



# Extremists' Targeting of Young Women on Social Media and Lessons for P/CVE

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, the digital sphere has become a growing vector for radicalisation. Much of extremists' ability to influence public discourse and recruit new members has been due to their adoption of practices and customs of the digital sphere related to gaming culture, social media campaigns and the usage of memes and videos. The advantages of social media, including low-threshold access, the ability to reach broad potential audiences, limited regulation and a rapid flow of information, have not gone unnoticed by extremist actors. Many groups have transferred their communication, recruitment and propaganda efforts to the digital space. Extremists' online presence is not limited to a single platform but is rather a *mélange* of a large variety of digital spaces and platforms ranging from social media, chatrooms and websites to the darknet <sup>(1)</sup>. While a few years ago the online recruitment and radicalisation of young men were the main focus of media and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) actors, this has shifted since the departure of young women and girls to the former territories of Daesh following online radicalisation and targeted grooming efforts.

A recent RAN conclusion paper on young women's usage of social media discussed extremists' digital recruitment tactics and vulnerabilities of girls and young women <sup>(2)</sup>. Identified vulnerabilities included experiences of on- and offline discrimination, a longing for online "sisterhood" with like-minded peers, as well as questions related to insecurity and (developing) sexuality. While the following paper will also briefly touch upon potential susceptibilities of girls and young women, the main focus will be on how extremist actors target and recruit female and primarily young users on social media.

In the first part of the paper, extremists' activities on different social media platforms are discussed. The paper will further explore which narratives and strategies are used by right-wing (RWE) and Islamist extremist (IE) actors to lure and recruit young women and girls to (violent) extremism. In a second step, implications for P/CVE are identified in order to better prevent and counter extremists' online targeting of women and girls.

## Extremists' targeting of young women on different social media platforms

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many P/CVE programmes have struggled to maintain and expand access to their target groups during the past year. While vulnerable individuals were to be found in relevant social spaces (such as youth centres or sports grounds), traditional outreach work was only possible to a very limited extent in 2020. Communication spaces that are gradually opening up as everyday life shifts more and more into digital settings have so far not sufficiently been used to address young women in a targeted manner.

Prevention, intervention and exit work increasingly needs to bridge the gap between offline and online settings. Misogynist online spaces and scenes (also referred to as the "manosphere") have been growing over the past years. On the one hand, women are the target of defamatory hate speech and anti-feminist online discussions for groups such as Men Going Their Own Way, or MGTOW, and incels where female users are usually categorically excluded from fora and subreddits. On the other hand are other RWE groups (e.g. Identitarian movements and neo-Nazi organisations such as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM)) actively employing grooming strategies producing content and using hashtags specifically targeted at luring young women and girls towards online extremism.

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<sup>(1)</sup> Weimann & Masri, Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok, p. 2.

<sup>(2)</sup> RAN Practitioners, Young women's usage of Social Media and Lessons for Preventing Violent Extremism.

As mentioned above, IE actors' use of social media platforms came to broader media attention with the beginning of Daesh's digital recruitment efforts. In 2014, Daesh launched a global social media recruitment campaign that not only targeted potential male foreign terrorist fighters but was also specifically aimed at women and teenagers. Daesh managed to establish a wide social media presence, particularly on **Twitter**, with tens of thousands of supporting accounts <sup>(3)</sup>. Although women joining terrorist networks is not a novelty, the number of female recruits joining Daesh was much higher than the influx other groups have experienced in the past <sup>(4)</sup>.

In the following sections, the most widely used social media platforms and their exploitation by extremist actors are briefly discussed.

## YouTube

Amongst all video sharing platforms, YouTube remains the one with the largest audience, despite growing competition with other platforms such as Vimeo and TikTok. According to polls by Pew Research Center, YouTube and Reddit are the only social media platforms that have seen significant statistical growth since 2019 <sup>(5)</sup>. Particularly for teenagers and young adults, YouTube has become a central source of news. However, despite the content moderation efforts brought forward by the platform, content analyses of YouTube videos have shown that independent YouTube channels are much more likely than those of conventional news outlets to create and share videos containing conspiracy narratives <sup>(6)</sup>. Due to the platform's algorithm, users who have already engaged with questionable or extremist content may be introduced to increasingly extremist videos <sup>(7)</sup>. Hence, individuals trying to get informed on political topics or even questions related to everyday life (e.g. "How to wear a hijab correctly?") can be proposed extremist content based on the platform's algorithm. For young online users, information-oriented videos seem to be particularly authentic though, as they give the impression that the information is conveyed by "real-life" people. Extremist actors and groups are aware of potentially impressionable audiences and therefore use YouTube as a key platform to spread their ideologies and narratives, but also for sharing videos reminiscent of image films. While some groups such as the relatively new Hizb-ut-Tahrir-affiliated group "Muslim Interaktiv" generate much larger numbers on TikTok, they continue producing high-quality and comparatively elaborate videos for YouTube <sup>(8)</sup>. When it comes to content, RWE and IE channels tend to reproduce gender stereotypes focusing on a precise concept of two genders by referring to "natural" gender roles <sup>(9)</sup>.

## Facebook

While Facebook attracts decreasing numbers of young users in some European countries compared to the early 2010s, the platform remains one of the most widely used social media sites. A study on American adults' social media usage showed that around 70 % of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 are using Facebook <sup>(10)</sup>. While other platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat reach distinctly lower numbers of older age groups, age gaps between youngest and oldest users are narrower when it comes to Facebook (the percentages of users of age groups between 18 to 29 and 50 to 64 only range from 70 to 73 %) <sup>(11)</sup>. Hence, Facebook remains a relevant platform when considering analysing, preventing and countering of extremists' targeting of girls and young women. In early October 2021, Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee disclosed internal company documents revealing that the platform's algorithm is actively leading teenage users to harmful content <sup>(12)</sup>. According to the leaked files and Haugen's testimonies before the United States (US) Senate, Facebook benefits from an algorithm enabling to exploit and amplify insecurities of young female users. Although intentions differ from profit-oriented companies, the approach pattern of extremist

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<sup>(3)</sup> Shaban, *Teenagers, Terrorism and Technopanic*, p. 535–536.

<sup>(4)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>(5)</sup> Auxier & Anderson, *Social Media Use in 2021*.

<sup>(6)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>(7)</sup> Baaken, *YouTube's Role as a Platform for Extremism*, p. 2.

<sup>(8)</sup> Potter, *Mit antisemitischen Viralvideos für das Kalifat*.

<sup>(9)</sup> Ipsen et al., *2018 & 2019 Report Right-wing extremism on the Internet*, p. 18.

<sup>(10)</sup> Auxier & Anderson, *Social Media Use in 2021*.

<sup>(11)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>(12)</sup> Alter, *How fixing Facebook's algorithm could help teens – and democracy*.

actors can be described as similar in the sense that it also focuses on exploiting the insecurities and vulnerabilities of their target groups on social media. In 2019 and 2020, Facebook employed researchers to examine the recommendations systems' role in polarising users. Through the creation of test accounts, the researchers found that some users were pushed into so-called rabbit holes and exposed to conspiracy narratives<sup>(13)</sup>. Organised in sometimes openly accessible groups and pages, or groups that are closed (where joining is at the decision of the group administrators), extremist actors use the platform to exchange their views, recruit new members and to influence public debate. RWE users put a specific emphasis on the alleged need to protect young women from non-white men. Through dark-humoured memes displaying racist content and posts that are directly linked to calls to "self-defence" and violence, RWE actors try to reach a young female audience. The image in Figure 1 was shared on Facebook and reads "Yesterday applauded, today already being groped" and fuels anti-refugee sentiments by referring to incidents that occurred on New Year's Eve 2016 in different German cities, where women were harassed by men with a migration background. The image's message suggests that the partially existing welcoming culture towards refugees was a mistake and is now taking revenge on women, as they (allegedly) have to fear physical harm by (all) refugees.



Figure 1: Image retrieved from Facebook

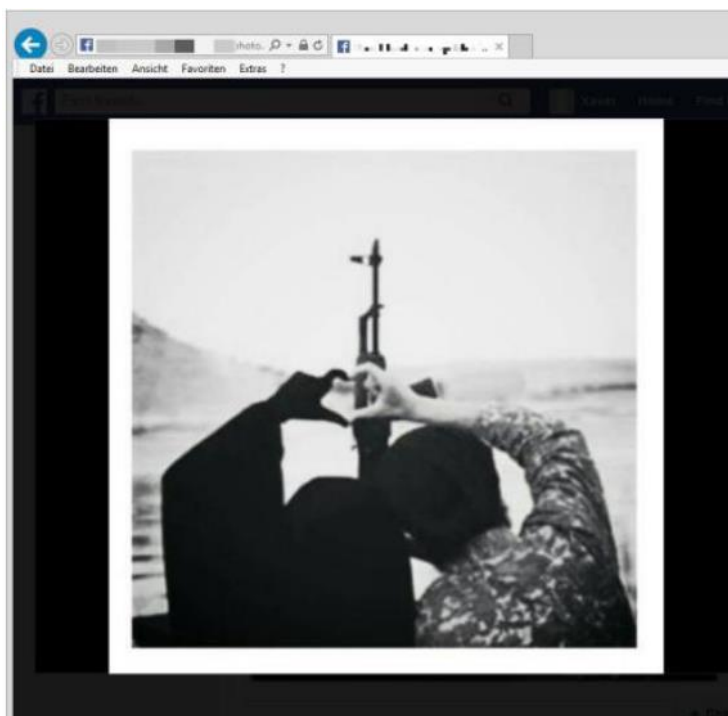


Figure 2: Depicting a heart with two hands in front of an assault rifle. Image retrieved from Facebook (Source: Jugendschutz.net)

The German organisation jugendschutz.net<sup>(14)</sup> specialises in detecting online content for violations of youth protection laws. In their report on RWEs' communication and recruitment tactics, jugendschutz.net describes that some of the images and posts found on Facebook refer to acts of violence against women committed in German cities by men with a refugee background. One of these images displays a young woman with a jackknife in her hand calling for girls to arm themselves against the imagined threat posed by refugees<sup>(15)</sup>. Particularly in the years of 2016 and 2017, jihadist groups focused their outreach efforts to reach girls and women on social media platforms such as Facebook. Violence-glorifying posts trying to recruit women as female warriors were shared alongside images promising a romantic adventure that comes with marrying a Daesh or Al Qaeda fighter.

## TikTok

TikTok is a video sharing platform and mainly used to create and share short comedy and dance clips. The app has a variety of different, easy-to-use functions and features including filters, quick cuts, music effects and stickers. From the beginning of the app's launch in 2016, the main target audience of TikTok was teenagers, which also explains its popularity amongst young users. A recently published study on RWEs' use of TikTok shows that many posts include a combination of far-right ideologies related to racism, anti-

<sup>(13)</sup> Zadrozny, 'Carol's Journey': What Facebook knew about how it radicalized users.

<sup>(14)</sup> See: <https://www.jugendschutz.net/en/>

<sup>(15)</sup> Beyersdörfer et al., Network of Hatred: How right-wing extremists use social media to court young people, p. 20.

Semitism, anti-feminism and anti-immigration hate speech<sup>(16)</sup>. As seen on other platforms, Daesh propaganda content was discovered on TikTok, leading to an effort to remove such posts in 2018<sup>(17)</sup>. Respective videos also explicitly targeted young girls by using the circulating term “jihadi lover” and young women referring to themselves as “jihadi and proud”<sup>(18)</sup>. Extremists also seem to be transmitting their messages to a broader audience by using keywords and trending topics, as TikTok’s “for you” page algorithm recommends posts by any users based on their interests (not just by users’ friends bubbles, similar to the mechanisms in place for Youtube described above).

In 2019, after Daesh lost control over the territories of their self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq, approximately two dozen, since deleted, accounts affiliated with Daesh took to TikTok to share propaganda videos. According to Elisabeth Kendall who is an expert on extremism at Oxford University, “this catchy sing-along method for propagating ISIS ideology means it spreads quickly and sticks in the collective memory”<sup>19</sup>. Many of these videos were specifically produced to target young girls. The image in Figure 3 shows a screenshot of one video in which a woman carries a Daesh flag and is labelled as a ‘jihadi lover’.



Figure 3: Screenshot of a video posted by a now-banned Daesh-affiliated TikTok account (Source: Wall Street Journal)

## Other platforms to pay attention to

The above-described platforms are used to spread propaganda to broad audiences and serve as places where extremists identify and connect with potentially vulnerable online users. In order to avoid raising suspicion and/or monitoring by law enforcement, more explicit conversations are moved to messenger services such as **Telegram** once a potential recruit is identified<sup>(20)</sup>. Attention also needs to be paid to **gaming platforms**, which are often used in a similar way to social media channels encouraging exchange and discussions between users<sup>(21)</sup>. Especially during livestreams, extremist actors (mis)use platforms to start or fuel discussions related to political topics and conspiracy narratives in an effort to try and reach potential new recruits. Livestreams pose a particular challenge for P/CVE work, as content can hardly be moderated or prohibited in real time<sup>(22)</sup>. **Broadcasting and livestreaming platforms** such as LiveMe and YouNow tend to have weak enforcement of prohibited content guidelines. Shortly after the 2020 US presidential election, a number of extremist users were banned from Twitter and other platforms and they moved to Twitch<sup>(23)</sup>. The livestreaming service DLive also came to broader attention earlier this year, when far-right rioters streamed the storm of the US Capitol on the platform.

While networks and imageboards such as **Reddit and 4chan** have approximately twice as many male users than female ones<sup>(24)</sup>, extremist content specifically targeted at girls and women is widespread. Some subreddits discuss women’s roles as traditional housewives and provide “advice” on how to fulfil this role, others consist of female members of the larger incel community (often referred to as “femcels”). Reddit bans certain accounts and extremist subreddits, which however leads to either new subreddits forming under a different name or users setting up own (unregulated) fringe platforms (such as Gab<sup>(25)</sup>) in many cases<sup>(26)</sup>.

<sup>(16)</sup> Weimann & Masri, Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok.

<sup>(17)</sup> Feuer, TikTok Removes Two Dozen Accounts used for ISIS Propaganda.

<sup>(18)</sup> Weimann & Masri, Research Note: Spreading Hate on TikTok.

<sup>(19)</sup> Wells, Islamic State Turns to Teen-Friendly TikTok, Adorning Posts With Pink Hearts, para. 7.

<sup>(20)</sup> Zeiger & Gyte, Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet.

<sup>(21)</sup> Schlegel, Extremists’ use of gaming (adjacent) platforms.

<sup>(22)</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>(23)</sup> Russonello, Twitch, Where Far-Right Influencers Feel at Home.

<sup>(24)</sup> Perrigo, The Subreddit /r/Collapse Has Become the Doomscrolling Capital of the Internet.

<sup>(25)</sup> Gab is like a hybrid version of Reddit and Twitter with posts limited to a maximum of 3 000 characters and similar up- and downvoting features to Reddit. Robert Bowers who committed the Pittsburgh attack in 2018 had been actively using the platform prior to the attack. For more information on Gab, please see Conway et al., Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence. History and Contemporary Trends, p. 9-10.

<sup>(26)</sup> Schofield, Inside the online ‘safe space’ for female incels.



The unique voting algorithm of Reddit including upvoting and downvoting functions has been shown to play a key role in supporting collective identity formation amongst users sharing extremist content. As the upvoting function leads to the promotion and subsequently normalisation of problematic content, the downvoting feature can cause counter-speech or posts/responses that may challenge extremist views to be displayed less to users. Through active downvoting and manipulatively “correcting” statements and behaviours of dissenting group members, extremist actors have turned subreddits into echo chambers <sup>(27)</sup>. So far, research studies have mainly focused on how upvoting and downvoting functions have influenced othering discourses and collective identity formation in far-right contexts <sup>(28)</sup>. It would be interesting to examine how these functions were specifically applied to target (young) female users. As Twitter has recently started test phases of a similar system with upvote and downvote buttons, we will see if this leads to a comparable situation regarding extremist bubbles on the platform.

## Reaching girls and young women online: Strategies and narratives of extremist actors

In many cases, young women and girls still experience limited freedoms in offline settings shaped by cultural norms and/or family pressure, which can result in restricted access to employment and education and may influence decisions in their private lives. Limited social ties with peers can open up a new scope for social interaction in the virtual world. Extremist actors exploit these grievances by propagating alleged agency for women within their groups and by promising them purposeful and self-determined roles <sup>(29)</sup>.

In general, online extremism appears to be highly gendered in the sense that content, messages and language are characterised by gender stereotypes and/or promote strict gender segregation, and also by addressing a (gender) specific audience <sup>(30)</sup>. A content analysis study of violent extremist websites in Indonesia examined recurring word pairs and links for the terms “wife” and “women”. It showed that in most cases ascriptive roles such as “mother” or “housewife” and attributions like “domestic” were associated with women. In sentences describing the roles of men, they were referred to as “leaders” or “protectors” <sup>(31)</sup>. However, even though both RWE and IE actors tend to reproduce traditional gender roles on digital platforms, when addressing young women and girls they promise active and in some cases also combat roles within their groups.

The following part will present and compare strategies, narratives and communication efforts by RWE and IE actors targeted at girls and young women on different social media platforms.

## An example of right-wing extremists' propaganda and recruitment efforts

Discovering one's own gender identity is part of a search for orientation particularly for young people. Girls and young women, like other young people, often turn to Google and social media platforms to find answers to their questions and fears surrounding gender-related topics. RWE actors know how to latch onto this situation and provide ideologically coloured answers and opportunities of identification across online platforms. Their narratives of gender roles are primarily shaped by the idea of a clear-cut binary gender identity <sup>(32)</sup>. Ideas about the place of men and women in society are not only reflected in RWE groups' and individuals' presentations on social media.

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<sup>(27)</sup> Gaudette, Upvoting extremism: Collective identity formation and the extreme right on Reddit.

<sup>(28)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(29)</sup> TED, A woman's place in security | Joana Cook | TEDxLondonBusinessSchool.

<sup>(30)</sup> Johnston et. al., The Lure of (Violent) Extremism: Gender Constructs in Online Recruitment and Messaging in Indonesia.

<sup>(31)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(32)</sup> Ipsen et al., 2018/ 2019 Bericht: Rechtsextremismus im Netz, p. 18-19.

To a greater degree, they utilise what they view as female role models (representing traditional gender values) and gender-specific approaches to reach and recruit young women and girls online. Content specifically targeted for male and female users becomes particularly evident on Instagram with images, videos and graphics reproducing gender stereotypes. Closely linked to RWEs' idealised gender images is devaluating content of deviant understandings of gender roles and hatred towards individuals representing, for example, non-binary images. Anti-feminism, feminism as well as hostility towards queer and trans people go hand in hand on extremist bubbles online. By blaming feminism, political correctness and "gender madness" for opening doors to an imagined "Islamisation" of Western societies, they try to pressure girls and women to follow their ideological lead for their own safety <sup>(33)</sup>.

Women and girls who are part of neo-Nazi groups such as the NRM, which is a pan-Scandinavian movement formed in 2016, and the Feuerkrieg Division (a movement active in the Baltic States) are described as "Nordic wives" and "Race warriors", the terms being used as self-reference but also by male online members of these organisations <sup>(34)</sup>. In what Askanius refers to as the "discursive marriage between misogyny and female empowerment" <sup>(35)</sup>, she explains that on one side female NRM members carry the role of recruiters by making

neo-Nazism more accessible and attractive for a wider social media audience. On the other side, while seeking agency in hyper-masculine structures, women are continually reproducing stereotypes and traditional gender roles, but having to defend themselves against accusations of being feminist by male group members.

Figure 4 shows a screenshot of a central female NMR figure's Twitter account. Contributing to the image of women and girls as empowered political voices by virtue of motherhood and taking care of their family, NMR and other RWE movements fuel the narrative of women as "saviours" of the white race. Similar communication tactics and narratives can be found across



Figure 4: Twitter account of a female NMR member

different RWE movements and groups on social media. While girls' and women's positions and posts on social media are in most cases policed by men or other (more senior) female members feeding into propaganda of women being subordinate to men, a large part of the content also consists of female empowerment and sisterhood <sup>(36)</sup>.

## Targeted online approaches by Islamist extremist actors

IE online content revolves around issues of identity, cultural belonging and (anti-Muslim) racism. Gender-specific approaches, real-life communication according to the needs and interests of young woman (e.g. fashion, lifestyle, family and friendship), and an attractive design seeks to achieve a greater outreach to young women.

<sup>(33)</sup> This narrative is often reproduced by different RWE actors and groups, e.g. Identitarian movements.

<sup>(34)</sup> Askanius, Women in the Nordic Resistance Movement and their online media practices.

<sup>(35)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(36)</sup> Askanius, Women in the Nordic Resistance Movement and their online media practices.

Similar to RWE actors, IEs share their values, norms and world views by linking “solution offers” for problems that particularly affect young women. Up-to-date topics such as current events and global crises (e.g. racist attacks on Muslims or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) are also integrated into various IE social media channels. The problem is not that actors point out social grievances and injustices, but the misappropriation of these issues by extremist users while concealing their actual ideological intentions<sup>(37)</sup>. Especially young Muslim women who wear a hijab tend to be a bigger target of public discrimination. IE actors often combine experiences of discrimination of young women and other similar societal debates as an entry point when trying to reach young women with their propaganda, for example in the context of societal debates surrounding hijab and/or burka bans, as recently seen in several EU Member States. This type of IE propaganda uses emotional elements such as pictures and videos interwoven with extremist ideological fragments. However, this does not mean that women and girls are helplessly lured into (violent) extremism by male IE actors. Similar to RWE context, women take on active roles within their groups, which also becomes visible in the moderating roles some of them hold in online fora and on social media platforms.

## Religious interpretations and online gender separation: Supposed safe spaces for girls?

The strict separation of men and women often dictated by IE ideology is also observed online: in many cases male users are not allowed to communicate with female users, nor may they visit groups intended for women<sup>(38)</sup>. The girls are given the impression that they are amongst their peers; however, it is difficult to verify whether the respective account holders are in fact women. The persons behind these profiles and postings – assumed to be women – address the adolescent girls as “sisters”, creating a feeling of togetherness and belonging. By providing these safe spaces, extremist actors hope to gain the trust of potential recruits, engage in conversations with them, and gradually indoctrinate them with IE ideological fragments and narratives. Options for direct contact via email or telephone are offered as well in order to entice young female users to engage in communication that feels private and personal<sup>(39)</sup>. The discussed topics on such platforms are broad and include advice on how to behave “right” in everyday life, how to wear a hijab correctly or questions surrounding love/married life. In many cases, IE actors cite religious sources to legitimise their views: by sharing and (re)interpreting surahs of the Quran, Hadith or quotes from several Islamic scholars regardless of their historical context, they try to underpin their ideology and political goals.

Once girls and young women are in touch with extremist actors in private chats or on messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp, Telegram), such interactions are likely to go unnoticed. While WhatsApp and other messaging services have developed automated systems in order to detect and remove abusive users and harmful content, communications are encrypted for privacy protection reasons, which makes it hard to intercept extremist content and recruitment efforts by extremist actors. Invitation links to groups on messaging services (such as Telegram and Signal) are posted on public profiles on different social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and TikTok. As pointed out in the previous chapter, it is a common strategy to approach young women with content innocuously worded by providing a low-threshold entry point for further indoctrination.

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<sup>(37)</sup> Röhlig, *Die Islamisten-Hipster*.

<sup>(38)</sup> Jugendschutz.net, *Dschihadisten werben um Mädchen und junge Frauen*, p. 1.

<sup>(39)</sup> For more information, please see Zeiger & Gyte, *Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet*, p. 384 or Jugendschutz.net, *Dschihadisten werben um Mädchen und junge Frauen*, p. 1-2.

## Aesthetics of social media posts targeted at female online users

IE groups and pages on social media that are specifically targeted at young women tend to be very colourful, often including internet-famous cat and dog videos to generate attention <sup>(40)</sup>.



Figure 5: Communication between female members of an IE group on Telegram

Images picking up topics including romantic relationships and sexuality can be found frequently. They transport feelings of empowerment and self-esteem at a first glance. A closer look at the content reveals the ideological fragments packed into posts and memes intended for young girls. The picture in Figure 5 shows use of the popular sticker function on Telegram, displaying a young girl with a niqab, dressed in modern clothes and with a skateboard in order to tie in with actual habits of young girls. Below that another sticker was used with a call for girls to focus on becoming better Muslims. The call to avoid and distance from possible distractions on their religious path in order to fight for a greater, common purpose is regularly repeated on these channels.

The values that are conveyed are linked to proscribed behaviour, which is frequently legitimated by reference to a religious fatwa. Such fatwas, particularly on websites and online platforms targeting girls, are frequently to be found and this strategy is also used when reaching out to young

men. Questions related to religion, love, sexuality and the body are answered in accord with religious texts by various scholars. A fatwa is an Islamic legal opinion, on any particular topic, issued by an Islamic scholar. Young people are often uncertain about who is allowed to issue a fatwa, as not every scholar or imam is qualified to do so. In most cases, the issuing of fatwas is preceded by several years of specialised and methodological training <sup>(41)</sup>. Those seeking advice assume that the statement corresponds to what is written in the Quran, to Islamic tradition and to Islamic law. Pictures and memes are generally published on social media networks with inspiring messages, religious quotes, or a fatwa combined with images and other short texts. The “like” and “share” options contribute towards infiltrating the daily communication of girls and young women and gradually creating an opening for Islamist extremism.



Figure 6: Information shared on an IE Telegram channel regarding dress codes for Muslim women

Similar to the screenshot on the previous page, the image in Figure 6 uses comic-style images of Muslim women. Information and advice on “appropriate” dressing for women and girls is often shared on these channels.

Close connections on social media also exist in the form of solidarity networks. The Instagram account ‘freeoursisters’ posts expressions of solidarity with women and girls who have left for former Daesh areas and are now held in detention camps in Syria and Iraq or in prison in European countries, but also with women whose husbands are detained for terrorist activity. The initiative has been monitored by the German state-level intelligence agency in North Rhine-Westphalia, as one of its central members had ties with Daesh. A study monitoring social media

profiles of Danish jihadi-Salafi organisations regarding female-specific narratives shows that much of the content revolves around contemporary and everyday issues (42). In many cases, motivation narratives are based on traditional doctrines and concepts but address identity issues concerning Muslim women living in Western countries. According to this research, often-used narratives include “the honour of being sisters of Islam” and their common obligation to stand up for their “deen” (this refers to the Arabic word *dīn* which means religion) (43). These organisations, such as Kaldet til Islam (Call to Islam) strategically



Figure 7: Image reads: It doesn't feel like Ramadan. I'm not waiting for Eid. My husband is in prison. What is he doing and how is he doing now?

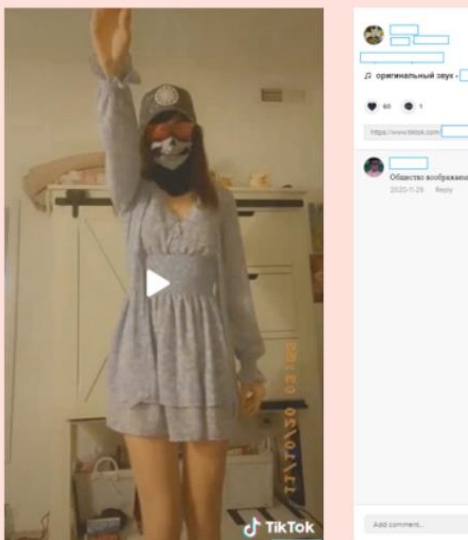


Figure 8: Video screenshot of Riley Williams promoting far-right accelerationism. Screenshot was retrieved from ISD Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok.

motivate girls and young women to participate in extremist actions, as the gender-based discrimination Muslim women can face in Western societies is constructed as a necessary means to take part in jihad.

Posts often include direct or implicit calls to violence. Far-right accounts on TikTok and other platforms use symbols of (neo-) Nazi imagery and support RWE accelerationism. Accelerationism in the far-right is the belief that societal collapse should be pushed forward in order to replace the current system with a fascist ethnostate (44). In a TikTok video featuring Riley Williams, who was arrested after storming the Capitol building on 6 January, Williams raises her arm in a Sieg Heil salute. The video shows her dancing and saying “There is no political solution. All that is left is acceleration. Heil Hitler.”

(40) Jugendschutz.net, *Dschihadisten werben um Mädchen und junge Frauen*, p. 1-2.

(41) There are a number of international institutions and bodies bringing together established scholars to jointly write fatwas. In most Muslim countries, a Grand Mufti holds highest religious authority. In Shiism, more precise degrees and standards are in place to determine who is allowed to issue fatwas, while the different madhahib (schools of thought) of Sunni Islam have very different streams. The scholars' rank and degree of training in jurisprudence play a decisive role when it comes to the “legitimacy” of an issued fatwa. However, there are no universally valid and recognised forms when it comes to fatwas. Therefore, fatwas also restrict or contradict each other. For more information, please see Skovgaard-Petersen, *A Typology of Fatwas*.

(42) Jul Jacobsen, *Calling on Women: Female-Specific Motivation Narratives in Danish Online Jihad Propaganda*, p. 19.

(43) *Ibid.*, p. 20.

(44) O'Connor, *Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok*, p. 9.

## Implications for P/CVE: Primary and secondary prevention on social media

Social media platforms are a central part of everyday life for most (young) people. However, many users are ill-equipped to judge the veracity, reliability and authenticity of their online sources. **Digital literacy and critical consumption of online content** can serve as protective factors when it comes to online radicalisation. Providing girls and young women with source verification skills is therefore crucial to help them identify false information, propaganda and recruitment efforts by extremist actors.

As recruiters feed into the vulnerabilities of young women and build online relationships with radicalised and/or extremist peers in digital networks are a central part of radicalisation processes, **creating alternative social (online) networks is important in order to compensate for the loss of contacts** <sup>(45)</sup>. While this is an integral part of many exit and deradicalisation strategies, it seems particularly crucial for girls and young women finding “sisterhood” online. It should be discussed whether it makes sense to respond to this threat by creating gender-specific P/CVE online approaches (e.g. with alternative/counter-narrative campaigns) or if a more general approach might be better, which does take gender into account but as a structural component amongst others (e.g. age, education, etc.). During the past years, most P/CVE campaigns suggested narrowcasting when it came to reaching vulnerable male and female users <sup>(46)</sup>. While extremists seem to be successful in using so-called gender-specific topics and narratives, P/CVE campaigns that are mainly based on gender-specific topics might unwillingly reproduce stereotypes and wrongfully homogenise the target audience based on their gender.

## Recommendations

- The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting (sudden) need for a wider range of digital P/CVE measures has created challenges for practitioners who are used to working in offline settings. In addition to the already often intense workload for practitioners, familiarising themselves with the rapidly changing world of social media platforms and offering tailored prevention and intervention services is not feasible for many. When it comes to better understanding girls' and young women's online behaviours, RAN YOUNG can help to identify relevant platforms and emerging trends. The list that follows provides a brief overview of relevant online practices making headway in the field.
- In order to help young women and girls to better understand and identify propaganda, misinformation and extremist content, developing programmes to **strengthen digital literacy source verification skills** can be a helpful tool for primary and secondary prevention. There are a variety of websites and search engines designed to help users identify whether information they found online is reliable or not. The Irish initiative BE MEDIA SMART summarises organisations and websites focused on providing fact-checking tools and databases <sup>(47)</sup>. It is crucial to better equip girls and young women to also spot subtle forms of IE and RWE propaganda and recruitment efforts.
- Increasing online presence on social media of civil society organisations and P/CVE practitioners seems crucial. In order to have a credible voice on digital platforms, organisations can provide low-threshold educational content, participate in discussions under social media posts with extremist narratives, and cooperate with influencers who can function as role models in preventing and countering online violent extremism.
- As discussed above, the sometimes limited or short-lived effect of alternative or counter-narrative campaigns is often due to the fact that they are set for a short period of time before projects end. Schlegel suggests a '**bookstore approach**' based on collaboration

<sup>(45)</sup> Gielen, Exit programmes for female jihadists: A proposal for conducting realistic evaluation of the Dutch approach, p. 15.

<sup>(46)</sup> Schlegel, A Bookstore, Not a Customized Page.

<sup>(47)</sup> See: <http://www.bemediasmart.ie/fact-check#check>

between P/CVE actors offering a variety of different campaigns and topics, taking gender into account but not necessarily focusing on gender-specific target groups <sup>(48)</sup>.

- In recent years, the relevance of targeted, local P/CVE approaches and the need for local teams of multi-agency actors have become increasingly clear, as extremist scenes differ greatly depending on their location. Hence, local hybrid measures where offline approaches are transferred to the online space are needed. The Belgium city of Mechelen is currently working on a respective model, in which youth and social workers try to continue conversations with vulnerable youth in offline settings on digital platforms (e.g. with Twitch FIFA tournaments).
- As **livestreams** enjoy a growing popularity across different social media channels where content can hardly be moderated in most cases, platform providers, policymakers, researchers and practitioners need to **discuss possible measures and responses** to extremist users taking advantage of the lack of regulation.

## Relevant Practices

1. With the active participation of girls and young women, the [NISA project](#) implements video and online campaigns to develop alternative approaches to patriarchal and extremist narratives on social media.
2. The [Islam-ist website](#) is set up as a Q&A platform on the topic of 'Islam' surrounding questions of everyday life for Muslim youth. Aiming at preventing radicalisation processes of young individuals, the team of Islam-ist is in touch with their target group through Instagram, Facebook and TikTok. The concept is not based on gender-specific columns but rather applies the above-mentioned bookstore approach.
3. As part of the [Dutch Foundation for Intercultural Participation and Integration](#), the Diamond programme supports individuals between the ages of 12 and 24 experiencing identity problems. The programme offers online spaces to explore and discuss questions related to gender roles, love life and related topics.
4. The US organisation [Life after Hate](#) specialises in mentorship for vulnerable online users provided by formers and mental health professionals. By being aware of aspects related to "sisterhood" prevalent in many extremist contexts, the team offers support with alternative contacts and networks outside of extremist settings.
5. As part of the Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP) of the European Commission, the initiative [YouthRightOn](#) targets online far-right influence on youth in Bulgaria. By developing alternative narratives to extremist messages disseminated online, the programme seeks to strengthen resilience amongst young social media users.
6. Many organisations offer contact points and counselling specifically for young girls and women on social media. At [Juuuport](#) and similar organisations, teams of experienced practitioners, counsellors and trained young people (starting from the age of 15) are present as contact persons on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok. In case young women or girls are concerned about online encounters or questions related to cybergrooming, hate speech or extremist content, they can reach out (also anonymously) and Juuuport offers individual support.
7. Another example is the [Web-constables](#) programme by the Estonian Police and Border Guard, where police officers function as spokespersons on online safety, monitor digital spaces and hold social media accounts on various platforms.

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<sup>(48)</sup> Schlegel, A Bookstore, Not a Customized Page.

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