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Understanding the Community's Perceptions Towards Online Radicalisation:
An Exploratory Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand the community's perceptions towards detecting signs of online radicalisation and examine whether different community members would exhibit different levels of understanding. A 57-item survey was administered to 160 undergraduates from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and 160 Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) workers. Based on the ratings of the 42 online radicalisation indicators identified by Neo, two-factor analyses were separately conducted using oblique rotation to undercover a four-factor structure for the NTU sample and a three-factor solution for the MTurk sample. The results revealed valuable insights into how community members would identify terrorist threats. Furthermore, the survey revealed differences in the participants' views on the role of the internet in radicalisation pathways and their perceptions regarding various counter-terrorism strategies. Together, the findings would contribute to the discussion of how law enforcement could better engage and work together with the community members to detect terrorist threats.

KEYWORDS

Community Perceptions, Indicators, Internet, Online Radicalisation, Singapore, Terrorism

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the growing threat of online radicalisation, it is unrealistic that the onus to detect the warning signs resides solely under the purview of law enforcement. Due to the massive amount of available data that intelligence agencies had to sieve through (Skillicorn, 2008) and the recognition that members of the community have reported cases of self-radicalised individuals to the authorities (Neo et al., 2019), observers have recommended the importance for law enforcement to work closely with the community that they are trying to protect (Shaftoe et al., 2007) in order to mitigate the threat of online radicalisation.

Specifically, community members are vital partners (Ministry of Home Affairs [MHA], 2019; Williams et al., 2016) as they have the opportunity to observe expressions and behaviours associated with online radicalisation on their social media accounts. To the best of the author's knowledge, there is currently a lack of research that examines how the community perceives indicators of radicalisation,

DOI: 10.4018/IJCWT.297860 *Corresponding Author especially within the context of the cyber realm. Thus, this exploratory study seeks to understand the community's perceptions towards detecting signs of online radicalisation. Insights about this study can inform law enforcement counter-terrorism outreach efforts and contribute to the development of measures to detect radicalisation in social media posts.

2. THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN COUNTERING RADICALISATION

The media's portrayal of attacks and the perpetrators behind them have shaped how people react to and formulate opinions about radicalisation and terrorism. Previous research has shown how the lack of or incorrect knowledge about terrorism has led the community to develop negative attitudes towards specific segments of the community (Abdul Rahman, 2019). For example, even before the perpetrator—responsible for the 2011 Norway attacks—was arrested, the media was quick to assume that the attack was motivated by Al-Qaeda. Many mainstream media were drawing this link without any conclusive evidence—e.g., the newspaper "The Sun" carried the headline "Al-Qaeda Massacre: Norway's 9/11". Eventually, investigations revealed that the perpetrator was not an Al-Qaeda supporter and instead was a right-wing terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik (Sehgal, 2011). In itself, such media framing risks the likelihood of people associating certain religions with terrorism (von Sikorski et al., 2017) and influences how they would identify terrorist threats.

In the context of jihad attacks, such perceptions may also increase the occurrence of Islamophobia (Abdelkader, 2016) and reinforce unwanted stereotypes of Muslims. These developments can lead to dangerous outcomes where individuals are harmed or traumatised due to their affiliation to certain groups. As Cameron et al. (2013) write:

> *Beards and rucksacks (as seen in video images of the bombers) became symbols of suspicions; everyday actions, such as taking a seat on the train or going out, could activate potential terrorism stories, reinforced by internalised voices of fearful parents or relations. (p. 9)*

Similarly, such stereotypical and biased mindsets may manifest in the cyber domain in the form of verbal abuse and unnecessary reporting of accounts—belonging to specific groups of individuals—to the authorities and social media companies. Hence, this prompts a critical need to rethink how one's experiences and knowledge on online radicalisation would impact our opinions about what kind of online content is deemed radical and who are considered dangerous.

It is, therefore, pertinent to appraise the level of knowledge and potential misunderstanding that the community may have regarding how radicalisation occurs and its associated markers (Hussain, 2018). Awan and Guru (2017) remark that many community members do not have a good grasp of the radicalisation process, let alone its warning signs. They may, in some instances, interpret a practising Muslim as a potential terrorist. This is of concern as community members are uniquely positioned to detect potential warning signs amongst their family and friends (see Neo et al., 2019). Thus, the lack of knowledge about radicalisation indicators may result in missed opportunities for community members to flag them and for authorities to assess and intervene (if necessary), or in the worst case, lead to the unnecessary activation of law enforcement resources to investigate bias reporting.

2.1 Framework for Detecting Markers of Radicalisation in Social Media Posts

Based on the common stages found amongst various models of radicalisation and insights gleaned from theories of online radicalisation, Neo (2020) presents a theoretical framework to detect markers of online radicalisation (see Table 1). It consists of three distinct yet interrelated dimensions (person-centric, psychosocial, and protective) and forms the basis of a study by the author to identify and validate factors and their associated indicators for detecting online