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Shifting the Battle to Social Media: The Effectiveness of Boko Haram's Online Strategy in Terms of its Recruitment¹

Abstract

In 2015, after Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and became the Islamic State West Africa Province, online social media's dominance was nearly instantaneous. This paper analyzes whether Boko Haram's use of social media results in more effective recruitment and, if so, what trends can be observed in the former that contribute to the latter. I conclude that social media plays an instrumental role in the terrorist organization's online recruitment since Boko Haram can disseminate instant messages to large online audiences while also exercising control over their visual content. Additionally, Boko Haram's use of social media ties into recruitment as there is a link to radicalization, religious indoctrination, and sharing its narrative. Finally, the group uses social media to depict itself as the winning entity by representing strength, unity, and taking advantage of the country's anti-government sentiment. While online influences are undoubtedly crucial for recruitment, it must be emphasized that they are usually coupled with offline physical connections in the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Nigeria, social media, recruitment, online messages

Introduction

The dominance of information and communication technology in Nigeria has both advantages and disadvantages since, on the one hand, it could promote

¹ My research is related to critical infrastructure protection. I presented my results at the ICCECIP 2020 conference, a written summary of which I will publish in this article.

development in the economic, political, and social spheres (United Nations General Assembly, 2013), while on the other hand, it has the potential to pave the way for the rapid growth of terrorists' use of social media. To illustrate the pace and importance of the latter, between 2000 and 2011, for instance, the number of mobile phone users has grown from 10 million to 647 million people in Africa (Carmody, 2013). Online platforms can provide terrorists with communication, coordination, and recruitment tools at relatively low costs. Furthermore, the use of online social media has contributed to the facilitation of sharing propaganda, enlisting potential recruits, and claiming or publicizing terrorist attacks (Cox, 2018).

Following its foundation in 2002, Boko Haram mostly conveyed information to intended audiences by more traditional types of media, such as newspapers, directly speaking to the press, giving open-air lectures, using pre-recorded videos, and distributing audio cassettes, fliers, and leaflets. However, in 2015, after pledging allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and becoming the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), the dominance of social media was nearly instantaneous² (Ibid, 22.). Owing to the large number of illiterate people in Nigeria, reaching out to desired audiences through graphic instead of written content was also facilitated. Besides their prompt circulation, social media messages were regarded to have a similar impact, although at significantly lower costs to a much larger audience.

Objectives of the study

Various aspects of Boko Haram have been studied extensively with the inclusion of the following areas: the strategies and tactics of the terrorist organization, the development, goals, and origins of the insurgency, Nigerian military campaigns waged against Boko Haram, the organization's threatening position for the stability and unity of Nigeria, and the positioning of the terrorist group within the context of Nigerian ethnic and religious violence. Some additional published material on Boko Haram has dealt with its characteristics as a terrorist organization, focusing on potential responses to Boko Haram by the Nigerian government, studying the connections between the group and other Islamic terrorist organizations, the effects of Boko Haram on civil-military affairs, and

2 RAND Europe interview with Professor Isaac Olawale Robert, academic expert, 8 September 2017.

the development of the insurgency as a consequence of the failure and weaknesses of the Nigerian state.³

Scholarly research has predominantly concentrated on analyzing Boko Haram's military exploits. At the same time, less attention was devoted to scrutinizing the interconnectedness of its use of social media and recruitment through public messages and messaging techniques. Nevertheless, I would reason the terrorist organization sees the potential in social media's power and therefore allocates both time and resources to circulate its messages in the form of social media statements and video recordings. I believe a reliable analysis of Boko Haram's military approach coupled with its online media strategy is needed to extensively understand Boko Haram's nature and the consequence of its attacks.

Importance of the study

Analyzing the links between Boko Haram's use of social media and recruitment may lead to a more comprehensive understanding of policymakers in the governmental and institutional spheres of what the terrorist organization stands for and its operations. As a result, the formulation of their counter-terrorism policies can be steered in the right direction. International cooperation is required since Boko Haram can no longer be considered as a regional organization. Still, it is rather interwoven in global terror trends, attested by its relations to other terrorist groups. For instance, concerning the training and recruitment of female suicide bombers, a link could be discerned to Hezbollah (Besenyő & Keresztes, 2016), while creating the Media Office of the West Africa Province (MOWAP) is an obvious connection to ISIL. Mapping the minds of Boko Haram's leaders could be instrumental in the sense that the more knowledge we possess, the more fully we will understand the group's motivations behind committing acts of terrorism. Through careful analysis of Boko Haram's online media statements and video recordings, not only may we be able to predict upcoming attacks in Sub-Saharan Africa but also put an end to them at an early stage (Ogbondah & Agbese, 2018). Additionally, the study is destined to enrich the growing literature on terrorism and recruitment in the region. Understanding the potential

3 Some of the published materials are Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria, edited by Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, 2014; Boko Haram: Anatomy of a Crisis, edited by Ioannis Mantzikos, 2013; Nigeria without Nigerians? Boko Haram and the Crisis in Nigeria's Nation-Building, written by Jidefor Adibe, 2012; Digital Activism and Cyberconflicts in Nigeria: Occupy Nigeria, Boko Haram and MEND, written by Shola A. Olabode, 2018; Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram: Guerrilla Insurgency or Strategic Terrorism? written by John Maszka, 2017.

linkages between Boko Haram's use of social media and the ways it recruits its members can help us formulate more efficient strategies to combat its influence.

Methodology, research questions, and hypotheses

The study adopts the qualitative research approach and is based on applying various research methods, including reports, former social media analyses, and previously-conducted key informant interviews, document content analyses of open-source, peer-reviewed academic works and journals.

Additionally, despite being fragmentary or politicized, media articles have been analyzed to paint a clearer image.

To scrutinize the effectiveness of Boko Haram's online strategy in terms of its recruitment, the study seeks to answer these research questions:

RQ1: Does Boko Haram's use of social media result in more effective recruitment?

RQ2: What trends can be observed in Boko Haram's use of social media that contribute to recruitment?

The next sections are organized around the following hypotheses that are destined to explore the connections between the potential role of social media and recruitment:

- Boko Haram uses social media to convey its messages to large online audiences.
- Boko Haram uses social media for radicalization, religious indoctrination, and sharing its narrative.
- Boko Haram uses social media to depict itself as the winning entity by representing strength, unity, and taking advantage of the country's anti-government sentiment.

HYPOTHESIS 1: Boko Haram uses social media to convey its messages to large online audiences.

In general, it can be stated that since its foundation, Boko Haram has taken advantage of different kinds of technologies to recruit members. At the beginning of the 21st century, audio cassettes' distribution was the most significant feature

of the group's recruitment strategy. The speeches of Mohammed Yusuf and his deputies at the time, Abubakar Shekau and Muhammad Nor could be found on these cassettes handed over to the followers, supporters, and sympathizers of the terrorist organization (Abubakar, 2016). A specific part of the Nigerian public also showed interest in the recordings' content due to the speeches mostly focused on the disapproval of injustice and corruption in the country. Before the use of YouTube for recording predications, CDs had been disseminated to the Nigerian population.

However, due to the swift expansion of Internet access in Nigeria since 2010, the general audience of Boko Haram has also undergone some fundamental changes. Possibly the most intriguing of these modifications was the terrorist group's ability to expand its geographic reach through reliance on the use of social media and the Internet. It has been reported that a threefold increase could be witnessed in terms of Internet usage in case we compared data in 2012 and 2015 (Kazeem, 2016). This significant difference could mostly be explained by the fact that mobile technology has been augmented in Nigeria by 2016, with 46 out of 100 active mobile phone users (Internet Live Stats, 2020). Due to the low economic indicators in the north, the rise in the audience could be justified by the increased use of the Internet to disseminate Boko Haram's on-line messages. The connection is especially intriguing, since only 13% of the terrorist group's statements were published on YouTube and Twitter in 2012 instead of as opposed to three years later, when all of them could be accessed online (Mahmood, 2017).

Internet growth in Nigeria also enabled the group to circulate information to a broader range of audiences. The distribution of audio cassettes and CDs complemented by fliers and local preachers' messages did undisputedly have an effect, albeit only locally. The most widely-read newspapers of the country reporting on Boko Haram are Daily Trust, Premium Times, Punch, and Vanguard (Campbell, 2016). They are mainly circulated in the capital, which is in Central Nigeria or Lagos, the economic hub and financial center of the south. It means distribution is relatively sparse in the north, where the terrorist organization is mostly active. Additionally, literacy constitutes another problem in the area, which is likely to restrict outreach to desired audiences⁴ (UNESCO, 2012). Nevertheless, while press releases issued by the newspapers amplified Boko Haram's voice, they did that indirectly without giving actual control to the group to convey its messages with the use of visual content. On the contrary,

4 For instance, a 2010 survey by Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics estimated literacy rate in Borno state to be 14.5%, compared to 92% in Lagos.

the extension of mobile technology and the rise in Internet access brought about significant changes, including sharing, viewing, and downloading photos and videos directly. Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, can be used by terrorists in furthering their objectives, whatever it may be. According to a U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-proliferation and Trade, Facebook is rather used for sharing online images, but Twitter is still the preferred social media site for terror groups. The reason can be that the latter is *'far worse than the rest with regard to acting proactively to track and remove terrorist content'* (Ogunlana, 2019).

At the end of January 2015, Boko Haram created four distinct accounts on Twitter under the name of 'al-Urwah al-Wuthqa', which gained 4,000 followers in a matter of days. Although they were all suspended due to policy violation in March 2015, while being operational, the group shared photos of the military training of 'cub' soldiers wearing dark robes and holding AK-47 assault rifles. According to the caption, child soldiers were regarded as the *'generation of conquest and victory'* (Laing, 2015). Although the images could as well serve propaganda purposes, I would reason there is also a link to recruitment through Boko Haram's intention to influence the highest number of individuals by disseminating instant messages to them. Besides, a specific video link was tweeted by the same account that contained various members of the terrorist organization providing explanations on motivations to join Boko Haram in its fight (Ibid). As a consequence, I would argue that Twitter was used with the explicit purpose of recruitment with the help of the video. Although, the terrorist organization's social media use can be regarded as less overt than that of al-Shabaab or ISIL, for instance. However, this way, existing members of the group could convey their messages to large online audiences.

HYPOTHESIS 2: Boko Haram uses social media for radicalization, religious indoctrination, and sharing its narrative.

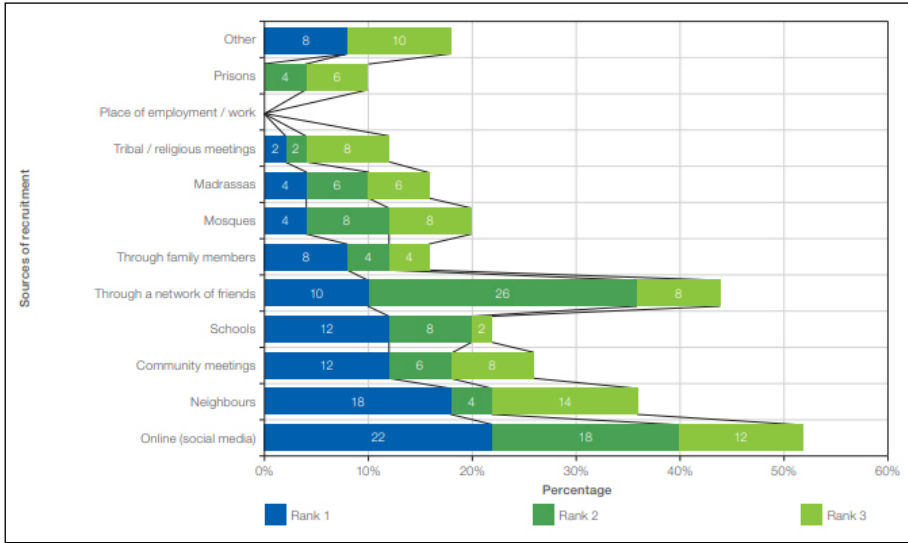
One of the most fundamental recruitment strategies conducted by Boko Haram is the negative instrumentalization of religion. With the intent of bolstering the group's membership, unscrupulous clerics radicalized the youth by spreading false teachings and misrepresenting Islam. According to recent research, by taking advantage of Northeastern Nigeria's cultural, economic, and social situation, these clerics were responsible for the indoctrination of individuals into concluding that their challenges were associated with Western influence (Onuoha, 2014; Olojo, 2019). A former Commander of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) pointed out that the use of false narrative to attract members

should come as no surprise since the terrorist group had always had negative sentiment towards Western civilization and education believed to be anti-Muslim. Hence the teachings of Boko Haram's founding leader, Muhammed Yusuf, were able to win the hearts and minds of people, who were '*largely uneducated, unschooled, impressionable, poor, and frustrated by the status quo*'⁵ (Maza, Koldas and Aksit, 2020, 7.). In that respect, the recruitment strategy of the terrorist organization has not undergone significant changes, with the sole exception of now shifting to social media.

This assertion is supported by a 2017 policy brief on the perspectives of peacebuilders, who were asked about the potential sources of recruitment by Boko Haram. According to the quantitative survey results, the terrorist group predominantly uses social media sites to attract new members (52%). However, online recruitment appears to be complemented by physical features through a network of friends (44%) and neighbors (36%). Peacebuilders also stressed the importance of religion in terms of Boko Haram's recruitment by arguing that upon joining the terrorist organization, individuals were often negatively influenced to believe they were '*adhering to true and pure Islam as prescribed by the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet*' (Salifu & Ewi, 2017, 5.). Indocination by destructive ideology as well as not possessing adequate knowledge about their religion can both be potential explanations for the recruits' manipulation. A 2015 report published by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) echoes the same message. It suggests the existence of a gap between Islamic values and some Muslim youth, implying their lack of religious knowledge (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, 2015). These people can be allured by the promise of paradise and can also be persuaded that their role in saving Islam from decadence is critical. A man from Yobe emphasized, '*they told us that it is the role of youth to protect the religion of God*' (Mercy Corps, 2016, 14.). Consequently, these impressionable and misinformed young people equipped with the reward of jihad and, more importantly, purpose, are an easy target for Boko Haram's recruitment, especially on the Internet.

5 Phone interview with a former Commander of the Multinational Joint Task Force, 6 November 2018.

Figure 1: *Peacebuilders' perception of where people are most likely to be introduced to Boko Haram*



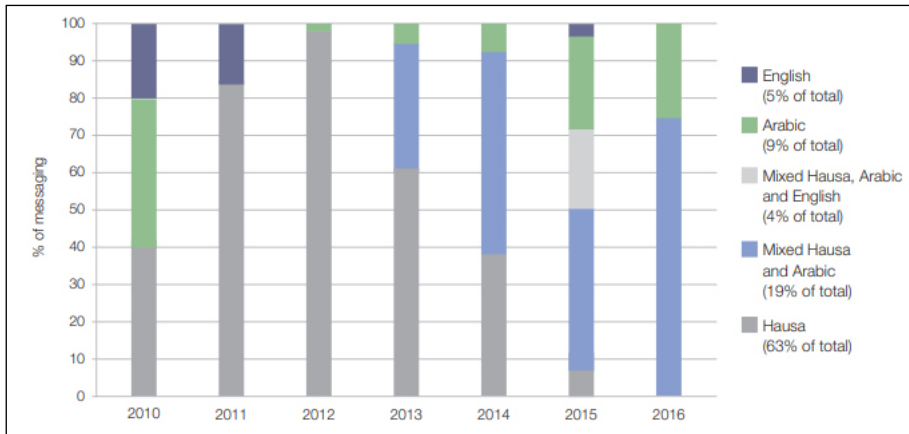
Note. Salifu & Ewi, 2017, 7.

Studying the choice of dominant languages in the online messaging of Boko Haram might also pave the way for a better understanding of its recruitment. In the beginning, the most often used language in disseminating messages was Hausa, which can be explained by the terrorist organization's mostly local focus. However, as the group started to expand geographically and intended to be exposed internationally, Arabic started to become more dominant⁶ (Mahmood, 2017). According to a 2017 report by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), there was only one Arabic language release between 2011 and 2012. Still, three years later, the language appeared in 80% of all publications, albeit sometimes not separately, since some of Boko Haram's messages have been circulated in several languages (Ibid, 7.). The growing influence of Arabic can be witnessed by materials containing a mix of languages and adding Arabic subtitles to them. While Hausa was elementary used for propaganda and perhaps recruitment purposes in the region, Arabic was taken advantage of because of strengthening ties with the Islamic State and the possibility of reaching individuals who had comprehensive education in Islam. However, the continuous dominance of Hausa in online messaging can be explained by the terrorist organization's desire to

6 Phone interview with a Maiduguri-based local journalist, 25 October 2016.

remain locally focused since Arabic productions had limited coverage due to the language barrier in the Nigerian press (Ibid, 23.).

Figure 2: *Percentage of dominant languages in Boko Haram messaging, by year*



Note. Mahmood, 2017, 8.

At times, Boko Haram regarded it as crucial to give a thorough explanation about its actions and way of thinking with the possible intent of deflecting blame for targeting civilians and/or recruiting members. There has been an ideological battle going on since the preaching of Mohammed Yusuf about the differentiation of a believer from a non-believer, with the latter including those who are either associated with Christians or the Nigerian government (Audu, 2014). However, the former category seems to be a lot more blurred, especially in light of the terrorist organization’s growing number of Muslim casualties. As the leader of one of Boko Haram’s wings, Abubakar Shekau emphasized that even the murder of Muslims can be justified if they lived together or worked towards establishing friendly relations with Christians. The former official spokesperson of Boko Haram, Abu Qaqa, also stressed the inadequate status of solely being a follower of Islam by arguing that *‘even if you are a Muslim and do not abide by sharia, we will kill you’* (Mark, 2012).

The group’s spokesman, Abu Zayd said that *‘we as a group do not kill people who are innocent. If there are people who profess Islam and do not partake in government or Western education, their blood and wealth are sacred unless otherwise’* (Pointblank News, 2011). Nevertheless, the conceptual issue of what innocence actually stands for needs to be discussed at this point. It appears as if Boko Haram only believes in its own strict version of Islam, and those who fall outside its sphere of acceptance deserve to be killed. In a 2015

video, Shekau reasoned that the group would never ‘engage in takfir [the practice of stating that a Muslim can be regarded as a non-believer] over a sin he did not commit’ (Mahmood, 2017, 19.), which further underpins the terrorist organization’s idea that – in technical terms – they cannot be held responsible for bringing death to innocent people, since they have their own definitions for guilt and innocence. The Internet and social media sites provide an easily-accessible space. The group’s recordings and publicly-disseminated messages may have the potential impact of persuading a larger number of individuals to assist them. Thus, providing explanations of Boko Haram’s ideology and goals could be regarded as an avenue to convince potential recruits that it is worth joining the terrorist organization.

Additionally, recent studies on terrorist recruitment demonstrated the growing influence of social media for Boko Haram to recruit its members. It is in line with the statement given by the former Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, at the 10th Annual Ramadan lecture in Kaduna. He drew attention to the perception of social media as a driver of radicalization for children and teenagers as well as a tool to engage with the terrorist organization. He stressed the adverse effects social media has had on establishing firm ethical values as the youth were becoming largely exposed to and obsessed with social media sites, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Due to Boko Haram’s increased abilities in the online space to either manipulate or negatively indoctrinate them after formulating personal connections or even friendships (Madugba, 2015). In November 2015, the niece of a community leader in Jos decided to personally encounter her boyfriend – whom she had allegedly been in contact with via Facebook – in Maiduguri, Borno state. Sadly, despite extensive searches, she had not been seen or heard of since then, apart from the only piece of information according to which she had been married to one of Boko Haram’s unit commanders. Many similar stories can be heard about people’s misguidance on social media sites with the intention of subsequently recruiting them⁷ (Maza, Koldas & Aksit, 2020). The terrorist organization uses online media to win over individuals who could assist them in its fights against eliminating moral decadence in north-east Nigeria, which is considered the by-product of Western civilization.

Moreover, a 2014 research conducted by CLEEN Foundation intended to pave the way for a better understanding of Northern Nigerian radicalization by looking at the motivation of the youth to join Boko Haram. It found that 21% of respondents in Borno state regarded audio and video messages as being crucial

7 Interview with a Community Leader in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, 21 June 2019.

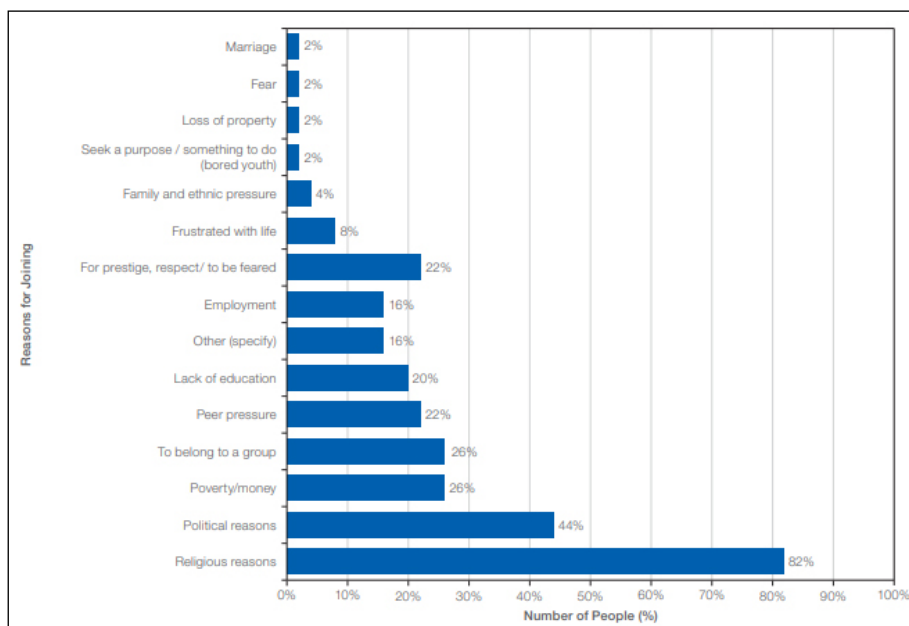
mediums. In the opinion of the surveyed youth, it was the second most significant pathway for radicalization, only to have been overcome by roaming preachers with 35% (CLEEN Foundation, 2014). The recruitment of members in the most remote areas of the country with the lack of social media and Internet is facilitated by ‘middle men’, who function as mediators in sharing messages⁸ (Cox, 2018). Although enlisting fighters, followers and supporters has always been highly ranked in Boko Haram’s online strategy, it also appears to be evident that offline connections remain to be important in the group’s recruitment.

HYPOTHESIS 3: Boko Haram uses social media to depict itself as the winning entity by representing strength, unity, and taking advantage of the anti-government sentiment in the country.

Due to the lack of economic, educational, and social opportunities, Nigerians are likely to be more desperate to seek unity. Consequently, their need for belonging is strengthened, which may be exploited by the terrorist organization. In analyzing the reasons why individuals join the ranks of Boko Haram, belonging to a group (26%) and peer pressure (22%) both appear to be significant (Salifu & Ewi, 2017). The latter’s growing dominance is further supported by experts studying the interplay between participation, peer pressure, and group bonding. Based on the content of the 2015 Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), it seems that social connections ‘*play instrumental roles in the radicalization process by propagating the ‘virtues’ of the group and normalizing membership within it*’ (Mercy Corps, 2016, 14.). Surprisingly, however, according to peacebuilders’ perspective, members motivated by fear are significantly less numerous (2%). The results of a 2017 ISS quantitative survey point in the direction of loose connections between coercion and the group’s recruitment (Salifu & Ewi, 2017).

8 RAND Europe interview with Blaise Bebey Abong, policy official, 16 September 2017.

Figure 3: Peacebuilders' perception of why people join Boko Haram



Note. Salifu & Ewi, 2017, 5.

Not only desperation but widespread frustration with the state of political procedures, corruption, and nepotism was an ever-present feeling mainly among the youth that contributed to the increased membership of Boko Haram. Especially the north-eastern population of Nigeria felt neglected by the government as the latter did not provide assistance and essential services, such as food, medicine, and water. Moreover, there were barely any forums that would have given individuals a chance to complain about their unfair treatment. As a result, initially the atmosphere of acceptance surrounded Boko Haram since the terrorist organization was viewed as an alternative to what people perceived as an inefficient government. A woman from Borno stated that *'the community perception about [Boko Haram] was that...they are a new sect that is coming in peace because at the beginning they showed love and concern, and [they] provided things to needy people of the community'* (Mercy Corps, 2016, 14.). Besides, the group was considered an entity that might be able to pave the way for government change. More importantly, however, the terrorist organization was thought to be able to provide security, thereby it was also attractive in terms of recruitment.

The same anti-government sentiment is reverberated by the messages of Muhammad Yusuf, Abubakar Shekau, and less significantly Abu Qaqa, who alluded

to religious violence before the existence of the group in certain parts of Nigeria, including Langtang, Jos, Shendam, and Zangon Kataf (Mahmood, 2017). With the help of online messaging, Boko Haram was able to draw attention to what they felt was the unjust treatment of the followers of Islam as opposed to Christianity in the country. The terrorist organization confirmed its role in defending Nigerian Muslims in place of the government, which was seen as idle and incompetent. In 2012, for instance, Qaqa stated that *‘the President had never visited any of the theatres where Muslims were massacred...the disposition and body language of the President clearly showed that he is the leader of Christians’* (Johnson & Awunor, 2012). Besides deepening the existing religious division in the country, the group’s intention with these messages must have been the galvanization of support, which is likely connected to recruitment.

A recent review about the public messages of Boko Haram revealed that by 2016 the two major themes were ‘claimed attacks’ (50%) and ‘strength’ (50%) (Mahmood, 2017). While the former is rather linked to (although not limited to) propaganda, the latter can tie into recruitment by presenting the terrorist organization as the winning side. Following the bay‘ah to ISIL in 2015, MOWAP was responsible for producing videos related to the claimed attacks of Boko Haram. Not only were these materials more visual and of higher quality, but they also put the emphasis on attesting to the group’s strength and operational efficiency, which *‘positively shaped youth perceptions of the group’* (Cox, 2018, 22.). They commonly depicted the successful nature of Boko Haram’s attacks, indicated by the corpses of Nigerian soldiers and the abundance of looted ammunition, weapons, and vehicles.

Figure 4: Percentage of messages that contained major themes, by year

Year/themes	Claimed attacks	Strength	Negotiations and conditions	Illegitimate government	Defender of Islam	Warnings and threats	Civilian targeting	Global jihad	Defining ideology	Justice and governance	Miscellaneous
2010	20%	20%	0%	20%	20%	0%	0%	60%	20%	0%	0%
2011	50%	7%	37%	13%	13%	37%	10%	13%	3%	0%	7%
2012	57%	6%	32%	11%	19%	51%	21%	4%	11%	0%	19%
2013	61%	44%	44%	0%	6%	33%	11%	22%	6%	0%	6%
2014	54%	8%	15%	23%	15%	31%	8%	31%	0%	38%	0%
2015	29%	36%	4%	4%	0%	21%	7%	14%	14%	14%	4%
2016	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%

Note. Mahmood, 2017, 9.

9 RAND Europe interview with Blaise Bebey Abong, policy official, 16 September 2017.

Analyzing the social media messages of the terrorist organization can be instrumental in understanding how the demonstration of its strength and military might can convince potential recruits to join the group. A recurring theme in these videos is the display of Boko Haram's advanced armament, including *'armored personnel carriers, multi-purpose vans, AK47 and Pump Action rifles, heavy machine guns (HMGs), mortars, artillery shells, anti-aircraft guns, heat-seeking missiles, bombs, rocket-propelled grenades, hundreds of motorbikes, pickup trucks and so on'* (Ogbondah and Agbese, 2018, 329.). In January 2015, the terrorist group possessed more than 70,000 square miles, which approximately equals 20 percent of Nigeria (Schmitt, 2014), exercising control over areas such as Abadam, Gambaru, Konduga, Mafa, Mallam Fatori, Marte, Michika, and Monguno. In one of their videos (URL1), the terrorist organization's soldiers are chanting and marching around in a self-assured way, not expecting any signs of resistance from government forces. In another video (URL2), a wide array of military weapons is presented that is said to have been seized from the Monguno barrack. On top of that, references are made to the numerical superiority of the group's weaponry that could contribute to the successful outcome. Besides drawing attention to military capabilities, I would argue that the aims of these videos are both the persuasion of Nigerians to take sides with the 'strong' Boko Haram instead of the 'weak' government and the potential recruitment of desperate individuals who flock to strength.

Following the 2015 Baga massacre in another video (URL3), Shekau emphasized that with the newly-confiscated weapons from a neighboring military base, the terrorist organization possesses military superiority, which is adequate to annihilate Nigeria. Apart from the message, the appearance of Boko Haram's leader and officers is also worth analyzing as they are all wearing *'expensive-looking military khaki and three-color desert camouflage pattern of dark brown, mint green and beige desert fatigue uniforms'* (Ogbondah & Agbese, 2018, 331.). After conducting several successful operations in the northeastern region of the country, the terrorist group's online media messaging began to concentrate on the repeated nature of being able to strike government facilities. For instance, the New York Times reported that at least eighteen people were killed in suicide bomber attacks against the United Nations headquarters in Abuja on August 26, 2011 (Murray & Nossiter, 2011). Additionally, the terrorist organization attacked a military airbase of an international airport in Maiduguri on December 2, 2013. According to an Al Jazeera video (URL4) *'this attack [was] a serious blow to the military's effort to put an end to Boko Haram'* and it seemed to be justifiable as the airport was shut down for all civil flights for one and a half years. Besides suggesting that Boko Haram is likely to gain the upper hand

over the Nigerian government in the long term, I would reason that the objectives of these social media messages are the reconfirmation of the strength of the terrorist group in the eyes of its fighters, followers, and supporters and that not only can the Islamic sect provide security, but also status and unity, which can both tie into recruitment.

Conclusion

Analyzing the effectiveness of Boko Haram's online strategy in terms of its recruitment can be instrumental since the terrorist organization increasingly uses social media sites. I conclude that although it is less overt than of al-Shabaab or ISIL, for instance, Boko Haram's use of social media results in more effective recruitment due to the swift expansion of Internet access in Nigeria that led to the terrorist group's increasing ability to convey instant messages to large online audiences while also exercising control over their visual content. Another trend that can be observed concerning recruitment is the use of social media for radicalization, religious indoctrination, and sharing of Boko Haram's narrative. By giving purpose to individuals who usually lack adequate knowledge about Islam, the terrorist organization may find it easier to recruit, especially among the youth, who are quite savvy with social media sites. However, while online influences certainly play a crucial role in recruitment, they are typically coupled with offline physical connections, such as family members, friends, and business partners. 'Middle men' are taken advantage of with the intent of disseminating messages in rural parts of Nigeria with limited or no Internet access. Furthermore, the continuous dominance of Hausa is connected to the group's mostly local focus and ties into the recruitment of misinformed Nigerians. Additionally, by explaining and building on its believer-non-believer narrative, the terrorist organization wishes to bolster its membership as well. Lastly, Boko Haram uses social media to represent strength and unity by emphasizing the interplay between participation, peer pressure, and belonging to the terrorist organization, which can be an attractive option for individuals deprived of economic, educational, and social opportunities. Moreover, Boko Haram tries to depict itself as a strong provider of basic needs and security as opposed to the Nigerian government, which is considered weak, inadequate, and taking sides with the Christians of the country. The strength of the group is further amplified by the dominance of military capabilities with which they can allure desperate individuals.

Since 2016, Boko Haram has been comprised of two factions with both of them allegedly affiliated with ISIL. After the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant withdrew its recognition of Shekau in 2015, Abu Musab al-Barnawi was named as the new leader of the terrorist group (BBC, 2016). Despite the fact ISIL had issued a statement about the replacement of the former leader, Shekau continued operations and claimed he was still in charge of Boko Haram, accusing al-Barnawi of attempting a coup against him (The Sun, 2018). Following the splintering of the terrorist organization, Shekau's faction could rather be characterized by the preference of indiscriminate attacks on internally displaced people (IDPs), while al-Barnawi's faction seemed to favor more direct engagement with Nigerian security forces (Mahmood, 2017). Although Boko Haram cannot be considered as a unified group, the movement remains lethal and active; which are illustrated by sabotaging security convoys transporting IDPs back to their homes in September 2020 (The Guardian, 2020a), attacking farmers, fishermen, and loggers whom are accused of assisting the Nigerian army and pro-government soldiers (The Guardian, 2020b) and abducting schoolchildren in Katsina in December 2020 with the potential purpose of forcibly recruiting them later (BBC, 2020). I believe a long-term strategy aimed at weakening Boko Haram's dominance in Sub-Saharan Africa should be brought about through the development of education, poverty alleviation, and the provision of a wider range of possibilities to the Nigerian youth. If political instability and unsustainable economic growth remain, even after the potential toppling of Boko Haram, another militant movement is likely to fill the power vacuum in the region (Loimeier, 2012).

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El-O37TNIm4>
- URL3: *Boko Haram 'leader Abubakar Shekau' claims Baga attack in new video.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6H3Psd-Y5o>
- URL4: *Boko Haram assault an air base in Nigeria.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r-wEOKd8FSMU>

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