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Entertainment-Education Versus Extremism: Examining Parasocial Interaction among Arab Viewers of Anti-ISIS TV Drama

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Abstract
Radicalization amongst youth is a challenge facing the Arab world. Recent reports indicate that over 20,000 Arab fighters traveled to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria and another 5-15 percent of millennials across seven Arab countries consider some violent extremist groups to be on the right path. In response, Arab countries have experimented with entertainment-education (E-E) by using anti-extremism narratives in popular culture to address radicalization at the societal level. This study explores whether those narratives can elicit viewers' parasocial interaction (PSI)—pseudo friendships with or animosity toward mediated personas that can catalyze persuasion—with fictional characters. Using qualitative and quantitative content analyses of more than 8,600 YouTube comments, this study explores Arab viewers' responses to a recent E-E project, al-Siham al-Marika (The Piercing Arrows) drama series, that portrays life under ISIS's control. The findings identify recurrent themes in the pool of comments, such as show debates, religious contestations, political disputes, empathy for victims, and engagement with plotline/characters. More importantly, they reveal at least one out of six comments (n=1477) exhibits PSI with fictional characters, addressing them as part of their social milieu. The study further traces the variations in the nature of PSI in relation to mediated positive role models, negative role models, and transitional characters in the narrative. It concludes with a discussion of E-E's potentials as an anti-extremism messaging strategy and PSI's role as a useful metric in assessing such narratives.

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Introduction

Fresh upon graduating from law school in Cairo, two young men in their early twenties, Islam Yaken and his friend Mahmoud El Ghandour, pursued an unconventional career path. Yaken,

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later deemed by international media as "the hipster jihadi," had first travelled to join ISIS in 2013, before Ghandour followed. The two came from middle class families, went to international schools, practiced sports, consumed popular culture, and produced their own entertainment content. They left behind an online repository that included workout episodes, an NSYNC music video remake, and a talk show about women (El-Naggar, 2015). As the duo performed their daily duties in ISIS's ranks, they continued to produce entertainment content. Yaken's 2014 fitness video in Syria dedicated to ISIS militants or their 2015 satirical video in Iraq refuting claims about Ghandour's death are but two examples that convey the appropriation of entertainment in extremist messaging (Mehwar TV Channel, 2014; Zaki, 2015). Whereas Yaken and Ghandour's stories ended in their deaths, they have further added to the complexities involved in understanding radicalization and engagement in violent extremism.

The two young men are among thousands of Arab youth who have joined militant groups over the past years. Yet, the number of fighters alone does not accurately reflect the level of radicalization in society. Scholars have developed various frameworks to explain the radicalization process (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2005; Moghaddam, 2005; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; Precht, 2007; Silber & Bhatt, 2007; Victoroff, 2005), yielding a lack of consensus on a definitive model and prompting some to conceptualize radicalization as a puzzle (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). This study adopts Horgan's definition of radicalization as "the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology" (Horgan, 2009, p. 152). As Horgan rightly argues, radicalization is only one risk factor that may or may not predict engagement in violence, and thus the cognitive and behavioral elements of extremism are quite distinct.

Applied in context, Horgan's insights reveal the need to recognize and respond to various points along the radicalization continuum. In the case of ISIS, for example, over 21,000 Arab fighters immigrated to Iraq and Syria to engage in violent extremism, adding to local members who make up a sizable portion of the group's rank and file (Barrett, 2017). But on a much broader scale, between seven and 47 percent of Muslim millennials across 18 Arab

countries perceive at least some of ISIS and al-Qaeda's ideas and/or actions to be correct, while an alarming five to 15 percent in seven of those countries consider such groups on the right path (Tabah Foundation, 2016; Yunas et al., 2017). In a region ravaged with ongoing conflicts, radicalization amongst Arab youth can pose serious challenges.

Consequently, Arab countries have used distinct approaches to address radicalization at the societal level. Targeting those who had disengaged from violence, Egypt facilitated in-prison debates and the production of corrective literature by leaders and members of *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* group (Ashour, 2009; Goerzig, 2019). Saudi Arabia taught critical thinking and other skills in deradicalization programs to ease re-entry into society (Horgan & Altier, 2012). Yemen, Algeria, and Morocco used a mixture of religious dialogue, reconciliation commissions, and/or clemency grants (Filali, 2019; Horgan & Braddock, 2010). To reach a broader segment of the population, however, the Arab world has also incorporated entertainment narratives as a potent tool for spreading anti-extremism messaging over the past two decades. Arab television stations have aired and produced anti-terror video campaigns, satirical shows, songs, films and drama series (Al-Rawi, 2013; Aly et al., 2014; Jaber & Kraidy, 2020; Khader, 2017; Lindsey, 2005; Navarro, 2019; Ratta, 2018; Stephan, 2015). Such content intends to spread pro-social messages and educate the public about the consequences of extremism in entertaining ways, a key feature of entertainment-education (E-E) programming. Yet, anti-extremism narratives in the Arab world leave much of their impact open for speculation.

This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring Arab viewers' responses to a recent anti-extremism E-E project, *al-Siham al-Marika* (The Piercing Arrows) TV series, which portrays life under ISIS's control. The study begins by conceptualizing the E-E framework as a narrative persuasion approach and reviewing the existing work on parasocial interaction (PSI), a construct that gauges viewers' virtual relationships with mediated characters. It then lays out the methodology for analyzing the show's content and viewer responses and highlights the main themes and viewer expressed interactions with the show's characters emergent in the comments. It concludes with a discussion of E-E's potentials as an anti-

extremism messaging strategy and the role of PSI as a useful metric in assessing such narratives.

Entertainment-Education (E-E) and Anti-Extremism Messaging

The psychology of communication literature shows that narrative enhances the persuasive effect of messages, particularly when it comes to entertainment. Storytelling in television dramas and films can thus be a more attractive and subtle form of persuasion that reduces audience's resistance (Nabi & Moyer-Guse, 2013). A range of concepts helps explain the underlying processes that involve the audience in the plot and with the characters. Transportation, for example, is when the viewer feels transported into the narrative, often losing the sense of bodily awareness, suspending reality, and experiencing real emotions that tend to reduce counterarguing (Green & Dill, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000). Identification is the merger between the self and the mediated character in the story (Cohen, 2009). In doing so, the individual discards their position as a viewer and adopts that of the character in the storyline. Constructs like presence (Lombard & Ditton, 1997), wishful identification (Giles, 2002), homophily (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991), and parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956)—the latter to be discussed in more depth below—underscore additional symbolic interactions that bolster the educational potential of entertainment.

E-E, which simply refers to the development and dissemination of prosocial, educational messages through entertainment narrative, first emerged in Latin America in the late 1960s. The Peruvian telenovela, *Simplemente Maria,* featured the success story of a female migrant who worked hard during daytime and enrolled in literacy classes at night to eventually become a prominent fashion designer. Besides its high audience ratings, the telenovela prompted a surge in domestic workers' enrollment in adult literacy classes. To understand the reason behind its success, Mexican producer Miguel Sabido then dissected the telenovela and developed a framework for E-E production that has inspired other projects worldwide ever since (Nariman, 1993; Sood et al., 2004).

Sabido's E-E approach hinges upon social psychology, and more specifically Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Bandura posits that people learn by observing models perform behaviors in their social milieu and by reflecting on the outcome of the models' actions. Rewards for and the attractiveness of the model are thus key factors that can enhance the reproduction of the behaviour (Greenberg et al., 2004). The character's similarity to the viewer further enhances their persuasive power and enhances the audience's sense of efficacy (Bandura, 2004). Moving beyond social interactions, E-E introduces similar models of behavior in media narratives through three main character types: positive role models, negative role models, and transitional characters (Singhal et al., 1995; Singhal & Rogers, 2001). The storyline narratively embodies rewards for the positive role model who adopts or supports the promoted behavior and punishments for the negative role model who rejects it. The transitional character typically receives rewards in the plotline as well for eventually switching from a negative to a positive role model. Portraying those characters, E-E narratives have proven successful in spreading awareness, changing attitudes, and/or altering behaviors when it comes to health- and gender-related issues (Bouman, 2004; Hether et al., 2008; Sood & Rogers, 2000; Vaughan & Rogers, 2000).

Narrative persuasion in and of itself is not new to the study of anti-extremism messaging. In fact, scholars contemplated the value of E-E television programming in countering terrorism long ago (Singhal et al., 2004; Storey & Sood, 2013), but the E-E framework remains understudied. Whether perceived as alternative narratives, counter-narratives, or strategic communication campaigns (Briggs & Feve, 2013; Ferguson, 2016), many anti-extremism media projects in Western Europe and North America do exhibit E-E features, ranging from the use of theater, animation and rap songs for educational purposes to the fictional portrayals of positive and negative role models to dissuade youth from joining violent groups (Colliver & Davey, 2017; Mazza et al., 2017; Payne, 2017; Vidino & Brandon, 2012). As most of these efforts circulate online, views, shares, comments, likes, and dislikes usually serve as the metrics to gauge audience response to such projects (Davies et al., 2016; Speckhard et al., 2018).

In the Arab world, where TV and film producers have developed anti-extremism narratives for years, tracking audience response has been more challenging. Social and political pressures can often bring an early end to such projects. Take, for example, *The Road to Kabul TV* series that Arab channels had pulled off air in 2004 after eight of 30 episodes. The media cited multiple reasons for the show's termination, including terrorist threats against the crew and pressure from the United States ("'The Road to Kabul' leads MBC and the Arab Center to Court," 2011). The ties between research firms and corporate and government actors in the region introduce another layer of complexity that tends to restrain transparent assessments of audience response (Jaber & Kraidy, 2020). Despite the pervasiveness of social media today, the lack of full project availability online and/or restrictions on comment posting can also hinder research. For example, upon airing the anti-ISIS TV drama *Gharabeeb Soud* (Black Crows) in 2017, the pan-Arab broadcaster MBC group uploaded only the first episode to YouTube. But even then, it had disabled viewer comments altogether, thus curtailing potential audience analyses online.

Jaber and Kraidy offer a useful starting point not only by exploring the reception of *Gharabeeb Soud*, but also by approaching the project through the lens of E-E (Jaber & Kraidy, 2020). Departing from previous studies that had examined the tropes in and counter-messaging value of the show (Khader, 2017; Navarro, 2019), they instead employ a close reading of the plot and characters. In doing so, they identify MBC's E-E strategy and the application of Sabido's framework in the show with the use of a narrator and the development of positive and negative role models. Jaber and Kraidy then apply discourse analysis to investigate online debates around the show, the media's coverage, and MBC's statements. Yet, they explain that their approach, despite insightful, "tells an incomplete story about GS's [Gharabeeb Soud] audience reception" (Jaber & Kraidy, 2020, p. 1878). This study expands on their work by examining the nature of viewers' interactions with fictional characters in anti-extremism messaging, using a more recent case study, *al-Siham al-Marika* TV drama. The uploading of all 30 episodes to YouTube by the Egyptian TV station al-Nahar in May-

June 2019 offers a unique opportunity for an in-depth, systematic analysis of audience's immediate responses to the show in the comments section.

Parasocial Interaction (PSI)

The parasocial experience is a key construct in entertainment audience reception research. Building on Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory (Allport, 1954), which maintains that interpersonal communication can reduce prejudice, Horton and Wohl coined the phrase "parasocial interaction" in reference to "the illusion of face-to-face relationship" with mediated characters (Horton & Wohl 1956, p. 215). Similar to interpersonal interaction, the one-sided, pseudo friendship with fictional characters can generate positive responses amongst viewers, change attitudes, and alter beliefs (Schiappa et al., 2005). However, previous scholarship emphasizes that PSI can also occur with disliked characters, prompting rejection of the mediated persona and negative attitudes toward their behaviors (Dibble & Raen, 2011; Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006; Rihl & Wegener, 2019). Hence, parasocial experience entails friendship with or animosity towards fictional characters in the same fashion as interpersonal interactions. Repeated PSI can further evolve into parasocial relationships that facilitate the reproduction of favored characters' behaviors (Cohen, 2003; Ortiz & Brooks, 2014).

The existing scholarship reveals new trends in analyzing PSI. For decades, surveys and experiments have made up the bulk of PSI research, often using a range of scales that have emerged since the introduction of the concept in the 1950s (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Powell et al., 2012; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tukachinsky, 2010). Together, such studies point to PSI's role in influencing political views and decisions (Centeno, 2010; Wen & Cui, 2014), attitudes about race and gender (Hoffner & Cohen, 2015; Kistler & Lee, 2009), trust (Sherman-Morris, 2005), purchasing behaviors (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015), and willingness to donate (Lee et al., 2010). In recent years, the emergence of social media has facilitated the examination of PSI expressions, and thus content analyses

of tweets, comments, and posts have risen (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Such research investigates how internet users express PSI with celebrities, media personalities and fictional characters (DeGroot & Leith, 2018; Gregg, 2018; Kim et al., 2016; Kopacz & Lawton, 2013; Sanderson & Hope Cheong, 2010; Van den Bulck, 2019; Van Den Bulck & Claessens, 2014).

Although previous work does examine PSI in the context of E-E (Lee et al., 2010; Sood & Rogers, 2000), none have investigated the construct in anti-extremism messaging. In fact, Braddock and Horgan's (2016) guide for constructing counter-terrorism narratives calls for the exploration of PSI as a persuasive strategy that can "make the audience more sympathetic to those [protagonist] characters, thereby undermining the terrorist group's justifications for their actions" (Braddock, 2020, p. 92). This study takes a step in that direction by examining viewers' PSI with the fictional characters in an anti-extremism TV series.

Two research questions guide this study's methodological approach and analysis:

(1) How do viewers respond to anti-extremism entertainment-education projects?
(2) How can parasocial interaction guide our understanding of the persuasiveness of anti-extremism messaging?

Methodology

This study examines the 8,615 comments available online in response to the 30 episodes of *al-Siham al-Marika* TV drama distributed on YouTube through 2019.[2] The focus on this TV series stems from its unique approach as compared with previous anti-extremism projects. First, the idea for *al-Siham al-Marika* came from co-producer Moez Masoud, a young and prominent Muslim televangelist who has created multiple TV shows about Islam over the past decade. His role introduces a layer of religiosity and education to this anti-ISIS narrative.

[2] The author used the Export Comments third party scrapping tool (exportcomments.com) to retrieve all viewers' comments on each episode into an excel format.

Second, the TV drama neither involves direct government sponsorship nor collaborations with foreign producers, which mitigates audience suspicions about the project's intent. Third, the pan-Arab crew, bringing together Egyptian, Tunisian, Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese artists, expands the show's appeal more broadly in the region. Lastly, the availability of all *al-Siham al-Marika*'s episodes on YouTube after it aired on Emirati and Egyptian television stations in 2018-2019 has also boosted the show's viewership (11.5+ million views on YouTube by May 2020) and, most importantly, facilitates analyses of audience response in the comments section.

To assess the audience response to the show, this study adopts a mix of methods. To gauge how Arab viewers reacted to the show, the study employed a Straussian approach to grounded theory, which involves open coding of the data and the inductive development of conceptual categories (Bernabo, 2019; Grbich, 2007). The qualitative content analysis yielded thematic groupings that account for recurring patterns across the pool of comments. To explore whether Arab viewers developed PSI with the characters in *al-Siham al-Marika*, one coder, who is a native Arabic speaker and fluent in English read each of the 8,615 comments to identify indicators of parasocial experience (Yes/No). Borrowing from previous PSI content analyses (Sood & Rogers, 2000; Van den Bulck, 2019; Van Den Bulck & Claessens, 2014), comments that described the fictional character as part of the viewer's social reality, used direct address to a named character in the plotline, and treated the character as an acquaintance, friend, relative, or enemy of the individual posting the comment were coded as exhibiting PSI. A close reading of all 30 episodes, including an identification of the plot and various character types, further complemented the PSI analysis.

Themes in Audience Comments

Al-Siham al-Marika features role models and transitional characters in the plot to convey an anti-extremism, educational message (see Table 1). The story takes place in an unidentified location in Syria that had previously fallen to ISIS. The positive role models are characters

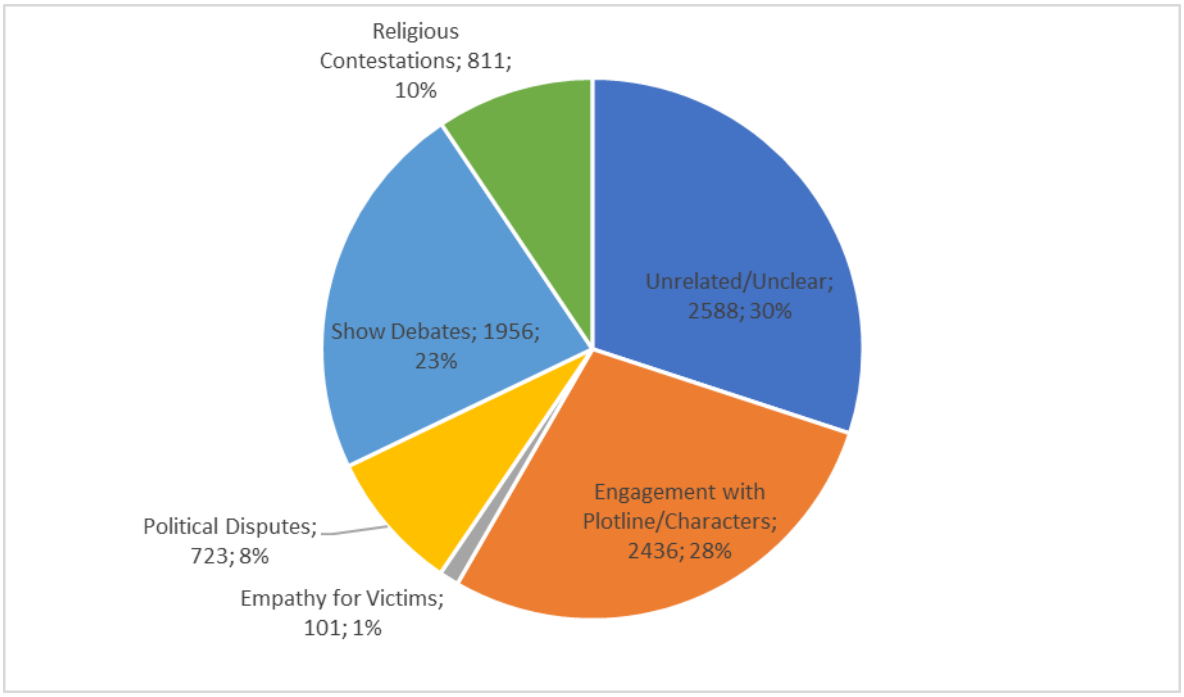
who, despite living under the group's control, distinguish ISIS from Islam, reject extremist ideologies, and preserve their Muslim identity. The characters who serve as positive role models either secretly hold on to their beliefs until they are able to escape or join the resistance movement to fight against ISIS and eventually meet a deadly, yet honorable and heroic, fate. The negative role models are ISIS members and leaders who outwardly appear religious, but manipulate sacred texts to justify their heinous crimes: rapes, enslaving women, theft, torture, and the murder of civilians. In some instances, the punishments for negative role models are explicit, such as the individuals suffering serious injuries or committing suicide out of despair. In others, the narrative prophesies that an imminent bad ending awaits ISIS leaders by showing more civilians and militants turning against them eventually. Meanwhile, transitional characters are initially extremists who exhibit a firm belief in ISIS's ideology and act upon it. Over time, however, they realize the group's deviance, and denounce extremism, repent for their crimes, and restore their faith. Transforming into positive role models, transitional characters rectify their ways by raising their kids to ensure a better future and/or by achieving martyrdom status in their fight against ISIS.

In response to that narrative, the full array of YouTube comments across the 30 episodes fall into six main categories: show debates, religious contestations, political disputes, empathy for victims, engagement with plotline/characters, and unrelated/unclear (see Figure 1). Despite making up the most recurring category, the unrelated/unclear comments do not address the show, the conflict, or any other relevant issues. Instead, they involve promotions of other YouTube channels, views about competing TV dramas, generic prayers, random questions, and personal attacks. The remaining five categories, which together constitute 70 percent of the comments, highlight numerous aspects of the TV series, the geopolitical conflict with ISIS, and the broader fight against extremism.

Table 1. Character types in al-Siham al-Marika TV series

Character Name	Character Type	Description
Sherif	Positive	A broadcast journalist that ISIS kidnaps while he reports from Northern Syria. Separated from his wife and daughter, Sherif fakes his support to ISIS as he searches for his family. Under pressure, he marries Umm Ubai, an ISIS female leader, but secretly joins the resistance movement. Despite finding and escaping with his family, he returns to save his stepson from ISIS. Wearing an orange jumpsuit in his final moments, Sherif publicly chants against ISIS, pronounces *shahada* (the Islamic testament of faith), and faces his death with a big smile.
Habiba	Positive	A female schoolteacher who allows her students to perform arts, despite ISIS's prohibitions. Married to Ammar, a top ISIS leader, Habiba continuously challenges his beliefs in hopes that he would denounce extremism. When Ammar learns about Habiba's links to the resistance movement, he takes part in her arrest. Like Sherif, Habiba pronounces *shahada* in her final moments as she courageously faces death.
Talha	Negative	An ISIS member whose sexual desires prompt his decision to join the group. Not only does Talha marry four women, but he also buys female slaves. Blindly following ISIS's orders, he beheads prisoners, betrays his best friend, and participates in battles. Talha loses a leg and suffers sexual dysfunction as a result of a bombing, after which he shoots himself in the head at the slave market.
Abu Anas	Negative	A top ISIS leader who plans and commits numerous crimes, such as targeting Shiite worshippers in a mosque, torturing kids, beheading prisoners, and enslaving numerous women. Abu Anas eventually succeeds in capturing members of the resistance, but his militants start defecting and the civilians begin to revolt.
Ammar	Transitional	A top ISIS leader who attacks villages and kills civilians. After contributing to his wife's arrest and execution, Ammar develops PTSD and goes through an internal moral struggle, culminating in his defection. He further leads the resistance movement until his arrest. In his final moments, Ammar challenges the ISIS Emir, calls on the crowds to resist, describes death in the fight against ISIS as martyrdom, and dies with a smile on his face.
Umm Ubai	Transitional	A female ISIS leader put in charge of new abductees, whom she manipulates to support extremist ideologies. Umm Ubai prohibits her son from drawing and excommunicates her new husband Sherif for disagreeing with ISIS. As Sherif continues to challenge her beliefs, she aborts her suicide operation targeting the inside of a Shiite mosque. But when he sacrifices his life for her son Ubai, she eventually denounces extremism, supports the resistance, and apologizes to her son for the way she was raising him.

Figure 1. Audience response to al-Siham al-Marika episodes in the YouTube comments



Engagement with Plotline/Characters

Making up over a quarter of the comments, engagement with plotline/characters is the second most recurrent theme in the audience responses after those unrelated to the show. Viewers share their feelings, views, and questions about events that had unfolded and about characters who had appeared over the course of 30 episodes. Commenting on episode four that portrays the selling of non-Muslim women on the streets, for example, one viewer wonders, "is it true that a slave market is present in the areas under Daesh's [ISIS's] control?" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019c) Watching ISIS militants capture and torture one of the members of the resistance movement leading up to his death in episode 25, another viewer voices the pain she feels and further expresses her grief, using broken heart and weeping emojis in the comment. As the story progresses, the number of those comments almost triples from an average of 39 per episode in the first half of the show's run to 123 per episode in the second

half. The crafting of a 17-hour, anti-extremism drama thus succeeded in engaging some audience members with the story.

Show Debates

Debates around the show comprise about another quarter of the comments. The vast majority of the debate postings (83 percent) favor *al-Siham al-Marika*, sometimes even deeming it as worthy of Oscar awards and honorary PhDs, due to its good acting, effective directing, nuanced scriptwriting, realistic storyline, and overarching educational message. For example, a comment on the first episode describes the show as a source of enlightenment, as it reveals "the truth about Daesh to the weak minds whom they [Daesh] can control under the pretext of Islam" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019a). The remaining comments either criticize the show for production issues (e.g., bad lighting, low audio, unconvincing acting, and exaggerated scenes) or perceive it as a malicious propaganda tool against Islam. Displaying suspicions about the show's true motive, a viewer comments on episode 16:

> Unfortunately, [it's] a failing TV series that deforms Islam…The Arab media is always a failure, fabricating and distorting truths, as if the Western media is not enough, particularly the American cinema that has destroyed the image of Islam in the world. And now, Arab [media] projects are helping with that, by making things worse (Al Nahar Drama, 2019i).

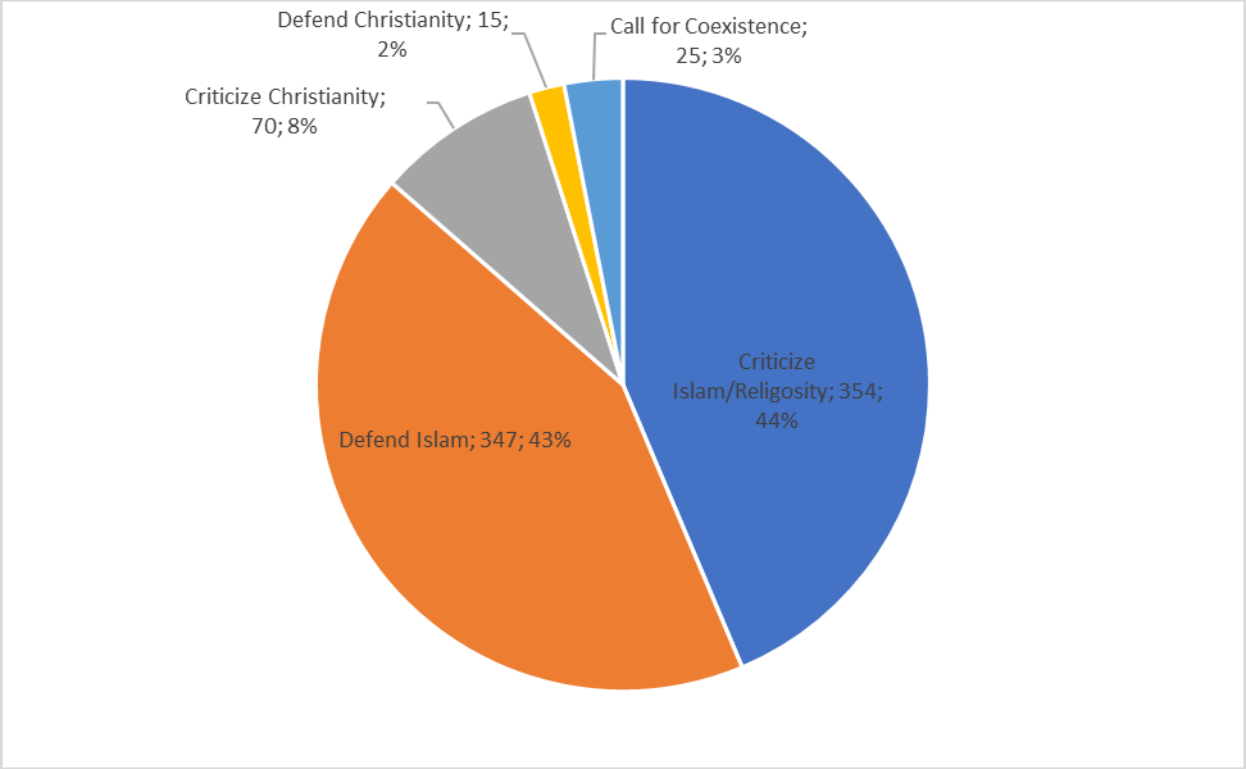
Although negative comments compete with and, at one point, outnumber positive postings in response to the show's early episodes, they gradually start to fade away in response to the fourth episode onward, leading up to the peak of viewers' praise by the final episode. The level of commitment involved in viewing anti-extremism narratives over many episodes likely catalyzes positive perceptions over time.

Religious Contestations

One in every 10 comments involve more heated debates around religion. The vast

majority of those postings are either inflammatory attacks against or defenses of Islam (see Figure 2). The derogatory comments equate Islam with ISIS, describe it as a barbaric ideology, and ridicule Prophet Muhammad. At the same time, more than 150 unique viewers exhibit pride in their choice to become a Muslim and underscore the show's message that extremists co-opt, manipulate, and misinterpret the true Islamic faith. A closer look at the pejorative remarks against Islam, however, reveals that almost three-fourths come from only eight YouTube accounts, with a single user accounting for more than one-third of the comments. In some instances, the attacks shift to Christianity, including discussion of excommunicating its followers, describing it as a violent religion, and citing excerpts from the Bible. Yet again, two-thirds of those remarks come from only seven users. The unregulated comment sections on anti-extremism narratives can thus attract trollers capable of deflecting attention away from the overarching message by stirring controversy.

Figure 2. A breakdown of the religious contestation theme in al-Siham al-Marika YouTube comments



Political Disputes

Making up eight percent of the comments, the political disputes theme conveys clear articulations of the conflict between extremists and the state(s). In line with the show's narrative, the majority of the postings generally attack extremists, often singling out ISIS members as terrorists, murderers, rapists, hypocrites, colluders, and, more importantly, as *khawarij*,[3] or renegades. Commenting on the ninth episode, for example, a viewer exclaims,

[3] *Khawarij* comes from the Arabic root *kha ra ja*, which means to exit. Applied in the Islamic context, it refers to a group of seventh century political dissidents who revolted against and excommunicated fourth Caliph and Prophet Muhammad's cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib, who fought them back. A number of *hadiths* (prophetic sayings) predict their emergence, deem them as individuals who exit from the folds of Islam, and call on Muslims to fight them. The creators of *al-Siham al-Marika* TV drama apply that religiopolitical construct to ISIS, use Prophet

"this is not religion, it is manipulation of religion. Indeed, they are *khawarij*" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019e). Another user passionately comments on episode 14, "may God curse the *khawarij* of this age, the dogs of hellfire," before citing religious texts that further condemn ISIS's actions (Al Nahar Drama, 2019g). While the show itself refrains from any portrayal of Arab states' counterterrorism efforts, some users nonetheless express pride in their national identity and support of their states (e.g., Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt) for fighting extremists and restoring order. Barely one hundred comments praise ISIS and/or attacks existing states. Those postings encapsulate support for the establishment of a caliphate and blame Israel, western nations, Iran, Turkey, Qatar and other Arab states for conspiring against Islam. For example, a comment responding to the second episode claims, "most Arab nations are in alliance with the West to distort the image of Islam" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019b). Despite the minimal expressions of support to ISIS against state actors, *al-Siham al-Marika* seemed successful in narrativizing religiopolitical labels like *khawarij* that viewers would adopt in denouncing extremists.

Empathy for Victims

With only one hundred related comments, empathy for victims is the least recurring theme in the audience's response. Watching portrayals of ISIS's oppression in *al-Siham al-Marika* episodes, some viewers share prayers and express emotional support for those who have lived under the group's control in Iraq and Syria. Posting in response to the second episode, a viewer asks that "God helps those who endured this oppressive reality" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019b). Other users also comfort Iraqi and Syrian nationals who share their individual experiences in the online comments. One Syrian viewer, for example, recounts how the brutal conditions in Aleppo had forced him out of his hometown, prompting another to post her prayers from Egypt that God would help him along with all Syrians against their enemies. Just

Muhammad's description of the *khawarij* in the title, invoke the label throughout the script, and visualize it on the resistance movement's graffiti in the narrative.

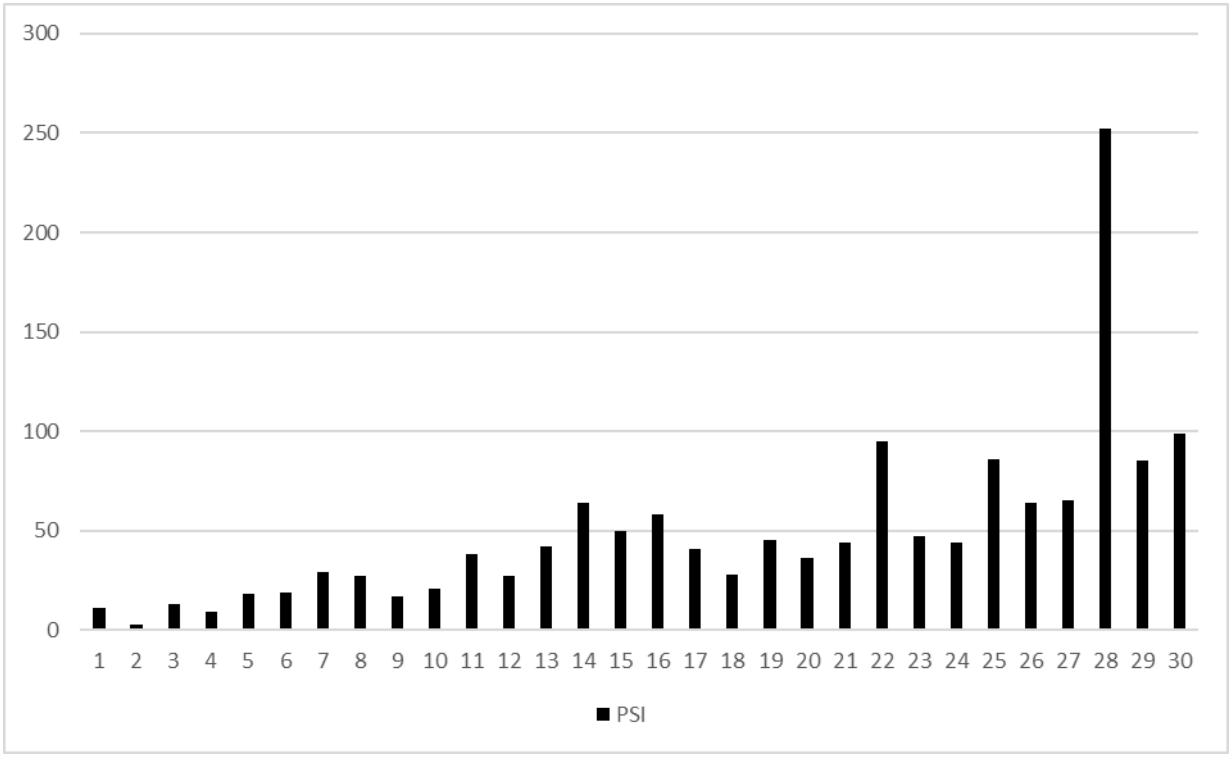
as the fictional anti-extremism narrative drew trollers to the comments section, it also created a sense of solidarity amongst sympathetic viewers in the Arab world.

PSI with Characters

One in every 6 comments exhibits PSI with *al-Siham al-Marika* characters. Most of the PSI comments appear in the engagement with plotline/characters theme regardless the viewer's sex. Yet, female users are more likely than males to exhibit PSI with fictional characters in the show (20 versus 13 percent respectively).[4] The viewers communicate about or with the mediated personas in this anti-extremism narrative as if they are part of their social network. Three-quarters of the time, they also address the show's characters by their fictional names. As the story progresses over 30 episodes, the PSI increases exponentially from an average of 17 comments per episode in the first ten to an average of 43 in the second ten, to a peak of 88 in the final ten (see Figure 3). The viewers of *al-Siham al-Marika* episodes appear to not only interact with the characters, but to also develop such one-sided relationships with them incrementally. The nature of such relationships, however, differ according to the character type: positive, negative, and transitional.

[4] After excluding all comments coming from users that were ambiguous in terms of sex, a chi-square test of independence revealed a significant difference in female and male's expressions of PSI in the comments, $\chi 2$ (1, N = 7365) = 68.42, p < .001.

Figure 3. Expressions of PSI with characters in al-Siham al-Marika across the 30 episodes on YouTube



Positive Role Models

Through their initial interactions with the positive role model Habiba, many viewers come to perceive her as an acquaintance. The series introduce Habiba (played by Lebanese actress Diamand Bou Aboud) as a teacher who deeply cares for her daughter and students as well as genuinely loves her husband Ammar, despite him serving as a top ISIS leader. Gradually, the audience learns that even though Habiba appears to adhere to ISIS restrictions on movement, clothing, and art performance, she does not actually share their views. For example, in episodes 5 and 6, Habiba comforts a student who lost his dad by secretly handing him a Mickey Mouse drawing to facilitate the practice of his painting hobby, reveals that the motivation behind her joining the resistance movement is to save the younger generations,

prepares an anti-ISIS graffiti that carries the words, "Down the *Khawarij*," challenges Ammar's extremist ideology, and lovingly expresses her willingness to move with him away from ISIS-controlled territory. In response, YouTube commenters blur the line between reality and drama by using Habiba's fictional name. They share their positive feelings toward her through a mix of words and heart emojis, praise her actions, and describe her, at times, as "the best of them all" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019d).

But when ISIS arrests Habiba in episode 13 and subsequently beheads her, the PSI intensifies by moving toward friendship. Prior to her execution, one viewer comments, "Oh God, I don't want them to kill Habiba. If they do, I will be deeply saddened" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019f). As she faces death in strong faith and courage in episode 14, the expressions of PSI reach their highest point since the beginning of the show. Many of those posting comments state how they cried for her, express their pain using broken heart and teary emojis, and blame ISIS for killing her. Even after her death, YouTube users continue to interact with her in the comments. They talk about how much they miss her and reminisce about her actions. A comment on episode 19 illustrates the heightened level of engagement:

> Habiba is wrong, she shouldn't have done anything. She should have remained silent because they are in a tough situation and the work of the resistance will not be useful. They [ISIS] are monsters who know no reason, only killing. The resistance fell in the hands of those who don't fear God, but He is the one who has the solution and He is the one who will help them. Habiba died and left her daughter behind in this cruel world (Al Nahar Drama, 2019k).

Building the character's story arc over time and invoking a dramatic event as the climax can thus facilitate the occurrence and development of PSI in anti-extremism E-E projects.

The interactions with another key positive role model are much more complex. The show introduces Sherif (played by Egyptian actor Hany Adel) as a Muslim man who pretends to join ISIS after his kidnapping to avoid execution and follows his superiors' orders in hopes

of being deployed to the border so that he can then search for his wife and daughter. In the show's initial setup of his character, the audience interact with Sherif as a good acquaintance. They sympathize with him for the struggle he is going through, praise him for refusing to have sex with an ISIS female leader he was forced to marry, and even express willingness to meet him in person. For some viewers, however, a few events complicate their virtual relationship with Sherif. In episodes 15 and 16, Sherif finds out his first wife and daughter are on display in the slave market and successfully buys his daughter but fails to purchase his wife after the top ISIS leader Abu Anas enslaved her. Sherif's unsuccessful attempts to convince Abu Anas to let her go spur a debate amongst the audience, prompting a notable increase in PSI in response to episode 16. Some commenters label Sherif a coward and weak for allowing someone to enslave his wife, while others remain supportive by offering sincere advice as to how he could resolve the situation. PSI reaches another high point in episode 22 when Sherif reports to Abu Anas about Ammar (an ISIS leader who turns against the group, secretly leads the resistance movement, and asks Sherif to join him) out of fear it may be a trap. Some viewers then angrily turn against Sherif, voicing their contempt and labeling him as selfish, filthy, stupid, traitor, low, and son of a dog, with some even threatening to "put a bullet in his head" for putting Ammar in danger (Al Nahar Drama, 2019l).

But as with Habiba, Sherif gradually becomes a friend to many viewers as he faces immense danger. In episode 27, Sherif eventually escapes with his family from ISIS-controlled lands, after which he learns that the paintings he gave to his 10-year-old stepson has put the young boy in jail. In response, YouTube users express their worries and fears about Sherif. One viewer, for example, prays that he doesn't go back and asks for somebody to call him; and another comments, "I will die if they execute Sherif" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019m). Indeed, episode 28 signals the peak of PSI throughout the entire show, as it portrays Sherif's return in an effort to save his stepson, his defiance against ISIS leaders, and his declaration of faith right before dying. Many viewers then share their prayers and their feelings of pain, sorrow, and depression, often addressing Sherif directly. For example, a commenter writes about how hard she cried before commenting on Sherif: "Seriously, you are

a hero. You could have said it's not my business and escaped with your wife and daughter, but really you are a great human being" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019n). Avoiding the idealization of positive role models in anti-extremism narratives by revealing flaws and bad decisions presents more realistic characters with whom viewers can interact parasocially.

Negative Role Models

Unlike the pseudo friendships with Habiba and Sherif, the PSI with negative role models evolve from the level of acquaintance to enmity. *Al-Siham al-Marika* presents Talha (played by Egyptian actor Walid Fawaz) and Abu Anas (played by Iraqi actor Kamel Ibrahim) as representatives of ISIS who carried out atrocities and manipulation of religion. The two characters follow their sexual desires by marrying and enslaving numerous women, commit heinous crimes of torture and prisoner execution, and justify their actions citing religious texts. In response, viewers' initial interactions with Talha and Abu Anas express discontentment and disapproval, often describing the two as insane, lustful, and psychopathic. As the characters continue to progress along the path of extremism without repentance in the later episodes, the PSI strengthens. Comments begin to convey hatred and detestation, to call for retribution by beheading, burning, and blowing up, and to utilize more negative labels, such as animals, dogs, trash, hypocrites, devils, and even infidels. In the final episode, Talha commits suicide after severing the head of his best friend, reporting members of the resistance, and losing hope in regaining his sexual ability. A YouTube user directly censures him, saying "You lived a traitor and died an infidel O you filthy, womanizer Talha [sic]" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019o). In a similar fashion, when Abu Anas oversees the beheading of Sherif in episode 28, a viewer remarks, "who can bring me Abu Anas and I will sever his head like he does to people" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019n). Hence, narrativizing the acts of extremists can not only elicit support for punishment of those who misappropriate the faith to commit bad acts, but it can also result in a heightened willingness to take retaliatory action.

Nonetheless, the attractiveness of some negative role models moderates the parasocial relationship. Through his sense of humor and friendship with one of the show's positive role

models, Talha is initially attractive to some of the YouTube audience compared to Abu Anas who constantly appeared as the heartless villain throughout the 30 episodes. Viewers' postings reflect some affinity with Talha in earlier episodes, describing him as funny, repeating a few of his punchlines, and using laughing emojis when talking about or to him. Some even sympathize with Talha when he loses his leg in episode 14, despite acknowledging his crimes and abusive behavior. Over time, feelings of enmity displace sympathy toward Talha in the comments. While the depiction of an attractive negative role model can lessen parasocial enmity, it cannot eradicate it if the plot does not show a reversal in the character's course of action.

Transitional Characters

In the show's early episodes, transitional characters prompt a similar level of parasocial animosity as the negative role models. Ammar (played by Egyptian actor Sherif Salama) and Umm Ubai (played by Tunisian actress Aicha Ben Ahmed) appear as ISIS leaders who wholeheartedly adhere to extremist ideology. They sanction crimes to further the group's cause, but eventually reconsider their interpretation of faith, struggle to justify their own actions, and repent. During Ammar and Umm Ubai's time as negative role models, the viewers denounce their actions and call for their punishment. Posts describe them as coldblooded enemies of God, criminals, and terrorists whom ISIS has brainwashed. Watching Umm Ubai pressure female abductees to either convert to Islam or become fodder for the slave market in episode 15, a commenter exclaims, "Umm Ubai is despicable, I wish they would behead her," while another remarks, "I hate Umm Ubai" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019h). Meanwhile, witnessing Ammar's pain after playing a role in arresting and beheading his wife Habiba, a viewer addresses him passionately:

> Only now you feel the heartache when the closest person to you loses her life in front of your eyes and you live with that burn inside of you. You were killing people and burning the hearts of their families, you were killing people in front of each other like

> they are animals and separating between men, women, and children. God is now avenging you, punishing you, and letting you feel the burn inside your heart [sic] (Al Nahar Drama, 2019k).

Yet, the attractiveness of the transitional characters prepares the audience for a shift in PSI. Ammar and Umm Ubai are both young, good-looking characters in love with their spouses, who are positive role models. As Ammar struggles after Habiba's death and seeks psychiatric help, some viewers show compassion and express appreciation for the deep feelings he holds for his late wife. For example, one viewer notes, "I cannot hate Ammar, his heart is full of love and he is being tortured" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019k). Umm Ubai also shows her love for her husband Sherif by helping set his first wife free after her enslavement. Seeing her efforts culminate in Sherif's reunion with his wife in episode 18, some commenters reconsider their perceptions of Umm Ubai and send her flower emojis and virtual hugs. One viewer applauds her, saying "Umm Ubai, now that you are showing compassion and acting like a human being rather than a robot, you are able to do the right and humane thing" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019j). The show's portrayal of the romantic side of extremist characters thus stimulated the audience to consider their forgiveness.

But character transformations appear to drive the actual shift in the nature of expressed PSI in viewer comments. In episode 20, for example, Ammar finally admits he was wrong and denounces extremism. The following episodes emphasize his repentance by showing his abandonment of extreme interpretations of Islam, his decision to lovingly raise his daughter, his leadership of the resistance movement, and his clandestine fight against ISIS. Viewers swiftly take Ammar's side in response. They welcome his transition, pray for him, provide advice for him, and express concern for his safety. When Ammar sacrifices his own life to save his brother by turning himself in to ISIS in the final episode, commenters eulogize him as a martyr and applaud his heroism. One viewer, for example, repeats Ammar's last words and stresses their continuity after his death, saying "Indeed, as Ammar mentioned, resistance is an idea and the idea does not die" (Al Nahar Drama, 2019o). Similarly, Umm Ubai aborts a

suicide attack inside a Shiite mosque in episode 27, signaling a shift away from extremism. She subsequently tells Sherif she loves him immediately before he dies, joins the crowd in defying ISIS's restrictions on music, and apologizes to her son for the way she previously raised him. Subsequently, viewers begin to voice their support to Umm Ubai, praising her transformation and praying she reunites with Sherif in heaven. Hence, incrementally humanizing defectors in anti-extremism narratives can potentially elicit support for their reintegration into society.

Concluding Thoughts

The audience response to *al-Siham al-Marika* demonstrates that E-E can be an effective messaging strategy to counter extremism. First, the viewers' engagement with the plot and characters in over 2,400 comments conveys the inherent ability of visual storytelling to overcome audience resistance to the message, particularly among female viewers. Other modes, such as testimonials of former terrorists, interviews with victims, statements by religious authority figures delegitimizing extremists, or social marketing campaigns against violence may lack the same potential for identification and persuasive potency of the entertainment narrative. Second, the show's plot and characters spur extensive online debates where the audience discuss religion, politics, and format of popular culture, often incorporating recurrent and complex religio-political constructs. In this case, the majority of postings align with the show's message, but regardless, the story simplifies key points of contention with the extremists' messaging. Third, the professional implementation of the E-E framework can amplify anti-extremism narratives. With the involvement of celebrities, the invocation of positive, negative, and transitional characters, the entertainment value of the story, and the show's release during the popular Ramadan season, *al-Siham al-Marika* episodes reached over 11 million viewers on YouTube alone, a number far surpassing that of typical counter-messaging campaigns. Although E-E projects will likely not pull away

individuals already engaged in violent action, they hold great promise for mitigating cognitive extremism at the societal level.

In addition, TV drama can be a promising format for anti-extremism E-E productions. Breaking down the story into episodes can generate anticipation, commitment, and familiarity. In fact, this study's findings show that the audience's level of engagement with the plot increases as the story progresses, while objections to the overarching message decreases over time. Spreading the narrative of the series over several hours further creates opportunities for nuanced story arcs for the main characters. In *al-Siham al-Marika*, for example, positive role models, like Sherif, can make bad decisions, while negative role models, like Talha or Ammar in earlier episodes, can appear funny or romantic despite their heinous crimes. As the viewers become more familiar with the characters and perceive them as somewhat similar in terms of religion, country of origin, ethnicity, appearance, and dialect, the tendency to blur the line between reality and fiction increases, with some later episodes prompting over 90 expressions of PSI. Moreover, the repeated exposure to the characters and their complex personalities, vulnerabilities, and struggles opens cleavages for PSI to evolve from acquaintance levels to those of friendship or enmity. Moving beyond the superficial depictions of extremists as evil and those fighting them as heaven sent, E-E dramas can thus showcase more realistic characters that can, in turn, enhance the potential for persuasion to occur.

The study also reveals the methodological potential of PSI in assessing audience response to anti-extremism E-E projects. Sampling individuals who are vulnerable to or supportive of extremist groups introduces various ethical and methodological challenges. Respondents may feel racially, ethnically, or religiously stigmatized when questioned about extremism or they may turn away or be less than honest due to fears of law enforcement (Cottee & Cunliffe, 2018; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2012; Nilsson, 2018). Examining PSI in user posts, by contrast, helps gauge immediate reactions to and interactions with characters on the screen. Respondents have distance and some anonymity through online posts that limits the problem of altering their sharing experience in a research setting. With the obvious caveat that

not all viewers express themselves in online comments, PSI can still offer a useful starting point to evaluate the import, reaction, and reach of anti-extremism narratives.

PSI further yields valuable insights into elevating audience response studies in the violent extremism context. Over the course of the episodes, many *al-Siham al-Marika* viewers increasingly express their affinity to and admiration for characters who hold on to their faith and resist extremist ideologies. They also voice their condemnation of those who accept ISIS orthodoxy without showing any signs of remorse. Building on previous research that emphasizes PSI's role in shaping attitudes about race, gender, health, and politics (Centeno, 2010; Hoffner & Cohen, 2015; Kistler & Lee, 2009), anti-extremism narratives that elicit pseudo-friendships and/or animosity with mediated personas has the potential to influence the audience's views on extremism as well. This study's findings, for example, point to viewers' emotional connectedness to fictional characters like Ammar and Umm Ubai once they defect and denounce extremism. This level of parasocial relationship with transitional characters, if amplified, could help the evolution of public opinion in ways needed to address the current rejection of former extremists and their children's repatriation to home countries ("Les Français approuvent massivement le jugement des djihadistes par l'Irak et ne veulent pas voir leurs enfants revenir," 2019; Vinopal, 2019). Similarly, expressions of parasocial enmity to negative role models in *al-Siham al-Marika* display willingness to take retaliatory action, which might be channeled toward initiatives combating extremism, building capacity of local communities, collecting donations, and providing social services to victims. In short, the incorporation of PSI analyses in the monitoring and evaluation of anti-extremism messaging can expand existing social media metrics, such as views, likes, shares, and retweets.

Study Limitations

Finally, the limitations of this study can be of benefit to future research. First, the quantitative investigation of parasocial occurrence depends on one coder, which, despite the coder's familiarity with the language and culture, can still compromise the reliability of the analysis to some extent. Other studies can integrate multiple coders in order to run inter-coder

reliability tests that solidify the analysis. Second, the study captures PSI in a small subset of viewers who post their comments on the episodes. But those viewers may or may not be among the main group whom the anti-extremism initiative aims to target. To alleviate this issue, future studies can complement content analyses with surveys that unveil more about the individual viewer, while using PSI scales to explore engagement in larger samples and exploring other constructs in narrative persuasion, such as perceived similarity and transportation. Third, the study shows that PSI often peaked in response to dramatic events that relate to loss of life in the storyline. While the study notes that pattern, it does not offer an in-depth analysis of the audience's grieving process. Hence, parasocial grief, which is a more recent concept in audience reception literature, can be another useful lens that researchers may apply to evaluate the persuasive potency of death portrayals in anti-extremism messaging. Moreover, the study focuses only on Arab audience response to one E-E project that depicts Islamist extremism. Further research can explore the reactions to similar projects targeting other regions, using different languages, and tackling other strands of extremism, including far-right, separatist, and environmental.

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