against the VE and terror organizations.

The participants from both institutions believed that counternarrative content will have a greater influence on other people rather than themselves. Three people – one from the community college and one from the university – gave a neutral opinion on the item, implying that they believe the videos could be of influence both to themselves and other individuals. The findings that counternarrative videos are influential, especially on other parties, support their use in various contexts. Gemmerli (2015) explained that the counternarratives can be in three categories – direct, positive alternatives, or critical reflection – all of which promote different

messages. Regardless of the category, the videos all portray the negativity of violent extremism, the importance of moderate views, and the benefits of subscribing to better ideologies. The participants' responses indicate that such content can be effective in the fight against radicalization and the activities of the VE and terror organizations, a concept which Carthy et al. (2018) explained in their article. Their influence could be even more telling among Muslim youth who are not in American higher education institutions, a theme that emerges from the participants' responses. Therefore, in the fight against terrorism and the spread of radicalization, there is a place for the use of counternarrative videos of different types since they have an influence on the individuals that view them.

Reception of a Counternarrative Video

Van Eerten et al. (2019) discussed the need to tailor a counternarrative to the target audience's political, moral, religious, and psychological beliefs. Consequently, an identification of the appeal that counternarrative media has on the psychological state of the targeted parties is necessary for the development of appropriate content for various user segments. Having completed the surveys, the participants took part in focus group discussions which involved watching a counternarrative video and presenting the psychological reactions they had to it. In the video, Abu Ghazwain, the narrator, gave his thoughts on the reasons for joining ISIS, the experiences he had while being part of the group and performing its activities, and the depression he endured from his experiences after getting arrested and serving time in prison. The participants found the video to be informative about the group and its activities, effective in sending a message to individuals contemplating joining the group or any other terror organization, and educational in the elements it discusses. These viewpoints implied that such videos could provide relevant information and messaging to help individuals who are

contemplating joining the VE and terror organizations to think twice before taking that step during their lives. There are participants who found the video to be depressing, heartbreaking, disturbing to watch, scary, and difficult to watch. The emotions that the video evoked in the participants indicate that the video could be a tool that appeals to the human sensibilities of its audience. As part of the in-depth research step of counternarrative development that van Eerten et al. (2019) suggested, the findings provide meaningful information for use in identifying the type of users that the showcased video can be designed for. Since it is both relatable and informative, the video could be a useful counternarrative tool for some audiences. It also shows the characteristics that counternarrative videos and other materials should have – informativeness, effectiveness, and appealing to human emotions.

Most participants also reported that the video was uncomfortable to watch. The discomfort associated with the video came from the fact that it depicted scenes of violence and described the gory details of planting bombs that ended up killing innocent individuals. The one participant who found the video to be scary admitted to the lack of desire to see violent images or to encounter horrific stories. The responses imply that there are individuals who would not take the video positively, meaning that in the production of counternarrative videos, there should be a consideration for the individuals who do not like to witness violence or horror. On the other hand, there are participants who did not mind viewing the video and consuming its content. Among these, the majority were open to seeing more of such kinds of videos while others got positive feelings from watching them. The sentiments from this category of participants indicated that more people should view the video because of its educative nature and the need to hear more real-life experiences of people who have been part of ISIS and other VE or terror

organizations. The implication is that such videos can be feasible in communicating the dangers of joining groups like ISIS.

Impacts of the Counternarrative Video

The literature has demonstrated that counternarrative videos could either have the desired effect or the negative effect of promoting undesirable propaganda (Hemmingsen & Castro, 2017). In support of this literature finding, the video had varying impacts on the participants as their responses to the follow-up survey during the focus group sessions indicated. The participants first found the video to be acceptable because they believed that Abu Ghazwan, the narrator in the video, had a true identity. This expression of belief indicated that the participants believed the authenticity of the video and its narrator. Furthermore, a majority of the participants rejected the notion that Ghazwan was exaggerating his experience. This expression of belief in his experience shows that they found the video to be an honest explanation of the things that the narrator went through, indicating that the video was believable. The implication is that many consumers of such videos will trust the testimony that the narrators give as those that authentically emanate from former members of terror organizations and are true explanations of their experiences. It is, therefore, feasible to use the recordings of the experiences of former members of terror organizations as part of counternarrative videos.

In their interpretation of the well-being of the narrator of the video, a majority of students from both the community college and the university had the opinion that the narrator was suffering very much psychologically from the experience, with only two from the university having a neutral stance on the item. Their responses are indicative of the negative experiences that the narrator admitted having undergone. The findings showed that the video belonged to the category of direct counter-narratives, which describe some of the mistakes that the terror

organizations have made and how they have negatively affected the defectors (Gemmerli, 2015). The thought that Ghazwan was suffering psychologically portrays the negativity associated with belonging to such organizations – they expose members to mental health challenges. Since the viewers can identify the psychological suffering that the defector experienced, it is possible to use this kind of counternarratives to appeal to targeted populations that are vulnerable to radicalization.

One of the desired impacts of a counternarrative video is to influence the attitudes and behavior of the audience in such a manner that the activities of the terror organization would be repulsive (Carthy et al., 2018). Thus, a useful video should influence the feelings and thoughts of the participants on the VE or terror organization. The video affected the participants' feelings about ISIS, with the majority – except one from the university – indicating a change in feeling about the terror organization. The feelings that most of the participants had afterward included dislike for the organization, the understanding of the evil they perpetrate by killing innocent people, and the understanding of the horrific experiences that members of the organization undergo. The findings indicate that individuals who watch this type of counternarrative videos will have changed perceptions of terror organizations and the experiences that people who subscribe to them have. According to van Eerten et al. (2019), meaningful counternarratives should achieve their purpose by resonating with the target audience. The changes in feelings would be a useful weapon against radicalization since such a video would inspire the consumers to understand the evil deeds that the organizations conduct and the dangers that belonging to them pose to the individual and society. The findings, therefore, demonstrate an important effect that counternarrative media content should have – inspiring the change in perspectives on VE or terror groups.

The participants then unanimously agreed that the video could convince someone not to join ISIS – which is the ultimate aim of a counternarrative (Carthy et al., 2018). The video – and those of its kind – could, therefore, be useful in reducing the appeal that VE or terror groups have on the youth and achieving the purpose of preventing radicalization and successful recruitments to the terror organizations. This finding is in agreement with the assertion that Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) made, that counternarratives reduce the attractiveness of terror organizations to the individuals who were contemplating joining them. The finding implies that it is possible to use counternarratives to stop the spread of radicalization and to neutralize the recruitment efforts that terror organizations make. Furthermore, the participants all agreed that the message of the video was that "ISIS is bad," with such a message being useful in convincing potential recruits that the organization that they are about to join does not serve a religiously acceptable purpose. Therefore, there is a place for the use of such videos and content in discouraging membership to VE or terror organizations.

Evidence from existing literature also shows that counternarrative could have the effect of enhancing some participants' belief in the VE or terror organizations' purposes and activities (Hemmingsen & Castro, 2017). Even though the majority of the participants believed that the video could not have this effect, one person from the university focus groups indicated that the video could lead to radicalization. The finding from this lone participant echoed the thoughts that Hemmingsen and Castro (2017) expressed in their article: that counternarratives are a reactive approach that could have the undesirable result of reinforcing the narratives that terror organizations perpetrate. Still, the majority opinion gave the indicator that the video can have its desired effect rather than be counterproductive. Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) indicated that for these videos and other counternarratives to have their desired effects, they need to handle

some of the concerns that potential recruits to terror organizations have. Essentially, they should convince the susceptible individuals that the extremist propaganda that they listen to is wrong and with undesirable effects. The fact that participants in the focus groups mostly considered the video to have no effect in promoting radicalization indicates that it meets some of these requirements. The emerging thought, however, is that the videos and content need to be suitable for consumers who might be vulnerable to radicalization or recruitment.

The survey also inquired whether the participants thought that Ghazwan was rationalizing his involvement in ISIS and excusing himself, an idea which all the participants rejected. It further assessed the degree to which the participants felt that Ghazwan was not taking personal responsibility for his membership in ISIS and involvement in its terrorist activities. All the participants responded in the negative, showing the opinion that Ghazwan was taking personal responsibility for his actions and membership in the terror organization. These items investigated the opinions that the consumers of counternarrative videos would have if they watched the personal confessions of defectors. The findings from the participants indicated that they do not consider such videos involving defectors as a means of denying responsibility and rationalizing involvement with terror organizations. Similarly, individuals with similar demographic characteristics as the participants would not view the defectors as irresponsible persons who are rationalizing and excusing their membership to terror organizations. These findings are supportive of the inclusion of testimonies from defectors in counternarrative videos.

Spreading Counternarrative Videos

An establishment of the degree of exposure to counternarratives is part of the in-depth research that Van Eerten et al. (2019) supported. It is necessary in identifying the need for counternarratives and the type of content to share with the identified population. Consequently,

the survey explored the participants' prior interactions with counternarrative videos and their willingness to share such content on social media. A majority of the participants is that they had never seen such videos before, with only two from both the university and community college admitting having come across such content before. The finding is indicative of the fact that the participants have had no exposure to counternarrative videos in the same way they had not come across VE propaganda and narratives. The evidence shows that the need for counternarratives in the American context has not been met. Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018) reported that since jihadist propagandists are aggressive in using the Internet to spread their propaganda, there should be readily available counternarratives targeting the youth. The fact that the participants who belong to one of the primary target groups – Muslim students in American colleges and universities – have not come across counternarratives points to the existence of no proactive approaches to countering the influence of VE and terror groups. There is, therefore, a need for more aggressive production and distribution of counternarrative content.

Despite the support they give for the use of counternarrative videos and other anti-VE materials, the participants expressed reluctance in using their social media pages and platforms to share such content. Before the focus group discussions, only seven participants (35%) from both institutions expressed a readiness to share messages against ISIS, al Shabaab, and al Qaeda using social media, with the rest showing that they would not use their personal accounts to spread counternarratives. Even though the number increased to 10 (50% of the participants) after watching the video, there is still a reluctance to use personal social media accounts for sharing anti-VE content. This finding is indicative of the amount of effort that supporters of the fight against radicalization and extremism should put in place. According to Spekchard and Shajkovci (2018), the VE and terrorist groups are already sharing content that promotes their course

through online forums and other media outlets. In contrast, the individuals who appreciate the dangers of radicalization and acknowledge the role of counternarratives do not express readiness to promote anti-terrorist materials on social media. The finding implies that the primary approaches to adopt in spreading counternarrative videos should be social media platforms and other communication channels that do not belong to individual users.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of the study demonstrate the necessity of counternarratives in curbing the spread of VE and terror organization propaganda and recruitment efforts. These groups already have aggressive strategies of reaching their target audience through the Internet and other media outlets (Spekchard & Shajkovci, 2018). In contrast, there are few counternarratives available online or in public media outlets, and the programmers are not actively engaged in aggressive campaigns to share the content with the target audiences. In higher learning institutions, where the majority of the population targeted for recruitment by VE groups are found, there are few programs in place to counter the spread of radicalizations. Many colleges and universities are not actively involved in the dissemination of information regarding radicalization and its deleterious impacts or advancing alternative narratives to those which the VE groups propagate. At the government level, the fight against terrorism has intensified, with the policies in place aimed at reducing funding and support to the VE groups, eliminating their leaders and bases through bombings and raids, and spreading messages against radicalization. However, most of the efforts have not had the desired impact of reducing the rate of radicalization of disenfranchised youth and higher education students who look to terrorism as the solution for fighting the societal issues they face every day. The common issues include marginalization, repression by governments, human rights violations, corruption, impunity, and cultural or religious threats

(Heydemann, 2014). Since these problems exist in various societies, there needs to be an education of the vulnerable youth with the message that terrorism is not the best solution to the problems, hence the use of counternarratives.

Therefore, there is need for policy changes, especially in institutions of higher learning, to create and aggressively distribute counternarrative content in a proactive manner to stop the spread of extremist propaganda. The research findings have revealed that counternarratives could be effective in changing the perceptions of the consumers about violent extremism, radicalization, and the results of engaging in VE activities. For instance, the participants in the study had a change in opinion about sharing counternarrative content, with more becoming willing to spread the message against radicalization through the use of counternarratives after seeing what a member of ISIS went through. Therefore, the use of counternarratives is a feasible strategy for preventing radicalization among individuals who have not yet been fed with radical content or the individuals who are on the verge of radicalization. The policy changes should, therefore, avoid sharing counternarratives as a reactive strategy to the rising number of radicalized youth but as a proactive strategy for preventing the process of radicalization.

In the development of counternarrative videos or media content, the creators should consider the feelings that such content will evoke among participants. Based on this consideration, there should be different kinds of videos and media content targeting different audiences. This emerging issue should lead to a segmentation of the target audience based on the feelings they have about various kinds of videos. For instance, one segment should be the Muslim youth in American universities and colleges who find videos containing images of violence or suffering to be scary or uncomfortable to watch. For this segment, the counternarratives created should be more fact-based and informative, containing the testimonies

of ex-members without showing graphical content. Another segment should be the individuals who prefer to hear or watch people conveying their real-life experiences of belonging to VE or terror organizations. To this segment, the counternarrative videos should contain candid confessions of the former members of groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, and al Shabaab. The onus is on the content creators to identify the characteristics of the target audiences in terms of their video preferences. As van Eerten et al. (2019) suggested, the effectiveness of counternarratives can be enhanced by basing the content creation and distribution on in-depth research and elaborate planning to ensure that the identified audience is reached with appropriate programs and messages.

Implications for Research

One of the findings of the study was that the participants are not ready to share counternarrative videos and materials on their personal social media accounts. After interacting with the video, many of them changed their mind about using their social media accounts to spread counternarrative messages, but a good number still showed hesitancy on the prospect of using personal accounts to spread such content. The finding implies that there would be relatively low success rates associated with the use of personal social media accounts to spread such content with the individuals that the participants have an acquaintance. Therefore, there is a need for future research into the best media outlets for sharing counternarrative videos and other materials in a manner that counters the direct messaging strategy that some VE and terror groups employ. Furthermore, there is a need for more research on the best way to enlist users to utilize their personal social media accounts to share counternarrative content without interfering with their privacy rights. This study also revealed that people react differently to various types of narratives and counternarratives, but it did not provide a profile of the category of people who

react in certain ways to videos. The study findings revealed that there are individuals who cringe at watching scenes of violence, who might be averse to counternarrative content that depicts the violence associated with VE groups. They also revealed that there are individuals who find the type of experiential content shared to be informative and educative and were willing to watch more of such materials to enhance enlightenment on the activities of the VE or terror organizations. However, the study did not focus on the characteristics of the individuals that could be predictive of their reactions to such content. The potential characteristics of interest could include the gender, age, personality traits, family background, or any other trait that research could reveal. Thus, future studies should consider the strategies for segmenting the target audience and selecting the appropriate content to share with them.

The study took place in the context of community colleges and universities in the US, where educators play a critical role in passing information to the students on the fight against violent extremism and the best strategies to use. However, it did not provide findings on the mechanisms that educators and other higher educational leaders can use to combat terrorism on campus. There is, therefore, a need for the conduction of research into the strategies that educators can use to encourage students to avoid violent extremism or use counternarratives. The focus of the study should be on how to prepare educators to combat violent extremism within their institutions or to use counternarratives in the fight against the radicalization of students. Because this study focused on Muslim students in community college and universities as it relates to foreign terrorist organizations, there is a need to expand this study to look at other violent extremist groups such as domestic extremist and terrorism.

Hamm and Spaaij (2015) noted that the radicalization of American youth has contributed to the rise of domestic terrorism, especially through lone-wolf attacks. However, domestic

terrorism is not limited to lone-wolf attacks and the mass shootings that such terrorists perpetrate. It also includes the activities that violent groups or organizations in American society conduct. Some of the groups commonly associated with violent extremism in the US include the white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and QAnon conspiracists, among others. Since the country is at a greater threat of domestic terrorism than international terrorists, a study into the strategies to use to curb domestic terrorism is necessary. Since the present study has established the usefulness of counternarratives, there is a need for more research on the potential usefulness of counternarratives in the fight against domestic terrorism.

Conclusion

The research sought to uncover, from the questionnaire and focus group instruments, the potential for using counternarratives in fighting terrorism and radicalization. The selected study population comprised Muslim students aged between 19 and 26 in two higher education institutions in the US, which represents the population mostly targeted by VE groups and terror organizations through extremist narratives and online propaganda. The participants had little knowledge of the terror organizations and had not encountered the extremist content that these organizations share. Consequently, they had a firm belief that radicalization and recruitment to such organizations could work on other populations rather than themselves. They still believed that radicalization is a major danger, especially to the youth that such organizations primarily target with their messages. To counter this possibility, the consensus was that there was a need for counternarrative videos and other materials. After watching the counternarrative video, they appreciated its message – the badness of ISIS – and the negative experiences that the defector had as a member. Their likelihood of sharing such content through their social media accounts increased after watching the video. The findings, therefore, support the use of counternarratives

to combat the process of radicalization and recruitment of young people to VE groups and terror organizations.

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APPENDIX

Introduction (5 minutes)	Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I'm _____ from Old Dominion University. I am speaking with various students to get thoughts and impressions of counterterrorism efforts in the United States. As a researcher and advocate for various social issues, I would like to talk with you about the effectiveness of counternarrative videos in curbing recruitment to violent extremism. What I learn from today's discussion will help us improve our nations efforts in prevention and countering violent extremism. In this study, I will treat your answers as confidential and I will not include your names or any other information that could identify you in any reports I will write. I will also destroy the notes and audiotapes after we complete our study and publish the results. Do you have any questions about the study?
Topic 1 (10 minutes)	To begin, please describe your understanding of what constitutes counterterrorism (CT) and tell me about the kinds of activities, measures, or policies you know of. What different types of counterterrorism measures/policies/interventions can be distinguished in the United States and abroad?
Topic 2 (20 minutes)	Now, we'd like to discuss your thoughts and impressions about the use of videos in preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) and the impact it has had on counterterrorism. How do the videos meet current counterterrorism demands? Do they reduce or increase the recruitment of terrorists and insurgents?
Topic 3 (15 minutes)	The last thing that I'd like to discuss with you is personal opinions on the effectiveness of counterterrorism narratives and videos in curbing extremism in the United States. What practical lessons can be drawn based on the existing measures regarding the evaluation of counterterrorism videos and preventing and countering violent extremism measures in the United States
Final thoughts (5 minutes)	Those were all the questions that we wanted to ask.

Do you have any final thoughts about the counterterrorism efforts that you would like to share? Thank you for your time.