

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Towards a Mixed Scanning Approach to Countering Violent Extremism: Emerging Media and Youth Radicalisation in Kenya's Garissa and Tana River Counties

Zedekia Opondo Sidha¹, Israel Nyaburi Nyadera², Paul Njuguna³, Elias Kimani Karuiru⁴

Abstract

Digital communication technologies have become vital tools for violent extremist groups, enabling recruitment, ideological dissemination, and covert coordination. This study investigates how localised experiences and socio-political marginalisation intersect with emerging media use in Garissa and Tana River counties, Kenya. Employing a mixed-methods design informed by diffusion of innovations and constructivist theories, the research analyses survey data from 277 at-risk youth, interviews with community leaders, and focus group discussions. Findings show that extremist actors strategically exploit encrypted and interactive platforms to circulate narratives of exclusion and identity-based grievances. Simultaneously, state-led counter-violent extremism (CVE) strategies lag in integrating media-responsive frameworks. The study advocates a mixed scanning approach that decentralises CVE communication, leverages clan structures, and engages youth on preferred digital platforms. By foregrounding media's dual role as both vector and counterforce to radicalisation, the research offers policy-relevant insights for adaptive and locally grounded CVE programming.

Keywords

Violent extremism; emerging media; youth radicalisation; counter-violent extremism; Kenya; mixed scanning.

¹ National Defence College, National Defence University, Nairobi, Kenya, ORCID iD: [0000-0002-1261-7070](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1261-7070), e-mail: zedekia.sidha@gmail.com

² National Defence College, National Defence University, Nairobi, Kenya, ORCID iD: [0000-0002-0432-6935](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0432-6935), e-mail: inyadera@gmail.com

³ National Defence College, National Defence University, Nakuru, Kenya, ORCID iD: [0009-0007-6663-8102](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6663-8102), e-mail: paulnjuguna252@gmail.com

⁴ National Defence College, National Defence University, Nairobi, Kenya, ORCID iD: [0009-0002-6119-5983](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6119-5983), e-mail: karuirue@gmail.com



Introduction

Governments across the world continue to grapple with the problem of violent extremism (VE), which has not only been a persistent threat to international security but continues to be exacerbated by advancements in information and communication technologies (McNeil-Willson 2023; Scrivens and Gaudette 2024). VE has been cross-cutting beyond the traditionally vulnerable states that have been branded either weak, fragile and/or failed states to countries in the global north, which are also dealing with a surge in far-right and extremist groups (Pantucci and Singam 2024; Mesok, Naji, and Schildknecht 2024). Groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram and the Taliban have mastered the art of capitalising on historical grievances and socio-political fractures to spread their ideas and recruit people, especially in marginalised communities (Nyadera et al 2020; Shihundu et al 2021; Mahood and Halim 2017).

Kenya's decades of perceived economic neglect, systemic exclusion, and ethnic tensions have created fertile ground for VE groups to spread radical ideas among young people (Jabane 2016; Thuo and Kioko 2023). The eastern counties of Garissa and Tana River, bordering the volatile Somalia (see Figure 1), are particularly vulnerable to spillover effects of extremist group activities from neighbouring countries (Anderson and McKnight 2015). Indeed, there are historical events that have been rekindled and weaponised by different groups to frame the government as an oppressive "other." Some of these historical memories include the *Wagala* massacre, secessionist aspirations of some groups in Garissa (Anderson 2017), as well as the Tana River's protracted intercommunal conflicts (Hanti 2022). Such memories have reinforced a dichotomy of "us versus them", leading to VE and radicalisation. While there is no dearth of studies related to VE in Kenya, most focus more on the role of governance failures and economic deprivation in driving radicalisation. Little attention is paid to how emerging media platforms - which are new channels through which dissemination of information takes place, such as TikTok and Meta - amplify existing dynamics in contexts marked by high youth unemployment and low state legitimacy.

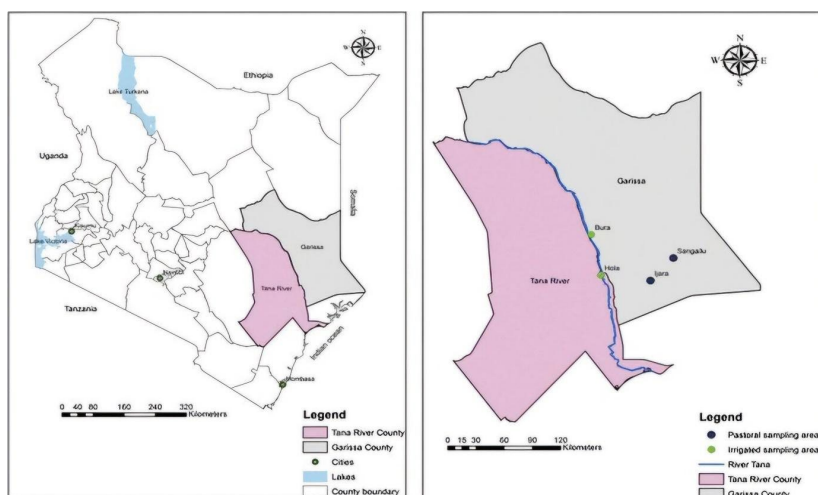


Figure 1: A map of Kenya showing Garissa and Tana River Counties

(Source: Wainaina et al. 2018, 3)

Emerging media, especially platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which are encrypted, are giving extremist an edge over traditional counterterrorism efforts by allowing them to bypass measures put in place to limit their activities. In this case, these groups use encrypted platforms to exploit communal ties and networks and disseminate propaganda, misinformation and disinformation geared towards achieving their goals. Yet, despite their untapped potential, these same tools can be used by CVE actors to disseminate counter-narratives, foster dialogue and engage at-risk youth. Despite this duality, studies on media's role in VE have primarily been conducted in Western contexts, with little attention given to areas where traditional communication avenues, such as clan-based communication and radios retain cultural salience (Conway 2016; Khan 2023). This gap is vital, especially in the Northeastern counties of Kenya, extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab have resulted in using social media and traditional broadcasts to spread extremist ideas. Their approach exemplifies the adaptive and resilient tactics of extremism in the contemporary world.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical question:

How can state-led CVE strategies address the exploitation of digital platforms and historical grievances by VE groups in Tana River and Garissa counties, while overcoming institutional barriers that hinder intervention?

By analysing survey data from 277 at-risk youths, evaluating Al-Shabaab's media tactics and interviews with community leaders, this research uncovers systemic mismatches between state responses and extremist recruitment strategies.

This study seeks to contrast the approach to technology adoption by showing how early adoption of encrypted platforms by Al-Shabaab is different from the reliance on hierarchical, one-way communication channels by the government of Kenya. This has created an environment where youth have less trust in the government. Empirically, the paper highlights the nexus between offline clan networks and online radicalisation in Kenya's Somali-majority regions. As part of the recommendation, the authors stress the need to decentralise CVE efforts, adopt an agile media approach and leverage community influences to disrupt extremist activities. Similarly, by bridging grounded ethnography and theoretical rigour, this study contributes to the growing debates on VE while offering actionable policies to stakeholders operating in resource-constrained, high-risk environments.

Existing literature: *Primary and Secondary Sources of Political Socialisation*

A central question in counter-extremism research is whether radicalisation can occur online. Existing literature identifies ten key theoretical explanations for radicalisation: personal crisis, community crisis, psychological vulnerability, psychological rewards, physical vulnerability, material rewards, recruitment, group norms, group biases, and cognitive frame alignment (Jensen et al. 2020). While these factors shape individual vulnerability, violent attitudes are transmitted from recruiters to recruits through distinct communication channels, categorised as primary or secondary political socialisation sources. Primary sources include family, education, and peers, while secondary sources encompass mass media, political parties, leaders, religious institutions, and workplaces. Studies by scholars such as Flood and Bob argue that individuals' attitudes toward violence are shaped by public opinion, which interacts with advice from friends and peers, often competing with other community influences.

In the study's target population, youth face conflicting pressures. For example, in the predominantly Islamic regions studied, religious teachings emphasise respect for parents, and youth frequently consult mothers for guidance. However, peers in informal social spaces (maskani) also wield significant influence. Secondary data revealed clans as critical tools for political mobilisation, with clan elders holding substantial authority in conflict resolution (e.g., land disputes, clan tensions, theft; Abdi and Mwangi 2023). Local chiefs and their assistants, often seen as the government's frontline representatives, play pivotal roles in implementing national and county-level Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategies. Their contextual knowledge enables them to address community needs more effectively than other CVE actors.

While social media can promote alternative narratives to violence, its utility in deradicalisation remains limited (Van Eerten et al. 2017). Violent extremist recruiters often exploit divisive rhetoric and emotive political messaging to cultivate violent mindsets, making attitude shifts gradual and reliant on lived experiences in conflict settings. The study found youth forums particularly impactful, providing safe spaces for airing grievances. However, youth voices risk being overlooked unless grassroots-level responses are guaranteed.

Theoretical Framework

The evolving nature of VE and its associated communication strategies has brought up an urgent need to develop a theoretical framework that is robust enough to capture the complex nexus between economic, socio-political and cultural factors that drive VE in the contemporary digital space. To best capture the relationship between VE and emerging media in Garissa and Tana River Counties, Kenya, the study integrates a mixed scanning approach, which combines elements of Diffusion of Innovations Theory and constructivist Theory. This theoretical approach will allow for a more comprehensive and robust lens that captures how VE actors use emerging media to promote their radicalised ideologies (See Table 1). In addition, the mixed scanning approach will lay the foundation for more optimised CVE efforts.

Table 1: Application of Mixed Scanning Theoretical Approach on CVE

<i>Theory</i>	<i>Key Contribution to Framework</i>	<i>Application to VE/CVE</i>
Constructivist Theory	Explains how narratives and identities (e.g., "us vs. them") are socially constructed.	VE groups weaponise historical grievances (e.g., marginalisation) to legitimise violence.
Diffusion of Innovations	Analyses how technologies are adopted; VE actors are "early adopters," and CVE actors are "laggards."	VE exploits encrypted platforms; CVE struggles with bureaucratic inertia.
Social Network Theory	Maps influence pathways (strong/weak ties) and community vulnerabilities.	Clan networks and online groups facilitate radicalisation; CVE must engage both.

(Source: Authors 2025)

Constructivist Theory: Understanding the Role of Narratives and Identity

Proponents of constructivist theory, such as Sterling-Folker (2002), opine that realities are often a construction of groups and individuals who rely on their shared symbols, narratives, and identities. In the context of VE, studies by Lindahl (2020), Winter & Feixas (2019) as well as Tulga (2022) have established that extremist groups tend to leverage issues such as socio-economic marginalization, historical grievances, and religious or ethnic identities as a basis of constructing compelling narratives that are attractive and resonate well with vulnerable segments of the populations. The narratives extremist groups tend to focus on often frame the government as an oppressive "other," thus building a dichotomy of "us vs. them" (Siller 2024).

In turn, given the vulnerability of the population, often blamed on the states, these groups justify violence as a legitimate act of communicating their grievances. In Garissa and Tana River Counties, groups such as Al-Shabaab have taken advantage of historical grievances, which include the perceived marginalisation of the Somali community and the concern that there is religious persecution. to radicalise youth (Shihundu et al. 2021; Nyadera et al. 2024). Of significance to this study is the role of emerging media platforms in accelerating the spread and amplification of these narratives. Such platforms provided VE groups with almost unrestricted, cost-effective and fast avenues for disseminating propaganda, coordinating activities and recruiting members.

Another assumption of the constructivist theory is based on its emphasis on the role of primary and secondary political socialisation in influencing people's attitudes towards violence (Checkel 2017). Schools, family, and religious institutions are the main avenues of primary socialisation, while peer groups and mass media mediate secondary socialisation. These two avenues combined play a crucial role in radicalisation, even though the emphasis of this study focuses on secondary socialisation. This is because the same people individuals interact with at schools, at home or in places of worship also constitute a significant segment of those they follow and interact with on emerging media. In places like Garissa and Tana River Counties, the behaviour of young people is highly influenced by religious leaders, clan elders and peers whom they not only interact with in physical geography but also on social media platforms; thus, the phenomenon of online and offline radicalisation (Orina 2022).

Diffusion of Innovations Theory: Media Adoption and Extremist Strategies

To understand how CVE actors and VE groups adopt and employ media technologies, we need to look at the Diffusion of Innovations Theory that was propagated by Rogers (1962) and later promoted by scholars such as Miller (2018), Karnowski and Kümpel (2016). The theory shows how groups, including VE groups, can act as "early adopters" of platforms such as Telegram and WhatsApp and leverage their encrypted capabilities to recruit members and disseminate propaganda. These media platforms are unique because they offer groups and individuals anonymity while remaining cost-effective and easy to use. They are ideal since they allow anyone to create private channels that can be turned into breeding grounds for extremist activities (Neumann 2013). If compared to CVE actors, we can see a lag in adopting innovative media strategies, relying on channels such as radio and official news apps that are traditional (Zamir 2024). Sometimes, such lag can be attributed to rigid

bureaucratic procedures. The consequence is that in countering violent extremism in the digital age and with institutions that are slow in adapting new strategies, extremist groups tend to be one step ahead (Benkel 2018). Moreover, most CVE institutions are reluctant to tap into the skills of tech-savvy young people who are more capable of encountering VE narratives online.

More importantly, the key concepts presented by this theory, including relative advantages, compatibility and complexity, further underscore the value of adopting media technologies. In practice, VE groups go to considerable lengths to ensure they take advantage of encrypted platforms that are interactive and targeted, strategically aligned with their audience's identities and grievances (Graham 2016; Brantly 2017). In contrast, CVE actors often struggle to keep up with the complexity of managing social media activism and campaigns. In addition, there is usually a perceived incompatibility between how messaging is used, the informal and localised communication styles preferred by young people, and the one CVE provides (Whittaker and Lilah 2019). Thus, this theory highlights the need to adopt more youth-centric and innovative media strategies capable of effectively countering radical and extremist.

Social Network Theory: Mapping Influence and Vulnerability

Social Network Theory is essential as it offers a framework for interrogating how relationships and social structures influence resilience and radicalisation (Kaczowski et al. 2022). Given the significant role played by religious leaders, clan elders, and peers in shaping youth attitudes towards violence, their role both within the social networks and social media platforms becomes essential. VE groups understand the tight connections between such groups and young people, especially in conservative societies. They will take advantage of such networks by using trusted intermediaries or embedding themselves within communities to spread their narratives. For instance, Nyadera and Ahmed (2020) found in their study that clan networks and religious institutions are often exploited by Al-Shabaab to disseminate their ideology and recruit members.

The essence of Social Network Theory in this study is its contribution to radicalisation processes through weak and strong social ties that are often ignored. The theory is based on the assumption that online connections and platforms which present weak social ties tend to enhance the speedy spread of extremist content and ideas. On the other hand, strong ties, which are represented by peers and family relationships, play the role of strengthening the narrative (Saltzman et al. 2013). Thus, this study applies the theory to show that these competing influences from family and peer pressure create some levels of vulnerability among the youths. In response, there is a need to have measures that take into account such real realities.

Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-method design to examine how VE groups are using emerging media to promote extremist ideas and radicalise youth in Tana River and Garissa Counties in Kenya. This design is also crucial in investigating how CVE actors can effectively disrupt the activities of VE groups on emerging media platforms. quantitative and qualitative data were collected using a cross-sectional approach. This allowed the researchers to examine social dynamics and complex communication in areas marked by ethnic tensions, marginalisation and historical grievances.

The authors targeted youths, considered to be at high risk of radicalisation, as well as community figures with influence, such as clan elders, media personalities, religious leaders, peace committee members, and local administrators. Non-random and random sampling techniques were both used to identify the respondents. Moreover, participants who were involved in the survey were chosen using the random sampling technique, while groups considered to be more sensitive, like at-risk youths and returnees were selected using the snowball sampling. This approach enabled the researchers to access populations considered to be difficult to reach, thus enhancing the overall depth of data collected.

Using the Yamane formula, 370 respondents were initially selected as the sample size for the survey, but the number was then increased to 400 to take into account non-responses. At the end of data collection, a total of 277, marking a response rate of 69.25%, were filled out and returned. In addition to the survey, 25 KIIs and six FGDs were conducted. Respondents in these categories included community leaders, government officials, youth representatives and members of the civil society. Data from the FDGs and KIIs allowed the authors to capture contextual dynamics and lived experiences of CVE and VE communication strategies.

Inferential statistics were analysed using R and SPSS. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo software. All FGD and interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo v12. The first step included applying deductive coding guided by our core research questions: (1) which emerging-media platforms do VE actors adopt, (2) how CVE actors utilise emerging media in their counter-narratives, and (3) which networks (religious, clan, youth) mediate online radicalisation. The second step included utilising inductive open coding to capture unanticipated themes such as “fear of censure in WhatsApp groups” and “mistrust of state media”. We then applied axial coding to arrange related codes into groups and generate overarching thematic categories. To ensure validity and consistency, we had a peer debriefing session to refine the data. Also, the UCINET software was adopted to map social networks (youth-nominated social network), and the metrics calculated were used to generate Figure 1. This was useful in illustrating how extremist groups leverage existing community structures for narrative dissemination and recruitment, as well as identifying influential individuals. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted using an alpha threshold of 0.05 for statistical significance. The test was conducted to study the difference between VE and CVE actors' patterns in using emerging media.

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory, Constructivist Theory and Social Network Theory were used to give a contextual foundation for the study phenomenon. Constructivist Theory was used to show how identity-based narratives and historical grievances are exploited by extremist groups. Diffusion of Innovations Theory was used to show the rapid nature by which VE actors were adopting encrypted platforms on the one hand and the slow uptake by CVE institutions on the other. Bureaucratic inertia emerged as a key source of the lag by CVE. Social Network Theory was incorporated to illustrate how weak ties (e.g., online contacts) and strong ties (e.g., clan leaders, family) facilitate the dissemination and radicalisation of extremist ideologies.

Overall, this mixed-methodology approach is useful in giving a nuanced and robust understanding of the link between local communication networks, emerging media and violent extremism. It reveals key gaps in state CVE strategies, especially the youth-centric communication modes and the limited

utilisation of digital platforms. By triangulating information from different sources and using multiple analytical tools, the research generates unique insights for improving CVE interventions not only in Kenya, but also the region's resource-constrained, high-risk environments. The methodology ensured depth, validity and policy relevance in an area that is overlooked by mainstream research on extremism in most cases.

One of the main limitations of this study is its dependence on data that were self-reported by community members and at-risk youth. This could be attributed to fear of reprisal or social desirability bias, especially in areas affected by surveillance and insecurity. Moreover, the adoption of snowball sampling for sensitive populations, such as radicalised individuals and returnees, while useful for access, it has the limitation when it comes to generalising the findings because of its non-probabilistic nature. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design may also limit the ability to capture changes in radicalisation dynamics and media usage over time. Finally, security and logistical challenges in Garissa and Tana River may have affected the depth and reach of field engagement.

Results and discussions

Response Rate

The study achieved varying response rates for the data collection strategies employed, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Response Rate

<i>Data Collection Strategy</i>	<i>Planned</i>	<i>Actual</i>	<i>Achieved</i>
Questionnaire	400	277	69.25%
FGDs	06	06	100%
Key Informant Interviews	25	25	100%

(Source: Authors 2025)

As indicated in Table 2, out of the planned 400 questionnaires, 277 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 72.70%, the questionnaires targeted general public and was distributed in both counties of study. The response rate for Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) was 100%, as all six planned FGDs were conducted. The FGD included 3 consisting of government officials and 3 consisting of community members with gender, age, leadership role and religious representation factored. Similarly, all 14 planned Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were completed, achieving a 100% response rate. The KIIs included government officials, religious leaders, youth representatives, scholars and officials from local non-governmental organisations. The relatively high response rates for FGDs and KIIs can be attributed to the targeted and scheduled nature of these approaches, allowing direct engagement with participants. However, the questionnaire response rate was lower due to participant availability and the logistical challenges of collecting data in geographically dispersed and potentially insecure areas.

The Role of Community Influencers in the counter-violence Extremism Effort

Community influencers (including elders, youth and women leaders, religious leaders and community based organisation leaders) play a crucial role in counter-violence extremism efforts by leveraging their credibility and access to at-risk groups. They help build resilience within communities and prevent radicalisation by promoting positive narratives and supporting vulnerable individuals. Shier et al., (2014) reveal that young people often face competing and sometimes contrary advice from influential actors. This can create confusion among the youth and make them more vulnerable to VE. Therefore, a program to address VE influence networks must be multi-dimensional. To identify the most influential people in society regarding CVE in the target populations, the youth were asked to list the individuals they viewed as having the highest influence in society.

Figure 1 is a sociometric map which represents what youths in the survey perceived as being their most significant influencers within Tana River and Garissa counties. In the survey, respondents were requested to identify up to five individuals or actors they felt had the most impact on CVE discourse. The nodes on the figure represent specific community actors - religious leaders, clan elders, radio presenters and representatives of youths - and their sizes are proportional to the number of nominations each category received, as well as the degree of centrality. The red circles represent nodes whose value of centrality falls in the top 20th percentile. This illustrates that small cohorts had a higher concentration of referential power. For actors whose centrality value was below the median of the network are represented by blue squares. This signifies that actors represented by the blue squares have limited status in the flow of information.

The edges indicate directed ties to the nominee from the nominator, thus revealing an asymmetric recognition of influence. The extent to which media figures and formal authorities significantly dominate communication channels at the local levels is represented by the dense clustering around red-circled nodes. This means that media figures and formal authorities act as important hubs for narrative dissemination. Although they are significant in numbers, peripheral nodes have limited reach and often rely on central actors to connect with the youths. This figure illustrates not only the structural pathways used to propagate CVE messages, but also whose influence matters in the two counties.

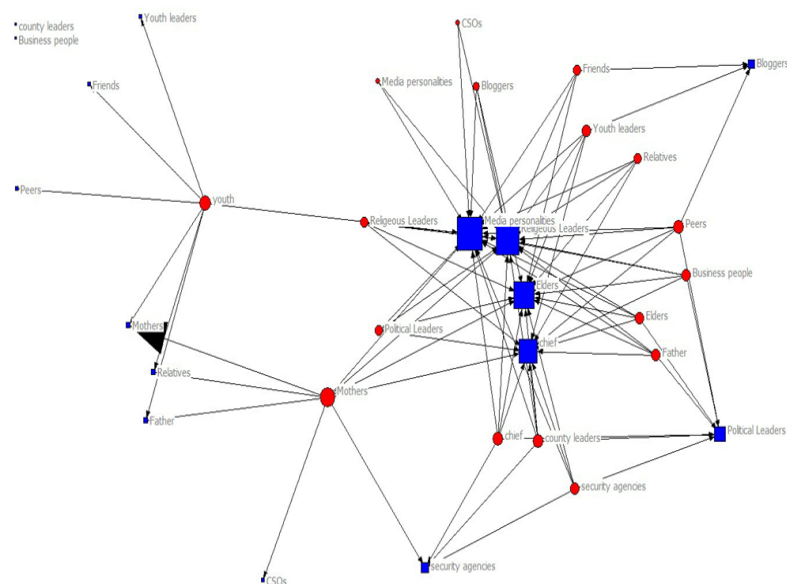


Figure 1: Power Analysis of Community Influencers in the Target Population

(Source: Authors 2025)

Various actors influence political opinions among the youth at risk for VE recruitment. At the top of this list are media personalities, including radio presenters and bloggers. As noted in Table 5, social media is the most important source of information for the most at-risk youth in the area.

For the most part, Islam is the prevalent religion in northern Kenya and the coastal region of Kenya, which includes the study areas. Discussions with KIIs noted that there are hardly any distinctions between traditional cultural practices and religious practices in the region; it is thus not surprising that religious leaders have an important role to play in shaping the youth. Relatedly, clans are the most important tool for political mobilisation among the Somali communities that live in Garissa and parts of Tana River County. To this end, clan elderly greatly influence youths' political opinions and general political behaviour in the study area.

It was further observed that street-level bureaucrats, such as chiefs and their assistants, sit at the intersection between government policies and grassroots communities. They are approached to solve conflicts of varied nature, including land, abductions, clan animosities, and theft. Additionally, they are the first line of response to a variety of public emergencies, such as terrorist attacks and abductions. As such, there is a frequent communication network between them and the youth.

Communication channels used by community influencers

The study also examined the communication tools used by state and non-state actors to disseminate and counter violent extremism (CVE) messages. The findings are summarised in Table 3. These findings were derived from a survey question which asked respondents, “Which media channels have you observed being used by counter-violent extremism actors (e.g., government agencies, NGOs, faith-based organisations) to disseminate their messages in your community? (Select all that apply.) Several options were included for the respondents to choose from. These included (Online News Apps; Radio;

X [Twitter]; WhatsApp; Facebook; Instagram; Telegram; Other – please specify). This closed list was based on categories that have previously been adopted in the study of extremist communication (Walther and McCoy 2021). Since the data collected only includes perceptions and not direct usage logs, the study adopts them only as indicators of the platforms through which messages on CVE are most visible.

Table 3: Perception of the most visible channels used by CVE actors

<i>Social Media Platform</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Radio	142	35.5
Online News Apps	111	27.75
X (Twitter)	98	24.5
Facebook	71	17.75
WhatsApp	36	9
Telegram	0	0
Instagram	0	0
Others	20	5

(Source: Authors 2025)

Table 3 reveals notable differences from the strategies employed by violent extremist (VE) actors. Radio emerged as the most used medium, cited by 58.48% of respondents, followed by online news apps at 40.07%. Social media platforms such as X (Twitter) and Facebook were less frequently used, with 35.38% and 25.63% of respondents identifying these as CVE communication channels. Notably, WhatsApp, a platform heavily exploited by VE actors, was cited by only 13.00% of respondents. Telegram, another platform prominently used by VE actors, was not featured among CVE communication tools.

Information in Table 3 was triangulated with qualitative data from participants in FGDs, who also highlighted the reluctance of CVE actors, especially the government, to engage directly with communities through social media. This hesitance stems from concerns about being misinterpreted or inadvertently amplifying extremist narratives. However, such cautious approaches weaken CVE efforts, especially when VE actors actively engage with vulnerable populations on these platforms. The mistrust of government messaging further exacerbates this issue, as many young people perceive CVE content as unrelatable or out of touch with their lived experiences.

Mapping of communication channels by extremist groups

The study examined the media channels Al-Shabaab frequently utilised for communication and recruitment as perceived by the respondents. Table 4 presents the respondents' findings.

Table 4: Media use by extremist groups in the study area

<i>Social Media Platform</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Radio	231	83.39
Online News Apps	196	70.76
Telegram	178	64.26
Instagram	148	53.43
WhatsApp	146	52.71
X (Twitter)	132	47.65
Facebook	121	43.68
Ok.ru	97	35.02
TikTok	51	18.41
YouTube	32	11.55
Snapchat	17	6.14
SMS	11	3.97
Phoenix	10	3.61
Others	9	3.25

(Source: Authors 2025)

As shown in Table 4, radio emerged as the most frequently used medium, with 83.39% of respondents identifying it as a key channel for Al-Shabaab's communication. This finding aligns with literature that shows the continued prevalence of radio in rural and low-literacy regions, where it remains an accessible and affordable communication tool (Archetti 2015; Prunckun 2014). Some of the popular radio stations that were frequently mentioned in FGDs include *al-Furqan* and *al-Andalus*. Similarly, online news apps were mentioned by 70.76% of respondents, underscoring the importance of digital media as an avenue for disseminating extremist propaganda. Some online news channels that FGD participants identified include *Somalimemo*, *Calamada*, and *Shahada News*.

Table 4 also shows a preference for encrypted and social media platforms, including Telegram (64.26%), Instagram (53.43%), and WhatsApp (52.71%). Telegram's popularity can be attributed to its end-to-end encryption and the ability to create private channels and large group chats, which provide anonymity and reduce the risk of surveillance. This finding is consistent with global studies, such as those by Conway et al. (2020), highlighting the strategic use of Telegram by extremist groups to coordinate activities and distribute propaganda.

Qualitative data obtained from FGDs further revealed that group chats on WhatsApp and Telegram are highly vulnerable to extremist content, as members often post propaganda videos and messages. This aligns with quantitative findings in Table 4, indicating these platforms' high frequency of use. For instance, one respondent remarked, "*The problem is not just the groups but the fact that people can post anything without consequences.*" Furthermore, respondents expressed fear among group administrators about censoring VE propaganda or removing those posting it. One youth explained,

"Admins are afraid that if they delete such content or remove the person posting it, they will be accused of being too pro-government or anti-community." This fear perpetuates the presence of VE narratives within group chats, creating an environment where extremist content thrives unchecked.

Similarly, Table 4 shows that platforms such as X (Twitter; 47.65%), Facebook (43.68%), and Ok.ru (35.02%) were also reported as essential communication tools. Notably, Ok.ru, a Russian-based social network, has been identified in prior studies as a platform exploited by extremist groups due to weaker content moderation policies (Sweet, 2020). Meanwhile, platforms like TikTok (18.41%), YouTube (11.55%), and Snapchat (6.14%) appear to have limited use, likely due to their predominantly entertainment-focused nature and more significant moderation of extremist content.

These findings are consistent with media studies that emphasise the adaptability of extremist groups in leveraging both traditional and emerging media for their activities. For instance, Katz et al. (2024) argue that radio fulfils the need for mass outreach in remote regions. Comparisons with studies in other areas reveal similar trends where extremist groups exploit encrypted apps and social networks to evade detection and amplify their reach (Montasari 2024; Javed 2023). However, the reliance on radio highlights a contextual factor unique to areas like Garissa and Tana River Counties, where infrastructure challenges and literacy levels shape media consumption (Thuo and Kioko 2023). Additionally, the limited use of platforms like TikTok and YouTube suggests that Al-Shabaab may prioritise platforms where they can effectively target specific demographics. TikTok's lower frequency of use in this context contrasts with findings in Western contexts, where extremist propaganda often infiltrates entertainment and youth-focused platforms (Agwanda et al. 2021).

Popular Sources of Information among the Youth in Garissa and Tana River Counties

The study revealed that social media is the most popular source of information for the youth. Group meetings, public events, newspapers, public campaigns, hospital meetings, and rehabilitation sessions were the least popular sources of information (see Table 5). The respondents were asked what their main source of information was. Because women rarely go to public places, their primary source of information are radio, social media, and one-on-one meetings in their homes. Male respondents were likelier to listen to news broadcasts such as BBC Somalia, whereas female respondents were likelier to listen to music and talk shows. The popularity of the radio could be attributed to the fact that vernacular radio stations are available, and the target population identifies with them. Star FM was the first radio station to broadcast in Somalia, attracting a wide range of listeners. At the same time, one radio can serve many community members, thus resulting in a high percentage of reach.

Table 5: Most Popular Sources of Information

		<i>Count of Yes</i>	<i>Column N %</i>
Sources of information in the society	Radio	62	44.30%
	Baraza	40	28.60%
	Religious gathering	8	5.70%
	Public addresses	15	10.70%
	Seminars	15	10.70%
	Leaders	4	2.90%
	Youth Meeting	5	3.60%
	Games	3	2.10%
	Elders	4	2.90%
	Social media	77	55.00%
	Tv	21	15.00%
	Other informal meetings	18	12.70%

(Source: Authors 2025)

The popularity of social media relates to widespread access to mobile phones, which has increased access and usage of social media apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, along with other forms of social media. Social media facilitates rapid sharing, and positive and negative messages can go viral.

Qualitative data from focus group discussions (FGDs) highlighted key barriers to effective CVE communication. A recurring theme was the mistrust of government-controlled media, particularly radio, often perceived as delivering one-sided and unreliable messages. One youth participant remarked, "*The programs sound like lectures, not conversations. They do not address the real issues we face.*" This mistrust diminishes the impact of government messaging on radio, even though it remains the most utilised medium.

Additionally, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of active engagement by CVE actors on popular social media platforms. Many youths pointed out that government agencies and other CVE actors rarely use platforms such as Instagram and Telegram, which young people heavily frequent. One participant shared, "*Government and NGOs are not active on the apps we use, so their messages do not reach us.*"

Analysis of Communication Channels Used by VE and CVE

To determine where most communication occurs among the various stakeholders in the VE programming, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was employed to determine whether there are significant differences between the communication channels used by two groups, VE and CVE actors. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test's null hypothesis stated no considerable difference between the two

groups. The null hypothesis was rejected with a p-value of 0.007813, confirming a statistically significant difference in how these groups engage with media platforms.

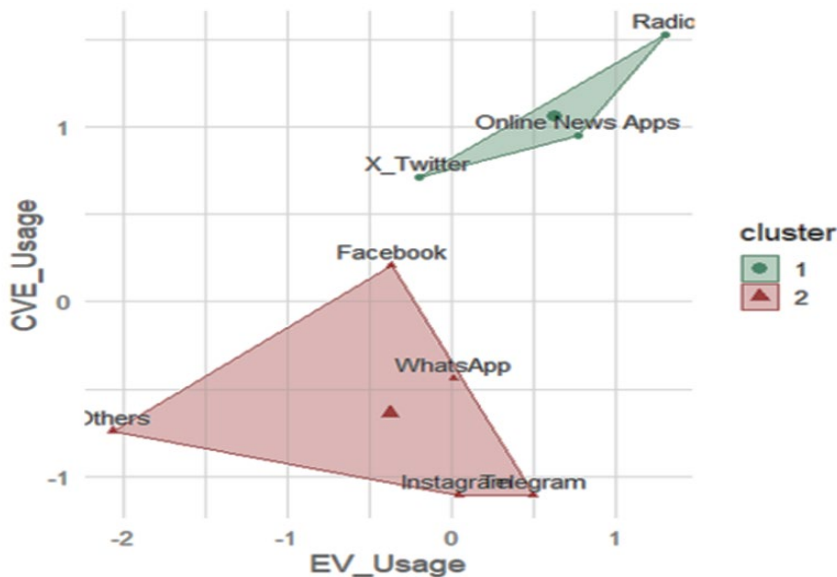


Figure 2: Cluster analysis on Media Platform usage by both VE recruiters and CVE actors

(Source: Authors 2025)

As can be seen in Figure 2, the cluster analysis categorised media platform usage into two distinct groups. Cluster 1 consists of platforms with higher usage frequencies by VE groups and CVE actors, indicating their wider reach and greater engagement. These include Radio, Online News Apps, and X (Twitter). Cluster 2, on the other hand, comprises platforms with lower engagement from both groups, suggesting they are less effective for outreach. Based on these findings, CVE efforts should prioritise platforms in Cluster 1 to maximise their reach and effectively counter extremist narratives.

Although the overall usage frequency was used to cluster the groups during the analysis, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test explores the paired differences in the level of engagement between CVE and VE actors, illustrating that despite being in the same clusters, the average engagement varies significantly ($p = 0.0078$). Thus, although the platforms appear in the same cluster, each group tends to use them with different intensities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study found that while social media platforms foster connectivity and information exchange, they also serve as vehicles for spreading extremist narratives. Platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram, which offer encryption, present significant ethical challenges. Although these forums are credited for providing freedom and privacy, including safe spaces for expression, VE actors leverage the features of these tools to recruit and disseminate content that can be harmful. Alongside community influencers like parents, religious and clan leaders, these tools provide platforms to amplify the influence of these social networks that take advantage of them to radicalise vulnerable youths.

A significant observation of this study is the level of mistrust young people have of state-run media channels. This is even more prominent in areas that have been marginalised historically. The impact of this is that the effectiveness of state CVE efforts is significantly undermined in their efforts to win the hearts and minds of people in the marginalised regions. The main driver of mistrust is the perception that governments running media platforms are avenues of propaganda and lack objectivity and/or accuracy. There is also a deep feeling that community concerns are often not highlighted. A growing debate has since emerged on the role of tech companies in dealing with the fast-spread extremist ideas and narratives. The contention has been on the dilemma between upholding civil liberties, including the freedom of expression, and CVE efforts. Moreover, the efforts in place have struggled to capture and curtail VE narratives posted on social media platforms using non-Western language, which the algorithms tend not to have been tailored for.

The contrast between media use by VE and CVE actors reflects broader disparities in communication strategies, audience engagement, and trust-building efforts. While VE actors effectively exploit both traditional (radio and television) and social media platforms like Telegram and Instagram to disseminate targeted and interactive propaganda, CVE actors are focused mostly on traditional media like radio and official online news apps. This reliance on older communication channels limits their ability to reach younger, tech-savvy audiences more likely to encounter VE narratives online.

Theoretical insights, such as those from the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers et al. 2014), offer a helpful lens to interpret this disparity. VE actors act as "early adopters" of digital media, leveraging their interactive and decentralised nature to appeal to at-risk youth. By contrast, CVE actors lag in adopting innovative media strategies, reducing their capacity to counter extremist narratives effectively. This gap may be attributed to several factors, including resource constraints, institutional inertia, and fear of misuse. Government agencies often lack the resources and agility to maintain an active presence on social media (Senadheera, Warren and Leitch 2017). Furthermore, their reliance on hierarchical and traditional communication channels prevents them from fully capitalising on the interactive potential of platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram (Ruohonen et al. 2017).

In communication and CVE, more specifically, the role of language is critical in shaping the audience's attitude. The government tends to maintain the use of formal languages, which in the case of Kenya is a mix of Kiswahili and English. The targeted audiences, especially in remote villages, tend to be alienated further by eroding trust. Thus, we argue that an important corrective measure for this disparity in language approach is adopting underscores the need for language-sensitive strategies when developing CVE measures.

In responding to the role of social media tools should not overlook the dual-edged nature of their service in contemporary society. On the one hand, these tools provide many people with a forum for connectivity, help democratize information and more importantly, empower marginalised people to be able to speak for themselves. On the other hand, the paper has illustrated the downside of these tools, especially to the extent that they provide VE groups with a haven for conducting their activities without serious consequences. Several interventions have been proposed, including blocking some of those social media tools, as well as limiting their reach. But opponents of this approach are concerned that doing so will limit the benefits these tools have to offer (Kisaka et al. 2022).

Therefore, a more balanced approach which can effectively root out those abusing the benefits of these tools, while allowing genuine users to take advantage of the convenience brought about by these forums is the key. In addition, we should not drown too much on social media and ignore other traditional avenues such as radio and social networks in the radicalisation matrix. These, too, require serious interventions to ensure VE groups have limited access to their target audiences. Two issues have emerged from this study. First, it is essential to increase the presence of CVE actors in online spaces where VE recruiters target vulnerable youth. CVE strategies must include a robust online component, leveraging partnerships with bloggers and online influencers to develop alternative narratives to violence. Second, scholars, policymakers, and CVE practitioners should explore premodern communication channels and innovative approaches to counter recruiters' propaganda. Additionally, research is needed on the utility of other communication spaces, including physical meetings at community bases, Muslim prayer gatherings, and sporting events. These spaces provide opportunities for minority groups to express their opinions freely and engage in interactive discussions, which can help solidify knowledge and counter extremist narratives.

References

- Abdi, M. S., and W. J. Mwangi. 2023. "Influence Of Community Participation In Peace Building Initiatives On Inter-Clan Conflict Management In Wajir County, Kenya." *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies* 7, no. 10: 125-133.
- Agwanda, Billy, Gershon Dagba, Prince Opoku, Mark Opoku Amankwa, and Israel Nyaburi Nyadera. 2023. "Sub-Saharan Africa and the COVID-19 pandemic: reflecting on challenges and recovery opportunities." *Journal of Developing Societies* 37, no. 4: 502-524.
- Alhadrawi, Ahmed Khalid Ali, Samira Ezzerouali, Ahmed Reda Jawad, Ahmed B. Saleh, Basim Khalid Al-Hadrawi, and Khaled Khalid Al-Hadrawi. 2024. "Unveiling Extremism: Leveraging Digital Data Mining Strategies." *Journal of Ecohumanism* 3, (7): 492–502.
- Anderson, David M. 2017. "Remembering Wagalla: State Violence in Northern Kenya, 1962–1991." In *Politics and Violence in Eastern Africa*, 131–149. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.946237>.
- Anderson, David M., and Jacob McKnight. 2015. "Understanding al-Shabaab: Clan, Islam and Insurgency in Kenya." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9 (3): 536–557.
<https://shorturl.at/Nb64c>.
- Archetti, Cristina. 2015. "Terrorism, Communication and the Media." In *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 134–152. London: Sage.
- Benkel, Yael, Stephanie Doucette, Christopher Godman, Katherine Hasty, Tom Hoffecker, Professors Jeffrey Connor, and Carol Rollie Flynn. 2018. "Digital Influencing for CVE."
- Botz-Bornstein, Thorsten. 2017. "The 'Futurist' Aesthetics of ISIS." *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 9 (1): 127-152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2017.1271528>.
- Brantly, Aaron. 2017. "Banning encryption to stop terrorists: A worse than futile exercise." *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 7: 29-33.
- Checkel, Jeffrey T. 2017. "Socialisation and Violence: Introduction and Framework." *Journal of Peace Research* 54 (5): <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343317721813>.

- Conway, Maura, Mubarak Khawaja, Suraj Lakhani, and Jeremy Reffin. 2020. "A Snapshot of the Syrian Jihadi Online Ecology: Differential Disruption, Community Strength, and Preferred Other Platforms." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46 (4) 1–17. <https://shorturl.at/KNceP>.
- Conway, Maura. 2016. "Determining the role of the Internet in violent extremism and terrorism." In *Violent extremism online*, pp. 123-148. London: Routledge.
- Flood, Michael, and Bob Pease. 2026. "The factors influencing community attitudes in relation to violence against women: A critical review of the literature."
- Graham, Robert. 2016. "How terrorists use encryption." *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 6 (2016): 20.
- Hanti, George H. 2022. *An Assessment of Drivers and Management Practises of Land-based Conflicts in Tana River Delta, Kenya*. PhD diss., University of Nairobi.
- Hernandez, Katherine S. 2022. *Peace' Murals? An Analysis of the Radicalization of the Troubles Through Peace Murals*. Bowling Green State University.
- Jabane, Abdi M. 2016. "Rural Development and Marginalisation: The Drylands of Northern Kenya." *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 16 (1): 15 -23
- Javed, Noman. 2023. "Combating Online Violent Extremism Through AI: Avenues for Pakistan." *Pakistan Journal of Terrorism Research (PJTR)* 5 (2) 1.
- Jensen, Michael A., Anita A. Seate, and Patrick A. James. 2020. "Radicalisation to Violence: A Pathway Approach to Studying Extremism." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34 (7): 1067–1090.
- Kaczowski, Wojciech, Kevin M. Swartout, Lee Branum-Martin, John G. Horgan, and Amy F. Lemieux. 2022. "Impact of Perceived Peer Attitudes and Social Network Diversity on Violent Extremist Intentions." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34 (8)1530–1548. <https://shorturl.at/Hc1VY>.
- Karnowski, Veronika, and Anna Sophie Kümpel. 2016. "Diffusion of Innovations." von Everett M. Rogers (1962). In *Schlüsselwerke der Medienwirkungsforschung*, 97–107.
- Katz, James I. 2024. "Periodically Modulated FRB as Extreme Mass Ratio Binaries." *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 528, (3)5114–5118. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mnras/stae386>.
- Khan, Ayaz, Muhammad Qasim, Irfan Ullah, Ibrahim Shah, Ikram Ullah Khan, and Muhammad Bilal. 2023. "Exploring the influence of social media on the radicalization of youth towards violent extremism." *Russian Law Journal* 11, no. 3: 3117-3125.
- Kisaka, Michael O., Israel N. Nyadera, and Felix Shihundu. 2022. "Examining the Prospects of Consociational Power Sharing as a Conflict Resolution Strategy in South Sudan." *The African Review* 49, no. 3: 249-266.
- Lindahl, Sebastian. 2020. "Conceptualising Violent Extremism: Ontological, Epistemological and Normative Issues." In *Encountering Extremism*, 40–54. Manchester University Press, <https://shorturl.at/cWuVv>.
- Mahood, Samantha, and Halim Rane. 2017. "Islamist narratives in ISIS recruitment propaganda." *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no. 1: 15-35.
- McNeil-Willson, Richard. 2023. "Assessing Our Understanding of (Violent) Extremism." In *Routledge Handbook of Violent Extremism and Resilience*, 17–32. Routledge. <https://shorturl.at/qmpP4>.
- Mesok, Elizabeth, Nour Naji, and Daniel Schildknecht. 2024. "White Supremacy and the Racial Logic of the Global Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Agenda." *Third World Quarterly* 45 (11) 1701–1718. <https://shorturl.at/QvVqJ>.
- Miller, Richard L. Rogers. 2018. "Innovation Diffusion Theory (1962, 1995)." In *Technology Adoption and Social Issues: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, 1558–1571. IGI Global.

- Montano, Benjamin, Samuel Emmanuel, Donald P. Green, David W. Groves, and Babak Rahmani. May 28, 2023. "Can a Radio Drama Influence Awareness, Prioritization, and Willingness to Respond to Gender-Based Violence? Evidence from a Field Experiment in Tanzania." Paper presented at the *Association for Psychological Science Annual Meeting*, Washington, DC.
- Montasari, Reza. 2024. "The Impact of Technology on Radicalisation to Violent Extremism and Terrorism in the Contemporary Security Landscape." In *Cyberspace, Cyberterrorism and the International Security in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Threats, Assessment and Responses*, 109–133. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Neumann, Peter R. 2013. "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalisation in the United States." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36 (6) 431–459.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.784568>.
- Nyadera, Israel Nyaburi, and Mohamed S. Ahmed. 2020. "The Somali Civil War: Integrating Traditional and Modern Peacebuilding Approaches." *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 8 (1) 153–172.
- Nyadera, Israel Nyaburi, Michael Otieno Kisaka, and Billy Agwanda. 2020. "Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria: a nexus of just war and fragile state." *The Round Table* 109, no. 3: 298–315.
- Nyadera, Israel Nyaburi, Nazmul Islam, and Billy Agwanda. 2024. *The Somalia Conflict Revisited*. Springer Nature.
- Orina, H. K. "Sources of authority and influence of councils of elders in Kenya with particular reference to Njuri Ncheke of Meru County, Kenya." 2022. *Journal of Environmental Sustainability Advancement Research* 8: 47–56.
- Pantucci, Raffaello, and Kumar Veerapan Singam. 2024. "Extreme Right-Wing in the West." *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 16 (1), 106–111.
- Prunckun, Henry. 2014. "Covert Radio Communications: A Viable Tactic for International Terrorists?" *Defense & Security Analysis* 30, (2) 176–184. <https://shorturl.at/6dfeE>.
- Rogers, Everett M., and David Williams. 1962. *Diffusion of Innovations*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Rogers, Everett M., Arvind Singhal, and Margaret M. Quinlan. 2014. "Diffusion of Innovations." In *An Integrated Approach to Communication Theory and Research*, 432–448. Routledge.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311487299_Diffusion_of_Innovations.
- Ruohonen, Jukka, Sami Hyrynsalmi, Sanna Rauti, and Ville Leppänen. 2017. "Mining Social Networks of Open-Source CVE Coordination." In *Proceedings of the 27th International Workshop on Software Measurement and 12th International Conference on Software Process and Product Measurement*, 176–188. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3143434.3143458>.
- Saltzman, William R., Robert S. Pynoos, Patricia Lester, Christopher M. Layne, and William R. Beardslee. 2013. "Enhancing family resilience through family narrative co-construction." *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 16: 294–310.
- Scrivens, Ryan, and Maura Conway. 2019. "The Roles of 'Old' and 'New' Media Tools and Technologies in the Facilitation of Violent Extremism and Terrorism." In *The Human Factor of Cybercrime*. Taylor & Francis. <http://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/23614>.
- Scrivens, Ryan, and Tiana Gaudette. 2024. "Online Terrorism and Violent Extremism." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*.
<https://shorturl.at/OHG5h>.

- Senadheera, Vajira, Mark Warren, and Shona Leitch. 2017. "Social Media as an Information System: Improving the Technological Agility." *Enterprise Information Systems* 11 (4) 512–533. <https://shorturl.at/lyAzb>.
- Shier, Harry, Marisol Hernández Méndez, Meyslin Centeno, Ingrid Arróliga, and Meyling González. 2014. "How children and young people influence policy-makers: Lessons from Nicaragua." *Children & Society* 28, no. 1: 1-14.
- Shihundu, Felix, Israel Nyaburi Nyadera, and Billy Agwanda. 2021. "Experience of Terrorism in Kenya: What are the Vulnerabilities and Strengths." *African Journal on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2021): 127-144.
- Siller, Samuel H. 2024. "Modern Characteristics of Domestic Extremists: A Study of Extremists in the United States." PhD diss., University of New Haven.
- Sterling-Folker, Jennifer. 2002. "Realism and the Constructivist Challenge: Rejecting, Reconstructing, or Rereading." *International Studies Review* 4 (1) 73–97. <https://shorturl.at/70WBV>.
- Sweet, James I. 2020. "Jihadist Media Networks and Virtual Propaganda in the Russian Cyberspace." PhD diss., Rutgers The State University of New Jersey, Graduate School-Newark.
- Thuo, Lucy, and Charles Kioko. 2023. "Marginalisation in Kenya in Historical Perspective (1963-2021): The Starts, False Starts and the Last Promise." Kabarak University.
- Tulga, Ayse Y. 2022. "Constructivism, Identity, and Discourse in Terrorism." *Journal of Politics and Policy* 4 (2) 1–22. <https://shorturl.at/dShDX>.
- Van Eerten, Jan-Jaap, Bertjan Doosje, Elly Konijn, B. A. de Graaf, and Mariëlle de Goede. 2017. "Developing a social media response to radicalization: The role of counter-narratives in prevention of radicalization and de-radicalization."
- Whittaker, Joe, and Lilah Elsayed. 2019. "Linkages as a Lens: An Exploration of Strategic Communications in P/CVE." *Journal for Deradicalization* 20: 1-46.
- Winter, David A., and Guillem Feixas. 2019. "Toward a Constructivist Model of Radicalisation and Deradicalisation: A Conceptual and Methodological Proposal." *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2) 398 -412. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00412>.
- Zamir, Munir. 2024. "Counter-Intuitive Strategic Communications' Role in P/CVE'Counter-Narratives'." PhD diss., University of South Wales, United Kingdom.