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HS 2019

Hochschule der Künste Bern

MA Design

Design Research

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**Colloquium III**

## **Visual Techniques for Counter Jihadi Narratives**

Abu Sumayyah al-Britani, a British Islamic State (IS) recruit  
said that life with the IS is  
“better than that game Call of Duty”  
(BBC 2014).

## **CONTEXT**

According to a recent report, 41,490 international citizens became affiliated with the IS (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation 2018). The visuals of the IS's self-representational photographs elicit and modulate to aspire its audience's perception and emotions to join the group. IS's agility and its ability to appeal to young adults and to radicalize urges experts to effectively counter jihadi narratives and evaluate their effectiveness. Gaining an understanding of these affect techniques while analyzing visual techniques employed in existing counter jihadi narrative campaigns could help to better assist deradicalization and prevention activities.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

This research investigates the following question:

how can the understanding of the affect techniques employed by the IS as well as the existing counter jihadi narrative campaigns ameliorate the development of deradicalization and prevention campaigns?

## **OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this research project is to:

- 1** understand if similar affect techniques between jihadi narratives and their counter-narratives play a role in a successful counter-narrative strategy,
- 2** have a repertoire of effective visual techniques that could be employed in activities that counter jihadi narratives, and
- 3** assist in preventing jihadi radicalization and deradicalization among young adults by applying these visual techniques in a free online platform that aims to prevent jihadi radicalization and deradicalization.

## **CURRENT STATE OF RESEARCH IN THE FIELD**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Resulting from the high significance of radicalization and the spread of jihadi content online, extensive studies have been conducted on radicalization, and how to create campaigns to prevent radicalization, deradicalization, and how to challenge and counter hate speech and extremism online (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2016; Radicalisation Awareness Network 2017). None of these publications discuss what visual techniques would appeal to the target audience and render the campaigns effective. Input from Design-discipline perspective is highly valuable and could assist in better designing campaigns to counter jihadi narratives.

### **CURRENT STATE OF OWN RESEARCH**

The current state of the research is part of the ongoing project “Counter Terrorism Communication Design” that conducts rhetorical design analysis of extremist visuals with the aim to provide models, techniques, and tools to develop and evaluate deradicalization and prevention campaigns.<sup>1</sup> It is carried out by the research group VIRAL<sup>2</sup> in the Research Unit Communication Design at the Bern University of the Arts HKB and headed by Dr. Arne Scheuermann.<sup>3</sup>

During the MAD program, I conducted explorative research and analyzed the visual aesthetics and techniques the IS uses in the self-representational photographs in the English-version of its online magazine, Rumiyah, to understand the assumptions the IS official media organization has of the visual preferences of young adults.

### **RELEVANCE OF THE EXPLORATORY WORK TO THE PRESENT PROJECT**

To effectively counter jihadi narratives, we first need to gain an understanding of jihadi visuals and the techniques used that render them appealing to young men and women in Western countries to join groups such as the IS. This understanding of visual techniques and the visual preferences of the young adults in its turn allows to better assist in radicalization prevention and deradicalization activities.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hkb.bfh.ch/en/research/research-projects/05f5aa87-3242-45cf-8736-94075014d4b3/>

<sup>2</sup> Visual Rhetoric Analysis Lab

<sup>3</sup> He is also the main supervisor of this MA research.

## **METHOD**

Along with understanding the visual techniques of the IS, it is also crucial to comprehend the visual techniques used in existing counter jihadi narrative campaigns to gain knowledge of successes and failures of these campaigns.

Rhetorical design analysis (Scheuermann & Beifuss 2017, 34-35; Schneller 2015, 339) allows the evaluation of design artifacts to understand the intentionality of the design at focus.

I employ this method to international counter jihadi narrative campaigns from the database of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue<sup>4</sup> and Swiss pilot projects that aim to prevent radicalization on the Internet through the development and dissemination of alternative narratives to understand the persuasion methods intended to affect these projects' target audiences.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.counternarratives.org/html/case-studies>

The Swiss pilot projects are SwissMuslimStories, Winfluence, and Positivislam.

The steps of this method are:

### **1 Formal analysis**

Factual description of the formal, stylistic, and design elements such as the colours, the content, the format, and the composition

### **2 Effect analysis & investigation of specific design means in correlation with specific intent**

### **3 Identification of counter-intentional elements**

### **4 Informing design for the content of the platform**

## **LIMITATION**

Tbd

## **RISK**

There is a significant risk that the platform would have an adverse effect<sup>5</sup> and be utilized by jihadi recruiters. In an attempt to eliminate this risk, the platform needs to adopt appropriate security measure and therefore monitor individuals' platform activities to a certain extent. This creates an ethical concern further discussed in the "Ethical Considerations" section of this proposal.

<sup>5</sup> Jihadi recruiters exploiting the platform for recruitment purposes

## **ORGANIZATION**

Maria Mahdessian

(M.A. Design Research & PhD applicant):

researcher, graphic designer, and interviewer

The platform requires the following personnels:

- Web developer
- Platform manager
- Illustration artist
- Animation artist
- Videographer
- Expert(s) on ethical consideration for monitoring the platform
- Social worker
- Psychologist

## BUDGET

The desired amount applied for is CHF 728,120.

Positions /Materials	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 5
Maria Mahdessian (researcher, graphic designer & interviewer)- 100% working rate	42 000	42 000	48 000	48 000
Web developer (to create & maintain the platform)	-	18 000	36 000	36 000
Platform manager	-	-	30 000	30 000
Domain name	-	-	20.00	-
Web hosting- blockchain service	-	-	50.00	50.00
Platform builder template	-	-	-	-
Illustration artist	-	18 000	36 000	36 000
Animation artist	-	18 000	36 000	36 000
Security technology- blockchain service	-	-	1 500	1 500
Social worker	-	17 000	34 000	34 000
Psychologist	-	24 000	48 000	48 000
Other expenses such as Monitoring tool, Expert(s) on ethical consideration for monitoring the platform: 350.00/hour and # of hours vary depending on need	-	-	5 000	5 000

All above amounts are in CHF.

All personnels will work at a %50 rate unless otherwise stated.

## WORK PACKAGES & TIMELINE

The research will be carried out over a period of 48 months, and is made up of 6 work packages (WP).

### WP1 Rhetorical design analysis

### WP2 Comparison of affect techniques

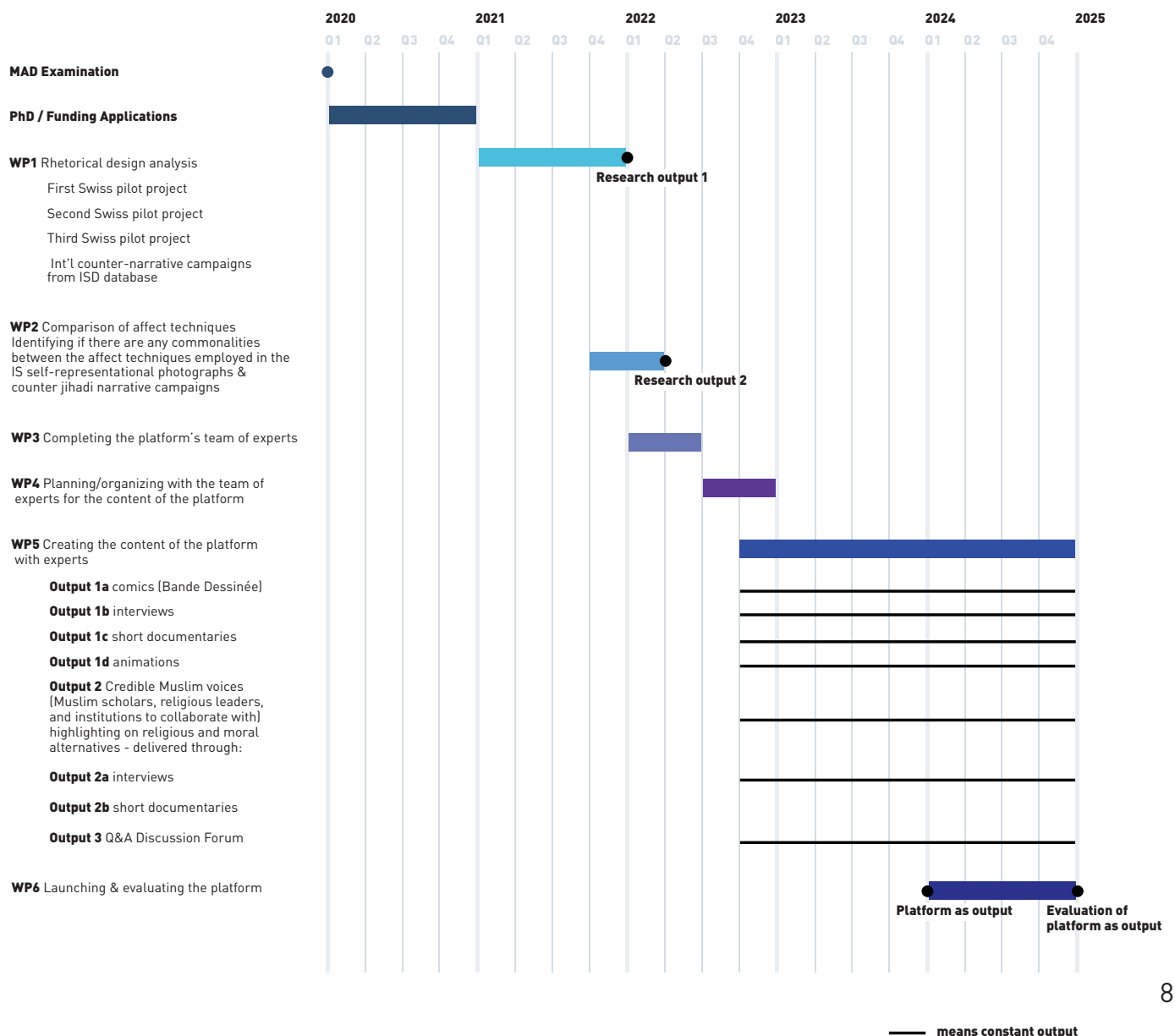
Identifying if there are any commonalities between the affect techniques employed in the IS self-representational photographs and counter jihadi narrative campaigns.

### WP3 Completing the platform's team of experts

### WP4 Planning/organizing with the team of experts for the content of the platform

### WP5 Creating the content of the platform with experts

### WP6 Launching & evaluating the platform





## **OUTPUT**

**WP1 & WP2** generate knowledge that would be available as **published research** for radicalization prevention and deradicalization activities.

**WP5 & WP6** generate **the online platform as output**, which has its own multiple output.

The deliverables of this platform feature:

Testimonials of experiences of deradicalized young adults delivered through **comics, interviews, short documentaries, animations**

Credible Muslim voices (Muslim scholars, religious leaders, and institutions to collaborate with) highlighting on religious and moral alternatives delivered through **interviews, short documentaries, private messaging** option if an individual does not want to share openly.

**Q&A Discussion Forum**, where individuals share experiences, ideas, concerns, and questions

**The evaluation of the platform (WP6)** would be an **output as a published research**

## **SOCIAL RELEVANCE**

Given the proliferation of jihadi content online, there is an urgent need to develop effective counter-narratives. To achieve this, first, it is crucial to have a thorough understanding of the visual rhetoric jihadi groups such as the IS adopt. Second, it is also important to inform graphic designers of the visual rhetoric adopted to effectively assist in developing designs to counter extremist narratives (Scheuermann & Beifuss 2017) in deradicalization and prevention activities. Resulting from the high significance of this issue, this project aims to create an impactful counter jihadi narrative campaign by applying the knowledge gained about the visual techniques employed by the IS and the existing counter jihadi narrative campaigns, and applying it on the platform.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATION**

To avoid having an adverse effect, the platform needs to be secure from the preying eyes of jihadi groups; this creates a need for monitoring, which in its turn urges ethical consideration to avoid violation of privacy and confidentiality of individuals using the platform. Therefore, there is a need for thorough discussion with expert(s) to avoid any ethical breach.

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