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Countering the Propaganda: Effective Strategies to counter the online campaigns of terrorist organizations



Syed Bilal Shah	HEC Fellow, FATA University FR, Kohat email: hamzabilal792@gmail.com
Dr. Muhammad Ibrar	Assistant Professor, Department of Criminology, University of Peshawar email: ibrarsworker@uop.edu.pk
Dr Muhammad Tufail	Lecturer Institute of management sciences University of Haripur, Email: mhmmmd.tufail.123@gmail.com , and tufail@uoh.edu.pk
Dr. Shahid Iqbal	CDPM, IER, Assistant, Directorate of Advanced Studies, University of Peshawar shahidiqbalkhan@uop.edu.pk

Abstract: *With the growth of information technology, the use of the internet has become a basic requirement of everyday's life. Not only business and education organizations, but the media, individuals and entertainment sector, use the internet to spread and share information. Moreover, microblogging sites and social media grabs the attention of consumers quite easily, as it is poorly regulated and access to such information is more convenient as compared to mainstream media. For this reason, the terrorist groups use social media to grab the attention of potential individuals, who could be misguided and recruited for malicious terrorist campaigns. Therefore, effective strategies are required to counter the narratives of such groups. For this purpose, a survey was conducted among the university students to identify effective strategies, which could help in countering the online presence of terrorist groups. The result shows that regulation of social media, active monitoring of online activities of children by their parents, and the role of public can help in countering the narratives of terrorist groups. Furthermore, it is also recommended that modern technologies like artificial intelligence could be used to track the online interests of individuals to prevent them becoming a prey to terrorist groups.*

Keywords: Internet, Social Media, Propaganda, Terrorism, Extremism, Countering Terrorism

Introduction

The 21st century has revolutionized the world with the innovations in information technology. The progress that begun at the late 20th century has been developed further with the emergence of new and groundbreaking technologies. The modern world is dependent on technology for day-to-day operations, and it has become a need of the day. Technology has benefited the life of everyone, and any disruption in technology harm to daily life working and can cause a huge loss. Among these technologies, the internet is

the one that binds together all the elements of business and society. It is like a spider web providing worldwide connectivity for working and operations. It is the source for sharing and getting information instantly and can be accessed from anywhere in the world. Internet technology has transformed the world into a global village. Business and education organizations, media, individuals and entertainment sector, use the internet to spread and share information.

Technology is supporting global communication

and helps in distributing information to any part of the world in no time. The students can interact with their instructor in any part of the world through internet applications. Similarly, business parties can interact with each other through online video conferencing and could make business deals. Likewise, with the innovations in technology, a doctor can perform surgeries by not being physically there. One could not have imagined such developments a century back. The internet has shrunk the distances and through virtual connections, people can interact with their friends, family, and loved ones, anywhere in the world. It could be regarded as the greatest innovation of all time because of the magical features of providing information and supporting connectivity.

If all the good things have some drawbacks that could cause harm, the same is the case with the internet technology. It is like a two-faced sword, which can cause immense loss, sometimes beyond repairing. Likewise, with all these advancements and applications in the field of information technology, some of the fractions have used the technology for destruction, and negative purposes. Terrorist and extremist groups have devised the use of technology for their malicious purposes. That include online propaganda, getting sympathies, attracting people, and funding and collecting resources. They fabricate the information and present it in such a way to get attraction and sympathies.

The era after the second-world-war has witnessed the emergence of conflict of interests and disputes in the form of terrorism, where a group uses terror to impose their ideology, agenda, and point of view. Although the history of terrorism could be traced back to AD 66, but other researchers explain it as a newly emerged phenomenon. It has become a challenge to modern democratic societies and has shaken the very foundation of institutions and has compromised the security arrangements. Terrorism has taken away the peace of the world. It is a global phenomenon affecting all the countries, nationalities, and populations. Technology has facilitated the terrorists in many ways. Like the availability of technology, sophisticated computer systems and tools has

supported the terrorists in carrying out their operations. Extremists and terrorists have used the information technology for their operations and the development in internet technology has supported their pursuit. The states and governments could implement a number of strategies to counter the narratives of use groups. The initiatives like online awareness, countering the propaganda with counter narratives, education and digital online engagements could be some of the measures for addressing the propagandas.

The literature and data suggest that internet is a form of unregulated and unrestricted media, and terrorists use it for getting the attention of the prospective recruits. They use information and technology in a luring way to attract youth and prospective recruits. It is because the advanced technology provides sophisticated means to share and develop their ideology and propaganda. There are hundreds of websites and social media platforms and hate sites, operated by extremists and terror groups to recruit, and influence young people. If not countered vigorously the young minds being delicate could be contaminated with the propaganda and campaigns of the extremist groups and terrorists. Therefore, effective strategies are required to restrain their online presence and operations. This study was conducted with the aim to develop strategies that can help to counter the propaganda by the terrorist groups. This study could also serve as a blueprint to raise awareness about the social media and online campaigns, of the terrorist groups and counter their arguments. For this purpose, a survey was conducted among the university students to record their views and suggest options to counter their campaigns and propaganda.

Literature Review

No one can repudiate the fact that information technology has created many opportunities and has contributed towards the development. Today the industries, are making progress all because of the applications of the modern technology that has crafted tools and equipment's streamlining the work and procedures. The literature suggests that in the modern times, the technology has changed the landscape of the

world. The development of a country is dependent on the advancement and use of information technology. Also, the advancement on the internet have diminished the space between the physical and the virtual world, and now the computers and internet controls the physical world. Therefore, terrorist use this medium for spreading fear, destroying properties and lives. They take the help of internet to spread their message as stated by.

Technology has speeded up the development of nations. As the processes are analyzed, monitored, and controlled using information technology, therefore, more the incorporation of technology, high is the ratio of progress, prosperity, growth, and development. Therefore, it could be stated that information technology and the application of internet helps in the socio-economic development of a country. Likewise, social development and prosperity is also contingent on the growth in technology. The data suggests that developments in the field of internet technologies have resulted in the sustainable development and prosperity of the society.

On the other hand, everything has its advantages and potential disadvantages. Similarly, internet technology has many drawbacks. The misuse of technology can harm to an unrepairable extent because fabricated information, incomplete information, deep fake technologies, and false news reports can misguide many people. It has been noted that most of the information online is not from trusted and verified sources and could cause damage to the consumers. It is therefore advisable to verify the source of information, before believing in it and sharing it with others. With the introduction of smartphone telecommunication technology, the access to internet has become much convenient. Smartphones are not just a tool of audio communication, but they also provide streamlined access to the internet. Just with a click, one can get the desired information, from several sources. This immense information may be unverified, or fabricated and can potentially damage the user both ethically and morally. Research studies shows that vague information could harm one ethically, religiously, and

morally. Likewise, internet is used by the terrorist groups for the propagation of their agenda. It is because of the unregulated nature of the internet as it can be accessed with ease and from anywhere in the world. With time, access to the internet is becoming more convenient, because the internet service providers have increased, due to which competition among them has become stiffer, and they are providing internet with less tariffs. Moreover, as stated it is not regulated, and any potential terrorist group can spread their agenda and propaganda easily to broader audience to any place in the world to attract people, audience, donors and members.

Terrorists not only use the internet for spreading their propaganda, but also use it as a source of financing for their terror operations. The reason internet being used for financing is that it to an extent hide the identity of the donors and recipients and the security agencies are not yet fully able to identify the financing sources through internet. They channel funds through various accounts through smurfing, placement, layering and integration. It is a challenging task and governments are developing mechanisms to address these problems. On the other hand, money laundering and terrorist financing is another challenge, which needs to be addressed. The security exchange companies and banking sector must strengthen their mechanism to address the issues of the money laundering and combat the problems of terrorist financing. Also, financial advancement and technological innovation has been at the peak of expansion and history could not provide examples of such scale development before. Due to this more stakeholders have entered the market, and the criminals are exploiting the loopholes in the security system to use the funds for money laundering and terrorist financing.

The terrorists are also advancing and developing with the rapid change in the technology as the terrorism has advanced, modernized, and became global. This has resulted in using the internet for many purposes, including broadcasting the propaganda, and spreading their activities. These groups have also maintained websites and social media handles to advertise their campaigns and operations. On the

other hand, internet has also been blamed for facilitating radicalization through information provision, as well as strengthening group division and legitimizing extreme ideology and violence.

The internet is facilitating armed violence, extremism, and terrorism and many research studies have investigated and unearthed this phenomenon.

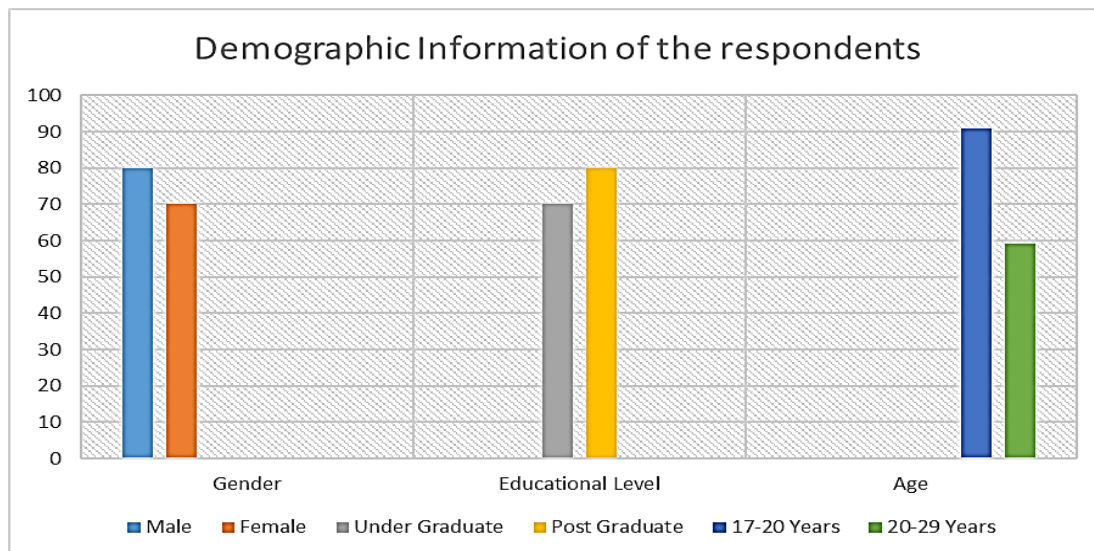
Methodology

For this study, data was collected in the form of survey from students studying in 3 different universities in Peshawar, Pakistan. The survey method was selected because it is one of the reliable methods of gathering information from the sample of population under study. It is the collection and gathering of information from respondents by posing questions to them. Survey methods are useful in exploring human interactions and behavior; therefore, such methods are frequently used in social and psychological research. The purpose of incorporating survey method is to obtain sufficient sample that represent the whole of the population.

Therefore, in this research study, the researcher contacted 200 university going students, out of which 155 students agreed to participate in the research study. Before the data collection stage, 5 more students, refused to be part of the research study. Thus, a sample size of 150 students was selected for the data collection. Of 150, sample size, 80 were male and 70 were female students. 94 of these respondents were pursuing undergraduate degrees, while 56 were postgraduate students at the time of data collection. Similarly, 91 of these students were in the age bracket of 17 to 21 years, while 59 students were in the age group between 20 to 29 years. The data was collected through a questionnaire which included both open ended and close ended questions. The questionnaire was self-administered and face to face survey was conducted by the researcher. It was a cross-sectional survey where the data was collected at a single point in time. A total of 15 questions were included in the survey, where 3 questions were about demographics, while 12 questions pertained to the research question. After data collection, 12 research questions were merged into 6 questions based on sharing similar characteristics.

Table 1.1 Shows the demographic information of the respondents.

Respondents	Male	Female
	80	70
Educational Level	Undergraduate Students	Postgraduate Students
	94	56
Age	17-20 years	20-29 years
	91	59



Results

The data reveals that out of the 150 respondents, 109 agreed to the notion that internet is widely used by the terrorist and militants for the fulfillment of their agenda and spreading propaganda, while 20 respondents did not agree and stated that there could be many other mediums and circumstances, that could fuel the propaganda by the terrorist groups. On the other hand, 21 of the respondents did not respond to this question and remained neutral. When inquired about whether social media be regulated and legal action may be taken for using social media for fueling terrorism and hate, 90 respondent agreed that social media platforms need regulation and monitoring, while 25 stated that regulation of social media will disturb the freedom of expression of the users by unrelated groups and organizations. Similarly, 35 respondents remained neutral.

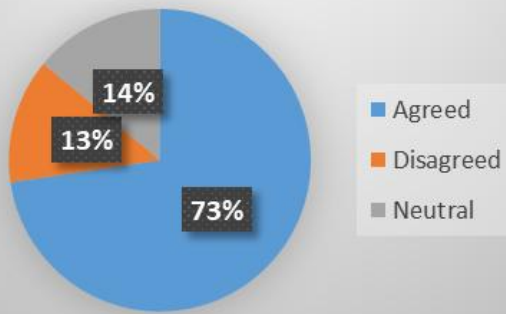
Likewise, 130 respondents agreed that there is a need of a comprehensive and effective strategies that can track and keep an eye on the online activities of the terrorists, while 10 disagreed and 10 respondents did not response to this

question. Similarly, most of the respondents stated that it is the responsibility of the parents, to monitor and keep an eye on the online activities of their children and inquire about their online activities. Out of 150 respondents, 101 stated that parents must monitor their children's online activities, while 30 disagreed and were of the view that it will invade the privacy of their children. Similarly, 19 kept silences upon inquiry.

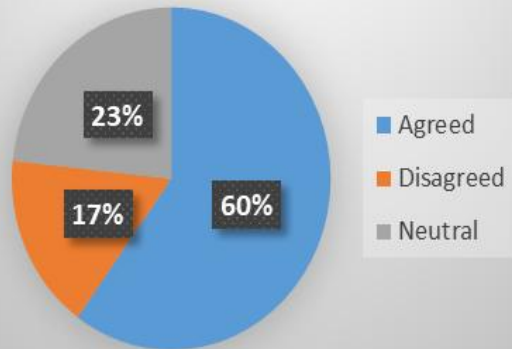
On the other hand, a total of 90 participants, agreed that modern problems need modern solutions and stated that new technologies like artificial intelligence may be used to overcome the threats of online terrorism activities. Likewise, 30 disagreed and 30 remained neutral. When asked about the measures that the government can take to overcome online propaganda, all the respondents agreed that measures like blocking the websites, micro blogging sites and social media channels can be effective in limiting the online presence of terrorist groups.

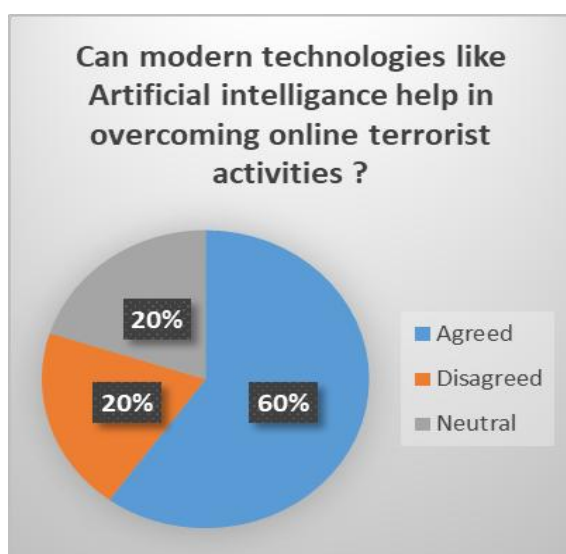
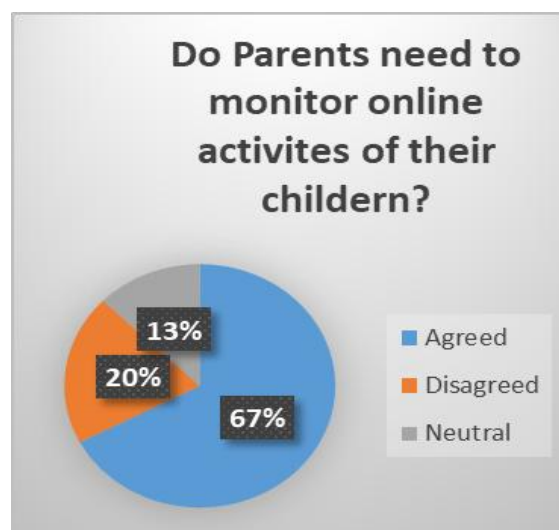
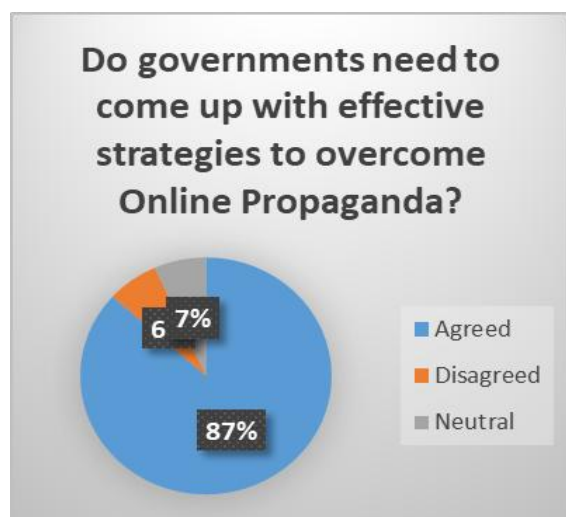
The pectoral description of the responses recorded by the researcher is given below in the form of pie charts. The representation is in the form if percentages, with the notion of agree, disagree and neutral, to the posed questions.

**Is internet used for
spreading Terrorists
Propaganda ?**



**Should Social media be
regulated ?**





Discussion

The results from this study show that 73% of the participants agreed that measures should be taken to overcome the threats of terrorism and the online activities and presence of terrorists. The results shows that internet being the most easily accessible and effective mean of connectivity and communication is used for the propaganda by the terrorists to get sympathies, donations, spread their agenda and make recruitments. The results also show that in order to curb terrorism, social media in particular needs regulations, and rules must be devised about the scope, and activates being shared and spread online. In this study about 60 % of the participants agreed that the regulation of the social media is the need of the time. It is worth mentioning that about 17% of the participants were of the view that while regulation of the

social media is the need of the hour, but freedom of expression of the other consumers must need be violated.

The respondents agreed that government should come up with effective strategies and policies to counter the negative propaganda by the terrorists. This includes the reforms in the educational curriculum, raising awareness in the public about their propaganda, and countering the propaganda, with positive responses. It is a long-term process and can be dealt with coordination and cooperation by the government, society, and the media. About 87 percent of the participants agreed that government needs to make efforts to overcome the online propaganda mechanism by the terrorists. Similarly, the 67% of the participants stated that the parents should be aware and keep an eye on the online activities of their children.

Internet providing unrestricted access to information and online content impacts the intellectual abilities of the children and if left unmonitored, can guide the children to unwanted activates and can fall prey to the propaganda of the terrorists. Therefore 67% of the participants were of the favor to track online activates of the children to keep them safe from online terrorism.

On the other hand, with the development and innovation in information technology, modern tools can be incorporated to overcome the propaganda of terrorists online. Tools and applications like artificial intelligence can be used for this purpose. As artificial intelligence, use language models, can differentiate the negative propaganda of terrorists form the normal online content, and can restrict it form the online platforms. The data shows that 60% of the respondents, agreed that modern tools like the artificial intelligence can help in reducing the hate and propaganda through internet. Likewise, all the participants agreed that government through department of communication and telecommunication should block the websites and social media handles to that spread the negative propaganda, online to get support and recruit prospective supporters.

These results show that the respondents were against the negative use of online platforms and supported initiatives to counter the propaganda spread by the terrorist groups through internet. The respondents also suggested that parents should keep an eye to keep children safe from any such activities.

Limitations

Although this study has identified many important concepts that can help in countering the online propaganda by terrorist organizations, but there are some of the limitations of this study like this research studied the views and understandings of the university students through a survey to get their insights. In future a full-fledged study can be conducted to study the phenomenon in depth. Furthermore, being a survey, the study was unable to study latent concepts, which could be studied with qualitative research in future, to get the essence

of the study. Similarly, the data could be collected not just from university students, but general public, youth , college and school going children could be made a part of a vast research study in the future. Also, the concepts under study, were not explored deeply in which research, due to the limitation of time and resources.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to identify and explain the effective strategies to counter the narrative of terrorist groups, fractions, and organizations, which use internet for spreading their propaganda online. Similarly, research studies are needed to know about the use of social media, websites and internet by the terrorists for funding their activities. Therefore, future studies may help to unearth the channels that they use not only for propaganda purposes but to fund their operations. Also, awareness and research are needed to know, how youngsters fell prey to their propaganda, and what can be done to break the online link to not only counter their narrative but to halt the recruitments by the terrorists for the malicious intentions.

Conclusion

The study illustrates that incorporating effective strategies can help in overcoming the problems and dangers posed by the digital means used by terrorist groups. The foremost important thing is that internet being the most accessible means of communication and information has been a soft target to be used as a medium of propaganda by such groups. This could be countered by spreading the positive counteractive about peace, love, harmony, and justice. Education can also play a very important role here, as it helps in broadening wisdom, understanding right and wrong, and differentiating the truth from fabricated and false information. With numerous things shared and communicated online, if one can interpret what is propaganda and fabricated incomplete information, they can help in battling it with education and correct information. They could also then report it to concerned authorities, to take it down. The government and educational experts can also help by transforming the curriculum and adding content on peace that

defies terrorism. On the other hand, a government alone cannot help in eradicating terrorism. It takes joint and collective efforts by civil society, educational institutions, parents, and government to address the issues of online hate content and terrorism. This study reveals suggests that to keep away children from the online hateful, and violent content, the parents must track and keep an eye on the online activities of their children.

On the other hand, the study supports the notion that strict policies should be implemented to monitor the social media and keep the public away from the online campaigns of militants. At the same time, modern tools and programs like the artificial intelligence can help in addressing the negative narratives of terrorists' campaign. The study suggests that government should redefine the policies and come up with effective strategies to address the tackle the online propagandas. Moreover, all such websites, microblogging sites, and social media accounts should be blocked to overcome the hate and propaganda campaign.

Terrorism is a real problem of the 21st century, where armed groups, having no concern for the rule of law, spread fear and terror to accomplish their objectives and agendas. These actions have no justification in religion, society, and the modern world. Therefore, joint actions by all the segments of society are required to address the looming problem of terrorism before it could cause further harm to peaceful societies and countries. In essence, combating the online campaigns, propaganda and activities of the terrorist organizations is the most effective step in eradicating the terrorism. This can limit these groups from spreading their agenda to online consumers and weaken their support, funding, and movements.

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