



An Appraisal of 'Facebook's Global Peer-to-Peer Campaign on Challenging Violent Extremism' in Nigeria: The SOAR Peer-to-Peer Project

 Victor Osae Ihidero

Department of Theatre and
Performing Arts, Ahmadu Bello
University, Zaria.

Corresponding Author: Victor Osae
Ihidero

E-mail:

Article Citation: Ihidero, V. O. (2020). An Appraisal of 'Facebook's Global Peer-to-Peer Campaign on Challenging Violent Extremism' in Nigeria: The SOAR Peer-to-Peer Project, *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, 1(1): 41–48.

Received Date: November 10, 2019

Accepted Date: December 1, 2019

Online Date: Jan 18, 2020

Publisher: Kare Publishing

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Cultural Studies

E-ISSN: 2667-6214



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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the efforts of Facebook Incorporated in countering violent extremist narratives in Nigeria since 2015. It assesses the methodologies of Facebook and Edventure Partners in the trifecta global campaign that involved Speak Out Act Right (SOAR) team in Gender Policy Unit of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria, Bayero University Kano (BUK), Kano, the Women Against Violent Extremism (WAVE) of the American University of Nigeria (AUN) Yola and African Youths International Development Foundation (AFYIDEF), Abuja. This study examines the impact of SOAR campaign in challenging extreme narratives both on Facebook and the university's hosting communities. The paper uses the theory of Virtual Ethnography to claim that the deficit in providing institutional and logistical support to small community groups, organizations, popular online pages and research institutes by the Nigerian government contributes to the widespread of extremist narratives online. It contends that the regional government and the armed forces of many West African countries fighting terrorism have not invested enough time and resources in developing counter narratives to dispel the tokenism or methods terrorist groups used in recruiting student fighters to feed the intellectual wing of their extremist positions. It argues further that governments invest more on procuring arsenals and other military hardware rather focus on communication dimension to halting the attractive lure offered by groups with extremist positions. The study affirms that the 'Facebook Global Peer-to-Peer Campaign on Challenging Violent Extremism' in Nigeria provides a toolkit, materials and methods with which individuals, community group, organizations, universities and even the government and armed forces can use in fighting extremism.

Keywords: Facebook, Peer-to-Peer Campaign, Extremism, A.B.U and B.U.K

Introduction

The internet pervades all facets of modern world and violent extremism is no exception. Although the centrality of the internet in modern social relationships and governance is sometimes contested, few would disprove the role that online communication plays in compelling or coercing people to join violent extremist groups. Whilst there are divergent positions on the exact nature of this process, it is believed that it is rare for individuals to radicalize entirely in absence of any outside communication.

Radicalization remains a social phenomenon and the fact that some of these social interactions have migrated online does not change this.

Extremists do not simply produce and disseminate propaganda and then move straight to offline recruitment, they utilize peer to peer messaging applications contained within social media platforms to engage in direct personal contact with potential recruits to their cause (Omoera & Ogah, 2016; Omoera & Ake, 2016). Sometimes these online conversations completely displace offline recruitment.

Extremist propaganda within the Nigerian cyberspace is often subtle and there are examples of nascent efforts to counter this through the creation of counter-narrative campaigns such as Speak Out Act Right (SOAR), Stand Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) and Women Against Violent Extremism (WAVE), all an offshoot of Facebook's peer-to-peer global digital campaign to counter extremist propaganda online and recruitment in the offline. However, the Nigerian government does not fund or provide institutional support to initiatives aimed at countering extremist narratives online especially after the expiration of externally sourced grants such as the one offered by Facebook. This highlights the fact that there is a crucial piece missing in Nigeria's efforts to counter recruitment to extremist groups via online activities. Worse, there is a dearth of report-data on practical workshops or practicalized digital campaign that have been conducted to counter the lure of extremists.

Part of the response to combat the lure of extremist ideology has involved recruiting individuals and groups to run Peer-to-Peer (P2P) countering violent extremism (CVE) programmes. These CVE campaigns, while at times haphazardly applied and largely untested, seek to halt individuals at numerous stages within the radicalization process – from pre- to post-adoption of extremist ideologies – by providing them with alternative discourses and narratives, along with other relevant information, that might convince and compel them not to support violence (Innes, Roberts, and Lowe, 2017). Hundreds of CVE campaigns have been launched around the globe over the past four years by Facebook, often with direct state and private sector support (EdVenture Partners, 2017). And yet, to date, none of these campaigns in Nigeria have actually been assessed in any rigorous or academic manner. This paper remedies this situation by providing first-hand insight on university-based, online, peer-to-peer CVE campaign. The paper is based on the campaign of a student group, Speak Out Act Right (SOAR) of Ahmadu Bello University Zaria – herein referred to as the P2P group – who between January 2015 to November 2017, developed and orchestrated an original, English language and Hausa CVE campaign as part of the *Facebook Global Digital Challenge*.

The article provides a detailed account of the group's approach to CVE and an assessment of its campaign. The group's CVE campaign was designed with both short- and long-term initiatives in mind. The first part of the initiative – a social media blitz entitled *Speak Out Act Right (SOAR)* (<https://www.facebook.com/SpeakOutActRightSOAR/>) by ABU Zaria – was developed to run for thirteen months. The data gathered therein, along with the material created during the campaign itself, was simultaneously posted and hosted by Facebook Incorporated with the intention of establishing a longer-term repository and platform that might assist organizations and groups looking to expand upon the CVE campaign in the future. The article highlights the entirety of the P2P group's campaign, from theory and conceptualization, to media strategy, and evaluation. The article begins with a description of the campaign's core objectives. That is followed with a detailed exploration of how the campaign was actually implemented, with a critical review of how external contributors to the campaign – that is, "credible voices", at-risk-youths, and civic minded individuals – were selected, vetted, and promoted. Next, the article provides a qualitative and quantitative breakdown of the campaign's real-time success and failure. The article ends with a discussion of the challenges and difficulties the student group faced in running their campaign, lessons that are pertinent for others contemplating a similar endeavour.

The Campaign's Description and Objective: Thematic Engagement on a Weekly Basis

The campaign is organized by Facebook Incorporated and managed by Edventure Partners. Students were told to design a working toolkit for countering violent extremism (CVE) in their country and by extension, their university campuses. The task is for them to implement a program, both online and offline, every week to dispel extremist positions and narratives. The student groups were to choose their target audience from: civic minded individuals, at-risk-youths, silent or uncommitted -majority and credible voices using both digital and non-digital strategies to reach them.

The SOAR campaign team in Ahmadu Bello University included two sets of objectives. At the macro-level, the teams sought to establish and run a unique, Nigerian-themed, CVE initiative within a twenty-eight-month timeframe, and create the online foundation. At the micro-level, the P2P group sought to accomplish other, more-limited objectives, including:

- ▣ *Utilize a Public Health Model:* The campaign took a broad initiative with CVE. Not only did the group seek to undermine extremist narratives, but its posts were also meant to disseminate public information on warning signs of people potentially on a violent extremist trajectory. The P2P group sought to infuse the campaign with information for individuals looking for further support. For instance, social alienation is a common theme highlighted by experts as a possible causal factor leading to extremism (Leiken, 2012). It was for this reason that details of support from credible voices and units within the

university help victims of bullying, gender extremism, and hate speech were included in the content published during the campaign

☒ *Disseminate credible voices of community members, activists, religious leaders, and scholars:* The inclusion of a variety of credible voices was a key component of the campaign. Given the timeframe of the project, the P2P group sought to quickly establish itself as a reliable resource of PVE-related content by developing and providing original

content with credible experts of PVE, who both lent the campaign their ideas and provided it with their official and open support

☒ *Short Films and Music Concert to Engage Students:* the SOAR CVE campaign produced short films which was uploaded and shared on Facebook to dispel the lore of extremist groups and to promote humanity. Music concert was also organized to engage students in a face-to-face interaction on the ills of promoting hate, cyber-bullying and gender extreme positions

☒ *Drama:* Drama performances that took the nature of invisible theatre were used to drag attention to the diverging issues of extremism within the university, and Samaru community

☒ *Sports and Games Challenge:* Inter-faculty games were organized for sport aficionados. The rules of the various sports and games were used to instruct student groups on life lessons. One of the highpoints of these games is “Basketball for Peace” spearheaded by

Coach Oliver Johnson of the University’s Basketball Team

☒ *Vox Pop/Community Voices of Women:* The voices of the community people, especially women were gotten from Samaru Market on issues of gender extremism, religious extremism and hate speeches within the community. With their permission, the voices were recorded and published on Facebook, television and radio

☒ *Guest Lecture/Inter-faculty Debate Competition on Challenging Extremism:* This strategy brought about divergent ideas and suggestions on countering extremism on campus. In attendance were the various students cut across divergent religious sects in Christianity and Islam. The preliminary stages of our P2P Inter-Faculty Debate Competition took place on online—Facebook. Questions were carefully chosen to get our target audience; in this case, at-risk-students to come together to talk about our religious differences and to develop narratives to counter hate speeches and extremist practices. About nine thousand five hundred and twenty-five (9,525) students participated (in Likes and Comments) in the online and live debate with 700+ Shares.

The P2P group subdivided its CVE campaign into seven themes, each corresponding to a given week within the campaign itself. Information on each theme was first disseminated on their respective Facebook pages, which was also used to cite and share credible news sources linked to the specific theme and/or other content related to an evolving event or CVE story. Written

excerpts and videos featuring the campaign’s credible voices, short films, vox pop were also posted to the Facebook page. In total, the P2P group created over 175 unique Facebook posts during the period of CVE, 700+ Facebook shares, 1,7039 Likes, 1,210+ comments and reactions with over five million, two hundred and twenty-five thousand, three hundred reach, as of the time submitting a final report to Facebook. All of the original content was then duplicated on the project’s website which also housed further information about the campaign itself.

The P2P group set out its thematic objectives with great sensitivity: the group was acutely aware of the numerous ways in which its campaign could lead to forms of “othering” and create feelings of exclusion within certain community groups. Given the potential for this pitfall, the P2P group’s campaign focused on all forms of violent extremism, including religious extremism, gender extremism, cyber-bullying, hate speeches and extremists-inspired violence. In sum, the group purposefully cast a wide net around CVE, addressing numerous forms of harmful rhetoric, and challenging the many distinct but equally harmful assumptions prevalent within Nigerian society.

Theoretical Clarifications: Virtual Ethnography

This article is anchored on the theory of Virtual Ethnography. The theory is chosen because it offers a tool for understanding the inferences made in this study. Virtual ethnography is a research approach for exploring the social interactions that take place in digitized and digitalized society or virtual environment. These interactions often take place on the internet in sites such as newsgroups, chat rooms, and web-based discussion forums. Virtual ethnography as a theory has divergent methods of inquiries such as virtual interview, visual interview and audio-visual ethnography. This study falls within the brackets of audio-visual aspects of virtual ethnography. Audio-visual ethnography uses photography, motion pictures, hypermedia, the web, interactive CDs, CD-ROMs, and virtual reality as ways of capturing and expressing perceptions and social realities of people. These varied forms of audio-visual representation provide a means for recording, documenting, and explaining the social worlds and understandings of people.

According to Berg (2008:937), “audio-visual ethnography can be applied in the form of photo elicitation, rephotography, photo voice and visual narratives.” Of the divergent applicative techniques in audio-visual ethnography three only concerns this study: photo elicitation, rephotography and visual narratives. Photo elicitation, Berg (2008:938) notes, is the use of

photographs or a film where the researcher asks the viewers to discuss the meaning of photographs or a film specifically created or selected by the researcher with the idea of using the photographs or film to elicit information from the viewers. Typically, the ‘viewers’ comments and analysis of these visual materials are recorded on either audio or videotape, providing a means for analysis at a later time.

Rephotography, on the other hand, slightly varies from photo elicitation. The technique involves collecting photographs taken at some time in the past and making second images at the current time to reveal how things have (or have not) changed. By asking the participants about these changes, one is granted access into their social understandings about social changes, natural disasters, political causes, war, and the gamut of other social and culturally related elements that may be depicted by various photographs. To expand on the idea of a series or sequence of photographs as data is actually to introduce the concept of the visual narrative. Sociologists use verbal narratives to offer an account, tell a life story, or delineate various aspects of culture. On the microanalysis level, the visual narrative view is wholly consistent with symbolic interaction. Symbolic interaction seeks to orient researchers toward the process of interaction based on interpretations. Visual materials are frequently offered as narrative in form. Visual narratives can invoke a variety of feelings and represent a number of meanings that reflect an individual’s perspective on his or her life, culture, and social reality. These methods are used to generate and to share data on Facebook, Twitter and the group’s YouTube accounts.

Virtual ethnography branches out of performance ethnography, a set of interrelated and still emerging qualitative approaches that bring together ethnographic methods and theoretical concepts from performance studies (Given, 2008). Performance ethnography is a field of inquiry that bridges communications studies and theatre and performing arts. It includes cultural activities deemed theatrical or self-consciously constructed performative works of art such as play productions, performance art, or educational drama inclusive of any performative or dramatic form—storytelling, dance, music, street theater, video, folklore and so on. Performance studies provides insights into the nature of social relations by examining performances in real life, such as public gatherings, rituals, games, or sporting events and recently digital applications that are seen as performative. This study goes beyond the scope of performance on stage. It branches into virtual reality and attempts to understand how theatrical performances updated on online platforms can be use to generate data for analysis with a view to discover the individual,

social, and cultural factors that give shape to extremist narratives. Jackson (1989:211) suggests that researchers should be aware of the “mutual dependency” of science and literature, letting each inform the other without elevating either to emerge as “truth”. The concern of this research is not to develop a neo/ethnography for CVE, but to argue for the inclusion of new communication approaches in reducing the allure of extremist groups.

Methodological Consideration

The SOAR campaign team deployed the survey research design. This is because surveys have an upper hand above other methodologies in that they can be used to investigate problems in realistic settings and a large amount of data can be gathered (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). Both qualitative and quantitative research instrumentations were used in generating data. For the quantitative instrument, questionnaire was used to generate data whilst focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were used. The questionnaire was administered online via the Facebook instant messages application of all the active participants of the campaign. SOAR’s uploaded videos and short films, speeches of credible voices and other creative content were assessed from Facebook. These creative materials also provided this study insight into assessing the impacts of the project. Three FGDs of 12 students were done; one for intra-faith comprising diverse religious sects: Sunnis, Shiite, Salafiyya, Quadariyya, Tijaniyya and Ahmadiyya; one for inter-denominational Christian faith comprising orthodox: Catholic, Protestants and Pentecostal faith. The third FGD comprised student-adherents of all the extant sects and faiths within the campus.

The study population consisted of the students of A.B.U Zaria. The total population of undergraduate students is 35848 (Gender Policy Unit, ABU 2017) with a distribution of 24530 male and 11318 female students. Of this total figure, 2131 students directly participated in the campaign. To get the sample size for this study, a formula by Yamane (1974) as cited by Evborokhai (2009) was adopted. The formula is illustrated thus: $n = (N)$

$N = \text{population}$

1 is constant

$E = \text{level of significance chosen } (0.05)^2$

$n = 2131$

$1 + 2131 (0.05)^2$

$n = 2131$

1+2131 (0.0025)

n= 2131

1+ 5.3275

n= 2131

6.3275

n= 336.7838799

n= 337

Sample size= 337

The study made use of the cluster sampling of the probability sampling technique. There are twelve faculties in A.B.U Zaria excluding the Institute of Education; to get the sample population the faculties were divided into clusters of four large faculties, that is, Science (7,079 students), Education (6,644 students), Engineering (5,086 students) and Arts (3,287). Questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection for these clusters. Three hundred and thirty-seven (337) copies of questionnaire were distributed out of which 309 copies were returned. Hence the response rate was 91.7% (80 (25.9%) male respondents, and 229 (74.1%) female respondents). Below is the response rate of the copies of questionnaire:

Table 1: Return rate of the copies of questionnaire

Faculties	Number Administered		Number Returned	
	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)
Science	94	27.9	91	29.4
Education	91	27.0	90	29.1
Engineering	73	21.7	66	21.4
Arts	79	23.4	62	20.1
TOTAL	337	100.0	309	100.0

The data gathered were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical method. The descriptive employed the use of frequency distribution, simple percentages and tables to analyze the data while the inferential statistics employed the use of regression analysis to check if the counter-narratives in the creative materials of SOAR team have significant influence on A.B.U students.

Data Presentation/Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: Are there extremist practices or ideologies in Samaru Campus of A.B.U?

Table 2: There are extremist practices and positions in A.B.U Zaria and Samaru

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	90	29.1
Agree	95	30.7
Undecided	6	2
Strongly Disagree	100	32.4
Disagree	18	5.8
Total	309	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2017

From the table above, (185)59.8% of the Ahmadu Bello University student-respondents resident in Samaru Campus agree that extremist practices exist within their campus while (118)38.2% disagree. (6)2% were undecided.

Table 3: Types of extremist positions mostly encountered by students

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender Extremism	109	35.3
Religious Extremism	83	26.9
Social/Cyber-Extremism and Bullying	100	32.4
Political Extremism	17	5.5
Total	309	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2017

Table 3 shows that gender, religious, social, and cyber-extremism are the predominant forms of extreme practices in Samaru Campus with 94.6% of the student-respondents attesting that they have been victims of one of at least one or all of the three forms listed in the table.

Table 4: Table showing the areas/issues SOAR's Peer-to-Peer Campaign on CVE effectively address

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender Extremism	91	29.4
Religious/Ethnic Extremism	108	35.0
Social/Cyber-terrorism	100	32.4
Political extremism	10	3.2
Total	309	100.0
Source: Field Survey, 2017		

Table 4 shows the issues the CVE campaign of Speak Out Act Right (SOAR) address. 29.4% of the campaign effort was put into challenging gender extreme narratives whilst a total of 67.4% was put into countering violent extremist narratives in religious and cyber-extremism.

Research Question 2: What are the impacts of SOAR's CVE Campaign in A.B.U, Zaria?

Table 5: The Peer-to-Peer CVE Campaign of SOAR has really impacted me

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Strongly Agree	146	47.2
Agree	128	41.4
Undecided	9	3.0
Disagree	16	5.2
Strongly Disagree	10	3.2
Total	309	100.0
Source: Field survey, 2017		

The table above shows the level of impact of Speak Out Act Right's (SOAR) CVE campaign in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. 88.6% of the student-respondents agree that they CVE campaign has had impacts on their online activities and has deepened their knowledge on how to use social media to counter the allures of extremist groups, how to identify online hook-traps and pages with subtle terrorist or extreme ideologies. This is backed up by the revelations of the discussants in the FGDs sessions with the intra and inter-religious sects in the University. Student-respondent 9 (SR 9) says that:

SR 9: Before now, I use to be drawn to many attractive things I see or I am invited to see on any pages online. This campaign has really opened my eyes to understand that I can be lured, without knowing, into enjoining groups which hold extreme ideologies without knowing. They say it is subtle and takes time before one is completely brainwashed. This campaign taught me a lot of things

Similarly, another respondent says:

SR 2: Hmmm. Truly, I use to think and hate Muslims because I feel like they don't like us. But during the campaign, one of the people [SOAR member] quoted somebody, no, it was a Facebook post, the person said something about "I think, therefore I am" and began to explain how many people behave towards their fellow human being and treat people outside their religion as animals and bad people. I knew that the person was talking to me. I wanted to know more and that is why I signed up to join the campaign. The campaign has changed my bias.

SR 13: It is true. I agree with what everyone said but for me, where I think that the campaign has affected me is the use of the internet. I always shared the update from the SOAR page and my friends and family members were like "when did you start all this one?" They were really surprised because they did not know me to show concern with things like this but I for first time saw a reason to be part of a campaign that helped someone and more to add my voice to an issue of global concern

SR 4: I learnt a lot from the games especially the Badminton tournament and Basketball match. It made me to learn to live by rules; to control my emotions and it also taught me how to use the right words when I am hurt by an opponent.

SR 7: I have learnt to respect women too. Before the campaign, I use to be one of the students in Suleiman Hall who will abuse and bully female students as they pass by Demonstration School. But through

this campaign I turned a new leaf as I discovered that hate speeches against women could make them have bad self-esteem which may lead to their committing suicide.

These responses represent some of the impacts discussants identified by active involvement in the peer-to-peer campaign on CVE. SR's comment reminisces the call from Coach Oliver B. Johnson's during an in-depth interview. Johnson (2017) says that:

If youths could respect the rule of the sports they love and apply same to their lives, [the Nigerian] society would be better... Nothing can thrive in chaos. All youth must be taught some kinds of rules pertaining to peace... As long as everyone adheres to the rules which are implemented by the referees there'll be peace... Respect, Tolerance and honesty...also have its rules

This statement presents alternative method of engaging youths from taking radical stand or supporting extreme ideologies that undermine humanity. An interview with the Team Lead of the SOAR/ CVE project campaign, Mr Timothy reveals the problem that catalyzes the involvement of students in violent extremism. CVE Project's revelation answers research question three [3] of this study which is on the sustainability of the peer-to-peer campaign. According to him:

The campaign had a lot of challenges especially in terms of institutional and government support. Firstly, we got a mini-grant of USD 1000 (₦351, 000) for the campaign. At the expiration of the grant, we wanted to scale up and approached many government agencies, military and paramilitary, government departments, civil society organizations for support which we never got. We tried to continue with small donations but could not function as we wanted to. We are still carrying out online campaign activities but on a low key. We would be launching a nationwide countering extremism campaign in Nigeria via the, stand against Violent Extremism (SAVE) the World Network. We achieved a lot in our recently concluded campaign. The campaign gave us a lot of insights into our worlds and we want to continue campaigning for humanity

This report shows the disinclination of many institutions toward perceiving extremism as a communication problem. From the findings of the student-respondents, it can be argued that there are divergent extant forms of extremism in Nigeria with 59.8% respondents of the sampled population attesting that extremist practices exist in the Ahmadu Bello University, Samaru Campus. Of the diverse forms of extremism, the student-respondents identify gender, religious and social/cyber-extremism and bullying as the predominant forms on campus. Table 3 shows that 94.6% of the respondents have been victims of one or all of the three forms listed in the table.

The Speak Out Act Right (SOAR) Peer-to-Peer campaign baseline research also captured this data and formed a premise on which the campaign addressed these three thematic areas. As seen in Table 4, 29.4% of the campaign effort was put into challenging gender extreme narratives whilst a total of 67.4% was put into countering violent extremist narratives in religious and cyber-extremism. The impact of the campaign is captured in Table 5 as 88.6% of the student-respondents agree that the CVE campaign has had impacts on their online activities and has deepened their knowledge on how to use social media to counter the allures of extremist groups, and has changed their stance on gender and religiously motivated positions. This is evident in the revelations of the diverse student religious groups in the combined FGD above where student-respondents highlighted ways the campaign has changed and benefitted them.

The choice of deploying alternative communication method to counter extremist narratives is imperative considering the use of games, credible voices and drama to engage students. As one of the credible voices, Coach Johnson says, "If youths could respect the rule of the sports they love and apply same to their lives, [the Nigerian] society would be better". Rules as in laws govern society and playing in a diverse team could help people appreciate their difference. However, appreciating difference can be short-lived if the diversified group is not constantly and continuously engaged. This is the problem that may have adverse effect on the success of the campaign. The current approach to engage extremist positions and ideologies has been confrontational whereas the problem can be solved from the grassroots by engaging small community groups like SOAR and others using communication. Rather than spend money to procure military hardware and arsenal as it is the practice or reality, extremist ideologies should also be fought using alternative methods. Guns and drones do not kill ideology. Ideology is diffused through communication and only communication can be used to counter extreme narratives.

What the SOAR campaign has done with the 'Facebook Global Peer-to-Peer Campaign on Challenging Violent Extremism' is to provide toolkits, materials and methods with which individuals, community groups, organizations, universities and even the government and armed forces can use in fighting the ideologies that sponsors extremism. This initiative as well as creative materials should form part of military engagement in the fight against terror.

Conclusion

To counter the ideologies that drive violent extremism in Nigeria require online and offline efforts. Most of the extant efforts in countering extremism have come with the might of direct confrontation militarily. Nevertheless, direct confrontation cannot be said to have yielded results because, while military engagements may succeed in quashing terror as the case may be with Nigeria, it cannot kill extremist or terrorist narratives or

ideologies resident in an individual or groups. There is a need for a communication to countering extreme narratives. SOAR's effort in the 'Facebook's Global Peer-to-Peer Campaign on Challenging Violent Extremism' is one of the viable methods that can be considered in preventing extremism.

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