Gender and Contextual Perspective in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Examining Inclusion of Women and Contextual Factors in Online Approaches to CVE

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Theuri, N. Gender and Context Perspective in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE): Identifying inclusion of women and contextual factors in online approaches to CVE. Degree project in Criminology 30 credits. Malmö University, Faculty of Health and Society, Department of Criminology, 2017.

Abstract
A holistic approach to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) in the Internet Environment and Social Media is essential. This thesis focuses on gender and context consideration in online approaches to CVE through use of a literature review and samples of online counter-narrative campaigns. This has led to determination of the extent to which gender and context have been considered in online approaches to CVE and identifying what they mean for CVE online, while highlighting full participation of women in online approaches that are aimed at countering violent extremism as well as the critical role of contextual factors in online approaches to CVE. In addition, the thesis shows that more research is needed to fill the gaps identified. These gaps are the role of women in online CVE campaigns as well as contextual factors that are associated to violent extremism. More so, online narratives should be all rounded since this study found that CVE narratives have failed to identify a predictable psychosocial trajectory to explain de-radicalization processes that are crucial to disengage radicals.

Keywords: Context, Counter-narratives, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Online, Criminology, Gender, and Radicalization Theory
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>ACT!</td>
<td>Act Change Transform</td>
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<td>AFRICOM</td>
<td>U.S. Africa Command</td>
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<td>CVE</td>
<td>Countering Violent Extremism</td>
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<td>DANIDA</td>
<td>Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark International Development Cooperation</td>
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<td>HURIA</td>
<td>Human Rights Agenda</td>
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<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<td>NYPD</td>
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<td>United States Agency on International Development</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Definition of key terms**

This thesis utilizes some terms that are either not clearly defined in the literature, or lack a universal definition. The definitions given herein are in accordance to how they are conceptualized for the purpose of this thesis. Specifically, the document of Kwale CVE Action Plan developed by HURIA in partnership Act!, DANIDA, USAID and IOM is used.

*Context:* Social, political, economical, ideological and cultural conditions within the societal realm.

*Counter Messaging:* Rebuttal of specific violent extremist/terrorist messages purposed to delegitimise and undermine their trustworthiness and appeal to targeted individuals and the public at large.

*Counter narrative:* A deliberate intervention by a state or non-state actors engaged in CVE that challenges the legitimacy and credibility of the stories and worldview promoted by violent extremist groups and their recruitment campaigns.

*Countering Violent Extremism (CVE):* Employment of non-coercive means to delegitimise violent extremism ideologies with an aim to reduce the number of violent extremism supporters and recruits.

*Gender Identity:* ”Is a recognition of the perceived social gender attributed to a person” (Diamond, 2002 p. 323).

*Gender:* The sex of a human being defined in terms of social and cultural contexts.

*Radicalization to violent extremism:* ”The process by which people come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it, and how they progress-or not-from thinking to action” (Borum, 2011 p. 8).

*Radicalization:* A gradual-phased process that employs the ideological conditioning of individuals and groups to socialize them into violent extremism and recruitment into terrorist groups or campaigns. It is dependent on a fanatical ideology that rejects dialogue and compromise in favour of an ends-justifies-ends approach, particularly in the willingness to utilize mass violence to advance political aims that are defined in terms of race, ethnicity, sectors and religion.

*Violent Extremism:* Actions of radicals, who engage in or are ready to support acts of violence to further radical, illiberal ideologies and/or undemocratic political systems.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of key terms</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contents</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Disposition</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delimitation</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance To Society And Criminology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review and Theory</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The History Of CVE</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories In CVE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radicalization Theory</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual factors and the link between Internet and CVE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVE Through Online Campaigns</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Gendered And Contextual Approach To CVE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design, Literature And Case Identification Strategy</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature review</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online campaigns</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description Campaigns</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations And Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic presentation of Contextual Factors Vital To CVE</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online campaigns</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Processes</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender And Age</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders/Actors</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method discussion</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results discussion</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Research</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 1</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do contextual and gender dimensions matter? Well, criminological research tends to resonate around context and gender issues when considering ways of preventing criminality. This extends to the notion of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) that has gained its traction in both political debates and counterterrorism measures at a global and domestic level in the past two years.

CVE efforts have been actively deployed both online and offline since combating terrorism continues to be a priority for countries and there is a need to include other counterterrorism measures to military efforts. This is reflected in for example a CVE summit held in 2015 and chaired by the then US president Barack Obama, the UK CVE program launched in 2003 (Patel and Koushik, 2017) as well as the United Nations’ plan of action to prevent violent extremism (U.N. Secretary General report, 2015).

At its basic CVE is defined as a collection of non-kinetic, non-coercive measures and involves voluntary activities that aim to prevent or intervene in processes of radicalization to violence (Selim, 2016). Thus, CVE is a “preventative and non-coercive ‘soft’ approach, designed to work in partnership with communities” (Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016 p. 54). This is the conceptualization adopted in this thesis. More so, radicalization is herein conceptualized as a process in connection to extremism, in the sense that "radicalization into violent extremism (RVE) refer to the array of processes by which people come to adopt beliefs that not only justify violence but compel it, and how they progress -or not- from thinking to action” (Borum, 2011 p. 2).

In his speech on cyber threats as a challenge to national security, the former US president Barack Obama emphasized that cyber threats are a security challenge, highlighting that most of the critical infrastructures are connected to the Internet, which is hugely empowered but is also dangerous (White House 2015a; Amanullah and Wiktorowicz, 2015). This is evident considering that extremist groups such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) “have become sophisticated at creating dense and global networks of support online, networks that are helping such groups to run virtual circles around government and communities (Ibid). In response, countries have embraced modern ways to counter extremism that these radical groups pose. These methods include monitoring social networks in order to counter-internet propaganda, especially in consideration of the rising global trends of terrorism and cyber related extremism in Europe, USA and Africa over the years (Patel and Koushik, 2017).

Although there is a substantial embracement of utilizing CVE strategies globally, the way in which online initiatives are applied require a consideration of gender and contextual aspects in order to exclusively tackle recruitment to extremism and radicalization. This is because online CVE approaches seem to be more concentrated on language particularly in counter narrative campaigns (Berger and Stratheam, 2013) but ignore other contextual factors that may be important when dealing with online platforms where extremist groups stream their propaganda.

More so, women participation particularly in online programs designed to CVE is somewhat neglected (Giscard d’Estaing 2017). For instance countries developing CVE strategies such as Canada are yet to identify ways in which to engage women either offline or online in CVE efforts (Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016).
This is despite the importance of incorporating gender in CVE initiatives being acknowledged broadly, as evident in the UN Security Council Resolution 2242 (2015). The resolution calls for women inclusion in planning CVE programs (Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016).

This thesis seeks to identify gaps involving gender and context in online CVE initiatives. This will facilitate a discussion on women agency, and their participation in online CVE programs and the critical role of contextual factors in effective CVE online campaigns. Gender is the sex of a human being but often defined in terms of social and cultural contexts, although the word gender and sex are at times interchangeable (Diamond, 2002). This thesis uses the term gender to depict women as female but also expands to the notion of gender roles. Gender roles are activities that are sex-linked. Roles are behaviours that are expected from the virtue of being a male or a female as well as ideas on how one ought to be treated based on their perceived sex biological, cultural or social based (ibid).

In line with Zill and Dill, this thesis contend that a ”woman” does not present a universal meaning of being female due to diverse discourses and contexts that exist in societal divisions and constructions (1996), and thus seek to include contextual factors in online approaches to CVE. More precisely, the social, political, economical, ideological and cultural conditions within the societal realm characterizes the contextual factors referred to for the purpose of this thesis.

Thesis Disposition
This thesis consists of four sections. The following section provides an introduction that consists of the research question, research aim, scope and thesis relevance to society and criminology. A literature review section follows, where the theoretical framework that guides this thesis is discussed. Thereafter methodological approach and ethical considerations are discussed, leading to presentation of results and a discussion. Lastly, a conclusion section is presented.

Research question
This thesis is guided by the following research question:

To what extent have gender and context been incorporated in online approaches to CVE and what do they mean for online CVE initiatives?

Aim
The purpose of this thesis is to examine to what extent gender and context dimensions have been included in online CVE approaches.

In order to achieve the overall aim, this thesis is guided by the following objectives:

- To identify gender dimensions and contextual consideration in online approaches.
- To establish what inclusion of women and contextual factors in online initiatives mean for CVE efforts.
Scope
The focus of this thesis is limited to gender and context in online CVE approaches. Lack of intensive research in this area informs this scope. Further, considering non-existence of a theoretical base of CVE, a literature review guides the academic discussion. In methodology, samples of online counter-narrative campaigns in English are used and analysed with a goal to supplement the discussion in answering the research question while the results and the discussion facilitates the objectives.

Relevance to society and Criminology
CVE is arguably a modern concept that communities have adopted in finding solutions to violent extremism since research has shown that when local communities are empowered, intercommunity dialogue is enhanced, trust is built and alternatives are offered (Selim, 2016). This is in itself highly commendable, and considering that women play a critical role in enhancing community resilience, their inclusion in online approaches becomes of relevance. Further more, the role of women and need to uplift their voices and power is crucial in CVE efforts, since violent extremism is deeply manifested at a community level. Hence inclusion of women in CVE efforts become of relevance to the society in curbing radicalization and violent extremism.

Similarly, contextual factors are important in understanding the society and the dynamic factors in the global trends. Thus, understanding the importance of context on online CVE initiatives is of relevance to society in efforts to curb violent extremism, which is evidence in radicalization and extremism studies (U.N. Secretary General report, 2015).

In Criminology, gender dimension and contextual factors are rarely a focus (Patel and Koushik, 2017; Challgren et al., 2016; Bakker et al., 2015) and thus, this thesis will contribute to the few criminological works that have focused on the same. More so, the link between gender, context and CVE online is under-researched (Duol et al, 2016) and thus, this thesis is beneficial to academia in highlighting the existing gap in the literature and in online CVE practices.

Literature Review and Theory
This section presents three sub-sections namely: The history of CVE, theories in CVE, contextual factors and the link between Internet and CVE, CVE through online campaigns and a gendered and contextual approach to CVE.

The History of CVE
The focus of international and national CVE strategies has further developed from exclusive use of hard security measures to a multi-sectoral, preventive and comprehensive approach to violent extremism (Dhabi, 2014). The CVE concept has no theoretical foundation but rather a policy and program base, which emerged as a policy response to counter extremism (Challgren et al., 2016).

However, the methodology guiding CVE is three-phased. Firstly, CVE is grounded in an approach that seeks to identify the push and pull factors to violent extremism. Secondly, the identified factors inform development of targeted intervention programs, which finally lead to implementation of programs designed for individuals that are vulnerable to radicalization or at risk of recruitment to violence (Dhabi, 2014).
Popularity of the CVE concept has risen over the last decade as an improvement on US-led ‘War on Terror’ that mainly employed coercive measures to combat the threat of terrorism (Nasser-Eddine, et al., 2011). CVE emerged as a counter-radicalization effort that the United Nations defines as “deterring disaffected (and possibly already radicalized) individuals from crossing the line and becoming terrorists” (McCants and Watts, 2012). Thus, CVE is generally discussed in terms of soft and hard approaches to counter terrorism.

However, the literature often interchanges violent extremism with terrorism, political terrorism, extreme violence and political violence (Nasser-Eddine, et al., 2011). Although not exclusively distinct from terrorism, violent extremism purposes “to provoke the target into a disproportionate response, radicalise moderates and build support for its objectives in the long term, while the purpose of terrorism is to endogenise the capabilities of both the terrorists and the target” (Lake, 2002 p.26). Thus, the need to shift from counterterrorism to CVE is reflected on the contemporary transnational and asymmetric environments, where individual behavioural patterns and intercepting communications are unpredictable and dynamic.

In addition, radicalization and violent extremism are context-dependent, and this has led to policy responses that have contributed to evolution of CVE (Harris-Hogan et al., 2016), which is a robust framework that lacks precision and focus. This is as Horgan argues that CVE approaches can hardly define the specifics of not only what they are preventing, but also if they have prevented (2014; Macnair and Frank, 2017). However, perpetrators of violent extremism depict a picture that ideological, community-based and psychological factors have an effect on their extremism trajectories (Selim, 2016). Thus, the ways in which online initiatives are applied require a consideration of gender and contextual aspects in order to exclusively tackle recruitment to extremism and radicalization.

The literature show that radical ideas are necessary precursors for terrorism, although this may not always be the case since “different pathways and mechanisms operate in different ways for different people at different points in time and perhaps in different contexts” (Borum, 2011 p. 8).

In CVE initiatives, the role of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), security agents and communities are well researched (Patel and Koushik, 2017; Challgren et. al., 2016; Briggs and Feve, 2013; Ferguson, 2016). Notwithstanding the priority placed on building community resilience in CVE efforts, the role of women is only highlighted as gatekeepers despite their myriad roles, which include but not limited to championing for CVE initiatives. For instance, there are mothers who are actively involved in de-radicalizing their children, female imams evangelizing religious tolerance as well as female police officers cooperating with local communities to counter violent extremism.

Nevertheless, women’s efforts are limited to offline initiatives (Couture, 2014). This is because online approaches concentrate on general counter-narrative campaigns, which do not clearly focus on women and/or girls either as victims, perpetrators or advocates for CVE.
More so, online CVE approaches tend to place a strong focus on language to ensure coverage but exclude other contextual factors such as; societal norms and beliefs, religion, identity, regional politics, education levels and social economic status (SES). Hence, a gap exists in context and gender considerations in online CVE initiatives. As a result, this thesis seeks to examine to what extent gender and context dimensions are incorporated in online CVE initiatives, and further discuss women agency, participation as well as relevance of contextual factors in online CVE approaches.

Gender should be utilized on both online and offline CVE initiatives as a global study on the implementation of UN security Council resolution 1325 focusing on “countering violent extremism while respecting rights and autonomy of women and their communities” highlighted that “in understanding women’s desire to become members of violent extremist groups, it is also critical to recognize the nature of women’s agency” (Coomaraswamy, 2015, p. 225).

Global trends in technology such as Internet and use of social media have arguably contributed to development in many ways and at different levels (Briggs and Feve, 2013). However, this has led to multiple paths of conceptualization and realization of own social class, particularly for women where on one hand, women take the opportunity to further their potentials on professional careers, activism and providing education to themselves and their daughters. On the other hand, young girls choose Internet as a source to reinforce their religious ideology in extremism that in their thinking, keep them free from family and cultural prohibitions and guard them to live in accordance to a righteous way of life (Foret and Itcania, 2013).

In addition, contextual factors should inform online CVE initiatives since radicalization to violent extremism is a multifaceted process that integrates both online and offline factors (Hussain and Saltman, 2014). These factors are both individual incentives and structural that influence individual pathways to violent extremism in online platforms. Thus, contextual factors provide a foundation for CVE both offline and online.

**Theories in CVE**

Theory serves as a tool for exploring complex assumptions. The field of CVE is relatively new and it is based on policy rather than theory. However, there are various possible theoretical frameworks that might be applied to CVE due to interconnectedness of different factors and processes that are crucial to violent extremism and radicalization. Hence, rather than developing a single model to explain CVE, social psychological and structural variables should inform theoretical assumptions that include multiple models, which fully captures CVE in its entirety.

This sub-section highlights theories used in CVE literature but presents radicalization theory in depth. As mentioned earlier, this thesis conceptualizes CVE as a counter-radicalization effort, aimed at “deterring disaffected (and possibly already radicalized) individuals from crossing the line and becoming terrorists” (Harris-Hogan et al., 2016 p. 6). In addition, despite many hypotheses on terrorism, there is no general theory of terrorism or violent extremism. This is because of the dynamic nature of violent extremism that is dependent on context and individuals (Borum, 2011).
CVE has a base in government policy responses to violent extremism and thus, lacks a theoretical hypothesis and a concrete definition (Nasser-Eddine, et al., 2011). However, literature on CVE has covered a wide range of theories that hypothesize terrorism, radicalization, violent extremism, social cohesion among others. These theories include rational choice theory, which argues that an individual independently decides whether or not to engage in violent extremism on the basis of cost benefit analysis (Eager, 2016). The benefits are associated to attainment of values that are deemed necessary for the individual participating in the extremist movement. However, the rational choice theory concentrates more on individual behaviour and is therefore not adequate in describing collective behaviour (Olson, 2009; Gupta, 2005), which is often associated with violent political and extremist movements where individuals participate for collective incentives. Thus, radicalization to violent extremism (RVE) is associated to the collective perception of the benefits. This is as Finkel et al. stated, ”if ‘everyone’ acted in accordance with the assumption of conventional rational choice theory, all would abstain and no public good would have a chance to be provided. The individual, faced with this dilemma, may first reason strategically that the participation of everyone is necessary to have a chance of obtaining the public good.” 1989 p. 888 as cited in Eager, 2016 p. 7.

Structural/Societal theory hypothesizes that violent groups choose political violence strategically, and that these groups possess “collective preferences or values and selects terrorism as a course of action from a range of perceived alternatives” (Eager, 2016 p.8). Structural theory focuses on underlying macro level factors that cause groups to turn to violence. The factors are based on preconditions and precipitating factors. The former are factors conducive for terrorism and violent extremism in the long run, while the latter are factors that trigger occurrences that happen prior to the onset of violent group activities (Ibid). This theory closely connects with relative deprivation theory, which suggests that individuals feel deprived in comparison to others socially, economically and politically (Al-Lami, 2009; Pargeter, 2006; Mullins, 2009). Thus, leading to collective action.

Collective Action Approach/Social movement theory (SMT) cites frustrations as the cause of radicalization, since frustrated individuals tend to use aggression to negotiate their frustrations (Rinehart, 2009). Social movement is by definition a “set of opinions and beliefs in a population, which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society.” (Zald ad McCarthy, 1987, p.2). In 1940s the SMT began with a hypothesis that strained environmental conditions groom irrational processes of collective behaviour giving rise to feelings of mass sentiments that trigger individuals to join movements. In connection to radicalization to violent extremism (RVE), SMT asserts that members of the movement aim to be both effective and efficient, thus focusing on identification of most probable to join the movement and further its cause. SMT utilizes the power of relationships and social bonds.

SMT connects with mobilization theory that focuses on contextual processes particularly group dynamics. Group dynamics are anchors for radicalization of an individual to violent extremism. This is through the process of conversion that is based more on individual processes of changing ideologies and beliefs, rather than collective movement (Borum, 2014).
This theory has roots in religious studies and adopts a seven-components model that was first discussed by Lewis Rambo. The components are outlined in stages as follows; context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences (ibid). These stages occur in processes that facilitate their interdependence.

*Psychological theories* focus on personality and mental functionality of individuals (Brynjar and Katja 2005). Although psychological theories are not directly about violent extremism, they have furthered scholarship on radicalization particularly in-group behaviour – intergroup conflict and dynamics (Borum, 2011). Since violent extremism is often group-centred, social psychology is key to deepen understanding of the collective behaviour of extremists’ or/and those in verge of terrorism. This is grounded on assumptions that extreme attitudes are cultivated by group contexts. In comparison to individuals, groups are prone to make less rational choices that are also biased. More so, people feel less responsible for collective actions, as groups have internally set rules that govern individual behaviours. Thus, in/out group bias crowns individual perceptions through group membership and due to perceived rewards associated to group membership, individuals are more likely to join (ibid).

The aforementioned theories lack an adequate definition of radicalization to violent extremism and do not comprehensively describe why violent extremism becomes an option for individuals and groups but rather discuss political violence in general. Radicalization is correlated to violent extremism in the sense that radicals often engage in violence. Thus, a complete CVE theory should adopt a holistic approach in explain violent extremism and radicalization processes.

### Radicalization Theory

Literature on radicalization portrays the challenge of defining radicalization, with most scholars assuming it is a self-evident concept (Al-Lami, 2009; Maskaliūnaitė, 2015; Hemmingsen, 2015). Others dwell on very broad definitions defining radicals as individuals whose opinion differ from “normative societal opinions” (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010 p. 798 cited in Nasser-Eddine, et al., 2011 p. 26). Despite definition mishaps in the literature the common assumption is that radicalization is a process (Al-Lami, 2009), which Silber and Bhatt presented in four stages in their report on *Radicalisation in the West: The Home-grown Threat* for the NYPD (2007). These stages include pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination and jihadisation.

Radicalization theory developed from an assumption that individuals who hold extreme views that are away from “moderate mainstream beliefs” are radicals (Monaghan and Molnar, 2016 p. 2). Hence, the theory adopts an indicator-based approach, which aims to identify persons who are probable to engage in political and/or religious motivated violence.

The indicators in radicalization theory focuses on push and pull factors to violent extremism. Push factors are personal reasons pushing individuals to radical ideologies while pull factors attract individuals that are potential radicals (Borum, 2011) and includes narratives that give answers to (negative) push factors (Wiktorowicz, 2004).
On one hand, push factors are characterized by identity crisis (internal) that leads an individual to embrace extremist ideologies and subsequent radicalization (Filoramo, 2003). On the other hand, pull factors are associated with social networks (external), which are interlinked to activation of radical ideas and extreme ideologies within individuals (Sageman, 2008; Neumann, 2013). These networks implies both online and offline interactions.

Radicalization through the Internet has been studied (Ashour, 2011) but there lacks a clear picture of individual pathways towards Internet radicalization (U.N. Secretary General report, 2015). However, there are patterns and trends that depict that push and pull factors play a key role also in individual radicalization through the Internet.

**Figure 1:** Radicalization theory
Some researchers argue that push factors are similar for males and females. These factors include perceived oppression of Muslims worldwide, strong conviction to support jihad as part of their religious and ideological duty, desire to change the world and build a new state and the attraction of travelling and adventure associated with foreign land (Saltman and Smith, 2015; Bakker et al, 2015). However, others assert that women are pushed by desires to find love or romance, getting married to heroic fighters and rebellion against their environments (Bakker et al, 2015). Pull factors differ by gender although they are greatly influenced by groups. This is because the group becomes the focal point for extremists. The factors include the glamour associated with the jihad war, which is perceived to have a cause (Perešin, 2015)

Radicalization theory proposes a pass through which individuals get radicalized. This entails “individuals join radical collectives, which develop in real-world location, such as mosques, prisons, shisha bars, sport clubs, and bookshops” (Pearson, 2015). However, the Internet has replaced the real-world milieu and individuals are using Internet to further their radical ideas (Ashour, 2011; Avis, 2016). Thus, radicalization theory fits best in guiding the hypothesis in this thesis that a holistic approach to Internet environment and social media particularly gender and context incorporation is essential for CVE online initiatives.

The criticism of radicalization theory is that its indicator-based approach easily translates to profiling practices (Monaghan and Molnar, 2016 p. 2). This is for instance in practices adopted by policing agents (Breen-Smyth, 2014; Croft, 2012; Eroukhmanoff 2015; Kundnani, 2014). However, radicalization theorists under the ‘narrative school’ expand these indicators to a holistic approach whereby credible indicators are grounded on a wide range of potential and credible variables that are derived from social and political contexts (Bramadat and Dawson, 2014).

Contextual factors and the link between Internet and CVE
For the purpose of this thesis, the attention is particularly on intervention focus of online CVE programs in order to establish the essence of gender and context in countering violent extremism. Scholars argue that violent extremism is manifested in radicalization. Feddes and Gallucci, 2017 concentrated on analysing methodology that is used in evaluating effectiveness of preventive and de-radicalization interventions. The authors identified non-radical, potentially radicalizing and radical individual and/or group classifications. The classifications differentiated between individuals who (a) have not shown interest in an extremist ideology, or (b) have shown interest in extremist ideology but have not shown extremist behaviour, or (c) have shown both interest in extremist ideology and extremist behaviour. Further, they identified common forms of interventions, where non-radical are suited with educational interventions or workshops, while potentially radicalizing and radicalized were fitted for interventions focused on social context surrounding them i.e. community, family, friends and first-line professionals e.g. social workers, police.

Feddes, et al., 2015 focused on how increase in self-esteem and empathy leads to prevention of violent radicalization especially on adolescents with dual identity. However, the authors observed that too high self-esteem levels are likely to make individuals more susceptible to radicalization.
Koehler, 2014 looked at former extremists and analysed their radicalization processes, highlighting mechanisms that are essential for radicalization through the Internet, namely: Connection to like-minded individuals, constrain free space and anonymity, perception of a critical mass and economical benefits.

Ferguson, 2016 identified the pull and push factors that hinder and/or promote individual abilities to move away from violent extremism. In particular, the author based his discussion on interplay between societal, family, individual and organizational level efforts that refrained individuals from violent extremism based on former combatants and their views on disengagement from violent extremism.

Musial, 2016 focused on dynamics that are gender-specific to radicalization and identifies narratives that show that the push and pull factors appealing in the radicalization processes differ between male and females.

**CVE through online campaigns**

Technology companies are important when it comes to CVE, since their services are vital to extremists. For instance, the Islamic State (ISIS) has been using online platforms mobilizing armies of followers and engages audience through tools such as Facebook, Kik, Twitter, Ask.fm, Instagram and SoundCloud (Amanullah and Wiktorowicz, 2015; Conway, 2016).

More so, ISIS has been in the forefront utilizing the technology, going as far as creating apps such as `Huroof`\(^1\) that was targeted to children, and Amaq Agency\(^2\) to stream and facilitate access to ISIS propaganda and further facilitate ISIS’s messaging campaign. This has led to development of few online responses such as Media Training for Muslim Americans and Network Against Violent Extremism that is targeted directly to CVE online (Awan, 2012).

Further more, a collaborative approach that involves professionals is at core of online programs such as Jigsaw that consist of a team of scientists, engineers, designers, researchers and policy experts\(^3\). However, women participation in online initiatives on CVE has neither been studied nor has a policy been developed to facilitate women engagement in online CVE approaches. This could be associated with difficulties to define CVE and difficulties to quantify CVE success (Challgren et al., 2016). However, adopting a framework of women role from others areas and adapting it to CVE efforts could inform policy-base for women in CVE. This is for example with refugee policies that had previously lacked a gender dimension but was later embraced in redefinition of gender roles in refugee and asylum politics (Bloch et al., 2000; Hunt 2008:).

Additionally, contextual factors considerations are limited to language and expansion is necessary in order to fully realize the potential of online CVE approaches.

**A gendered and contextual approach to CVE**

\(^1\) http://fortune.com/2016/05/11/isis-mobile-app-children/
\(^2\) http://fortune.com/2015/12/10/isis-smartphone-app/
\(^3\) http://mackenzieinstitute.com/googles-jigsaw-works-counter-violent-extremism-2/
Mothers have particularly been acknowledged as influential actors in leading youths either away or towards violent extremism (Dhabi, 2014). On one hand, there have been mothers’ programs that have been involved in fighting extremism such as the PAIMAN Alumni Trust in Pakistan (Dhabi, 2014). Such programs have been good examples in showing that voices of women especially mothers to victims of violent extremism and/or perpetrators are powerful and their narratives could be a source of counter narratives of violent extremism and promotion of peace.

On the other hand, mothers have been on the limelight in steering their children to extremism and being participants themselves (Winterbotham and Pearson, 2016). More so, women have voluntarily participated in violent extremism (Bloom, 2011; Khelghat-Doost, 2017; Bakker et al., 2015), which is more visible in the rising trends of women jihadists who use online platforms to challenge the traditional gender roles and champion for extremist ideologies (Musial, 2016) as well as existence of women as violent extremists (Pearson, 2015; Bakker et al., 2015).

However, online CVE approaches neglect the role of women in the online platforms, where women actively engage and establish a strong appearance (Perešin, 2015). These roles are well documented in research. This is for instance women role as indirect supporters of violent extremism. As mothers, women influence their children towards extremism by enforcing militant Islamic ideology to their children and supporting the myth of a “freedom fighter” (Loadenthal, 2014). As nurses, they have been responsible for taking care of wounded fighters and as facilitators, they help raise funding for jihad course and further help to spread jihadist propaganda in an attempt to convince others to join (Ibid). These roles are often in favour of violent extremism (Hoyle, 2015; Zakaria, 2015), however, they can be converted to CVE efforts particularly online. This could be converting tips offered to women intending to travel to Syria with counter messages that discourage such moves. Thus, women role as CVE agents would help in disengaging women vulnerable to radicalization as well as other individuals who perceive women as role models or key actors in the society for example as teachers and mothers.

Studies show that participation of women in extremism and affiliations with radical groups is increasing. This is for example with studies done at refugee camps (see for example Khelghat-Doost, 2017), where extremist groups are argued to have developed a mechanism through which women are successfully engaged into violent extremism (ibid, p.17). Another example is a study on female foreign fighters that identifies which women travel to Syria and what they do when there (Bakker et al., 2015). The findings were that women who travel to Syria follow a similar thread to men, which is based on a personal conviction rather than the stereotype perception of women as submissive and docile (Ibid).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This thesis uses qualitative method and adopts an interpretative paradigm in examining to what extent women and contextual factors are incorporated in online CVE approaches (Fossey et al., 2002; Neuman and Wiegand, 2000).
This approach will help in understanding and interpreting how social world is created and maintained this will be in connection to gender and context in countering violent extremism online.

This section presents four subsections. Firstly, research design, literature and case identification strategy. Secondly, procedure undertaken in selection of publications and and online campaigns. Thirdly, a description of selected materials (publications and online CVE campaigns) is provided and finally, limitations and ethical considerations.

**Research design, literature and case identification strategy**

Research design is basically a plan or a strategy that is used to generate answers to a research problem (Welman & Kruger, 2001). This thesis is based on partial elements of literature review and case study methods. In regard to the former, research studies and academic publications on CVE are used. This was done through academic library databases, reference lists and bibliographies from identified publications, and academic engines such as Google scholar.

The case study method implies use of case studies of selected online campaigns that are analysed individually focusing specifically on gender and context considerations. This thesis applies case studies in order to meet the aim of assessing to what extent gender and context have been incorporated in online CVE initiatives.

The mixture of literature review and case study methods used in this thesis is grounded on several considerations. Firstly, the theoretical and empirical aspect was put in consideration. The literature review supliments radicalization and CVE debate in academic research while case studies of selected campaigns facilitate the limited analysis and evaluation of online CVE campaigns. Secondly, practical aspect was considered. The cases selected were considered due to detailed information on what the campaigns deal with particularly in alignment to objectives of this thesis.

**Materials**

**Literature Review**

Under this section, review of the literature was done in different phases to facilitate the theory discussion and specific areas discussed herein. The phases included radicalization to violent extremism, gender and context in CVE and online approaches to CVE.

**Procedure**

In order to facilitate acquisition of publications relevant to this thesis, various key terms were utilized, using logical combinations of selected words. These terms include extremism, radicalization, CVE interventions, CVE narrative, counter messaging and women in extremism. These key terms aided in retrieving articles, e-books and publications related to gender and context in CVE initiatives both online and offline from the following databases: Malmö University Library (summon), google scholar, Springer, Wiley, JSTOR, Journal of criminal Justice (Elsevier), Journal of deradicalization, which publishes scholarly materials.
The search result yield over 3350 publications that were narrowed down to 22, which were selected and were analysed throughout the thesis, while some others were used for reference purposes in the thesis. The publications had to be published not earlier than 2000, since the notion of CVE emerged as an improvement of the US led war on terror after September 11 attacks in 2001 (Nasser-Eddine, et al., 2011). However, studies could either present empirical or secondary analysis and reviews. This was to ensure that reports, essay, policy documents and scholarly journals were included.

More so, publications had to exclusively focus on gender and CVE, content and CVE or Internet and CVE. This was to ensure that the literature was relevant to the aim and objectives of this thesis. To ensure a wide coverage the literature selected had to have focused on gender and CVE, context and CVE, or Internet and CVE.

Hence, the gender and contextual factors used in this thesis are drawn across criminology scholars who have identified gender and other key contextual factors that are important in prevention of radicalization to violent extremism. However, the results are presented based on a thematic analysis, which has been identified in the literature and online campaigns selected. Content thematic analysis was used due to recurrance of meanings and hence thematic analysis being ideal. The themes identified are social processes, gender, identity and age, actors and strategy.

**Online Campaigns**
The campaigns were selected through a basic desktop research, where 21 online counter-narrative campaigns were identified. The search included search of keywords such as but not limited to extremism, Islamic extremism and CVE. This led to identification of sites that listed successful online counter-narrative campaigns.

**Procedure**
The programs selected for review were based on three criteria. The first consideration was use of English language. Thus, campaigns that run in Arabic, German and French were dismissed. This is because English is the required language in writing masters criminology thesis at Malmo University.

Second, the campaign had to have an online component. Some campaigns run both online and offline while others just run either offline or online. The focus was based on online element and a combination of both was not necessary since the focus of the thesis is on the Internet and social media, which are run online. Hence only the online element was considered for inclusion.

Lastly, campaigns that captured Islamic extremism were considered in order to strategically exclude far right extremist groups, since all other programs were categorized to deal with among others, Islamic extremism. This decision was informed by a majority of programs identifying Islamic extremism as a focus area, and the few that did not were already excluded under other considerations such as language and mode of running (online/offline).
This study focuses on women agency and full participation of women in online approaches that are aimed at countering violent extremism as well as the critical role of contextual factors in online approaches to CVE. Of the 21 identified campaigns, 6 were excluded due to lack of required elements namely: English language, online component and focus on extremism.

Thus, this thesis analyses fifteen online CVE campaigns (n=15), and they all have an online component although some are also delivered in an offline context. These programs target violent extremism especially targeted to jihadist-related extremism, except one campaign that focus on white supremacist motivated extremism. However, these programs differ in ways through which they are deployed to counter violent extremism in terms of geographical coverage, targeted beneficially, content and means of implementation among others.

The method used to identify these campaigns was basic desktop search using aforementioned keywords. This decision was informed by lack any research that have exclusively analysed multiple online campaigns (scholarly search engines were used to find such research).

Description of campaigns
This section presents a description of each campaign (as presented in their respective websites) and then outlines to what extent the program includes a gender and/or context element based on gender and contextual factors identified across criminology scholars as important in CVE.

*Abdullah X*
This campaign targets young Muslim men living in the United Kingdom, with an aim to equip them with a critical mind-set to build resilience to violent extremism. The program uses a character of a former Islamic extremist living in the UK (Abdullah X) to share his experiences and insights to dismantle extremist narratives; the character picks on news events and issues that youth can relate to and airs them as video animations mainly on YouTube but the counter narrative also has a website, and it also utilizes social media such as Twitter and Facebook to reach its audience. Abdullah X also features a female counterpart, Muslimah X, in graphic novels, who offers a female perspective to the overall campaign.

*The Association française des Victimes du Terrorisme (AfVT)*
AFvT is an organization that provides resources and support for terror survivors. Online, AFvT runs a video campaign to intensify survivors’ voices with a goal to counter the dehumanising narratives of extremists. The featured survivors are a global collection and narrate how violent extremism has forever changed their lives. The videos are as short as 1-2 minutes and are considered to be suitable for social media. The campaign targets youth at a global level and everyone else at risk of radicalization to violent extremism by highlighting real consequences of violent extremism with a purpose to foster resilience to extremist narratives.

*Average Mohamed*
This campaign utilizes animated cartoon videos that target young English speaking Muslims living in the West and it is aimed at countering narratives of Islamic extremism and contributes to early resilience to radicalization of young Muslims.
The campaign covers topics such as religious tolerance, being a Muslim in the west, violent extremism and identity. The campaign runs own website and also uses social media and recognizes power of in-group communication, which is crucial for movements at grassroots level.

**Extreme Dialogue**
Extreme dialogue is a project that has been launched in Canada (2015), UK (2016), Germany and Hungary and it intends to decrease the appeal of extremism among youths, and offers a positive alternative to the increasing quantity of extremist propaganda and materials available online. The alternative materials are presented as online Prezi presentations and resource packs, and are targeted to benefit young people between 14-18 years in classrooms and/or community settings. Through enhanced critical thinking and active discussions on controversial issues, the videos are purposed to build resilience to extremism. Further more, the videos have been promoted on social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook. The videos contain real life experiences of survivors of terror and former members of extreme groups and are ideal for classroom teaching with a goal to develop the skills to think critically and enabling pupils to challenge extremist arguments and ideologies. The primary targets are teachers, parents and Youths in Canada.

**Global Survivors Network**
The Global Survivors Network (GSN) purpuses to amplify voices of survivors and victims of violent extremism. The network produces and disseminates testimonies of survivors with a goal to systemize the construction and dissemination of counter-narratives that are meant to undermine the appeal of extremist messages within vulnerable communities. The targeted audiences are survivors and global civil society.

**Hours Against Hate**
Hours Against Hate is a campaign from U.S. State Department that purposes to combat bigotry and promote pluralism across all societal sectors through raising awareness online. It primarily focuses on engaging youth in meaningful ways through pledging an hour to do something to someone who is different from them. It utilizes social media as a medium of communication and offers a go-to resource for those interested in getting involved.

**Jiladz**
It is a campaign that features a UK-based comedic duo in a video that speaks on a peer-to-peer level unravelling most prominent arguments used by extremists and the harsh consequences of travelling to Syria. It targets young Muslims in the west.

**Know Extremism**
This campaign uses comprehensive digital media approach to counter online extremism. It utilizes tools such as online ads, social media networks, digital advocacy hub and a website to educate about violent extremism and to mobilize individuals to speak against violent extremism. Using the online tools, individuals at are able to engage in grassroots efforts to advocate against violent extremism.

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4Prezi is a visual storytelling software and alternative to traditional slide-based presentation formats.
by sharing curated content via their own social media channels. It primarily targets the youth.

My Jihad
Through user engagement and educational resources this campaign aims at reclaiming back the word Jihad from extremists. It offers Muslims a platform to share own stories and highlight their own personal jihad. In addition, the campaign offers reading materials where people can read more about Jihad and Islam. The targeted group is Young Muslims and those susceptible to anti-Muslim propaganda.

Not Another Brother
The campaign has a video that showcase an emotional story of a young man who realizes about his mistake before it is too late. The video helped to spread counter narrative content and it challenges the aspects of recruitment to extreme Islamism and brings forward the dangers of going to fight abroad. The targeted group is Young Muslims living in the West.

Radical Middle way
Radical Middle Way (RMW) is a grassroots British Muslim initiative that purposes to connect young British Muslims with authentic Muslim scholarship, offering a safe space for young people to seek guidance and engage in open debate, while promoting cohesive communities and civic responsibility.

The initiative is locally - focused, but also promote international engagement. RMW is active within Muslim communities in the UK and abroad, with engagement activities in Mali, Pakistan, Sudan and Indonesia. It combines social activism with popular culture in order to maximise its reach among young people since it targets young Muslims.

Sabahi and Magharebia
Sabahi and Magharebia were online information platforms that aimed to provide impartial and balanced news coverage in Africa as a counter-narrative to the misinformation that feeds extremist narratives on the continent. These platforms synthesized international and regional news, but maintained an entirely localised approach and promoted regional sources and local journalists. However, both platforms were shut down in February 2015. Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of a military-run information campaign. U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) sponsored them.

One to one
Is an online intervention program for countering violent extremism where UK, USA, and Canada based individuals who were at-risk or already expressing sympathies for extremist organizations were identified on Facebook via open sources, and were matched up with an appropriate intervention provider based on age, ideology and gender. This intervention program operated on the assumption that formers would have the best credibility in direct messaging, and thus intervention providers were all former extremists with experience in offline interventions.
Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI)
Launch in 2016, Online Civil Initiative is a European initiative that challenges hate speech and extremism online with a goal to counter online violent extremism. It further aims to make change so that everyone can feel empowered to share his/her voice and exercise civil courage to stand up through empowerment of organizations and grassroots activists carrying out valuable counter speech online. OCCI promotes positive dialogue and debate and purposes to combine experiences across NGOs, Civil Society, as well as the creative sector and academia with a goal to promote new partnerships and positive campaigns.

Innovation Hub
Institute of Strategic Dialogue Innovation Hub brings together capabilities of technology, marketing, campaigns and communications sector with those with the expertise and credibility – the activists, former extremists, survivors of extremism and frontline workers who are at the root of counter-narrative campaigns and interventions – with an aim to challenge, push back, disrupt and counter extremist propaganda and activity online.

Limitations
Due to a vast range of campaigns against extremism and lack of universal definition for CVE, this thesis was limited in scope of results yield by the keywords searched. This is because the list of words used in is not exhaustive of all key words used in violent extremism and CVE works. Hence, the programs listed here are not purposed to be exhaustive or representative but rather serve as a sample for scanning online CVE programs in order to examine to what extent gender and contextual factors are aligned to online CVE approaches.

In addition, the role of women in violent extremism particularly in social media is to a great extent directed to women participation in violent extremism (Perešín, 2015) rather than women role in countering violent extremism. Thus, the discussion on policy and women engagement in CVE in this thesis was limited to suggestions for future research.

Ethical Considerations
Ethically, there was no application for ethical approval since this thesis employed a desktop research and concentrated mainly on content that is available online in relation to online approaches to CVE. Moreover, there was no interaction with sensitive materials that necessitate application of ethical approval.

RESULTS
The literature and online CVE campaigns analysed reveal that gender dimensions and contextual factors are incorporated to CVE approaches to a very low extent. For instance, there were only 2 campaigns that engaged women while less than half considered ideology, age and language. Nevertheless, the online CVE campaigns were found to have other elements. Most of them (n = 12) offered counter-narratives to extremist propaganda, and majority focused on educating the youths (n= 10). The area of policy and education was a focus with 8 campaigns while 10 considered geographical locations in their coverage. This is shown in table I.
In the publications considered for analysis (see table II), there is a general direction in the CVE literature that recognizes gender and contextual factors as vital to CVE online campaigns. This will be presented in broad themes identified. These themes include; social processes, gender, identity and age, actors and strategy.

Table I: Summary of campaign focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offering counter narratives</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating youths</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educating/providing recommendations on violent extremism to policy makers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western context (Europe, Canada and USA)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa and Asia</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender focus</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language, ideology and age</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II: Summary of publications analysed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ahmadi, B. and Lakhani, S.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Afghan Women and Violent Extremism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashour, O.</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Online de-radicalization? Countering violent extremist narratives: message, messenger and media strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bartlett, J., Birdwell, J. and King, M</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>The edge of violence: A radical approach to extremism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borum, R.</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Rethinking Radicalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briggs, R. and Feve, S.</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Review of programs to counter narratives of violent extremism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feddes, A.R. and Gallucci, M.</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>A literature review on methodology used in evaluating effects of preventive and de-radicalisation interventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feddes, A.R., Mann, L. and Doosje, B.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Increasing self-esteem and empathy to prevent violent radicalization: a longitudinal quantitative evaluation of a resilience training focused on adolescents with a dual identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferguson, K.</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gill, P., Emily C., Maura C., Amy T., Mia B., and Horgan J.</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Terrorist use of the Internet by the numbers: Quantifying behaviors, patterns, and processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemmingsen, A.S.</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>An introduction to the Danish approach to countering and preventing extremism and radicalization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hussain, G. and Saltma, E. M.</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Jihad trending: A comprehensive analysis of online extremism and how to counter it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khelghat-Doost, H.</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Women of the Caliphate: The Mechanism for Women's incorporation into the Islamic State (IS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koehler, D.</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>The radical online: Individual radicalization processes and the role of the Internet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Musial, J.  
2016  
My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujahidah®-Narratives in the propaganda of the Islamic State to address and radicalize Western Women. An Exemplary analysis of the online magazine Dabiq

Ni Aoláin, F.  
2016  
The “war on terror” and extremism: assessing the relevance of the women, peace and security agenda’

Quillian Foundation  
2015  
‘Mothers & wives: women’s potential role in countering violent extremism’

Selim, G.  
2016  
Approaches for Countering Violent Extremism at Home and Abroad

Szmania, S. and Fincher, P.  
2017  
Countering violent extremism online and offline

Waldman, S. and Verga, S.  
2016  
Countering violent extremism on social media

Williams, M.J., Horgan, J.G. and Evans, W.P.  
2016  
The critical role of friends in networks for countering violent extremism: toward a theory of vicarious help seeking

### Thematic presentation of contextual factors vital to CVE online

This section presents themes identified in the literature and online campaign analysed in this thesis. These themes are composed of contextual factors that the literature and campaigns consider as vital to online approaches to CVE. These themes include; social processes, gender, identity and age, actors and strategy.

#### Social processes

Violent extremism is a complex mechanism that is caused by a combination of multiple factors (*push and pull factors*). Push factors are structural such as systematic dearth of livelihoods and/or government oppressions, while pull factors are individual incentives such as economic benefits and/or feeling of brotherhood (Selim, 2016; Hemmingsen, 2015; Ferguson, 2016; Musial, 2016). This is in line with radicalization theory that places emphases on pull and push factors as explanations of radicalization to violent extremism (Filoramo, 2013; Sageman, 2008; Neumann, 2013).

The interplay of different factors commence in a gradual exposure and results to socialization towards violent extremism (ibid). In the literature, identity processes are highlighted as social processes through which radical groups utilize especially on adolescents with an aim to recruit them to radical ideologies (Feddes, et al., 2015).

Other factors such as stakeholders such as community, family, friends and first-line professionals e.g. social workers; police who are active in de-radicalization process are key in terms of effectiveness of preventive and de-radicalization interventions (Feddes and Gallucci, 2017).

More so mechanisms surrounding radical processes are essential for RVE through the Internet, namely: Connection to like-minded individuals, constrain free space and anonymity, perception of a critical mass and economical benefits (Koehler, 2014).
Radicalization to violent extremism is therefore a process in which the literature analyses at different levels and contexts. The levels include individual, network, group, organization and mass movement, while the contexts focus on socio-cultural, international and interstate contexts (Borum, 2011). The levels and contexts focus is primarily on abnormalities associated to unique terrorist profiles that depict the dynamic nature of radicalization to violent extremism (ibid). Thus, social processes are vital for successful online CVE.

**Gender, Identity and Age**
The campaigns analysed lack the gender component (except 1) and how women in particular could be included in order to further their agency and participation in online approaches. The literature includes women in CVE efforts but the discussion is somewhat limited to offline approaches on roles of mothers as gatekeepers (Ni Aoláin, 2016; Quilliam Foundation, 2015; Hamoon, 2017; Musial, 2016).

Identity revolves around ideology where individuals get the urge to belong. The strong bond that is associated with sister/brotherhood has been a motivation for individuals to join extremist groups (Bakker and Leede, 2015). The Internet offers an environment for engagement with like-minded and bring about plurality of theories and opinions manifested within individuals (Koehler, 2014).

Ideological base of radicals further facilitate individuals engagement to violent extremism. However, identity is closely linked to status, revenge and thrill (Borum, 2014). Status is connected needed recognition and esteem from others. Revenge is associated to feelings of frustrations and anger within an individual, who seeks to direct that to some particular person, group or entity. Thrill is affiliated with excitement, adventure and glory (ibid). These factors relate to individual mechanisms of radicalization to violent extremism through personal or political grievances.

On age, most online campaigns target youth since they are most vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism. These young people are often Muslims living in the west (n = 8) hence acknowledging local context such as religion and its interplay with local communities and politics.

**Actors**
*Voices of victims of violent extremism, experiences of former violent extremists and other credible messengers*
Credibility is paramount for counter-narratives to be effective as presented in the online campaigns that use the former violent extremists, survivors and/or others who are deemed credible massagers. Credibility of these actors is often based on personal circumstances (McCants and Watts, 2012; Ashour, 2011).

Victims/survivors of violent extremism have a powerful role in online CVE initiatives since they give an account of real effects of extremist violence, and they subsequently de-legitimize actions of extremists against ordinary civilians. The Global Survivor Networks (GSN) and The Association française des Victimes du Terrorisme (AFvT) are such campaigns. The former purposes to amplify voices of survivors and victims of violent extremism, through dissemination of testimonies of survivors with a goal to systemize the construction and dissemination of counter narratives that are meant to undermine the appeal of extremist messages within vulnerable communities.
(Global Survivors Network, Website). The latter runs a video campaign to intensify survivors’ voices with a goal to counter the dehumanising narratives of extremists and the featured survivors are a global collection and narrate how violent extremism has forever changed their lives (Network of Association of Victims of Terrorism, Website).

Former violent extremists speak about the flaws and the negative consequence of violent extremism. Their experiences accord them credibility in the sense that they are aware and have been part of violent extremism and thus know futility of real-world violent extremism (Bartlett et. al., 2010).

Peers, role models and social networks
CVE approaches seek to empower communities and employ both formal system such as law enforcement agencies, CSOs, learning and religious institutions, and informal system of volunteers who engage at-risk individuals to formal systems in CVE work (Williams, et al., 2016). The volunteers are mostly peers, role models and other social networks that an individual is affiliated to (Szmania and Fincher, 2017). These volunteers are important in identifying at-risk persons to radicalization and connect them to relevant channels. Online CVE campaigns have therefore incorporated formal systems and informal systems in CVE online, for instance, the One to one online intervention program for countering violent extremism, where UK, USA, and Canada based individuals who were at-risk or already expressing sympathies for extremist organizations were identified on Facebook via open sources, and were matched up with an appropriate intervention provider.

Government
Governments and state agents have been in the forefront in CVE. This has led to allocation of considerable human and financial resources in domestic and international CVE efforts. CVE initiatives have been developed as a response to perceived increase in radicalization among Muslim communities. However the efforts have mainly been implemented in an offline setting for example the UK Prevent Model and the Community Oriented Policing for Muslims. The former aims to directly involve with Muslim communities with an aim to identify their grievances and attempt to improve them, while the latter is a modification from a model tackling gangs and narcotic networks in the USA and adopted to CVE (McCants and Watts, 2012; Ashour, 2011).

Nevertheless governments are a crucial element in CVE online approaches since they are key to policy that set rules and regulates undertakings of campaigns. This is evident in various CVE campaigns that are shut down for example the shutting down of Sabahi and Magharebia online information platforms in February 2015 as concerns were raised about the effectiveness of a military-run information campaign (Briggs and Feve, 2013).

More so, enforcing filtering and takedowns of illegal content online has been a responsibility of governments, although these strategies have proven to have limitations on their effectiveness due to high speed and huge loads of data being put up online (Briggs and Feve, 2013; Waldman and Verga, 2016). Furthermore “only a tiny fraction of extremist content is actually illegal” making it complex to pull them down (Ibid, p. 15).
Strategy
The strategies of CVE are often referred to as post-9/11 prevention model, where they are targeted to counter ideological recruitment. The critical role of Internet to provide effective and efficient ways to network, communicate and organize extremist related activities is vital in various activities carried out to counter violent extremism such as prevention, intervention and disengagement, and rehabilitation and reintegration (Selim, 2016; Ashour, 2011). Nevertheless when these activities are carried out in an online setting, positive and negative tactics are applied.

*Positive tactics* entails positive messaging aiming to promote tolerance, cohesion and build resilience against violent extremism. Thus, online campaigns are run to push back extremist propaganda (Kaye, 2015 in Szmania and Fincher, 2017). *Negative tactics* involves counter-narratives that de-legitimize extremists propaganda (Hussain and Saltman, 2014).

On one hand, the campaigns analysed, 80 % used negative tactics. This included messages aimed at showing the consequences of engaging in violent extremism as well as the negative impacts of violent extremism. On the other hand, the literature showed a mixed approach of both positive and negative tactics in CVE online (Szmania and Fincher, 2017; Waldman and Verga, 2016, Ashour, 2011).

Online initiatives adopt ideological approaches to CVE. The campaigns adopt different soft approaches to CVE. Ideologically, religious drive ideology is used in attempts to distinguish extremist propaganda from religious philosophy. More so, critical and deconstructive approaches are applied to de-legitimize extremist propaganda. Finally, a moral perspective is applied in some campaigns, where acts of violent extremism are looked upon through voices of victims.

**DISCUSSION**
Although online counter-narrative approaches have a potential, gender and contextual aspect are fundamental dimensions that should be addressed to reach the high-risk individuals (Ashour, 2011). This is because the pull and push factors that lead individuals to violent extremism are manifested within the social processes (Selim, 2016; Ferguson, 2016; Musial, 2016). Thus, counter narrative campaigns should be linked to public engagement and put gender and context into consideration due to the fact that individuals seeking to reinforce their beliefs are more likely than individuals seeking to change their beliefs to search for online extremist propaganda (Gil et al., 2007; Szmania and Fincher, 2017).

**Method discussion**
This thesis has focused on 15 online campaigns and publications to examine the extent to which gender and context are applied in online CVE approaches and what they mean for CVE online. However, the results yield is not generalizable to online CVE programs but they give an indication that online campaigns are crucial in CVE. The contextual factors identified in the literature review are not discussed individually rather than in broad themes namely the literature show that radicalization processes are initiated in an offline setting and enhanced online and further emphasizes that context and gender have an impact in successful CVE approaches.
The overall aim of the thesis is to assess the extent to which online CVE campaigns incorporate gender and context, and what they mean for CVE. In this regard, literature review and case study methods were favourable approaches in achieving the goal. However, this selection has both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, a mixture of the two methods brings in diversity, which encompasses a wide range of variation allowing reliability of the findings. On the other hand, the diversity makes it difficult to identify all related studies and online campaigns that would capture the holistic picture of context and gender in online CVE.

However, carrying out a primary study to evaluate to what extent gender and context are incorporated to online CVE approaches and what they mean for CVE would give a clear picture, and yield results with a stronger base.

Results discussion
This thesis is guided by two objectives. Firstly, to evaluate to what extent gender and context are incorporated in online CVE approaches, and secondly, to identify what gender and context mean for online CVE approaches.

The analysis shows that gender and context are incorporated to online CVE approaches to a low extent. In the literature, women participation in CVE efforts is much more concentrated offline (Ní Aoláin, 2016; Quilliam Foundation, 2015; Hamoon, 2017; Musial, 2016). The online campaigns analysed included a gender dimension and contextual factors in very few cases.

Gendered and contextual factors surrounding social processes, identity and age, actors and strategy, have been alienated in online CVE campaigns creating an opportunity for individuals who look for operationally relevant and ideologically inspiring information online with intent to sharpen and enhance their radical ideas (Gill et al., 2017; Szmania and Fincher, 2017. As a response, online CVE campaigns should include gender and context in their targeted counter narrative to fully challenge extremist ideologies online through means that push back radical propaganda.

But what do gender and context mean for online CVE efforts? In essence, gender and contextual factors have a real potential in building resilience against violent extremism narratives because these are issues that are influential to individuals that are vulnerable to online recruitment of violent extremism as literature on CVE analysed in this thesis has shown (Ferguson, 2016; Bakkker and Leede, 2015). Thus, “empowered women are the foundation of resilient and stable communities that can stand firm against radicalization” (Mlambo-Ngcuka and Coomaraswamy 2015). However, embracing women potential in online campaigns should not overlook the potential of forced radicalization where fear is manifested within individuals in the families or communities. This could be in instances where women are married to jihadists or are directly forced to extremism through family and/or social ties (Bakkker and Leede, 2015).

Similarly, contextual factors should inform online CVE initiatives since radicalization to violent extremism is a multifaceted process that integrates both online and offline factors (Hussain and Saltman, 2014). These factors are both individual incentives and structural that influence individual pathways to violent extremism in online platforms.
Therefore, gender dimensions and contextual factors are vital in online CVE campaigns particularly in the multiple areas. Firstly, identification and diversion of violent extremism and support in disengagement from violent extremist ideologies. As this paper has shown, women are key in participation to violent extremism, and they are at the lead in identifying early warnings of violent extremism. Thus, their inclusion in online CVE efforts is necessary.

Secondly, identification and supporting of high-risk individuals to reject and resist extremist ideologies. This is well achieved in combination of contextual factors such as political, social and economical factors that are associated to recruitment into violent ideologies and are manifested within social processes that promote RVE (Koehler, 2014; Borum 2011).

Thirdly, building community resilience to violent extremism. Communities are social settings that conceptualize gender and context in different ways. For instance gender roles differ from one society to another and similarly online CVE campaigns should include women to ensure comprehensiveness in their outreach.

Lastly, inclusion of context and gender in online CVE initiatives would further contribute to achievement of effective communications that challenge extremist ideologies and propaganda and support alternative narratives. This would further contribute to an enhanced social cohesion that heavily relies on shared values within societies.

**CONCLUSION**

The analysis of online CVE campaigns and literature on CVE depicted a clear picture of gender and context exclusion and a critical disconnect of these factors in online CVE campaigns. As outlined in the thesis (Selim, 2016; Ferguson, 2016; Musial, 2016; Feddes, et al., 2015, Feddes, Gallucci, 2017 and Koehler, 2014, Ferguson, 2016 and Musial, 2016) there is a need to engage gender dimensions especially women in online CVE approaches in order to fully embrace women agency and participation. This is because women do not only actively engage in violent extremism as jihadist but also as peace agents countering violent extremism (Ahmadi, 2016).

Similarly, contextual factors are relevant in strengthening the potential of online CVE approaches. Despite the global coverage of Internet environment and social media networks, local contexts influence these platforms and shape the spread of extremist propaganda. This is because drivers to violent extremism are bled within communities and within local social networks (Szmania and Fincher, 2017), thus requiring a local but comprehensive approach to encompass on-going preventive and counter-terrorism security measures (U.N. Secretary General report, 2015).

Based on results and discussion herein, it is arguable that the role of contextual factors and gender dimensions in online CVE approaches is important. Thus, the need to investigate online approaches and effects of gender and context should be fostered.

In conclusion this thesis has identified that gender and context specificity are excluded in online CVE approaches and places strong emphasis on their inclusion in order to further improve effectiveness of counter- and alternative-narratives in
online CVE approaches (see for example in programs analysed; Feddes, et al., 2015, Feddes, Gallucci, 2017). Local context such as social, economical and political mechanisms are not evidently incorporated in CVE online initiatives, although efforts to use the Internet and social media as tools for CVE are greatly utilized. However, majority of radicalized individuals have a prior contact to extremist ideology through offline socialization. Thus, the Internet acts as a "facilitator and catalyst for the radicalisation process" (Hussain and Saltman, 2014). In line with these finding, gender and local context is vital in shaping online CVE initiatives to ensure success in their implementation and effectiveness in result deliverance.

**Future research**

The findings of this thesis highlights the need for further analyses of online CVE approaches and the role of gender and context in their effectiveness. In addition, based on the existing research on CVE, there is still a need to further develop online CVE approaches and incorporate gender and context. However, the drivers to violent extremism ought to be identified and the changing nature of violent extremism should guide the dynamics of such inclusion. Hence, further research and development of gender and context specific online CVE approaches should be investigated in depth.

More over, similar to other CVE approaches, online CVE efforts are targeted to policy rather than getting to the root cause of violent extremism. Thus, more research focused on online CVE approaches should concentrate on understanding emergence and pathways of violent extremism and what these pathways mean for CVE online (Ashour, 2011), especially on the unseen gender and context structures that exist. This would facilitate to further shape practical implications of the Internet, gender, context and violent extremism, which would inform strategies and policies for CVE at a global level.
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Violent Extremism website, www.againstviolentextremism.org


ANNEX 1

List of all campaigns

Abdullah X
http://www.abdullahx.com

The Association française des Victimes du Terrorisme (AfVT)
https://www.afvt.org

Average Mohamed
https://www.averagemohamed.com

Extreme Dialogue
http://www.strategicdialogue.org/counter-narrative-campaigns/extreme-dialogue/

Global Survivors Network
https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/415/global-survivors-network

Hours Against Hate
http://www.milwaukeejewish.org/departments/social-action/hours-against-hate/

Jiladz

Know Extremism
https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/10105317

My Jihad
http://myjihad.org/?reqp=1&reqr=nzcdYaEvLaE5pv5zpt==

Not Another Brother
https://www.another-brother.se/mission-1

Radical Middle way
https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/554/the-radical-middle-way

Sabahi and Magharebia
https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/412/sabahi-magharebia

One to one Initiative
http://www.counternarratives.org/html/case-studies-entry

Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI)
http://www.strategicdialogue.org/counter-narrative-campaigns/online-civil-courage-initiative/
Hero-Factor
http://www.counternarratives.org/html/case-studies-entry

Al-Sakina
https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/414/al-sakina

Operation Trojan T-Shirt
https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/7493_en

Operation Unmanifest
http://www.counternarratives.org/html/case-studies-entry

English Disco Lovers
http://www.edl.me

Exit USA
https://www.exitusa.org

Innovation Hub
http://www.strategicdialogue.org/counter-narrative-campaigns/innovation-hub/