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Author(s): Elena Savoia

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Recipient Organization:

President and Fellows of Harvard College
T.H. Chan School of Public Health 677 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115-6028

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Principal Investigator:

Dr. Elena Savoia
Senior Research Scientist Department of Biostatistics
Division of Policy Translation & Leadership Development
90 Smith Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02215 Tel: 617-384-9055
Email: esavoia@hsph.harvard.edu

Authorizing Official and Signing Official:

Wendy Chan, Ass. Director of Research
Administration Sponsored Programs Admin., Harvard Chan School 677 Huntington Ave.,
Boston, MA 02115-6028
Tel. 617-432- | Fax: 617-432-8160
Email: NGA@hsph.harvard.edu

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Purpose of the project

The 2011 National Strategy for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States emphasized that violent extremists target their messages towards children, families, and individuals. As a consequence, it is important to develop strategies that create well-informed and educated families, communities and institutions. The overall goal of our project was to provide data useful to improve initiatives aimed at preventing radicalization to violent extremism in the online arena, including improving the selection of target audiences for counter messaging, empowering youth in countering violent extremists' messages and increase the ability to quantitatively measure the success of such approaches. To achieve our goal we evaluated interventions created as part of the P2P Challenging Extremism Initiative that aim to inform and educate youth on violent extremism, enhance acceptance and tolerance of ethno-cultural groups different from theirs and enhance young people's ability to discredit and confront messages that violent extremists propagate.

Our project had four specific objectives: 1) Evaluate the content and dissemination of the P2P Initiative social media products, 2) Evaluate the impact of the P2P Initiative on youth engaged in its development, 3) Evaluate the impact of youth exposure to the P2P educational activities and 4) Assess the drivers of success and barriers in the implementation of the initiative.

Project subjects

Project participants included youth aged 14-25.

Project design and methods

Objective 1: Evaluate the content and dissemination of the P2P initiative social media products

To evaluate the content and dissemination of the P2P initiative we conducted a review of 150 P2P products produced from the fall of 2015 to the spring of 2017. All products were categorized by: campaign goals, target audience (middle and high school students, college students, uncommitted populations, silent majorities, millennials civic minded individuals, parents/educators), digital metrics (Facebook likes, Facebook reach, Twitter followers, likes, posts, Instagram followers, posts, likes, websites visits, page views, You tube views and likes, Vine followers, Tumbler followers and Snapchat views), number of events held on campus. We also conducted an analysis of end-users interactivity by gathering data on the social media platforms used by the P2P campaign developers.

Objective 2: Evaluate the impact of the P2P: Challenging Extremism Initiative on youth engaged in the initiative

Twenty-four phone interviews and four in person group interviews were conducted with faculty and students engaged in the development of the counter-narratives and/or interested in discrediting extremists' propaganda. Questions in regards to the development of the initiative were asked to the P2P developers including motivation, strategies and reason for choosing a specific target audience. In a subsequent phase of the project groups of college students were presented with extracts from white nationalists' narratives and asked a series of questions about their ability to discredit the passages, and their capacity to create a counter-narrative. A counter-narrative was defined as a message that offers an alternative to a normative viewpoint or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimize an extremist narrative. Audio files were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by two reviewers by the use of NVivo12.

Objective 3: Evaluate the impact of youth exposure to the P2P educational activities

Two P2P products were selected for evaluation in regards to their impact on the targeted audiences: Kombat with Kindness created by Utah Valley University and OP250 created by UMass Lowell. We have worked with the Kombat with Kindness developers from Utah Valley University to identify schools in Utah engaged in the implementation of the campaign. Schools have been identified in the Jordan School District and an implementation and evaluation plan developed in collaboration with the School District. Data were gathered by the use of surveys (pre-post intervention) from the two schools identified as the implementers of the initiative and an additional school of similar socio-demographic characteristics was identified as the control group. The main outcomes of the Kombat with Kindness campaign were: *Increase acceptance and tolerance of diversity, increase amount of positive messages kids' encounter.*

In Massachusetts we collaborated with the OP250 implementers to evaluate the impact of their P2P product aimed at educating youth about online safety. In this case two high schools were selected to participate in the study (BR and FR) and a randomized control study was implemented. Pre and post intervention surveys were gathered from the high school students exposed to the OP250 product as well as from controls.

Objective 4: Assess the drivers of success and barriers in the implementation of the initiative

Phone interviews were conducted with faculty implementing the initiative. Questions focused on organizational and logistical aspects and reasons for embracing the program. Recommendations for future initiatives were also solicited during the interviews.

Data analysis

Interviews

Transcripts were reviewed simultaneously by two team members by the use of a mixed inductive and deductive process. The overall process of the qualitative analysis consisted of the following steps: familiarization and data extraction, development of a thematic framework, coding, and interpretation. Based on pre-identified frameworks we performed systematic coding, which is the process of organizing and sorting your data. Codes serve as a way to label, compile and organize the data in themes. A deductive and inductive approach was used by two reviewers concurrently to identify themes from the extracted narratives. All coding was performed by the use of NVivo v12.

Surveys

Survey data used to assess the impact of the Kombat with Kindness campaign and the OP250 training on online safety were analyzed by the use of descriptive statistics to describe baseline attitudes and online behaviors. Factor analysis was performed to develop scales measuring online behaviors (online safety index), motivational cultural intelligence, acceptance of other ethno-cultural groups, experience with discrimination and exposure to hate speech. Regression models were performed to test for associations between variables and detect changes in attitudes and behaviors as a result of the exposure to the initiative, comparisons were made with control groups.

Project findings

From our analysis of the P2P products we found that most of the time campaign goals were focused on raising awareness about discrimination and promoting positive messages towards unity, equality and peace, promoting acts of random kindness, and motivating students to counter

extremism by creating digital initiatives. Seven out of 150 campaigns focused on countering white supremacists propaganda, 22 out of 150 focused on Jihadi propaganda. The goals of the campaigns were to raise awareness about the existence of extremists' groups rather than specifically discrediting the propaganda. The rest of the P2P campaigns 121, greatest majority, were focused on raising awareness about unity, peace, tolerance and similar values. Almost all P2P products included a mix of approaches such as on campus events and use of social media. More specifically almost 80% held an on campus event to promote the theme of their campaign. From the analysis of end users interactivity of the 150 P2P products we found that overall such products generated almost half a million Facebook likes (484,256), of which the one with most Facebook likes (188,823) was *Kombat with Kindess* developed by Utah Valley University. This product became object of in depth analysis for objective 3 in the present study. Only 1/3 of P2P products provided data on Facebook reach which in cumulative terms resulted to be almost 4 million: 3,806,064. They reached a total of 21,033 Twitter followers (only 40% reported Twitter followers), 14,005 Instagram followers (reported by only 33% of P2P developers), and only 9 products reported You Tube views which resulted to be in total 4,316. Results show that there is no consistency in the metrics being used which may underestimate the actual reach of these campaigns.

Results of the interviews

The faculty involved with the implementation of P2P initiatives reported two major motivating factors for the development of their campaigns. The first most frequently reported factor was a desire to facilitate a “hands-on” approach to their students' learning experience in relation to the course they were teaching by providing them with an experiential learning opportunity. The second motivating factor was that EdVenture Partners provided them with the tools to get the job

done. One faculty member said: “Edventure Partners had just an excellent package for the students”. Students involved with the development and implementation of P2P initiative reported that passion and personal interest drove their desires to participate. Although faculty made the opportunity available to them through course registration, students reported, “I joined the P2P project as a result of personal interest in challenging the definition of violent extremism,” and “[I joined because of] my enthusiasm. Other reasons included: [It was an] opportunity to do hands-on, policy relevant research.” Faculty and students’ recommendations to make future campaigns more effective included the following: a larger budget, more time (one developer said “a two term project might have been less frenetic,” and more practical expertise. More specifically, the interviewees reported that to be able to create effective counter-narratives, empowering targeted audiences to discredit extremist narratives, it is necessary to: 1) study extremists’ strategies used to disseminate their propaganda, 2) learn and understand the psychological process of radicalization and 3) foster critical thinking skills in youth and 4) keep the definition of violent extremism as broad as possible so that this effort cannot be construed as being partisan, racist, xenophobic,” and education.

Results of the surveys

Baseline data from Utah included 843 individuals. 85% had no previous experience in participating in campaigns designed to promote acceptance and tolerance of others. All students were from 8th or 9th grade middle schools in Utah. The majority (88%) were in 9th grade, 48% male, 46% were white. Initiatives implemented in middle schools (8th and 9th grade) showed an impact on the initiative on the reduction of exposure of hate messages in the school environment. Our preliminary findings also indicate that awareness of cultural racism and institutional racism in society is strongly associated with higher levels of tolerance (motivational cultural

intelligence) towards ethno-cultural diversity. Data from Utah (n=843) and Massachusetts (n=1145) on online behaviors show that social media is the main environment where youth are exposed to hate , 4 out of 10 kids have experienced unsafe situations online, girls have been exposed to online threats and uncomfortable situations more frequently than boys, 2 out of 10 encountered someone online trying to sell them alcohol or drugs, 2 out of 10 encountered hate groups online trying to convince them of their views, 3 out of 10 encountered a stranger online who wanted to meet with them in person, 5 out of 10 have been bullied or harassed by their friends or acquaintances while online. Data from the randomized trial aimed at assessing the impact of the OP250 educational activity on online safety are currently being analyzed, preliminary findings show a positive impact of the initiative on youth willingness of improving their online behaviors.

[Implication for Criminal Justice Policy and Practice](#)

Initiatives aimed at enhancing tolerance towards diversity, as those developed by P2P, needs to be integrated in the school curriculum to be sustainable and effective. The best way to engage youth in such initiatives is to use mixed approaches that integrate in-person educational activities with the use of social media. The educational component needs to focus on knowledge of cultural and institutional racism because strongly associated with cultural intelligence. In regards to online behaviors initiatives should focus on empowering girls to protect themselves online, raise youth awareness about online risks and opportunities should be created to link school-based initiatives with the out of school environment (i.e. after-school programs kids attend) to make sure the initiative is effective outside the school environment as well. It is also important to develop mechanisms that allow kids to report when and where they are exposed to hate speech against themselves or others.