
Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Facebook Campaigns in Europe

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Recommended Citation

Speckhard, Anne and Ellenberg, Molly. "Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Facebook Campaigns in Europe." *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 3 (2020) : 120-148.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.13.3.1844>

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Abstract

Despite the territorial demise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], the group's cyberoperations, which once drew an unprecedented 45,000 foreign terrorist fighters [FTFs] to their so-called Caliphate, continue to entice supporters online. ISIS's slick, high-quality content encourages supporters to hope for the return of the Caliphate and to seek revenge upon those who destroyed it by executing attacks at home. The European Union [EU] was one of the highest contributors of FTFs to ISIS and continues to be a hotspot for ISIS directed and inspired attacks. The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism [ICSVE] has produced over 180 counter narrative video clips featuring ISIS defectors, returnees, and imprisoned cadres denouncing the group, published in over 100 Facebook campaigns. This article details the results of 20 one-minute long counter narrative Facebook campaigns in eight EU countries. The results support marketing best practices of using shorter videos to increase viewer retention and suggest that EU viewers are more engaged with counter narratives in which the speaker is relatable and representative of the audience toward which the video is targeted.

Acknowledgements

ICSVE wants to give special thanks to the European Commission's Civil Society Empowerment Programme, the Embassy of Qatar in the United States, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, and Facebook for supporting this project in part and for the Syrian Democratic Forces, Iraqi Falcons, Iraqi Counter Terrorism Services, Kenyan National Centre for Counter Terrorism, Albanian and Kosovar Justice Ministries and other American and European authorities and private citizens who helped the researcher gain access to ISIS prisoners and returnees. ICSVE also thanks our video editors as well as Haider Shaghati and Gabriel Sjöblom-Fodor for their translation work.

Introduction

Researchers have long established that studying the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) must include research into its media and propaganda techniques, and similarly, that countering ISIS must involve a media aspect that is just as effective as the terrorist group's online recruitment. Those familiar with the group understand that the unprecedented flow of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), first to fight with ISIS and other insurgent groups, and then to live under ISIS's Caliphate, can be attributed in large part to ISIS's adeptness at creating high-quality, emotionally evocative propaganda videos and ideological content. ISIS produced its content was produced in scores of different languages spoken around the world along with face-to-face recruiters who are also active in many countries.¹ Social media, and ISIS's skill at exploiting it, has been integral in spreading their propaganda and streamlining the process of terrorist recruitment online.

While the territorial defeat of ISIS has largely been accomplished, their online recruitment and propaganda machine continues diminished, but unabated. In late March 2020, ISIS released a video that portrayed fighters killing pro-regime soldiers in Syria, sometimes in particularly brutal ways.² In May 2020, the group's Iraq faction released a 49-minute video entitled "Strike [Their] Necks," boasting of their increased attacks and fatalities in Iraq over the previous month.³ Similar to ISIS's early videos, prior to those lauding the glory of the Caliphate, ISIS has designed recent videos in an effort to instill fear in the group's enemies and hope for resurgence among their supporters.

In the European Union (EU), specifically, ISIS had recruited at least 3,000 FTFs by 2016, before the beginning of their demise.⁴ The EU countries with the highest numbers of FTFs were France, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands. The EU countries with the highest numbers of FTFs per capita were Belgium, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, France, and Finland. European Union candidate states such as Turkey, North Macedonia, and Albania also had high raw and per capita numbers of FTFs, as well as potential candidate countries Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As of 2017, France alone had the fifth highest number of FTFs, following Russia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Tunisia.⁵ Half of those who left from the EU had criminal pasts, often histories of petty crime, and ISIS used petty crime to finance FTFs' travel from Europe to ISIS, as well

as attacks at home. Approximately 17 percent of the EU FTFs as of 2016 were women.⁶

ISIS's success in recruiting online drove government entities such as the U.S. State Department to create counter narrative propaganda materials aimed not at promoting prosocial and pro-democratic values (alternate narratives), but at directly disputing terrorist arguments and ideology. Unfortunately, the U.S. State Department's *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign was discredited partly because it was led and labeled by a U.S. government agency and secondly because of a particularly disastrous video that mocked ISIS but was itself mocked by American audiences. This failure led many to believe that counter narratives could not effectively fight ISIS online. Others inside the communities from which ISIS recruits argued that counter narratives alone are not enough, particularly if there are no measures taken to address real grievances, which terrorist groups addressed in their narrative and recruitment calls.

As the U.S. State Department and other government entities turned to non-government entities to take over creating counter narratives, little funding was made available for them to do so. The non-government entities were therefore unable to compete with the drive and manpower ISIS devoted to producing their content, even after the demise of the territorial Caliphate. This has resulted in a dearth of counter narratives to disrupt and dispute to ISIS's online claims and recruitment drives. Although terrorist material is now often quickly removed from mainstream platforms, ISIS and its followers are still able to share massive amounts of their formerly (sometimes reworked) and currently produced content. ISIS posts their content on encrypted and even on mainstream platforms far faster and more cleverly than those who remove such content can manage to do so. This is particularly true on encrypted apps such as Telegram.⁷

Although abandoned, the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos campaign provides an excellent comparison guide to the aspects of ISIS's videos that apparently made them so much more convincing than those of the State Department. Whereas the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos focus exclusively on portraying the enemy [ISIS] in a negative light, ISIS's videos are primarily concerned with portraying itself in a positive light, with denigrating and dehumanizing their enemies taking a secondary role.

Likewise, ISIS videos often name a commonly shared grievance such as discrimination or marginalization, or a commonly cared about grievance, such as victims of Assad's atrocities. ISIS's videos then weave the answer to these grievances into religious language that forms a clear call to action: Take hijrah and travel to Syria, answer the claimed individual obligation to jihad and join the ISIS jihad, and come live under the Islamic Caliph and build the ISIS Caliphate. State Department's campaigns by contrast denigrated ISIS but did not create rapport on the reasons one might join ISIS, nor did they provide a clear call to action to address legitimate social grievances and claimed obligations shared among Muslim populations.

State Department's focus on the negative versus ISIS showing itself in a positive light while denigrating their enemies may have been a critical flaw in the *Think Again, Turn Away* counter narratives. As one report notes, "This rhetorical asymmetry favors ISIS, in that a positive or balanced message tends to be more persuasive than a purely negative one."⁸ The same report notes that the narrators in many of the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos are unidentifiable and never heard; the State Department's perspective is presented only as text, interspersed with videos of others speaking, primarily ISIS members in an attempt to dispute their arguments. In contrast, ISIS's use of real people speaking directly to the camera makes their videos appear more genuine.

Indeed, researchers identified distrust in the source as a key barrier to creating effective counter narratives. Creators of counter narratives can cultivate trust; argue Braddock and Morrison (2018), through realistic and immersive counter narratives that challenge the terrorist group's credibility without requiring significant cognitive effort. Information should be presented or endorsed by peers of the intended audience and should come from trusted authorities on the topic, namely former members of terrorist groups or ideological leaders, not government entities whose trust has already been eroded among the target audience.⁹ Furthermore, some have argued that terrorist groups can use counter narratives produced and disseminated by perceived-untrustworthy entities such as the U.S. Government as evidence that the United States and the greater Western society are trying to target and manipulate Muslims.¹⁰ Finally, a report by Braddock and Morrison (2018) mentions that some of the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos are insensitive to Islamic cultural values. The videos may insult conservative Muslims who believe that the

Quran does allow for some types of slave ownership or that women should be completely covered and separated from men, but do not support ISIS or brutal enforcement of the aforementioned Quranic requirements.¹¹

In the EU, counter narratives have been slightly more successful. The Radicalization Awareness Network Internet and Social Media Working Group [RAN], founded in 2012, specifically defines counter narratives, in contrast to pro-democratic values alternative narratives, as videos or other material that “directly or indirectly challenge extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humor.”¹² However, critiques of counter narratives frequently note that factual, logical, and cognitive arguments cannot stand up against the emotional draw of ISIS. In the United Kingdom, previously a member of the EU, the Research Information, and Communications Unit (RICU) within the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism has been an integral part of the CONTEST and Prevent broader counter terrorism strategy, specifically aimed at counter messaging. The target audience accused the RICU campaigns and *Think Again, Turn Away* of being Islamophobic propaganda.¹³ Breakthrough Media, funded by RICU, created a counter narrative video with Quilliam.¹⁴ *Not Another Brother* is a dramatic enactment of a brother’s regret over his jihadist brother who lands in prison in Syria. While the messaging is emotionally evocative and appears to come from peers, that fact that there are no labels saying how made it or if the story is even true can also create a sense of being manipulated by unseen others. In France, the counter narratives produced as part of the #StopJihadisme campaign have been effective in convincing middle-class French parents to approach the authorities if they fear their child is being radicalized. Unfortunately, #StopJihadisme has not had the same impact in lower income and immigrant households, where family members are wary to trust the government.¹⁵

Other criticisms of counter messaging in general, with explicit reference to *Think Again, Turn Away*, emphasize the diversity of messages presented in ISIS’s propaganda. Counter narratives, therefore, must address the wide breadth of reasons why people radicalize and seek out terrorist content online, many of which are not ideological. Moreover, counter narratives must also address the different types of audiences toward which the terrorists aim their propaganda, for there is no one profile of an ISIS member, supporter, or follower. Some critics have also accused counter narratives of emphasizing brutality as a reason not to join a terrorist

group, while the groups themselves have not attempted to hide that brutality. Therefore, someone who has already viewed terrorist propaganda will not be shocked or disillusioned by images of corpses or beheadings.¹⁶ In fact, some may be attracted to brutality. Similarly, accusatory, even fearful, exclamations regarding the numbers of people, particularly Westerners and non-Muslims, killed by ISIS only serve to validate ISIS's own claims of dominance and infallibility.¹⁷

For these reasons, counter narrative campaigns in the West have tended to fall flat. Researchers and policy makers can use the same reasons for the failures of some counter narratives as a roadmap, in addition to guidelines set forth by Braddock and Horgan (2016), for producing and disseminating counter narratives against ISIS that are credible, trustworthy, realistic, and culturally sensitive. *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narratives Project* is a project undertaken by the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) that aims to do just that. ICSVE creates the *Breaking the ISIS Brand* counter narratives by contrasting ISIS imagery with the voices and footage of actual ISIS defectors, returnees, and prisoners. The first author, a research psychologist, in prisons, camps, and field settings in Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) territory, Iraq, Turkey, Belgium, Kosovo, Albania, and Kyrgyzstan, interviewed the speakers. These speakers, certainly authorities on their own experiences in ISIS, explain the reasons for which they were drawn to ISIS: A sense of belonging, employment, a chance to help and defend the suffering Syrian people, pursuing Islamic ideals, among many others. They tell of ISIS recruiters who promised them dignity, significance, purpose, and the hope of going to live in an Islamic utopia, the ISIS Caliphate governed by Allah's laws. The speakers then go on to reveal what they experienced in ISIS. They recount, sometimes with tears in their eyes, of watching their families die in bombings or of starvation, and of being tortured for breaking the most minor and arbitrary rule. They tell of being forced to fight and unable to escape, of seeing innocent people executed and children playing with corpses on the side of the road. They urge others not to follow the same path and to learn their religion well so as not to allow predators who twist and misuse Islamic sacred scriptures to manipulate them.

International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism has produced over 180 counter narrative videos gleaned from a database of 239

interviews with ISIS defectors, returnees, and prisoners. The researchers have tested the videos in over 150 Facebook campaigns all over the world, in all of the languages in which ISIS recruits.¹⁸ The ICSVE staff has also tested the videos in focus groups and other face-to-face settings in various parts of the world.¹⁹ Results of previous studies have made clear that the *Breaking the ISIS Brand* counter narratives are deeply emotionally evocative, and viewers perceive the speakers as credible and trustworthy. The challenge for online campaigns, therefore, has been in increasing viewership to ensure that the videos are reaching the target audiences and having the intended effect. Likewise, the videos aim to delegitimize ISIS ideology and as a group, but also fail to give any call to action. Thus, the videos direct Facebook users operating in English, Arabic, and Albanian, to the ICSVE-run website, theRealJihad.org, which is a growing repository of on-the-ground deradicalization resources, blog posts aimed at redirecting viewers into more productive pursuits to address their grievances than terrorism, and the complete collection of *Breaking the ISIS Brand* videos.

The videos direct users operating in other languages to ICSVE's YouTube channel in their language, which posts playlists of all of the counter narrative videos, categorized by subtitle language. The goal of the ICSVE online campaigns is disruption to prevent and intervene in ISIS's online recruitment efforts. Facebook collaborated with ICSVE, inserted ICSVE counter narratives that look and are labeled similarly to ISIS propaganda online to catch viewers moving along the terrorist trajectory and perhaps already deeply in it. The goal is not to completely deradicalize those already deeply in, but to cause all of them to question some of the narratives and arguments that they may have received, and to reach out for help from religious or psychological professionals equipped to handle cases of militant jihadist radicalization.

The Present Study

The researchers designed the present study in an effort to increase viewership of ICSVE's *Breaking the ISIS Brand* videos among European audiences. During the second half of April 2020, ICSVE ran 20 Facebook campaigns in eight European Union [EU] countries, in the main and vulnerable minority group languages in each country. The researchers selected each video specifically for the country in which it was shown in

order to ensure the speaker was as relatable as possible to the target audience. In Austria and Germany, the video shown, “Learning About Your Religion in the Islamic State Caliphate,” features Jamila, a 24-year-old German woman of Kosovar and Turkish descent, describing the torture she and her husband endured after trying to escape from ISIS.²⁰ In Germany, the video was shown to Turkish- and German-speaking audiences, and to German-, Bosnian-, and Albanian-speaking audiences in Austria. In Belgium and France, the video shown, “Interpreting Scriptures in the Islamic State Caliphate,” features 29-year-old Belgian Abu Usama al Belgique, who is of Moroccan descent, describing ISIS’s hypocrisy and brutality in enforcing their twisted version of Islam.²¹ The video was shown to Arabic-, Dutch-, French-, and Albanian-speaking audiences in Belgium and Arabic-, French-, and Albanian-speaking audiences in France. In Greece, the video shown, “My Islamic Duty to Help Suffering Syrians,” features 32-year-old Bosnian Din Azmat Aliayad, who joined ISIS in the hope of fighting for Syrian civilians as others did for Bosnians when he was a child.²² The video was shown to Arabic- and Albanian-speaking audiences. In Italy, the video shown was “The Promises of ad-Dawlah to Women,” which features Belgian Laura Passoni (whose parents are Italian), aged 31, who speaks about a male ISIS recruiter luring her to ISIS by the promise of marriage and a pure Islamic life after a failed relationship left her heartbroken and vulnerable.²³ The video was shown to Arabic-, Albanian-, and Italian-speaking audiences. The video shown in the Netherlands, “In Search of a Just Islamic Caliphate,” features 39-year-old Dutch Munir Hassan al Kharbashi, of Moroccan descent, who tells of the brutality and corruption he witnessed under ISIS.²⁴ This video was shown to Dutch-speaking audiences. Finally, the video shown in Sweden, “Life is Good in the ISIS Caliphate,” features 26-year-old Danish Abu Bakr al Kurdi, who admits he believed in ISIS’s ideology until he saw how cruelly ISIS treated its own members.²⁵ The video was shown to Swedish- and Arabic-speaking audiences.

Method

The researchers ran all of the videos for 13 days, from 17 April to 31 April 2020. Researchers gleaned and calculated quantitative results based on Facebook metrics at the end of the campaign period. The *reach* metric refers to the number of people on whose Facebook feeds the video appeared. Thus, it does not refer to the number of people who watched the

video, but rather the number of people who could have seen the video. The *ThruPlay* metric refers to the number of times Facebook users viewed the video either for 15 seconds or for the majority of the time. Because each of the counter narratives run in this campaign was one minute long, the *ThruPlay* metric is equivalent to the number of times Facebook users viewed at least 25 percent of the video. This number is a more accurate measure than the *view* metric, which refers to the number of times users played the video for at least three seconds, which can happen without the viewer even registering that the video is playing. Therefore, *ThruPlay* refers to the number of times a user knowingly let the video play. *Complete views* are the number of times Facebook users played the counter narratives in their entirety. From the *complete views* number and the *ThruPlay* number, one can calculate the percentage of times users played the video was until the end after watching the video for 15 seconds. Thus, the difference between *complete views* and *ThruPlay* equals the number of times users did not complete the video after watching for at least 15 seconds. Readers should note that *both complete views* and *ThruPlay* refer to the number of times users viewed the video, not the number of people who viewed it, as one person could view the video multiple times. Other metrics, such as *post reactions*, *post shares*, *post saves*, and *post comments* refer to the quantitative amount of engagement with the counter narratives. Engagement can occur without the user watching the video and ICSVE recorded such engagement in previous *Breaking the ISIS Brand* studies, such as when an ISIS supporter shares the video, assuming based on its title, which is purposely ambiguous, that it is pro-ISIS material.

The researchers also report qualitative results in this article. Researchers recorded comments on each video daily, to capture comments that either commenters or the Facebook system may later edit or delete. At the end of the campaign, researchers sorted the comments by language and sent to professional translators in order to ensure that no culturally relevant idioms or references are lost by computer translators. The comments were then analyzed based on sentiment regarding ISIS or the speakers themselves, level of emotionality expressed in the comment, and expression of other relevant themes such as anti-Western conspiracy theories regarding ISIS's origins.

Results

Quantitative Results

All of the videos had relatively high reach numbers, with the Italian language video shown in Italy and the French language video shown in France standing out as particularly high reach outliers. The Bosnian language video shown in Austria was a low outlier, which makes sense given it is a minority language in Austria. Breaking down the reach numbers by age and gender allow for determination as to whether the counter narratives are reaching the target audiences within the specific countries and language groups. All but one of the videos reached primarily men, which is in line with the target, as the vast majority of Europeans who joined ISIS were men.²⁶ The Italian language video shown in Italy was again an outlier in this regard, as the majority of Facebook users reached were women, but it was also a woman speaking. In fact, the Italian language video shown in Italy accounted for the majority of women reached by all of the campaigns. Although this video also reached the highest number of men of any campaign, it accounted for only 19.9 percent of the men reached in total. The counter narrative run in Italian featured a female speaker discussing the treatment of women under ISIS, so the researchers reached the target audience in that sense, but the video shown in Austria and Germany also featured a female speaker, and that video reached where more men. Moreover, the same video run in Italy with Italian subtitles ran with Albanian and Arabic subtitles. Although the speaker and the story were identical, the video with Italian subtitles was the only one that reached more women than men; the videos with Albanian and Arabic subtitles reached more men than women.

Regarding the reach numbers broken down by age group, the target audience for the counter narrative videos is between the ages of 18 and 34 for both men and women, as most Europeans who left to join ISIS tended to be in their 20s.²⁷ However, although this age group can be considered “fighting age,” or for women, an appropriate age for marriage to an ISIS fighter, when ISIS declared its Caliphate, older adults were also drawn to the Caliphate, believing that they could live as civilians, not as fighters. Generally, the reach for these counter narratives run in Europe were skewed older, with the bulk of users reached for most of the campaigns being between 35 and 64. These numbers may not be completely accurate,

however, given the tendency for young people to register for Facebook accounts with an older birthdate. Currently, Facebook requires all users to be at least 13 years old, but the EU, where all of these counter narratives were run, the minimum age to set up a Facebook account is 16. Therefore, a user registered as being 37 years old, could actually be as young as 25 or 30 if, at age 13, he or she signed up for an account saying that he or she was 25. Indeed, children educated in the dangers of social media may list their ages as much older in order to evade online predators.²⁸ It is also possible, however, that younger men and women are moving away from using Facebook and toward using Instagram as their chosen social media platform, while older adults remain on Facebook.²⁹ Proportionally, the age distribution of the reach numbers was similar for men and women with the most viewers being in the oldest age categories between 35 and 64. Readers can find a full breakdown of the reach numbers by age and gender in Table 1. Readers can find breakdowns of reach by campaign in Figures 1 and 2 and breakdowns of reach by age in Figures 3 and 4.

Table 1. Reach by Age and Gender

| Campaign | Age Group | Male Reach | Female Reach |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| Sweden – Swedish | 18-24 | 1,800 | 240 |
| | 25-34 | 3,056 | 400 |
| | 35-44 | 3,432 | 544 |
| | 45-54 | 4,432 | 880 |
| | 55-64 | 4,864 | 1,264 |
| | 65+ | 3,480 | 1,176 |
| Sweden – Arabic | 18-24 | 1,628 | 652 |
| | 25-34 | 3,544 | 1,280 |
| | 35-44 | 3,712 | 1,288 |
| | 45-54 | 2,796 | 1,168 |
| | 55-64 | 1,940 | 1,000 |
| | 65+ | 988 | 572 |
| Netherlands – Dutch | 18-24 | 2,784 | 568 |
| | 25-34 | 3,400 | 664 |
| | 35-44 | 4,216 | 1,592 |
| | 45-54 | 5,632 | 3,104 |
| | 55-64 | 6,528 | 4,056 |
| | 65+ | 4,832 | 3,416 |
| Italy – Italian | 18-24 | 14,336 | 24,320 |
| | 25-34 | 15,296 | 21,952 |
| | 35-44 | 21,632 | 25,216 |
| | 45-54 | 32,000 | 39,360 |
| | 55-64 | 41,152 | 39,424 |

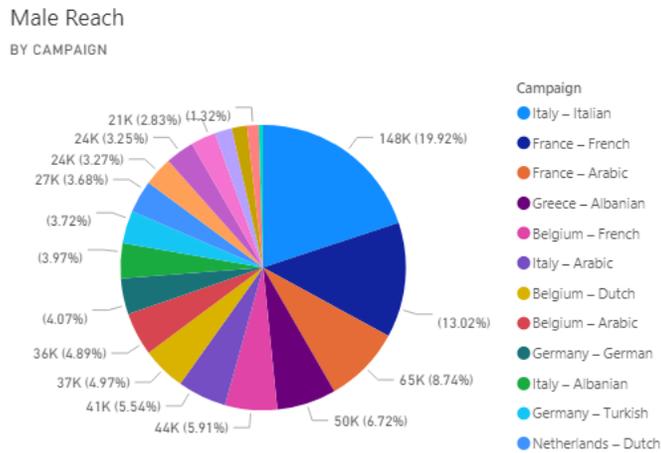
| Campaign | Age Group | Male Reach | Female Reach |
|--------------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| | 65+ | 23,808 | 18,304 |
| Italy – Arabic | 18-24 | 4,880 | 1,536 |
| | 25-34 | 11,376 | 3,264 |
| | 35-44 | 13,344 | 3,168 |
| | 45-54 | 7,872 | 1,888 |
| | 55-64 | 2,976 | 608 |
| | 65+ | 800 | 336 |
| Italy – Albanian | 18-24 | 5,512 | 2,504 |
| | 25-34 | 8,336 | 4,320 |
| | 35-44 | 7,408 | 3,568 |
| | 45-54 | 5,216 | 2,120 |
| | 55-64 | 2,384 | 1,312 |
| | 65+ | 656 | 472 |
| Greece – Arabic | 18-24 | 5,392 | 760 |
| | 25-34 | 8,920 | 1,432 |
| | 35-44 | 5,344 | 760 |
| | 45-54 | 3,024 | 344 |
| | 55-64 | 1,192 | 224 |
| | 65+ | 440 | 120 |
| Greece – Albanian | 18-24 | 2,352 | 880 |
| | 25-34 | 8,464 | 2,752 |
| | 35-44 | 17,168 | 4,576 |
| | 45-54 | 13,984 | 4,480 |
| | 55-64 | 6,352 | 3,264 |
| | 65+ | 1,648 | 848 |
| France – Arabic | 18-24 | 5,504 | 1,104 |
| | 25-34 | 19,056 | 3,232 |
| | 35-44 | 20,864 | 3,040 |
| | 45-54 | 11,600 | 2,272 |
| | 55-64 | 4,880 | 1,776 |
| | 65+ | 3,136 | 1,024 |
| France – French | 18-24 | 6,560 | 512 |
| | 25-34 | 11,680 | 1,076 |
| | 35-44 | 15,168 | 1,312 |
| | 45-54 | 23,104 | 3,072 |
| | 55-64 | 24,512 | 4,736 |
| | 65+ | 15,872 | 4,832 |
| France – Albanian | 18-24 | 1,564 | 560 |
| | 25-34 | 3,912 | 1,908 |
| | 35-44 | 4,028 | 1,720 |
| | 45-54 | 2,196 | 1,020 |
| | 55-64 | 808 | 348 |
| | 65+ | 280 | 120 |
| Belgium – Arabic | 18-24 | 2,848 | 664 |

| Campaign | Age Group | Male Reach | Female Reach |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| | 25-34 | 8,640 | 1,784 |
| | 35-44 | 8,224 | 1,704 |
| | 45-54 | 4,816 | 1,056 |
| | 55-64 | 1,816 | 576 |
| | 65+ | 880 | 280 |
| Belgium – Dutch | 18-24 | 6,872 | 496 |
| | 25-34 | 5,832 | 352 |
| | 35-44 | 5,792 | 384 |
| | 45-54 | 6,024 | 792 |
| | 55-64 | 7,576 | 1,792 |
| | 65+ | 4,880 | 1,784 |
| Belgium – French | 18-24 | 5,808 | 656 |
| | 25-34 | 7,264 | 624 |
| | 35-44 | 7,424 | 832 |
| | 45-54 | 8,048 | 1,024 |
| | 55-64 | 8,592 | 2,816 |
| | 65+ | 6,848 | 3,408 |
| Belgium – Albanian | 18-24 | 1,020 | 400 |
| | 25-34 | 2,632 | 924 |
| | 35-44 | 2,672 | 1,092 |
| | 45-54 | 1,844 | 760 |
| | 55-64 | 704 | 312 |
| | 65+ | 280 | 116 |
| Germany – Turkish | 18-24 | 688 | 288 |
| | 25-34 | 3,152 | 880 |
| | 35-44 | 7,624 | 2,824 |
| | 45-54 | 8,472 | 3,152 |
| | 55-64 | 5,728 | 2,008 |
| | 65+ | 2,008 | 1,040 |
| Germany – German | 18-24 | 2,776 | 624 |
| | 25-34 | 4,992 | 1,732 |
| | 35-44 | 5,416 | 2,072 |
| | 45-54 | 6,488 | 2,016 |
| | 55-64 | 6,816 | 2,816 |
| | 65+ | 3,784 | 1,592 |
| Austria – German | 18-24 | 2,240 | 648 |
| | 25-34 | 5,656 | 1,760 |
| | 35-44 | 5,104 | 2,240 |
| | 45-54 | 5,344 | 2,296 |
| | 55-64 | 3,856 | 2,080 |
| | 65+ | 1,952 | 1,144 |
| Austria – Bosnian | 18-24 | 300 | 180 |
| | 25-34 | 830 | 480 |
| | 35-44 | 808 | 480 |

| Campaign | Age Group | Male Reach | Female Reach |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|--------------|
| | 45-54 | 808 | 526 |
| | 55-64 | 660 | 362 |
| | 65+ | 246 | 176 |
| Austria – Albanian | 18-24 | 960 | 284 |
| | 25-34 | 2,740 | 900 |
| | 35-44 | 2,920 | 836 |
| | 45-54 | 2,200 | 544 |
| | 55-64 | 756 | 228 |
| | 65+ | 280 | 36 |

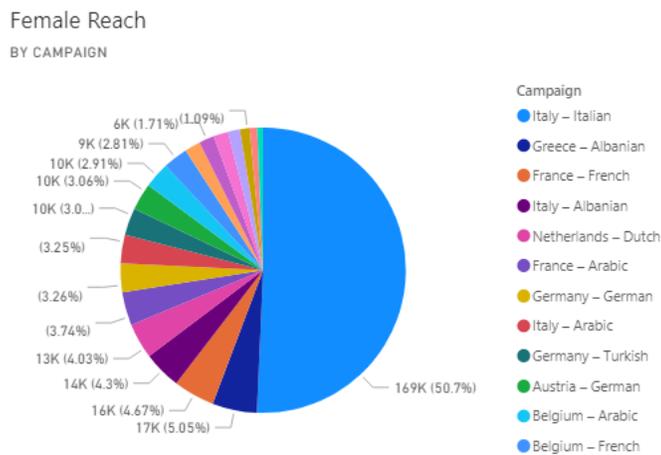
Source: Authors

Figure 1. Male Reach by Campaign



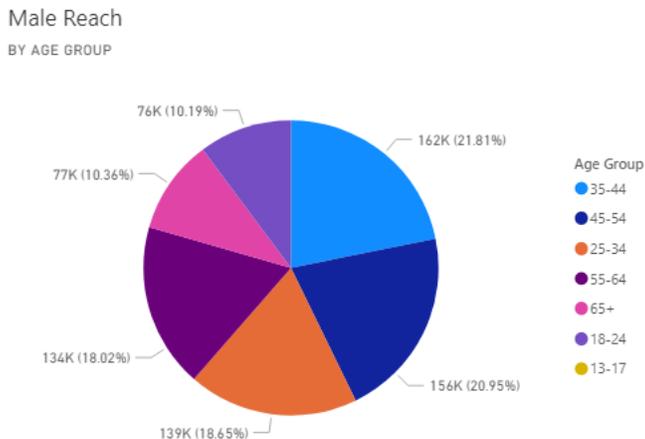
Source: Authors

Figure 2. Female Reach by Campaign



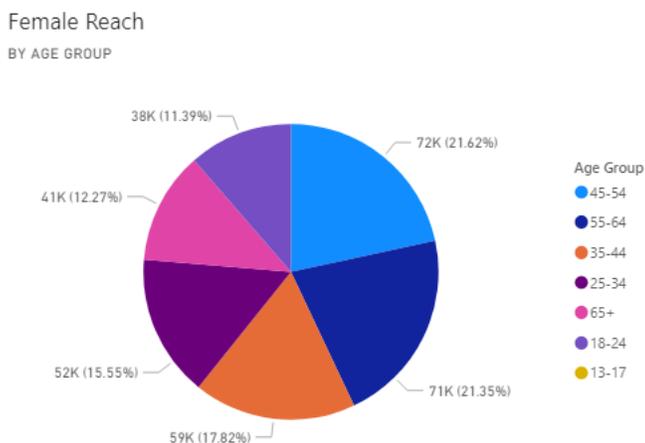
Source: Authors

Figure 3. Male Reach by Age



Source: Authors

Figure 4. Female Reach by Age



Source: Authors

The quantitative data regarding viewership demonstrates that, overall, one-minute videos were more effective at grabbing and keeping viewers’ attention than previously run, three-to five-minute long ICSVE counter narrative videos. For instance, a counter narrative run in Belgium in late 2018 had a *ThruPlay* to Complete View rate of only four percent. A counter narrative run in Italy at the same time had a *ThruPlay* to Complete View rate of 10.9 percent, and a counter narrative run in France had a rate of 4.5 percent. However, a counter narrative in Germany had a rate of 6.8 percent, higher than both counter narratives run in Germany

during this campaign. The different metrics regarding viewership reveal that no single counter narrative was the most successful in gaining and retaining viewers. While the Italian video shown in Italy had the highest raw number of complete views, this appears to be proportional to its higher reach. In terms of viewer retention, that is, the percentage of viewers who after watching 15 seconds of the video then finished the video, the Arabic language video shown in Belgium was the most successful, even though it had relatively low raw numbers of *ThruPlays* and complete views. By this metric, the Italian language video shown in Italy ranked fourth, behind the Arabic video shown in France and the Dutch video shown in the Netherlands. However, on average, the Dutch video shown in the Netherlands was played for the longest, followed by the Italian video shown in Italy and the Arabic video shown in Belgium. The Arabic video shown in France ranked ninth. This demonstrates that although a high percentage of people who watched the Arabic video shown in France for 15 seconds then finished the video, the video also had a large number of views at less than 15 seconds, which brought down the average play time but did not affect the *ThruPlay* to Complete View retention metric.

Just as there was no single highest performing counter narrative, no counter narrative stuck out as being the least successful. While the Bosnian video shown in Austria had the lowest raw number of complete views, the Albanian video shown in Austria had the lowest percentage of *ThruPlays* to complete views. The Bosnian video shown in Austria had a higher percentage of *ThruPlays* to complete views than the French video shown in France, the Albanian video shown in France, and the Turkish and German videos shown in Germany. The counter narrative with the lowest average play time was the Arabic video shown in Italy, with the Bosnian and Albanian videos shown in Austria having the second and third lowest play times, respectively. Despite having the lowest average play time, the Arabic video shown in Italy had the fifth highest *ThruPlay* to Complete View percentage. This indicates that this counter narrative was viewed many times for less than 15 seconds, but when viewers did watch the video for more than 15 seconds, they were likely to finish it. Readers will find viewership and viewer retention by campaign in Table 2. Readers will also find the number of complete views, broken down by campaign in Figure 5, viewer retention by campaign in Figure 6, and average play time broken down by campaign in Figure 7.

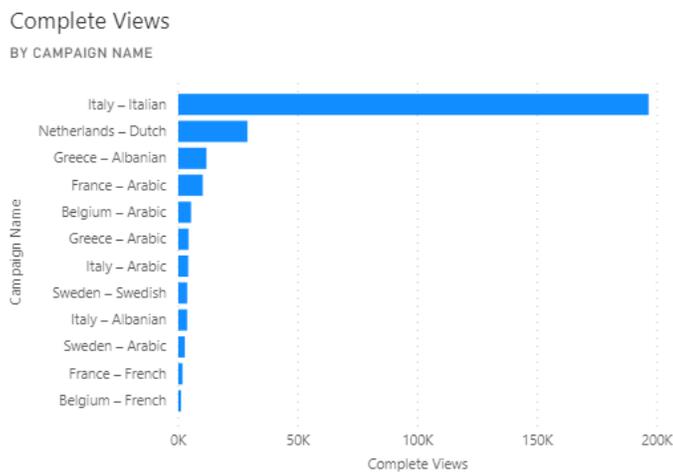
Table 2. Viewership

| Campaign Name | ThruPlays | Complete Views | Percentage: ThruPlay to Complete Views | Percentage: Average Play Time |
|----------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Sweden – Swedish | 12,448 | 3,742 | 30.1 | 35.0 |
| Sweden – Arabic | 8,603 | 2,704 | 31.4 | 28.3 |
| Netherlands – Dutch | 71,613 | 28,932 | 40.4 | 61.7 |
| Italy – Italian | 569,284 | 196,489 | 34.5 | 55.0 |
| Italy – Arabic | 12,394 | 4,155 | 33.5 | 15.0 |
| Italy – Albanian | 12,620 | 3,710 | 29.4 | 16.7 |
| Greece – Arabic | 13,608 | 4,266 | 31.3 | 18.3 |
| Greece – Albanian | 37,231 | 11,773 | 31.6 | 21.7 |
| France – Arabic | 25,324 | 10,241 | 40.4 | 23.3 |
| France – French | 38,395 | 1,790 | 4.7 | 30.0 |
| France – Albanian | 8,896 | 423 | 4.8 | 18.3 |
| Belgium – Arabic | 11,638 | 5,000 | 43.0 | 21.7 |
| Belgium – Dutch | 14,563 | 961 | 6.6 | 30.0 |
| Belgium – French | 17,281 | 1,141 | 6.6 | 28.3 |
| Belgium – Albanian | 6,416 | 338 | 5.3 | 18.3 |
| Germany – Turkish | 8,702 | 465 | 5.3 | 20.0 |

| | | | | |
|--------------------|-------|-----|-----|------|
| Germany – German | 9,629 | 517 | 5.4 | 23.3 |
| Austria – German | 7,552 | 495 | 6.6 | 20.0 |
| Austria – Bosnian | 2,724 | 159 | 5.8 | 15.0 |
| Austria – Albanian | 4,605 | 206 | 4.5 | 15.0 |

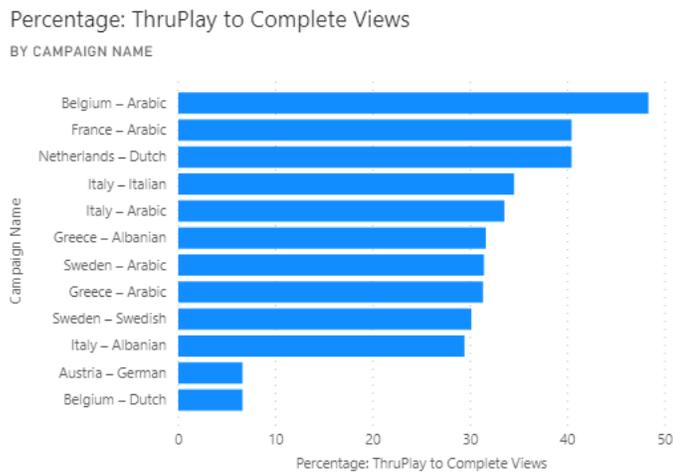
Source: Authors

Figure 5. Complete Views



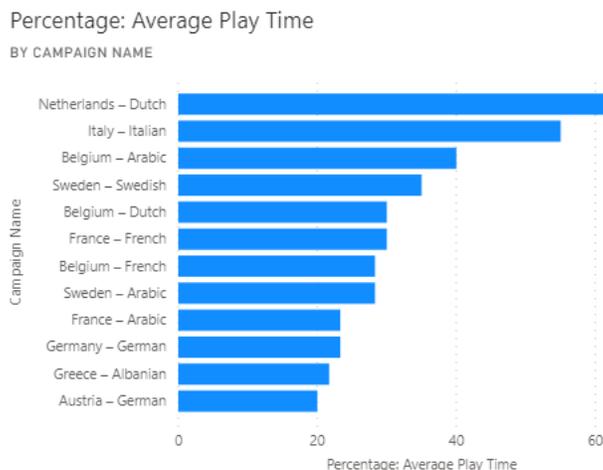
Source: Authors

Figure 6. Percentage of Thru Plays that became Complete Views



Source: Authors

Figure 7. Average Play Time (Percentage of One Minute)



Source: Authors

Post engagements on these counter narratives were not significantly higher than the longer counter narratives. Reactions were highest on the Arabic language video run in Greece and the French language video run in France. Post shares and saves were generally inter-correlated, with the French video shown in France having the highest number of shares and the Italian video shown in Italy having the highest number of saves. The French video shown in France also had the highest number of comments. Thus, engagement was highest overall on the French video shown in France, even though that counter narrative did not receive especially high reach or viewership. It is important to note that the number of comments does not paint a full picture, as the number only includes original comments, not replies to comments. As will be demonstrated during the discussion of the qualitative data, many of the counter narratives sparked lively discussion among commenters that Facebook’s metrics did not capture. Readers can find post engagements broken out by campaign are in Table 3, post reactions by campaign in Figure 8, post comments by campaign in Figure 9, and post shares and saves by campaign in Figure 10.

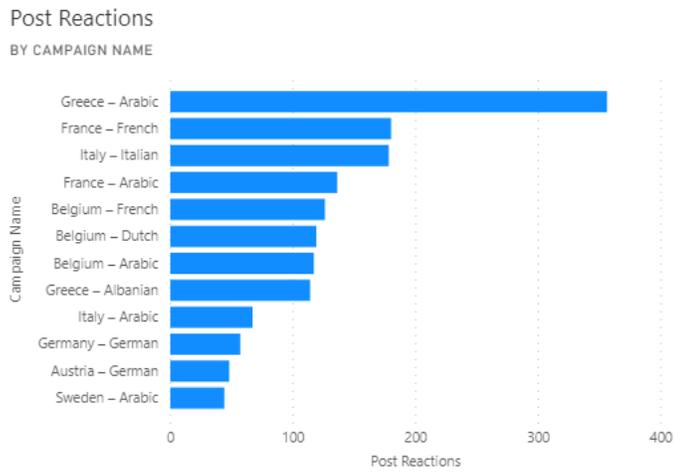
Table 3. Post Engagements

| Campaign Name | Post Reactions | Post Shares | Post Saves | Post Comments |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Sweden – Swedish | 39 | 6 | 1 | 5 |

| Campaign Name | Post Reactions | Post Shares | Post Saves | Post Comments |
|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Sweden – Arabic | 44 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Netherlands – Dutch | 21 | 6 | 4 | 6 |
| Italy – Italian | 178 | 69 | 29 | 18 |
| Italy – Arabic | 67 | 19 | 5 | 5 |
| Italy – Albanian | 28 | 5 | 10 | 0 |
| Greece – Arabic | 356 | 25 | 22 | 16 |
| Greece – Albanian | 114 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| France – Arabic | 136 | 44 | 9 | 10 |
| France – French | 180 | 74 | 15 | 24 |
| France – Albanian | 32 | 6 | 0 | 2 |
| Belgium – Arabic | 95 | 31 | 16 | 15 |
| Belgium – Dutch | 119 | 30 | 12 | 7 |
| Belgium – French | 126 | 35 | 10 | 12 |
| Belgium – Albanian | 22 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Germany – Turkish | 33 | 17 | 4 | 5 |
| Germany – German | 57 | 24 | 10 | 22 |
| Austria – German | 48 | 9 | 6 | 15 |
| Austria – Bosnian | 11 | 4 | 0 | 1 |
| Austria – Albanian | 18 | 2 | 1 | 1 |

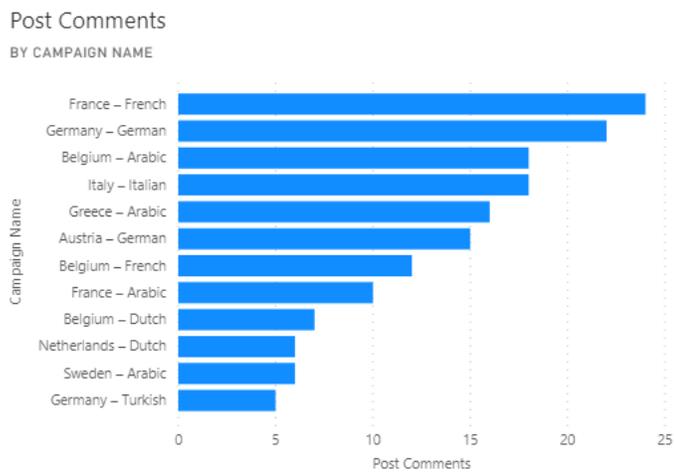
Source: Authors

Figure 8. Post Reactions



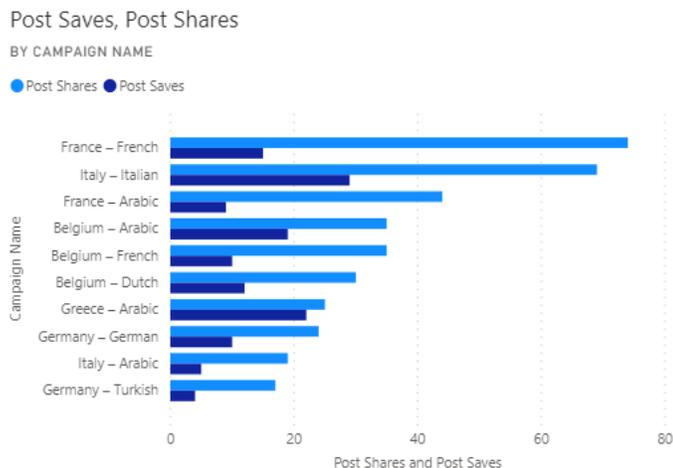
Source: Authors

Figure 9. Post Comments



Source: Authors

Figure 10. Post Saves and Shares



Source: Authors

Qualitative Results

Researchers analyzed comments on the counter narrative videos not as spontaneous utterances, nor as representative viewpoints of all viewers. Rather, the comments indicate views about ISIS, as well as the emotional resonance of the counter narrative videos with their most engaged viewers. While it is quite easy to react to, share, or save a post, it takes more time and effort to comment, thus indicating a higher level of engagement. Moreover, researchers used replies to comments to assess the ability of the counter narrative video to spark discussions among the viewers, as would be more directly facilitated in a focus group setting.³⁰

While many comments were clearly direct responses to the content of the videos, others were reactions to the presence of the videos on their news feeds, often believing that they had been targeted specifically to view the ad. For example, one user who saw the Swedish language video run in Sweden wrote in Swedish, “Why the hell am I seeing this shit???”

Some comments were overtly pro-ISIS. One commenter on the Arabic subtitled video shown in Sweden quoted from the Quran to encourage jihad, using the standard terrorist practice of promoting jihad as defensive, rather than offensive. Another commenter on the same video wrote a longer paragraph in defense of ISIS:

When a Shia militia is killing a whole town of Muslims and not one Shia cleric declares them terrorists... When the Burmese army is

killing thousands of Muslims and you will never see a Buddhist monk denounce Buddhists for terrorism... When a Christian militia is killing a mosque imam and Muslims in the mosque in Africa and you will not see a single church monk denounce that... When the Americans and the Russians air strike our cities and towns, and you never see a diplomatic dog denounces their democracy and countries for terrorism [...] We will treat them as they treat us.

An Arabic speaking commenter on the video shown in Belgium also justified ISIS's actions, echoing other comments referring to a sort of tit for tat: "Daesh [ISIS] is a small response to terrorism of international orders for their people generally and specifically Muslims! What the Americans and the Europeans in the world did? What about their terrorism in killing millions of people?" Another commenter on the same video wrote curtly, "It's a reaction for an action." These pro-ISIS comments indicate that at least in some cases the videos are reaching the correct target audience and causing them to think enough to make comments of why they believe ISIS is correct.

Other comments were overtly anti-ISIS and anti-militant jihadism in general. A Turkish commenter in Germany wrote, "God damn you! You are undignified dogs!" Another expressed concern at the systemic mechanisms that allowed ISIS to be as lethal as they were "Who gave these weapons to them? Who treated them at the hospitals? Who let these terrorists from all over the world go to Syria? I wonder if anyone knows?" Two viewers of the Arabic-subtitled video run in Italy bluntly commented in Italian, "Fuck ISIS," and "Criminals." An Arabic speaking commenter on the video shown in Sweden commented on the speaker's conversion to Islam that changed his life before joining ISIS: "It was better for you if you were still drinking, and women are better for you than using Allah's name to justify your activities. You made Allah's name the source of evil and terrorist religion and evil ummah." In contrast, a user who saw the Albanian language video in Greece offered a more nuanced critique of ISIS and defense of Islam:

One can tell that you are a traitor, you devil. Muslims do not kill innocent people; ISIS is not Muslim. Muslims are the ones that protect their families and pray and take care of their neighbors.

Muslim is someone that; whatever he wishes for himself, he wishes it for the others.

A commenter on the Albanian language video run in Austria echoed the sentiment, exclaiming, “Islam does not behead YOU HAVE NO SHAME, IDIOTS!!!”

Some anti-ISIS commenters, however, were not so clearly opposed to militant jihad as they were opposed to ISIS. Although some specified that Islamic doctrine condemn killing innocent people, the common thread in these comments was the propagation of conspiracy theories that the West and Israel created ISIS and that ISIS members were therefore not true jihadists. For instance, a commenter on the Arabic language video run in Italy wrote in Italian, “First of all, ISIS doesn’t belong to Islam. ISIS is a religion created by the U.S. to make Islam and Muslims look bad. As Islam condemns killings of people and any murder like that.” Three commenters on the same video replied in Italian, “Congratulations, you said everything my brother,” “Thank you, you told the truth,” and “And thank goodness Allah, because of you.” Similarly, an Arabic speaking commenter on the video shown in Greece wrote, “Daesh [ISIS] leadership is made by Iranian, Iraqi, and American intelligence. All of them are terrorists, I mean Daesh with intelligence agencies of these countries.” Another Arabic speaker in France expanded upon the conspiracy theory: “The Masonry organization and international intelligence agencies created al Qaeda and Daesh and other organizations, and these same powers are playing a role of ruining it and destroying it. Hell will be their end.” Yet another commenter on the same video wrote, “Daesh is infidels and agents of Israel and America.” One commenter on the Arabic subtitled video shown in Greece included the same conspiracy in a longer condemnation of ISIS, but, unlike other more general conspiracy theorists, offered what he claimed was proof that “those who joined ISIS were greedy to money, weapons, and power.” He claimed, “We didn’t hear doctors, engineers, teachers, pharmacists, or any educated people joined them [...] Those people cannot build a state, they are just a tool to destroy Islam.” Of course, scores of evidence that high-level professionals in a myriad of fields joined ISIS to offer their services contradicts this claim.³¹

While many of the anti-ISIS commenters were quick to defend Islam in their condemnations of ISIS, others conflated the two. Said one

commenter on the Swedish language video run in Sweden, “But you understand that if you hurt someone and say it is in the name of God, that there is something wrong with the religion??” A commenter on the Italian video run in Italy wrote, “A total whack-job only could believe in a Muslim.” A commenter on the Arabic video shown in Belgium declared that ISIS was a clear representation of Islam: “It’s dirty Islam and its terrorist doctrine, and Daesh [ISIS] is simply representing it in voice and image for what Islam is all about, and they teach this in Europe and America.”

Comments on the counter narratives in direct response to the speakers themselves are important to assessing the credibility and trustworthiness of the speaker from the perspective of the audience. Facebook users wrote many such comments on the Italian language video run in Italy. The speaker, Laura Passoni, does not use a pseudonym and shows her face in the video, which may increase the resonance of her message with the audience. Moreover, all of the comments on her video were written on the ad with Italian subtitles, rather than with Albanian or Arabic subtitles. Therefore, it is possible that because Laura is a Caucasian convert to Islam of Italian descent, she was more relatable to native Italians. In contrast, immigrants and people of immigrant descent who use Facebook in Albanian or Arabic, indicating less integration into the larger Italian society, did not relate to her as well. Still, commenters on that video expressed a range of feelings regarding Laura and her story. Many compared Laura’s trust in her ISIS recruiter, who set her up for marriage and travel, to children believing in Santa Claus: “On Netflix there is a movie called ‘The Caliphate’ narrating the same story... gullible girls really believing in Santa Claus,” “Who knows... I don’t believe in Santa Claus since I was 10 years old, and now I’m 63: In the past we’re babes in arms!” Others were more critical of her trust, rather than pitying, “If you really believe in these stories, it means you’re really weak... to go to Syria and become wealthy...unbelievable...,” “To get rich owning diamonds! Unbelievable!! The drama is that a lot of them fall for it.”

Discussion and Future Directions

The results of this counter narrative campaign provide clear direction for enhancing the utility of counter narratives against ISIS in the EU. First, the quantitative results are evidence that shorter videos retain more

viewers. The results are also evidence that viewers are more likely to complete shorter videos than longer videos. This aligns with other studies of marketing in general on Facebook. In the past, practitioners have advocated for longer counter narrative videos, as longer videos allow for far more depth and explanation. However, this meaning is not gleaned by Facebook users if they do not watch the entire video, or at least most of the video. A goal of the shorter videos, therefore, should be to pique viewers' interest and entice them to click on the links that take them to watch longer videos that are more detailed. While the goal of the Facebook campaign discussed in this study was to maximize viewership, a future study could examine the ability of the short counter narratives to encourage viewers to watch longer videos, by emphasizing the landing page or a YouTube playlist of the full-length counter narrative videos.

Another fascinating result of this study was the high success rate of videos featuring representative speakers. For example, the Italian language video shown in Italy, featuring a woman of Italian descent who converted to Islam, received many comments, but the same video shown in Italy but subtitled in Albanian did not receive any comments, and all of the comments on the same video shown in Italy but subtitled in Arabic were actually in Italian. This suggests that the most engaged viewers were native Italian speakers who identified with the speaker, rather than people of immigrant descent living in Italy. In contrast, the French video run in France received far more comments than those subtitled in Albanian and Arabic, even though the speaker was of immigrant descent. However, the speaker was Moroccan, and in the diaspora, second generation Moroccans commonly speak French and sometimes cannot speak Maghreb Arabic at all. Thus, many of the French-speaking commenters could have been Moroccans living in France who are native French, rather than Arabic, speakers. Future studies of ICSVE counter narratives will examine the utility of matching speakers of European and immigrant descent with target European audiences using Facebook in different languages.

Finally, there is a need to examine the utility of the counter narratives from a gender-based perspective. The majority of the female viewers on all of the campaigns came from the Italian video shown in Italy, and the same video was the only counter narrative with more female than male viewers were. However, neither the Albanian and Arabic videos shown in Italy nor the video shown in Germany and Austria, which also featured a female

speaker, garnered similar numbers of female viewers as the videos featuring male speakers. While many more men than women have been recruited by ISIS and future campaigns will limit the age of people reached to 40 to better target younger people, part of ISIS's unprecedented recruiting strategy was the number of women they were also able to lure to the Caliphate.³² The women served as wives and mothers, but also participated in ISIS's crimes as members of the *hisbah*, the morality police, as well as occasionally as suicide bombers. Therefore, it is critical to be able to address women specifically in counter narratives with the express purpose of disrupting ISIS recruiters who seduce women online through promises of love and marriage.³³

Overall, this series of Facebook campaigns made clear that it is possible to reach the target audiences who already endorse ISIS, to engage viewers to watch the entire video and to share, save, like and comment on the videos. Likewise, the emotionally evocative nature of the videos and the genuineness of the speakers telling about the real experiences of being drawn into and living under ISIS appear to engage viewers, and viewers believe the stories and take the time to comment. Continued study of how well the ICSVE Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project videos can actually disrupt ISIS online and face-to-face recruitment will be an objective of future studies, but this one make clear that both shortened videos and the content itself reach their targets and engages them in the counter narrative material.

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