

Communicative channels for pro-social resilience in an age of polarization

by Vivian Gerrand

Abstract

While the messaging tactics of extremist organizations have been studied by researchers, little attention has been devoted to understanding how alternative multimodal communications can enable resistance to polarizing content. This article takes as case studies three grassroots youth arts projects that deploy multimodal resources to educate and build resilience: *Build Solid Ground*, *Jamal al-Khatib* and *Loulu*. The projects won awards at the Horizon 2020 Building Resilience to Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRaVE) Fair, which was hosted by the Berlin-based intercultural organization Cultures Interactive and took place via Zoom in November 2020. In the pandemic context of increased time spent online, polarization, and growing social and structural vulnerability in which young people face uncertain futures, these projects have been selected for their ability to build channels of communication that support pro-social resilience.

Contents

[Introduction](#)
[Conceptualizing pro-social resilience as a rejection of exclusivism](#)
[Understanding youth resilience to violent extremism: Social capital and the BRAVE](#)
[Communicating a complex cultural identity as a source of strength](#)
[Multimodal messaging as social capital: Theorizing communicative channels](#)
[Build Solid Ground](#)
[Jamal al-Khatib — My Path!](#)
[Loulu](#)
[Conclusion](#)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced a grievance-rich environment that may be readily exploited by anti-democratic actors. The fact that human social life is now more than ever lived online, often in isolation, increases the scope of extremist influences to deliver narratives that foster social division and share them with a captive audience. To what extent can online multimodal resources support alternative narratives to those used by extremist organizations to recruit people?

This article explores whether and how multimodal communications on the platforms of the Internet may be used to build resilience to polarization and violent extremism. Drawing on the BRAVE measure [1] and existing conceptualizations of belonging and agonism, three grassroots arts projects that won awards in the Horizon 2020 BRaVE Fair are evaluated in terms of their ability to create channels of communication that support young people in moving away from polarization and violent extremism. At a time of heightened vulnerability, and diminished trust in institutions, in what ways do these interventions encourage a shift away from

friend/enemy polarities, instill an attitude of agonism (Mouffe, 2013) and mobilize social capital to support the building of resilience to polarization and violence?

Contemporary anti-democratic and violent extremist cultures rely on the social and media platforms of the Internet to conduct their activities (Conway, 2016; Khosrokhavar, 2015). Efforts to mitigate the social influence of such groups by removing violent extremist content from big tech platforms through de-platforming initiatives, or through CVE counter-narrative campaigns, have limited efficacy (Conway, 2020; Grossman, 2014; Hemmingsen and Castro, 2017; Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2017; Nouri, *et al.*, 2021; Rogers, 2020; Rosand and Winterbotham, 2019; Roy, 2018). There are at least three key reasons for this. First, removed content may be relocated to alternative or dark Web platforms. Secondly, violent extremist groups may turn to analog means to conduct their recruitment processes off-line, and then work in a blended online and off-line fashion. Thirdly, and most importantly, content-driven counter-narrative ‘pull factor’ interventions will be at best inadequate if the underlying ‘push factor’ grievances that motivate radicalization processes are not addressed.

We should remember, for example, that most people join violent extremist organizations *to be part of something*; that is, for social rather than ideological reasons (Barelle, 2014; Grossman, *et al.*, 2017; Cottee, 2011; Nilsson, 2015). Indeed, belonging to a network is a critical driver of radicalization processes (Kruglanski, *et al.*, 2019). Multimodal communications deployed by terrorist organizations appeal to this need for belonging, as well as to a need for a narrative and a purpose, through their facilitation of affective processes of socialization (Macnair and Frank, 2018; Mbakwe and Cunliffe, 2007). The particular affordances of multimodal communication created by digital media bring text, image, sound and kinesthetics together in novel ways that deeply engage sensory as well as cognitive trajectories of experience, feeling and action (Machin, 2013).

For those exerting social influence in order to further violent extremism, these communications may easily be designed to nurture social capital through affective means and to reproduce particular ‘truth markets’ on both clear and dark social networking sites (Ebner, 2020; Harsin, 2015; Kress, 2009; O’Halloran and Smith, 2011; Williams, 2019). They may also be designed in such a way as to promote a complex cultural identity, critical thinking, pro-social dissent, an appreciation of multiple points of view, non-violence and ambiguity — the kind of ‘agonism’ that is required for democracy to function.

To what extent can multimodal resources build resilience by offering alternative networks, narratives and a different sense of purpose, to counter the polarizing appeal of extremist organizations? The following sections provide brief conceptualizations of resilience — in particular, young people’s resilience to violent extremism — within the BRAVE framework of social capital. I then theorize communicative channels, before examining the three grassroots arts projects that won awards at the Horizon 2020 BRaVE Fair to assess their role in promoting resilience to polarization and violent extremism.



Conceptualizing pro-social resilience as a rejection of exclusivism

Resilience is commonly defined as the ability to adapt to or withstand conditions of strain or stress (Kirmayer, *et al.*, 2009). In atomized capitalist societies, resilience tends to be conceived of at an individual level, with the burden of ‘being resilient’ often placed on particular people or communities. More nuanced studies of resilience understand it to be a socio-ecological phenomenon that is multisystemic, intersectional and context-bound (Ungar, 2021, 2013). Resilience-based approaches to addressing violent extremism focus on what is keeping people resistant to violence, rather than what is making them vulnerable to it.

As a dynamic process (Hunter and Warren, 2014), resilience can be enhanced or diminished by the allocation or negotiation of intersecting contextual factors and social resources (Sippel, *et al.*, 2015; Ungar, 2008). What produces resilience in one set of circumstances might impede it in another. It is important also to consider the ways in which violent extremist groups are themselves resilient, and therefore to distinguish between pro- and anti-social forms of resilience (Grossman, 2021). Pro-social resilience is resilience that serves the public good.

On the other hand, exclusivism, defined by Grossman, *et al.* (2016), is:

... a set of attitudes and actions informed by the assumption of inequality between groups and especially the superiority of one’s own group. Exclusivist viewpoints tend to define group boundaries in rigid terms based on assumed fixed sets of values, traits and ‘in/out’ criteria [...] [S]ocially harmful manifestations of exclusivism, for example racism and violent extremism [...] aim to humiliate, denigrate and/or harm others based on their actual or perceived membership of or identification with a particular ethnic, racial, cultural or religious group.

Exclusivist in-group and out-group dynamics may, but do not necessarily, support trajectories of violent extremism. As Berger (2017) writes, ‘movements become extreme when the in-group’s demand for legitimacy [...] can only be satisfied at the expense of an out-group’. Exclusivist forms of resilience have been the subject of considerable sociological research (Aly, *et al.*, 2016, 2014; Grossman, *et al.*, 2016; Nilsson, 2015; Joosse, *et al.*, 2015; Klausen, 2015; Qureshi, 2015; Ranstorp, 2009; Thomas, 2012) as efforts to prevent radicalization to violent extremism have proliferated.



Understanding youth resilience to violent extremism: Social capital and the BRAVE

As the heaviest users of online social media, yet with limited psychological maturity (Odaci and Çelik, 2016), young people around the world are growing up immersed in image-saturated, volatile, digital spaces. Most live lives in which the online and off-line are interwoven — a pattern that has expanded across generations in the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. Young people face uncertain future employment prospects in an age of inequality, climate emergency and a pandemic — all factors that may encourage an environment conducive to radicalization. Indeed, becoming radical, understood as a form of activism, would make sense in response to such existential threats, provided it is a non-violent form of radicalism (Pemberton, 2021).

In this context, social networking platforms have become critical sites of social capital (Putnam, 2000) that enable young people to bond with peers, build bridges with others outside of peer groups and link with authorities (see Watkin and Conway, this issue). The nature of social networking sites means that while young people engage in these spaces with considerable technical competence, they are also at great risk of being exposed to, and manipulated by, a range of perspectives, dynamics and political agendas (Harsin, 2015). Social media spaces have been studied as sites of identity work, self-expression, networked sociability and branding (Goodwin, *et al.*, 2016; Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010). Online environments may also enable engagement with extremist organizations which exploit the digital affordances of the Internet to disseminate their propaganda and recruit people (Aly, *et al.*, 2016; Mahood and Rane, 2016).

In a study of Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism undertaken in 2017 with young people from diverse backgrounds across Australia and Canada, different kinds of social capital were found to encourage resilience to violent extremism among young people (Grossman, *et al.*, 2017). The study pioneered a quantitative BRAVE measure (Grossman, *et al.*, 2020) which identifies five key factors that affect young people’s resilience to violence:

1. **Cultural identity and connectedness:** Familiarity with one’s own cultural heritage, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms; knowledge of ‘mainstream’ cultural practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms if different from one’s own cultural heritage; having a sense of cultural pride; feeling anchored in one’s own cultural beliefs and practices; feeling that one’s culture is accepted by the wider community; feeling able to share one’s culture with others;
2. **Bridging capital:** Trust and confidence in people from other groups; support for and from people from other groups;
3. **Linking capital:** Trust and confidence in government and authority figures; trust in community organizations;
4. Violence-related behaviours: **Willingness to speak out publicly against violence;** willingness to challenge the use of violence by others; acceptance of non-violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts;
5. Violence-related beliefs: **Degree to which violence is seen to confer status and respect;** degree to which violence is normalized or well tolerated in any age group in the community (Grossman, *et al.*, 2017).

A mixture of different kinds of social capital, taken together, create complex cultural identity. The measure reveals that when this complex cultural identity is combined with non-violent behaviors and attitudes, resilience to violent extremism is likely.

Applying this framework to social networking platforms, we can observe how such platforms enable young people to form alliances with people in disparate locations and to build strong ties with like-minded others in real time (Williams, 2019). And yet, while social media may afford particular reinforcing connections, if bonding capital is not accompanied by sufficient connectedness, including bridging and linking capital, excessive immersion in closed environments may increase the likelihood of exposure to exclusivist viewpoints.

Social networking sites can also have positive effects in exposing or undermining extreme ideologies that advocate for violent action when they present complex cultural identity and agonism as sources of strength. Thinking with the BRAVE measure, the next section describes a methodology that uses multimodal communications to foster different kinds of social capital that may support pro-social resilience in a context of polarization.

Communicating a complex cultural identity as a source of strength

These interventions are building bonding capital which is also referred to as cultural identity and connectedness. It's really important because it's about helping young people feel good in their own skin and feel connected to their own heritage as well as to the mainstream culture and to feel free and safe to share themselves with others and they can really discover their own unique potential. These projects are also bridging capital, so building trust and confidence in people from other groups. That's where you see a lot of intercultural work being done in these projects. These projects are also linking capital, building trust and confidence in government and authority figures and institutions around them, and the skills, knowledge and resources to make use of these institutions around them. This is about creating a sense of agency and self-determination and citizenship in the environment around them. These are elements we're seeing in projects presented at the BRaVE Fair.

Robin Scalifani, CEJI, BRaVE jury member

Complex cultural identity, when combined with a commitment to non-violence, can foster resilience to violent extremism. With this insight, to what extent do the three BRaVE award-winning interventions discussed in this article support complex cultural identity — through bonding, bridging and linking social capital — and promote non-violence?

Expanding on earlier studies of representations of minority belonging (Gerrand, 2016), radicalization and resilience to violent extremism, and current studies of recruitment and building resilience to violent extremism and polarization, **each intervention is evaluated in terms of its capacity to endorse:** (1) complex cultural identity by providing resources for bonding, bridging and linking capital and (2) agonistic attitudes and non-violent behaviors.

The multimodal interventions will be explored — from the point of view of Appadurai's (2013, 1990) critical understanding of the imagination as social practice — in terms of their capacity to foster a complex cultural identity that can be shared with a variety of audiences on social media.



Multimodal messaging as social capital: Theorizing communicative channels

In an increasingly visual age, in which people can access and share an unprecedented number of images at any time, images have assumed new prominence in meaning-making and identity formation, especially online (Manjoo, 2018). Image-making practices, by presenting opportunities for interaction at sites of encounter, can contribute to a complex cultural identity, a sense of belonging and conviviality. Visual social cultures can establish the means by which an Other is projected, understood and responded to, and the means through which a common humanity is constructed. Images can not only divide people, they can also create alliances.

While the circulation of images plays a central role in the carefully orchestrated campaigns of extremist organizations (O'Halloran, *et al.*, 2016; Klausen, 2015; Wignell, *et al.*, 2017), there is a surprising lack of empirical research on the particular mechanisms by which image-making can strengthen resilience or resistance to violent extremism. Images are primarily social phenomena insofar as they 'structure our encounters with other human beings' (Mitchell, 2005), in 'a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, bodies and figurality'. (Mitchell, 1994)

Imagination and image-making are central to cultural identity and social life. Mediatized images can reinforce or shift the limits of existing narratives of nationhood (Bhabha, 1990) and public discourses about who belongs in a particular community. For example, partitioning the world into black and white through reductive imaging sustains polarization. Imaging that fosters an appreciation of complexity is therefore critical to reducing vulnerability to polarization.

Building on broad expertise in cultural studies, and earlier research on how the image-making practices of young Somalis in the diaspora can contribute to the prevention of violent extremism (Gerrand, 2015; Gerrand and Omar, 2015), together with research on image making (Mitchell, 2005), and on young people's resilience and vulnerability to violent extremism (Grossman, *et al.*, 2014; Weine and Ahmed, 2012), I draw on a qualitative approach to analyse the three BRaVE award-winning interventions. The next section considers the potential of the multimodal communication strategies of these three grassroots projects to support pro-social resilience.

Build Solid Ground

This project focuses mostly on education and educators [...] We decided to submit these activities, which we carried out in the past six months, because it was a big change for us, trying to adjust to the situation and seeing that the educational system needed to bring in new methods, to introduce a different way of teaching and learning — also, we focused on this in cooperation with people from different African countries who are now living in Slovakia. We brought this piece of the world into the schools through online learning, and we've produced a manual which we'll be very happy to disseminate in the coming year through another training for teachers, so that they can use what we have produced. We've made different videos and created new tools which they can use, even during these times of pandemic and online learning.

— L'uboslava Šefčíková, project manager at PDCS, BRaVE Award recipient

In an age of heightened mobility, belonging is increasingly complicated and contested (Ganguly-Scrase and Lahiri-Dutt, 2016; Morley, 2001). The concept of 'belonging as such', theorized by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in *The coming community*, locates ethical belonging as being predicated on the fact of one's presence in a particular place, rather than belonging on the basis of cultural, political, racial or religious ties (Agamben, 1993; Gerrand, 2016). This idea resonates with the work of geographer Ash Amin (2012), for whom narratives of community that 'take the stranger as a given' are crucial for living together in times of cultural multiplicity, contingency and precarity.

This contingency can either create new forms of solidarity, or it can inspire reactionary groups who manipulate the insecurity generated by the shifting sands of identification for their own political advantage. Stories can divide communities, as well as creating them. A strategy common to extremist groups is to tell stories that reinforce a black-and-white, uncomplicated identity, often drawing on retropopias that may appeal to grievances (Bauman, 2017). Those who are recruited are led to believe they are mobilizing in a 'just cause' that seeks to uphold dignity, and yet the polarized friend/enemy binary (Mouffe, 2002) into which they are seduced fortifies pathways towards recruitment into hate and violent action. Building resilience to this polarization requires investment in educational resources on belonging in the twenty-first century (Carroli and Gerrand, 2012), that show how to manage adversity through agonism rather than resorting to exclusivist, antagonistic identities (Mouffe, 2013).

Build Solid Ground is an EU-funded project that has produced educational resources for promoting cultural multiplicity and encouraging encounters between different perspectives. Taking place across Bulgaria, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and the U.K., the project has produced a series of educational interventions and awareness-raising tools that tackle various aspects of socio-ecological resilience building. These include affordable housing in sustainable communities; youth radicalization to violent extremism; migration; interfaith, interethnic and multicultural dialogue; and sustainable development goals (<https://en.pdc.sk/projects/project/build-solid-ground-project>).

Featuring theatrical performances in its arts-based *Bistro Afrika* initiative, a documentary called *Talking Feet* and 12 short videos on best-practice projects with the 'Open up for Dialogue' program, in addition to tackling the issues of housing and extremism *Build Solid Ground* takes an intersectional, multisystemic approach to building resilience to polarization. *Bistro Afrika* in particular has produced a repertoire of multimodal educational activities. These resources introduce sensitive topics to secondary-school students, equipping them with the tools for participating in discussions that open up spaces for intercultural interaction and reflection on points of sociocultural difference and similarity. In this way, they also serve to contest stereotypes about Africans in Slovakia (Bajžíková, 2020).

Directed by Šimon Ferstl, the *Bistro Afrika* initiative began off-line. Its menu of 'exclusively African ingredients' featured TED talks by Chimamanda Adichie on 'The danger of a single story' and Boyd Varty on 'What I learned from Nelson Mandela', and Joseph Lekuton's 'A parable for Kenya'. It also included music by artists Mulatu Astatke, Moussa Dumbia, Fela Kuti and William Onyeabor, and publications such as 'We should all be feminists' by Chimamanda Adichie (Bajžíková, 2020).

During the pandemic the initiative moved online, and from April to July 2020 the resources were delivered via Zoom meetings, using breakout rooms. House rules such as 'One person speaking at a time', respecting different opinions, and online communication via the chat and whiteboard, were adhered to. A topic would be chosen based on shared interest, and participants would be asked whether they, or someone close to them, had experienced something similar in their own lives. If this was met with silence, the facilitator would give an example from their own life and would move the participants into breakout rooms (Bajžíková, 2020).

The Living Libraries initiative, 'Africa Days at school [online]', is another example of the project's pro-social use of multimodal communications (Bajžíková, 2020).

Inspired by the Danish ‘Stop the Violence’ NGO’s use of The Human Library, designed to lend people instead of books, Living Libraries were enacted via Zoom, in both Slovak and English. They gave 500 young secondary-school students living in lockdown a chance to participate in conversations with people they were not used to talking to, in this case marginalized people of African origin in their society. The participants’ storytelling gave them an opportunity to hear and understand different points of view.

The initiative features sites of transcultural storytelling with actors as ‘living books’, readers, a librarian, and a support team (2020). The actors are people from African countries — Benin, Ethiopia, Guinea and Kenya — now living in Slovakia.

Kenyan-born Maryam Abdinoor Dima, one of the ‘living book’ actors, tells readers about her experiences of being a student in Slovakia:

I was born in Isiolo, Kenya, like my five siblings. I study finance at the Faculty of Management at Comenius University. I love the culture and traditions of my home country, but I do not turn away from new things I encounter on my travels. What I like best about Slovakia is the castles and nature. My great hobby is fashion. It brings joy not only to me, but also to the people around me, who are fascinated by my colorful clothes. I have a big dream, and if you wish to know what it is, you have to ask me yourself. (2020)

Another ‘living book’ actor, Alhassane Touré, said to readers:

Can you imagine attending primary school in three different cities and countries? That was what happened to me. I was born in the Mamou region in Guinea. I started primary school in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, then continued in Beijing, China, and completed it in Berlin. Are you wondering why? My father worked at the Guinean embassy in Germany as the consul general. In 1991, I arrived in Slovakia. In the 23 years I have lived in Slovakia, I taught myself to speak Slovak. (2020)

These libraries led to the development of an audiobook of African stories and online materials for teachers. The project has developed a guide for teachers wishing to run Living Library sessions with their classes.

According to the project manager of *Build Solid Ground*, L’uboslava Šefčíková, these encounters showcased ‘people like us, living in Slovakia but not being heard’. Students — old and young — had the opportunity to get close (within the confines of a Zoom call) to people they would not ordinarily have had a chance to speak with. In addition, through theatrical performances and facilitated group discussions, understandings of who belongs where were challenged, thereby increasing intercultural awareness and bridging capital.

Giving space for talking, listening and meeting people from different backgrounds enabled an intercultural exchange of resources. These multiple cultural resources served as resilience-building initiatives that promote the conviviality of different cultural groups. The activities of *Build Solid Ground* are thus an important example of an intervention that fosters complex cultural identity — one that could readily be replicated in school-based intercultural awareness training to prevent polarization.



Jamal al-Khatib — My Path!

Jamal al-Khatib — My Path! sets out to [...] deliver alternative narratives to those propagated by extremist groups to adolescents who are vulnerable to, or who have already been influenced by, extremist propaganda; to initiate discussions and processes of self-reflection; and ultimately, to increase young adults’ resources to cope with conflict, compromise and contradictions, and to foster their tolerance towards ambiguity.
— Rami Ali, Džemal Šibljaković, Felix Lippe, Ulrich Neuberger and Florian Neuburg, 2020, BRaVE Award recipients.

Since 2014, a small minority of young people have found cultural belonging in taking on and being socialized into the ideologies of extremist groups such as the so-called Islamic State Group (IS), whose sophisticated marketing has included social media apps to befriend and indoctrinate ‘cubs of the caliphate’ (Clarion Project, 2016), and which has specifically targeted disenfranchised Muslim youth (Dingle, 2015; Galloway, 2016; Hemmingsen, 2015; Stern and Berger, 2015). *Jamal al-Khatib — My Path!* developed by the Turn Association civil society organization, is a youth-led Austrian online streetwork project [3] that responds to the online social influences of such groups. Like campaigns such as CAIR Chicago’s #MyJihad, which contest propaganda through reclaiming the true meaning of jihad (Chowdhury, 2013; Rehab, 2018), this social media intervention tackles exclusivist jihadi subcultures in Vienna by appropriating jihadi audiovisual cultures in order to subvert IS recruitment (Ali, *et al.*, 2020).

Addressing both ends of the radicalization spectrum through the use of bonding, bridging and linking social capital, and agonism, this project supports both rehabilitation and prevention. Initiated by a young man who had been in prison for involvement in jihadist activities and wished to write about his experience, the project demonstrates the potential for rehabilitating militant offenders through a real-life example of someone who was radicalized at a young age but was able to redirect his efforts. The initial project team, comprising social workers and Islamic Studies experts, reached out to young people at risk of being exposed to terrorist content (Ali, *et al.*, 2020).

In recent times, far-right and Islamist violent extremist groups have taken advantage of the widespread misunderstanding of Islam, strategically deploying images that are designed to heighten antagonism towards Muslims living in West, in order to further their own political ends (Wignell, *et al.*, 2017). Such propaganda typically deploys bonding social capital to construct an in- and an out-group, an either/or binary, and tends to reinforce prejudices already in circulation in tabloid media.

With the knowledge that extremist organizations take advantage of grievances — or perceived grievances — to gain traction with prospective recruits, the project team designed content that acknowledged the very real grievances experienced by Muslim-minority youth in Austria. The content they disseminated addressed, for example, the discrimination and racism associated with rising Islamophobia and right-wing nationalism in Europe. Giving young people a space in which to validate their experiences produced a solidarity which, according to the project researchers:

proved crucial in tackling the ‘us versus them’ narrative of jihadis that aims to convince vulnerable individuals that they are isolated in a hostile society and can count on no one but themselves or their ‘Muslim brothers and sisters’ (*i.e.*, the construed in-group) in the fight against discrimination (by the out-group) (Ali, *et al.*, 2020)

The project’s commitment to high production values and the employment of a professional film-maker was designed to produce messaging that would rival the appeal of extremist content with its multimodal ‘atmosphere and sounds’. Unlike extremist content, however, this messaging *deconstructed* ‘us versus them’ narratives through videos that appropriated the audiovisual aesthetics of jihadi propaganda.

The same kind of material that would otherwise appear to be in the exclusivist genre of jihadi recruitment was thus reconfigured to include bridging social capital through the communication of a complex both/and cultural identity. In this manner, the project succeeded in forging a cultural identity and connectedness and creating bridging capital.

The project adopted narrative biography work, to acknowledge legitimate grievances without recourse to exclusivism. This approach encouraged young people to question extremist narratives and to address the issues they face through pro-social means, at a distance from the IS spectacle of enemies to be destroyed (Impara, 2018). To this end, the film-maker guided adolescent participants ‘to develop a shooting script together’, one that would be capable of competing with the sophisticated production values of IS materials (Ali, *et al.*, 2020). The audiovisual codes used were fashioned to captivate the attention of young Internet users who spend extended periods watching videos of jihadi content online.

These codes included quotations from the *Quran*, and drew on culturally specific locations, props, costumes and content. The protagonist, Jamal al-Khatib, whose silhouette appears as a black shadow in the videos, was developed in consultation with adolescent participants. The faceless al-Khatib embodies the concerns and experiences of young participants. The fact that his face is never revealed makes his character one that must be imagined, and also enables multiple points of identification. Any young person with al-Khatib’s desires and experiences could inhabit the ‘emotional landscape’ of his story (Ali, *et al.*, 2020).

Another aspect of the project that worked, successfully engaging young participants in issues that were live to them, was the use of ‘online streetwork’. Here, the project sought to go beyond merely delivering content to target audiences: it was designed to reach out to viewers who could then reflect on the content so that they might form their own views. Content-based online streetwork — conceived of as the digital equivalent of hanging out at shopping centres — would be initiated in the comments section of project videos posted on YouTube, Facebook or Instagram where debate would be encouraged. Hard-to-access groups were included in this exercise, through engagement with their ‘bubbles and echo chambers’ (Ali, *et al.*, 2020).

Unlike government-produced counter-narrative campaigns that are explicitly designed to prevent radicalization, Jamal al-Khatib was not categorized or marketed as a preventative project. Accordingly, rather than acting as a simple ‘counter’ narrative, the project developed an alternative method for connecting youth with authorities. According to the project researchers, when young viewers became aware of the nature of the project and asked about it, the project’s online streetworkers responded with transparency and openness. The conversations that began in the comments sections were followed up by private messages and, where appropriate, offers of counseling with youth workers. The project thereby created linking capital through relationships based on trust.

The project’s videos were initially viewed by 200,000 users. A subsequent campaign received 450,000 views. The project’s appropriation of jihadi aesthetics was so effective that the researchers found some of its content removed or restricted on social media platforms. An evaluation of the videos’ audience by the project’s researchers showed that they had reached their target audience, namely, adolescents considered to be ‘at risk’ of connecting with violent extremist content. While regarding certain demographics as ‘risky’ itself risks creating suspect communities (Hickman, *et al.*, 2012), thereby feeding the ‘us versus them’ narratives promulgated both by extremist organizations and by dominant media, the risk profile of the adolescents in question was determined by their search requests concerning particular concerns and grievances (Ali, *et al.*, 2020).

Instead of the neo-Salafist ‘us versus them’ messaging young people would often come across in such searches, in the *Jamal al-Khatib* materials they would encounter alternative narratives that acknowledged their grievances (facilitating bonding capital) while communicating across different points of view (bridging capital) and building trust (linking capital). Their engagement with these complex messages was made possible only through the project’s careful usage of ‘the right images [...] the right music [...] and the narrator [...] speak[ing] the right kind of language’ (Ali, *et al.*, 2020). This juxtaposition worked to bring jihadi variables and codes into play, creating new sites of ambiguity (Gerrand, 2016).

These channels of communication served to undermine the ontological certainty promoted by terrorist organizations (Wright-Neville and Smith, 2009). The content they conveyed had the benefit of opening up spaces where viewers could embark on dialogic self-reflection and critically review beliefs and ideas they had taken for granted. In this sense, the videos’ portrayal of a complex cultural identity was accompanied by ambiguity and agonism, making this grassroots intervention a highly nuanced and powerful example of multimodal social media resources that can create pro-social resilience.

Loulu

We started it during the first months of the pandemic and we were working on it most of the time online talking to so many people — experts in extremism and younger people. We are developing it further, hoping to finish it next year, and we can really use this Award because we have so many production parts — we need lots of material for all the social platforms.
— Kathi Kraft, *Loulu* Project Director, BRaVE Award recipient

Far-right movements have grown to become among the most prominent threats within the fast-evolving landscape of terrorism in recent years and, like other violent extremist groups, have used the Internet to recruit a new generation of members (Dearden, 2017; Greene, 2020). With large numbers of people housebound and unemployed during the pandemic, recruitment has diversified (Gerrand, 2020). Social media platforms offer some reinforcing connections that may support resilience, but they can also lead people to spend lengthy periods in closed groups, where the exposure to different perspectives and information sets may be limited.

The fact that lives are lived more than ever online has enabled a range of exclusivist groups and conspiracy-mongers to gain influence and accelerate their mission, infiltrating new and unlikely demographics. Occupying the everyday spaces of social media platforms such as Instagram, many contemporary far-right and conspiracy influencers represent themselves as ‘ordinary’ through popular posts of daily activities. These accounts are then intermittently interspersed with extreme material that may be redacted within a short time of being posted, and the posting of more conventional content is resumed. Internet researcher and artist Joshua Citarella (2021) argues that this is a deliberate ‘slow red pill strategy’ deployed by extreme right groups: ‘By posting mainstream conservative content most of the time, these extreme-right groups [are] able to build up an audience numbering in the range of 30,000 to 40,000, which they [...] incrementally expose to radical content’.

Online gaming cultures have also facilitated recruitment into violent extremist and hate-based ideologies (Young and Boucher, 2020; Schlegel, 2021). To address this growing problem, targeted gamification interventions, including grassroots initiatives that educate young people about how recruitment works on social media platforms, are critical. *Loulu* is one such intervention. Winner of the BRaVE Innovation Award, *Loulu* is a digital, interactive and protected gaming space that makes

the manipulation structures of the far-right tangible and reflects them critically. Designed by the German organization [Onlinetheater.live](#), the online game is designed to educate about recruitment pathways into far-right violent extremism via familiarity with an influencer called Loulu, whose profile players can follow. The game is set in a fictional city in Germany where a far-right terrorist attack has just occurred, in which a mayor was targeted with a knife. The perpetrators were apprehended, but the city is in shock, with its inhabitants asking themselves how this could happen.

The players are journalists who learn that a far-right radical influencer called Loulu is connected to the attack. Their task is to research and understand the network behind the attack through Loulu. To this end, they read her posts and pretend to be interested in her thoughts and beliefs, until they are eventually discovered and become targets for the hate of her far-right network. In the game, Loulu's trust must be gained — her friendship requested and bonding and linking capital cultivated — until she invites trusted players to her closed Telegram group. To understand Loulu's manipulations, the journalist players can seek the support of their editorial office.

As a popular influencer on Stadtspiegel, Loulu posts banal gendered images of herself that appear mainstream: we see the accoutrements of an Instagram-able middle-class domesticity (Leaver, *et al.*, 2020). Flowers in a vase, a close-up of fingers resting on the page of a book, a photo of Loulu sitting on a bed in a floral dress looking pensive, another of her posing in front of a tree in a forest. Through her presentation of herself as a 'delicate young academic', Loulu attracts a large number of dedicated followers. This enables her to normalize essentialist gender norms and far-right extremist ideas to a captive audience. The player is faced with the task of identifying the manipulations at work.

The algorithms that govern online platforms provide users with content that is a reflection on their preferences and can lead people to encounter more of what they know, and less of what is unfamiliar to them (Bartlett, 2018; Gillespie, 2019). *Loulu* demonstrates how this may result in a gravitation towards extreme ideas, with social media algorithms such as content surfacing by YouTube, whereby they are offered videos by like-minded people and groups, with the result that extremist views appear mainstream (Ribiero, *et al.*, 2019). The players start their research in the Stadtspiegel clear social network. As the game goes on, they find themselves digging into the depths of the dark social network where they are at risk of being exposed.

The manipulation mechanisms of the far right within their networks are thus rendered transparent and readily identifiable. Young players are prompted to ask questions such as: 'How do these influencers present extreme-right ideas as being legitimate?' The right posts must be shared to gain traction in the game, and players need to be discreet to continue to maintain their connection with Loulu. Should they fail to do this, they will find themselves in the middle of a 'shitstorm', that is, a hate-fuelled controversy. Game over.

Loulu is informed by state-of-the-art understandings of mobilization to hate and violent extremism. With the collaboration of scientific experts and journalists knowledgeable about far-right operations online, the project is currently being expanded from its 2020 design. It is now [available for download](#), free of charge, for German-speaking Internet users to play. It will eventually be available for all Internet users. *Loulu* is particularly useful for making young people more aware of the nuances of violent extremist recruitment in the lockdown situations of the pandemic, when young people are more than ever online. Taking an interactive, ludic format, the project presents a scenario that is true to life. Sophisticated multimodal messaging ensures that *Loulu's* target audience of young Internet users will readily gravitate towards its relatable content and, while being immersed in the characters of the game, will learn to think critically about the tactics of the far right. Through occupying the fictionalized spaces of the far right, players of *Loulu* develop critical thinking skills and gain bonding, bridging and linking capital which bolster their resilience to the recruitment efforts of violent extremist groups in real life.



Conclusion

In an environment that is conducive to polarization, the three grassroots BRaVE award-winning interventions evaluated in this article exemplify how online multimodal communications can be mobilized to engage young people in becoming agents of pro-social resilience. *Build Solid Ground*, *Jamal al-Khatib* and *Loulu* involve young people through a series of distinct participatory approaches. In the first two interventions, this approach enabled them to reflect on their lives, compare their experiences with those of sociocultural others and interact meaningfully with them. These processes allowed for the cultivation of a sense of purpose, supporting the development of a complex cultural identity and an appreciation of the power of non-violent conflict. Through its gamification strategy, *Loulu* similarly succeeds in supporting young people as they become able to identify the tactics of contemporary far-right recruiters, gain critical insight into how social capital can be mobilized to polarize people, and develop agency while learning.

By building on the positive attributes of young people's use of multimodal image-making on social media and other platforms, both within and outside of educational settings — from gaming to digital narratives and peer-to-peer mentoring — these interventions provide compelling alternatives to the exclusivist recruitment efforts of

extremist groups. Ambiguity, critical thinking, intercultural dialogue, a sense of belonging and purpose and — through interactive gaming — educating young people about recruitment techniques all serve to open channels of communication that facilitate pro-social resilience.

Grassroots arts-based interventions can support the development of resilience in young people when they promote cultural identity and connectedness (bonding), encourage interaction with and support for and from socio-cultural others, and different perspectives (bridging), build trust (linking) and endorse pro-social conflict/dissent (agonism) and non-violence.

Nevertheless, the enduring success of such interventions is contingent on the extent to which they address the environment of vulnerabilities and grievances in which they are conducted. To ensure that communicative channels for pro-social resilience work effectively with online environments, algorithmic systems [4] must also be taken into account. This entails observing closely how the attention economies of the Internet tend to reward polarizing content. 

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Notes

1. The Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) measure is a brief questionnaire tool that can be used to assess risk and protective factors for young people’s resilience to violent extremism. The measure was developed and validated as part of a collaborative research initiative by the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University (Australia) and the Resilience Research Centre, Dalhousie University (Canada).

2. Use of the social media platform TikTok, for instance (dominated since its inception by Gen Z youth) has diversified in the pandemic. According to digital anthropologist Crystal Abidin, the social isolation of the pandemic led to an ‘onboarding of a massive diversity of people onto Tik Tok’. All kinds, ‘from politicians, property agents, grandparents, teachers, medical professionals’ have gravitated to the platform ‘to communicate with other people’. Interview with Crystal Abidin by Emile Zile, *Print Screen*, 22 March 2021.

3. The creators of *Jamal-al-Khatib — My Path!* describe online streetwork as a series of ongoing discussions initiated in the comments sections of their videos. Akin to social workers in public places, online streetworkers occupy digital spaces to connect with young people: ‘Like an off-line youth club, the *Jamal-al-Khatib — My Path!* campaign platforms [...] serve as a primary meeting and communication space for the targeted young audience.’ (Ali, *et al.*, 2020)

4. For an insight into how to design recommender systems to depolarize, see Jonathan Stray’s article in this special issue.

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