

2.2: THE EMERGENCE OF VIOLENT NARRATIVES IN THE LIFE-COURSE TRAJECTORIES OF ONLINE FORUM PARTICIPANTS (Martin Bouchard, Simon Fraser University)

Executive Summary

With online activities quickly replacing offline ones, many of today's youth have become adept at creating lives for themselves whereby they rarely need to leave their computer in order to live them. Within the past two years, the Canadian government has openly begun stating their concern for the younger generations being easily manipulated, influenced, and even "radicalized" online (Bizina and Gray, 2014). While the current project will not directly address the phenomenon of online "radicalization", it will take the first step in understanding the narratives that individuals post on online discussion forums. These forums have been identified as an online social milieu that may facilitate the development of violent narratives for a minority of participants. Drawing from Life Course Theory (LCT), the study seeks to address the development of negative emotions in an online context, specifically whether the turning point of entry into adulthood is associated with a change in the nature of the sentiments expressed online.

The research question will be answered via a mixed methods approach where the content of posts will be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively to assess both the nature and level of negative emotions. Since the events of September 2001, young Canadian Muslims, more than non-Muslims, have had to learn to develop their identity in a society that sometimes point to their religion as having a role in various major terrorist events around the world. For this reason, three forums both open to the public and focused on Islam-related issues were selected: Islamic Awakening (IA), Shia Chat, and Ummah. A total of 96 individuals who either self-identify themselves as Canadians, or had mentioned living in Canada at one point in their lives were sampled from these forums. Forty-eight (50%) of these individuals started on the forums before the age of 19 - they were considered as our sample of "minors". The other half of the sample started as adults; they acted as a comparison group. Posts were extracted for each user sampled through the use of a custom made online web parser which allows for the systematic collection and extraction of information within a website of interest. Each post was rated on a continuum of "positive" and "negative" emotions using a sentiment analysis software called Sentistrength. Scores were averaged up over 6 month time periods. All 96 individuals in the sample posted for at least 12 months on the same forum (two time periods). Close to 3000 posts per individual were analyzed. The mean length of time spent on the forum from first to last post was 9 years, providing a long enough window to study evolution and change in narratives for a majority of the sample.

The analysis was divided into three main steps: 1) Before/After Analysis – to test if there is a significant difference between a minors sentiment scores before 19 years old compared to after entry into adulthood; 2) Analyzing the consistency of sentiment trajectories for individuals; and 3) Qualitative Analysis - to identify turning points in a user's online trajectory, and see how these may have affected individual sentiment trends. The qualitative assessment is also used to validate (or refute) the trends uncovered in the quantitative sentiment data.

The first set of results suggests that minors have a wider range of sentiment scores than adults (range of 29.14 vs. 19.14, respectively), and adults to be more negative overall when compared to minors (mean score of -1.9 vs. -1.1, respectively). Importantly, the trend in sentiment score was found to change over time: overall sentiment scores for minors before turning 19 were significantly less negative than scores found after turning 19. Similarly, the first 50% of sentiment scores (overall) for adults were significantly less negative than those of the second 50% - showing a similar decrease into negativity throughout their time on the forum.

A second set of results focus on the content of the posts. A total of 21 minors and 22 adults were selected for further qualitative analysis, as their sentiment trajectory was either negative; changed significantly over time, or both. Overall, three themes emerged for both the minors and adults groups.

The first theme was 'consistency in narrative'. Those who were the most negative, violent, extreme, and even radical in their speech did not develop into (or out of) this type of online behavior as they transitioned into adulthood. These individuals tended to remain fairly constant in their speech patterns over time, and various transitions/turning points did not alter the users' sentiment to the extent of obvious change. Four of the twenty-one minors, and two of the twenty-two adults could be found within theme 1. The second theme was 'development in narrative'. These individuals tended to vary in their speech patterns over time, with the turning point of entrance into adulthood/university (or the halfway point for adults) displaying a noticeable change in each user's sentiment and content of posting. While some minors developed into negativity, the majority of minors simply portrayed a development of maturity and responsibility as they transitioned into adult roles. For both groups, it was common for users to exhibit increasingly negative emotions paired with interest in politics, international affairs, and terrorism in the Middle East. Finally, the third theme was 'using forums as a stress outlet & means of support'. Many users tended to rely on their respective forum for support and advice relating to challenging life events. These individuals to use their forum as a means by which to alleviate stress – expressing their frustration/anger with regards to a key event or situation via short bursts or long, emotional monologues. Many experienced life-altering transitions (offline), and then garner support and relieved stress via their new community online.

It was initially a concern that the more extreme individuals would be acting as "inspirers", "motivators", or "indoctrinators" towards others online. This did not appear to be the case from the users examined in the current project. Those who were most extreme were not well received by others online, regardless of age. The majority of minors examined appeared to be quite resistant to, and able to identify, other users of a more extreme and even radical nature. While it would have been ideal to use the current project (and subsequent findings) to inform the process of radicalization in an online setting, the current design was not intended to accomplish such a goal. Future research, however, might benefit from expanding the current research design to include a broader sample of all nationalities (and not simply Canadians), and several more forums, with a specific aim of better understanding how and whether violent radicals may influence others online, if at all.