Preventing violent extremism through mental health promotion: an evaluation of a public health approach

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REACHOUT AUSTRALIA Sydney, Australia

REACHOUT AUSTRALIA

ReachOut is the most accessed online mental health service for young people and their parents in Australia. Its trusted self-help information, peer-support program and referral tools save lives by helping young people to be well and stay well. The information it offers parents makes it easier for them to help their teenagers, too. ReachOut has been championing wider access to mental health support since it launched its online service more than 20 years ago. Everything it creates is based on the latest evidence and is designed with experts, and young people or their parents. That's why ReachOut is a trusted, relevant service that's so easy to use. Accessed by more than 2 million people in Australia each year, ReachOut is a free service that's available anytime and pretty much anywhere.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Impact Snapshot

Impact Snapshot: ReachOut Identity Project

Social media campaign

reached 739,077 people

engaged with 109,587 times

one in five (19.3%) young people in NSW recalled seeing the campaign.

Online resources

26,670 visitors to the online self-help resources

Online resources

viewed almost 4,500 times.

Key outcomes

Outcome	Percent endorsed
Validate	92.7
Decrease isolation	92.7
Attitudes towards help	90.2
Self- awareness	87.8
Knowledge of self-help	87.8
Connectedness	95.1
Self-compassion	90.2
Self-efficacy	87.8

Percent endorsed
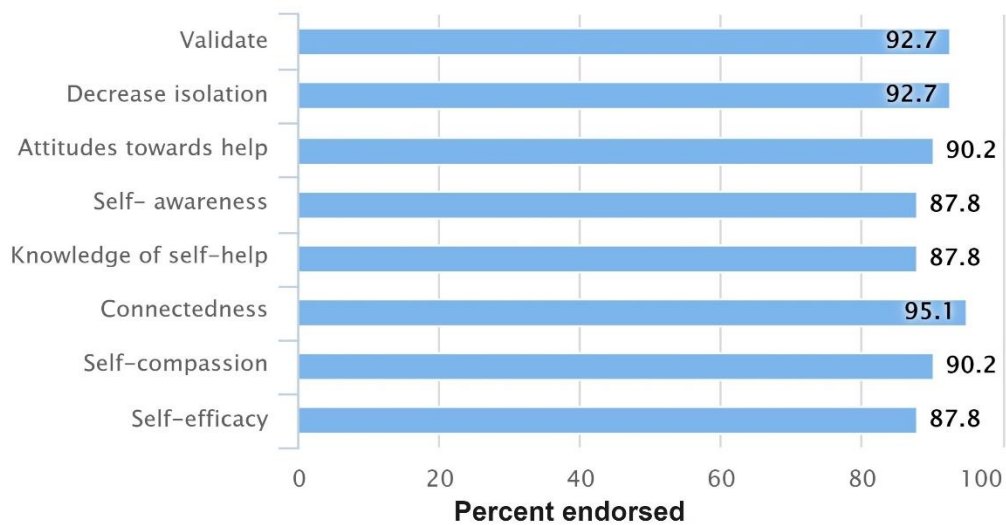
92.7% improved self-worth   87.8% improved sense of identity
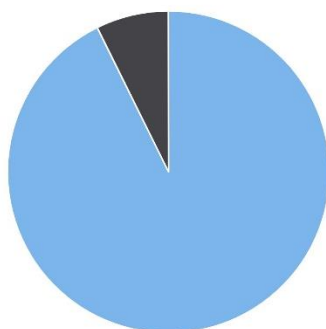
Executive Summary

This report outlines the evaluation of an online program designed to prevent extremism in young people of New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The project aimed to reduce the im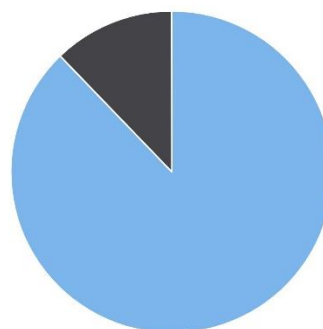pact of psychosocial risk factors for extremism by bolstering resilience and wellbeing in young people (aged 14-25 years). The Identity Project comprised a social media campaign, online resources on ReachOut (relating to tough times at home, school, and relationships), and peer support activations on the ReachOut Online Community forum. The program aimed to validate feelings of powerlessness, reduce loneliness, promote positive attitudes towards self-help and social support, increase self-awareness and knowledge of self-help. The ultimate goal was of the Identity Project was to impact positive identity and self-worth by increasing social connectedness, self-compassion and self-efficacy.

This evaluation indicates the program reached and engaged large numbers of people in NSW. The social media campaign reached 739,077 people and was engaged with 109,587 times, translating in 26,670 visitors to the online self-help resources, and 4,500 views to Online Community discussions. Around one in five (19.3%) young people in NSW recalledseeing the campaign, of whom over 40% had shared the campaign and had gone on the access the program resources.

Almost all young people who saw the campaign and engaged with the online resources experienced the desired short and medium-term outcomes, including validation (92.7%), decreased isolation (92.7%), improved attitudes towards self-help (90.2%), improved attitudes towards social support (90.2%), feeling understood and heard (90.2%), increased self-awareness (87.8%), increased knowledge of self-help (87.8%), belonging and connectedness (95.1%), increased self-compassion (90.2%), improved self-efficacy (87.8%) and personal agency (82.9%). Finally, participants endorsed the long-term impacts of the program theory, with 87.8% experiencing an improvement in their sense of identity and 92.7% endorsing improvements in self-worth.

The findings of this evaluation are promising given the burden of psychosocial risk factors in the target audience and their notably hard to reach status. We anticipate the research-driven and theory-based approach influenced the success of this project. The involvement of young people throughout the project design and delivery allowed the program to be iteratively improved. The findings further highlight the promise of brief online interventions and prevention approaches delivered at scale.

Background

ReachOut Australia is an online mental health platform for young Australians. ReachOut, in partnership with the NSW Office for Community Safety and Cohesion, developed an online mental health and wellbeing campaign and self-help resources to support young people in NSW, Australia. Given the relationship between adolescence and gender on identity development and risk for extremism, this project focused on adolescent men. The Identity Project was underpinned by a public health approach to address the root psychosocial vulnerabilities that extremism leverages. It aimed to target young people before exposure to extremist material occurs, when young people are experiencing early psychosocial risk factors and are open to online support. The project took a strengths-based approach to support young people to build their resilience and wellbeing by bolstering protective factors, including decreasing perceived marginalisation, increasing belonging, social skills, social cohesion, and self-efficacy. This approach leveraged the reach and expertise of ReachOut in engaging young people about their lived experience and wellbeing.

Formative research

A range of research methods informed the project design and implementation. These included a brief literature review (published and grey material); an environmental scan current of programs, campaigns, and online content; stakeholder interviews with practitioners in Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) areas (StepTogether, All Together Now, Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN), Multicultural NSW, SynqUp, Shifa Institute, and Google Public Policy); focus groups and interviews with young men; and the development of the Theory of Change (Figure 1a).

LITERATURE SCAN AND STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Violent extremism is a complex, dynamic and non-linear process linked to hundreds of risk factors. Young people in extremist groups often believe they belong to an inherently superior group. However, ideology is often not the initial trigger for antisocial or extremist behaviour [1, 2]. Instead, feelings of isolation, powerlessness, and disconnection make joining an extremist group attractive due to the perceived benefits they offer through fostering a sense of belonging and purpose [3-7]. Ideology as an outcome, rather than an antecedent of extremism, is supported by several models of extremism, including Moghaddam's Staircase Model of Radicalisation [2, 8]. The path to engagement in extremist behaviour is often a social process dependent on some level of exposure to extremist narratives [4, 8-14]. This exposure often occurs online and may include interaction between people who have never met offline. Once engaged in extremist groups or activities, individuals often reject alternative messages that contradict the arguments or worldview of the group.

> *"The ground level of the model starts with perceptions of discontent and a desire by individuals to improve their situation. If they are unsuccessful in doing this, feelings of frustration and anger develop towards any entity individuals believe are responsible for these setbacks." (Literature review: Silke and Brown 2016)*

Many risk factors for extremism have been identified in the literature. These risk factors operate at the individual, interpersonal, community and population levels. Common risk factors for extremism include a perceived sense of disadvantage relative to others; insecure personal or social identity; loss of personal significance; low self-esteem; a belief in traditional gender roles or a sense of thwarted masculinity; social isolation and exclusion; loneliness; exposure to extremism; and poor physical and mental health [2-5, 10, 12, 13, 15-20]. Protective factors that bolster against engagement with extremism included: personal agency and self-efficacy; physical and mental health; strong social connections, belonging and connection; social cohesion and participation; resilience; and a sense of purpose or meaning [2, 5, 8-10, 13, 19, 21-25]. The literature review also highlighted that extremist acts are disproportionately committed by males, and adolescence is a critical stage of vulnerability in which young people frequently experience psychosocial risk factors for extremism as they develop their sense of identity [11-14, 18, 25-34].

It is important to note that risk factors for extremism are diverse and operate at many structural and interpersonal levels [24, 35, 36]. Further, research only accounts for around 30% of factors that may predict why people join violent extremist groups, and there is a high degree of individual variability [4, 5, 15]. Most of what is known about potential risk factors for extremism is informed by retrospective accounts of individuals who have previously engaged in extremism but are now disengaged. However, these retrospective accounts do not provide insight into those individuals who experience risk factors but do not go on to engage in extremism. Many people experience risk factors and do not become radicalised, and little is known about the protective factors that *prevent* individuals from engaging inextremism [1, 5-7, 13, 28, 37]. As outlined in Silke and Brown:

> *"There is no single root cause of radicalisation … more than 200 different factors have been identified by research which could play a role in the radicalisation process. Not all of these factors feature in every case, and there is often very considerable variation. Ultimately, radicalisation is not simply the sum of different factors, but rather that the different factors seem to play a role at different stages in the process" (Literature review: Silke and Brown 2016)*

Predicting extremism is near impossible, and there is no clear pathway or trajectory for extremism [2,21, 22]. Psychosocial risk factors for extremism (e.g., feelings of powerlessness, social isolation, hopelessness, and the like) have significant overlap with other social issues, particularly risk for suicide [3-5, 15, 38]. These psychosocial factors are more likely to drive other social and interpersonal problems (e.g., substance misuse, violence, crime, suicidality, etc.) than extremism. A universal approach to preventing violent extremism through promoting wellbeing is, therefore, likely to benefit a broad population of young people, rather than just those at risk for antisocial behaviourand who may go on to be engaged in extremism.

> *"A person's own problems, whether that be loneliness, social isolation, in most cases it will manifest in a whole range of issues that aren't extremism… but in a very rare amount of cases the social health problems can manifest as an interest in extremist ideology or seeing that as a simple answer that's going to give you … immediate rewards in terms of a sense of family and connection … everything that I'm feeling is going to go away." (Stakeholder Interviews: Step Together)*

Given the variability in risk factors, the social causes of extremism, and the difficulty of identifying and preventing those at risk for extremism from going on to engage, there is a unique opportunity for universal prevention initiatives. There has been significant investment in strengths-based initiatives for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in NSW who are often subject to islamophobia [43-45]. However, there are fewer examples of universal approaches to address extremism. Additionally, many past programs have aimed to increase leadership or conflict resolution in marginalised individuals and communities. Such programs are likely to be attractive and effective for some, but not all, especially those experiencing social isolation and other barriers to accessing support services. Therefore, there is a clear opportunity for strengths-based programs and services that build on protective factors and are relevant to a broader population of young people [39-43].

RESEARCH WITH YOUNG MEN

We conducted a series of formative research activities with young men in NSW who were experiencing the psychosocial risk factors for extremism. That is, they were feeling powerless, out of place, or inadequate. In October 2019, young men (aged 16–19 years) in NSW participated in online focus groups. The focus groups indicated that young men were experiencing frustration, confusion, and stress due to the perceived pressure to live up to societal expectations and social comparison with peers and others online. Young men compared themselves to others regarding their social skills and status, wealth, body image, relationships, dating, and school performance. They experienced confusion and stress about identity, including questions about who they were, who they wanted to be, and what they wanted to do in their lives. Other stressors that young men experienced included

physical injuries, chronic health issues, concerns about current issues (e.g., bushfires, drought), family illness or death, and family separation. Of note, we found that early exposure to far-right material can occur through traditional social media sources, whereby men follow accounts that share memes embracing negative attitudes towards women, LGBTQIA+, and CALD communities. At least one individual involved in the research was already following accounts that shared this material.

In December 2019, young men (aged 16–20 years) participated in an asynchronous online research project to review ReachOut content. ReachOut content that was identified as suitable for this target audience was included in an article collection page which they reviewed. Young men felt much of the content was helpful and appreciated action-orientated and practical guidance about managing their negative emotions. They were particularly interested in content related to uncertainty about the future, insecurities, achieving goals, and recognising and acknowledging feelings. They felt that sign-posting content targeted towards a male audience was important for engagement (e.g., using male imagery and calling out men in the title or description). The research also indicated this group were susceptible to feeling judged, shamed, patronised, homogenised, and coerced into behaviour change.

In March 2020, young men took part in face-to-face interviews and online focus groups. This research indicated that young men enjoyed engaging with visually appealing, creative, entertaining, youthful, and relatable online content. They liked to use online spaces to prompt motivation, learn new things, hear different perspectives on topics of interest, and get actionable support for issues they were facing. However, some were wary of online communities (like forums) due to past negative experiences of arguments or bullying. Moderation of online communities was seen as essential to counter these risks. On reviewing the existing ReachOut Online Community, young men felt it was credible, trustworthy, and safe due to the strong focus on moderation, safety, and respect. However, young men were sensitive to language and tone, such as congratulatory language, being told they were brave, overly enthusiastic responses, and emojis. This tone did not feel relatable and could make young men feel uncomfortable, especially if this did not feel genuine or proportionate, and they often attributed use of language and tone to female users.

PROJECT THEORY

In part, extremist groups are successful in recruiting young people as they are attractive to those with psychosocial risk factors (e.g., who feel a sense of marginalisation, loneliness, powerlessness)

and because they offer a sense of perceived control through vindication of marginalisation and externalisation of feelings (e.g., an externalised explanation for their feelings, a course of action, a sense of inherent superiority, and role models, etc.). The program aimed to engage individuals early, before they become at risk for extremism, to support their wellbeing and prevent this course of action. Given the research indicating adolescent men are particularly vulnerable to extremism, the program was designed to be universal, but with a particular focus on reaching and engaging young men.

Figure 1. Program Theory
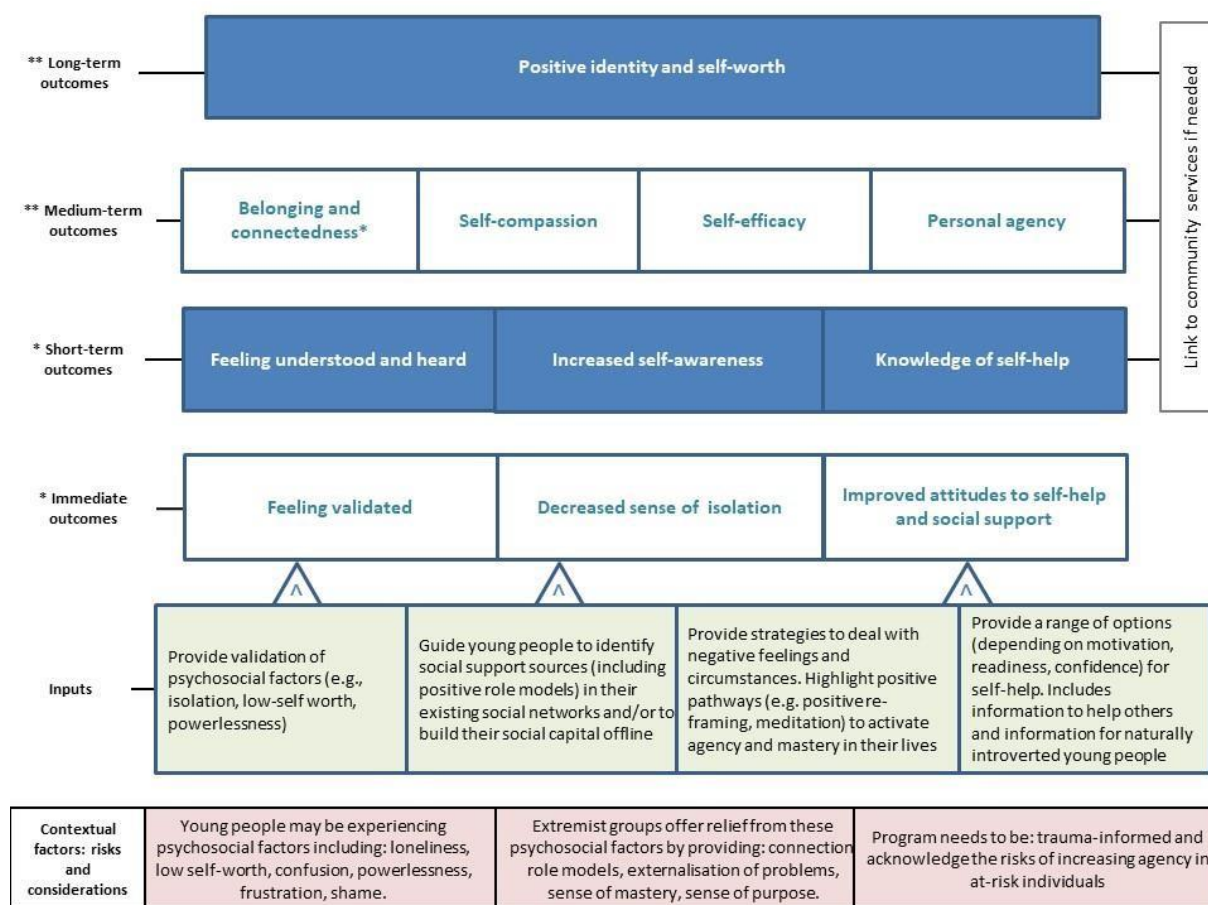
*Indicates activated by campaign; **indicates activation by online resources*

Important risks and considerations were outlined, including acknowledging that many young people may be experiencing significant psychosocial distress and that the program needed to meet young people where they were. We felt it was necessary to acknowledge the psychosocial state that these young people are in to increase engagement with the program – that young people were feeling disengaged, not heard and like they didn't have a voice. Extremist groups can offer a simple and externalised cognitive solution to these risk factors, and the program needed to redirect young people towards more positive coping strategies. We also recognised the project needed to be trauma-informed and acknowledge the risks associated with increasing agency in this group. The program was designed to engage young people well before any exposure to extremist groups has

occurred to mitigate these risks. The program theory (outlined in Figure 1a) was developed through workshops with research and project staff at ReachOut, and the NSW Department of Justice and Communities.

The program aimed first to validate feelings of powerlessness, reduce loneliness, and promote positive attitudes towards self-help and social support. At the short-term level, the program aimed to increase feelings of being understood and heard, self-awareness, and self-help knowledge. Finally, to impact identity and self-worth, the program aimed to increase belonging and connectedness, self-compassion, self-efficacy, and personal agency. Finally, the overall aim was to bolster resilience and wellbeing through promoting positive identity and self-worth. We recognised that the program needed to be embedded within a multidisciplinary and sector-wide approach to achieve longer-term outcomes. Figure 1a, therefore, highlights linking to relevantcommunity services as necessary.

This program logic was developed to be aligned with ReachOut's vision and strategy. The project theory is also broadly consistent with the NSW CVE Evaluation tool indicators and outcomes (see Appendix 1). The overall desired outcomes of the program were bolstering resilience and wellbeing. The following indicators are consistent with the short to medium-term outcomes of the program: to reduce sense of marginalisation, increase belonging, social skills, self- efficacy, and wellbeing.

Evaluation

Underpinned by the program theory was a social media campaign which linked to a unique landing page on ReachOut with collections of relevant resources (hereafter collection pages), online self-help resources on ReachOut, and dedicated discussions on the ReachOut Online Community. The campaign and collection pages were launched in March 2020 and were promoted until June 2020. For more information on the project design and development see Appendix 2.

The evaluation began in April 2020 and concluded in October 2020. The overarching goal was to ascertain the impact of the project and measure its success against the desired outcomes. Specifically, the evaluation sought to establish whether the project was successful by answering the following questions: 1) Did the project reach the target audience; 2) What was the reach and engagement of the project; and 3) Did the project achieve the intended outcomes of the program theory.

Methods

Capturing a baseline measurement necessary for traditional impact evaluation was not possible as existing ReachOut resources were leveraged, and new resources were published on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, the nature of this anonymous, open-access, online program made measuring impact using traditional methodologies challenging. Therefore, a combination of evaluation approaches was used and data were triangulated to assess the project's impact including through analytics, an online cross-sectional survey, and an online discussion board.

Web and social analytics were captured to ascertain reach and engagement of the campaign, online self-help resources, and Online Community activity during this time. Data was captured from March to October 2020. Google Analytics was used to capture web activity, channel-specific social metrics were used to capture campaign activity, and Khoros was used to determine page views of dedicated Online Community discussion pages.

In May 2020, young people aged 14–25 years in NSW (n=507) participated in an online cross-sectional panel survey. The survey captured demographic information (including age, gender), recent experiences of psychosocial risk factors and distress, reach and engagement of the campaign, and the subjective impact of the project materials. Participants viewed the campaign videos and indicated if they had seen the campaign before (see Appendix 3 for full details). Those who were not previously aware of the campaign were shown the campaign videos. Participants were then asked about the perceived impacts using subjective impact statements relating to the outcomes of the

program theory. Young people who had visited ReachOut were asked additional questions relating to the higher levels of the program theory using subjective impact statements.

Between August and September 2020, 30 young men aged 16-19 years experiencing psychosocial risk factors (felt powerless, out of place, or not good enough in the last month) participated in an online research forum that ran over five days (see Appendix 3 for full details). Participants reflected on what things were causing them to feel powerless, out of place, or not good enough and reviewed ReachOut self-help resources and discussions on the Online Community. Brief surveys captured psychosocial risk factors and any change in program theory domains immediately before, and one week after, engaging with ReachOut. Due to the number of similar or oppositional outcomes (e.g., reduced isolation and improved connection), we measured change on a domain level (e.g., loneliness, self-efficacy, self-worth). Both surveys (pre and post engagement) asked participants to rate their sense of loneliness, self-efficacy, and self-worth on a 10-point scale.

Participants rated the likelihood they would access different forms of support on a five-point Likert scale to capture attitudes towards self-help, social and professional support. Finally, to capture knowledge of positive pathways and professional help, participants rated on a five-point Likert scale if they knew of support services to access if they were experiencing a mental health or wellbeing issue. Any positive change in the domain (equal to or greater than one) was categorised asan improvement, while any adverse change in the domain (equal to or greater than one) indicated a decline.

Results

WEB AND SOCIAL ANALYTICS

The reach and engagement metrics (outlined in Table 2) indicate the campaign reached over 400,000 people on Facebook/Instagram alone, translating to over 10,000 unique users who viewed the online self-help resources on ReachOut. The campaign reached close to a quarter of a million people through Snapchat, translating to over 10,000 individual users to the ReachOut self-help resources. Taken together, this equated to almost 110,000 clicks on the campaign link, 26,670 unique users, and over 30,000 sessions on ReachOut.

Assuming each metric represents one individual across all channels, the campaign reached nearly three-quarters of a million people and led to 25,000 people viewing the project resources on ReachOut.

From March to October 2020, 24,950 unique users from NSW accessed the collection pages associated with the campaign (Table 3). These numbers do not reflect those who may have accessed

the resources indirectly, that is, those who may have been exposed to the campaign and subsequently visited ReachOut. Only those users who accessed the resources through the embedded link in the campaign are captured here.

Table 2. Engagement Metrics of Social Media Campaign

	Reach and Engagement metric			
Social media channel	Reach[1]	Clicks[2]	Unique users[3]	Sessions[4]
Facebook / Instagram	403,225	21,407	12,315	14,170
Kotaku	*	1,209	460	478
Snapchat	247,907	81,136	10,535	13,178
Spotify	87,945	5,835	3,297	4,796
YouTube	*	*	*	73
Total	**739,077**	**109,587**	**26,670**	**32,695**

[1] Number of people who saw a video [2] Number of mouse clicks on campaign material [3] Number of unique users that went to ReachOut directly from campaign [4]Sessions on ReachOut are online visits separated by at least 30 minutes * Metric not available for this channel.

A further 73, 466 unique users in NSW accessed at least one of the online resources included in the project collection pages (Table 3). Furthermore, from January to October 2020, the Online Community dedicated discussion pages were viewed 4,429 times.

Table 3. Engagement Metrics of Online Resources

	Collection pages only		Individual resource pages	
	NSW	Australia	NSW	Australia
Total visitors	26,724	29,071	85,376	182,650
Unique visitors	24,950	27,100	73,466	157,144
Sessions	33,537	36,154	98,565	206,742
Web pages viewed	39,538	43,252	224,639	503,067

ONLINE CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY

The online survey indicates that participants had frequently experienced psychological risk factors in the past six months. The most common risk factors were feeling angry or frustrated (59.6% experienced), lonely (57.8%), not good enough (51.9%), and lacking a sense of control over their
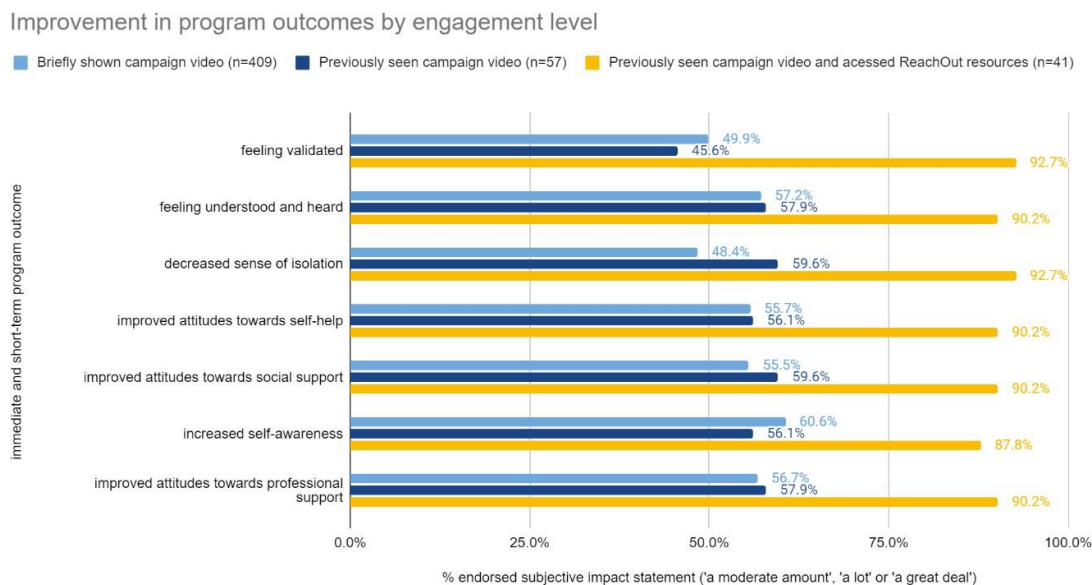
lives (50.5%). The most impactful experiences were loneliness, a perceived lack of control over their lives, and feeling inadequate.

Participants were asked if they recalled seeing the campaign video. Those unaware of the campaign were briefly shown the campaign video (n=409). Those who had seen the campaign (n=57) and accessed project resources (n=41) were then asked about their perspectives of the campaign and subjective impact statements.

Around one in five (19.3%) participants reported they had seen the campaign. Most reported they had seen the campaign through social media: Facebook (42.9%), YouTube (39.8%), Instagram (36.7%), Snapchat (22.4%)). Of those aware of the campaign, 43.9% reported they had shared the campaign or told a friend about it, and a further 41.8% had visited ReachOut after seeing the campaign. Of those not previously aware of the campaign (n=409), 43.5% indicated they would visit ReachOut after viewing the campaign videos. Participants who had visited ReachOut, or who indicated they intended to visit reported doing so as the campaign was relatable, were curious to learn more about ReachOut, and were hopeful it could be helpful to them. Those who would not visit ReachOut felt the issues they were experiencing were not severe enough to warrant seeking help, or were already receiving support. Some who were no longer at school felt the school-based imagery was not relatable and made them think the campaign was not for them.

The campaign had a significant impact on the immediate outcomes outlined in the program theory, with around half of the participants reporting feeling validated and less alone. In addition, the campaign also had other unexpected benefits, including improved attitudes towards self-help and social support, increased feelings of being understood and heard, and increased self-awareness (see Figure3). Over half of those who had seen the campaign reported it made them feel understood (57.2%), improved their attitudes towards self-help (55.7%), improved their attitudes towards social support (55.5%) and professional help (56.7%), and increased their sense of self-awareness (60.6%). In addition, just under half reported the campaign had validated them (49.9%) and helped them feel less alone (48.4%).
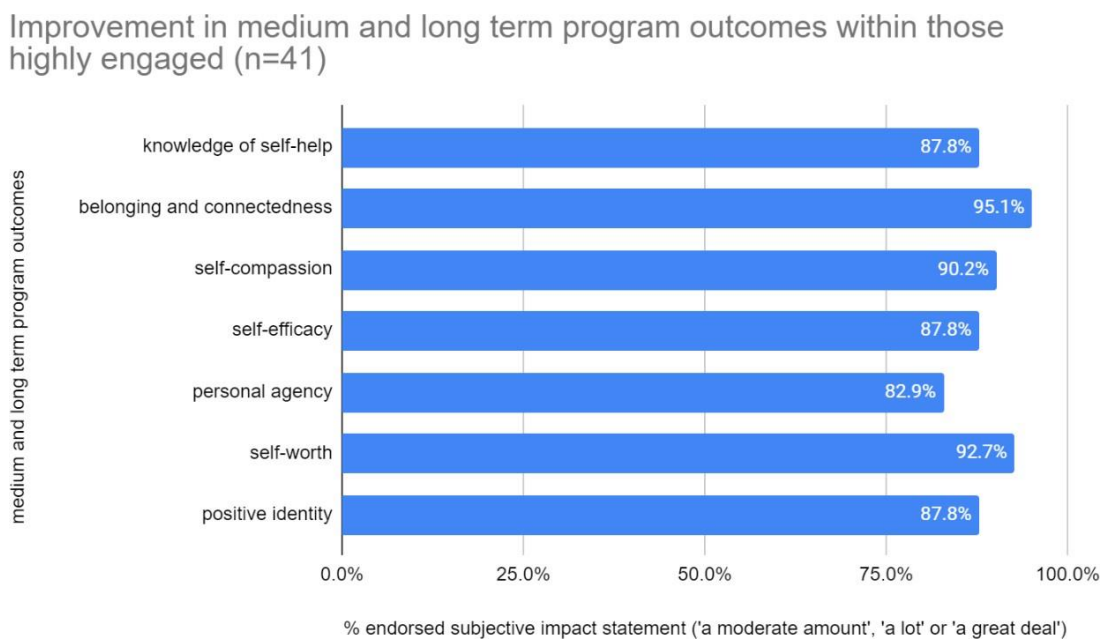
Figure 3. Endorsement of Short-Term Outcomes (Online Survey)

Improvement in program outcomes by engagement level

■ Briefly shown campaign video (n=409)   ■ Previously seen campaign video (n=57)   ■ Previously seen campaign video and acessed ReachOut resources (n=41)

Outcome	Briefly shown	Previously seen	Seen + accessed ReachOut
feeling validated	49.9%	45.6%	92.7%
feeling understood and heard	57.2%	57.9%	90.2%
decreased sense of isolation	48.4%	59.6%	92.7%
improved attitudes towards self-help	55.7%	56.1%	90.2%
improved attitudes towards social support	55.5%	59.6%	90.2%
increased self-awareness	60.6%	56.1%	87.8%
improved attitudes towards professional support	56.7%	57.9%	90.2%

y-axis: immediate and short-term program outcome
x-axis: 0.0% 25.0% 50.0% 75.0% 100.0%
% endorsed subjective impact statement ('a moderate amount', 'a lot' or 'a great deal')

Participants who had visited ReachOut were also more likely to experience the short-term outcomes of the program theory (see Figure 3). Almost all young people who saw the campaign and engaged with the online resources experienced immediate and short-term outcomes, including validation (92.7%), decreased isolation (92.7%), improved attitudes towards self-help (90.2%), improved attitudes towards social support (90.2%), feeling understood and heard (90.2%), and increased self-awareness (87.8%). Importantly, those that had seen the campaign and accessed the self-help resources on ReachOut endorsed the impacts of the campaign and self-help resources on their sense of connection to others, self-compassion, self-esteem, and confidence. Figure 3 demonstrates the increased impact of the project based on increased exposure to project materials.

Finally, participants endorsed the long-term impacts of the program theory, including 87.8% endorsing an improvement in their sense of identity and 92.7% reporting improvements in self-worth. Figure 4 outlines the intermediate and long-term outcomes within those who saw the campaign and accessed the online resources (n=41).

Figure 4. Endorsement of Long-Term Outcomes in Those Highly Engaged (N=41) (Online Survey)

Improvement in medium and long term program outcomes within those highly engaged (n=41)

% endorsed subjective impact statement ('a moderate amount', 'a lot' or 'a great deal')

ONLINE BOARD DISCUSSION

The online board discussions indicated that several improvements in outcomes were observed after using ReachOut. The in-depth responses garnered through the research forum indicated the resources impacted young men's psychosocial risk factors. Before the project, young men were feeling powerless and inadequate due to academic and social concerns.

> *"I feel like I am out of place nearly every day, I am not an academic or into sports, so I fall through the gaps. I feel invisible… I am a good person, but the way society portrays what good looking or popular is has a huge influence over how we are treated by peers. I have been bullied... because I don't fit in and find it hard to find my tribe."*

> *"This sense of powerless has put stress on my relationship with friends and family... carrying around the constant mindset that I must do everything for everyone... when I look around… everyone seems to have their life together, but here I am feeling powerless, sad, stressed, broken and not good enough"*

After visiting the landing page on ReachOut for the campaign and seeing the collection of resources, young men felt supported, less alone, more hopeful, and confident in themselves.

> *"Before viewing the website I felt anxious and disheartened ...seeing the article on the home screen made me feel reassured, as it felt as though I was the only one who felt affected by these issues."*

> *"I feel eager to read about the issues relevant to me. I thought some issues were specific to me (jealousy, being single) and as such pushed them to the back of my mind. However, seeing them presented in such an accessible way made me eager to read and learn about why I feel certain ways."*

After reading the online resources on ReachOut, many young men also experienced improved self-awareness, increased knowledge of self-help, and decreased isolation. Engaging with the resources helped some young men gain new insights into the challenges they had experienced, guiding them to reframe their thoughts and think more positively about their situation. Some also felt more empowered to cope with their issues, experienced improved self-worth and increased self-acceptance. Together, these experiences made young men feel hopeful about their ability to cope with challenges in the future.

> *"I never really thought things through…how people aren't automatically judging everything you do. It was definitely a positive outcome in relation to understanding and recognising issues that I feel anxious about."*

> *"I felt pretty empowered after reading "How to cope when things feel out of your control". The idea that your negative thoughts aren't facts and that your thoughts don't make you...even without implementing any of the mentioned techniques ...just reading the article makes me feel better…"*

> *"A lot of men feel like they have to be macho… otherwise they're not really men... they don't want to believe that they need any kind of external help... they might ... give the website a go. No one has to know anything about it... there's an instant connection... it encourages the reader to open up and explains how much lighter the person would feel after sharing what's on their mind."*

For many young men, their responses indicated they had experienced a change in the program outcomes. For example, young men described feeling more validated, less alone, experiencing increased self-reflection and awareness, and a sense of belonging and connectedness. Some also experienced increased knowledge of self-help.

> *"This allowed me to understand … how everyone is facing similarly difficult things … gave me a place to search for people who are also going through extremely similar issues… overall this thread made me feel like I'm not alone and with the help and knowledge of others we can all find a way through this together. It gave me hope for a certain future that is within my own control."*

> *"The discussion had several people in similar situations to me so seeing their advice was pretty helpful... I feel better as I know there are others going through similar things."*

> *"It made me feel part of a small community, an open discussion where I can say anything."*

The surveys delivered one week before and after engagement with ReachOut also indicated there were improvements. Half of the participants experienced an improvement in their self-worth (50.0%), and almost half experienced an improvement in their sense of connection (42.9%), self-efficacy (42.9%), and attitudes towards professional support (42.9%) (one week after engagement with the project resources compared to baseline). In addition, about a third experienced an improvement in attitudestowards social support (32.1%) and professional help (28.6%), and a quarter experienced an improvement in attitudes towards self-help (25.0%). Additionally, over half had returned to ReachOut in the interim week (60%). It is essential to note the short time frame of this research and that improvements in outcomes within one week with limited exposure to the program are difficult to achieve. With extended exposure to the resources, we anticipate the impacts observed would be amplified.

Despite finding the discussions helpful, most young men indicated they would not return to the Online Community in its current form. Low peer activity,a confusing user experience, and a preference for reading ReachOut content rather than Online Community discussions were noted as reasons for not returning. This highlights the need for online spaces to stay current and have a positive user experience to ensure they will be used and to ensure online spaces cater to individuals' needs.

Discussion

Despite this hard to reach audience, the program successfully attracted the target audience, whilst also being perceived as relevant and engaging to others outside the target audience. The campaign and self-help resources were accessed largely by young people experiencing psychosocial risk factors for extremism. The evaluation findings indicate the project resources had a considerable impact on the intended outcomes outlined in the program theory. In particular, the project successfully validated young people's sense of powerlessness, insecurity and inadequacy and decreased their sense of isolation.

The campaign alone had a significant impact on the immediate outcomes of the project it was designed to address, namely validation and decreasing isolation. In addition, the campaign also addressed other immediate and short-term outcomes outside of the intended remit, including improved attitudes towards self-help and social support, increased feelings of being understood and heard, and increased self-awareness. Even in isolation from the online resources, the campaign videos had a demonstrable impact on the immediate and short-term impacts of the project.

The suite of online resources was also highly effective at bringing about the immediate and short-term outcomes for young people, including validation of feelings, decreased sense of isolation, improved attitudes towards self-help and social support, feeling understood and heard, and increased self-awareness. It also effectively addressed the intermediate outcomes, including an increase in knowledge of positive pathways, increased sense of belonging and connectedness, self-compassion, self-efficacy, and personal agency. Finally, the self-help resources supported the achievement of some of the long-term impacts, thought initially out of scope, including bolstering a secure sense of identity and self-worth.

The Online Community effectively validated young men, decreased isolation, and increased self-awareness and a sense of belonging. However, meeting longer-term outcomes was challenging due to young peoples' preference for content and actionable advice, and low intentions to return due to a poor user experience. These insights confirm past research findings, the importance of enhancements to user experience, ensuring discussions are easy to follow, and encouraging contributions from a range of young people. Since this evaluation, in May 2021, a major re-design of the Online Community was conducted, and a range of new features were introduced, including improved navigation, user experience, and the creation of dedicated 'spaces' for young people to connect.

Notably, for a significant number of young people who engaged with the full suite of resources, the project was able to significantly improve the ultimate long-term outcomes of the project, previously thought out of scope; that is, to improve young people's sense of identity and self-worth. In line with the program theory, outcomes were most pronounced in users who had higher engagement. Young people who engaged with both the campaign and the online resources saw the greatest improvements, underscoring the importance of exposure and dose.

There were some differences in the program theory and the results observed. Young people experienced more significant improvements than anticipated in the program theory outcomes, including improved attitudes towards self-help and social support, increased feelings of being understood and heard, and increased self-awareness. We were surprised to find that young men felt supported, more hopeful, and encouraged by visiting the collections pages, even before reading or viewing any of the self-help resources. We also expected that the long-term outcome of the program around increasing identity security and self-worth would not see much change. However, we found that subjectively rated improvements in their sense of identity and self-worth after a relatively short time. In addition, some young people experienced outcomes not articulated in the program theory. Some young men also experienced improved emotional intelligence. For example, young men gained a greater understanding of the nature of the difficulties they were experiencing and were more equipped to articulate these feelings to others. The responses also indicated that hope and empowerment were unintended outcomes of the program. Through encouraging reflection and self-awareness young men felt less alone, more confident and hopeful for the future.

The evaluation findings suggest that, in line with the program theory, outcomes appear to ladder up. Outcomes were most pronounced in users who had greater exposure to the project materials (e.g., the campaign and self-help resources). Each component of the project was critical to leveraging the desired outcomes of the program theory. An ideal user pathway is one in which the user is engaged with the campaign, visits the collection pages, and engages with resources on ReachOut.com. The social media campaign effectively provided a sense of validation, decreased isolation, increased self-awareness, and improved attitudes towards self-helpand social support. The campaign was even more effective if paired with the associated self-help resources. Those who visited ReachOut and viewed the collection pages and self-help resources also experienced benefits over and above what the campaign provided. The suite of online resources was unique in its capacity to leverage short to intermediate outcomes including validation of feelings, decreased sense of isolation, improved attitudes towards self-help and social support, feeling understood and heard, and increased self-awareness, increase in knowledge of

positive pathways, increased sense of belonging and connectedness, self-compassion, self-efficacy, and personal agency, and was also effective at delivering on the longer-term outcomes of the project, including fostering positive and secure identity and self-worth. The Online Community leveraged self-awareness, connection and belongingness but did not appear to be as engaging as the other project arms.

Research consistently demonstrates the difficulty of predicting who will engage in violent extremism, and there is no clear pathway or set of definitive risk factors [2, 21, 22]. The psychosocialvulnerabilities for extremism overlap with other social issues, including suicide, mental health challenges, violence, and criminal behaviour [3-5, 15, 38]. Moreover, young men are a heterogeneous group with different lived experiences, and risk and protective factors for social issues like extremism. There is an opportunity for universal strengths-based initiatives which bolster protective factors for a broad population of young men. Such initiatives are likely to have wide benefits for the community at large, particularly in promoting mental health. This program demonstrates the impact that such interventions can have at scale. Further, we propose that there is an opportunity for universal prevention programs which take an intersectional lens and provide tailored experiences to address individual and community needs.

There has been a dearth of published literature on the effectiveness of programs designed to prevent violent extremism[48, 49]. Recent policy action, and the development of program and evaluation frameworks reflect the growing appreciation of the need for research in this space[50] [1, 51-53]. However, much of the existing literature is based on process and not impact or outcome evaluation[26, 49, 54]. Online and social media programs typically only report reach and engagement metrics and do not measure or report on impacts or outcomes [55]. Additionally, the impact and outcomes literature is based mainly on high-intensity programs delivered to a highly targeted and selective audience [25, 56, 57], and many rely on key informant and stakeholder interviews rather than evidence of impact on the target audience [25, 56, 57]. These factors make it difficult to compare the program outcomes observed here with previous evaluations. However, this project's reach and engagement metrics far exceed those observed in other CVE campaigns and interventions. Moreover, the observed impacts on desired outcomes are impressive, especially when compared to the results seen in higher-intensity programs.

The reach, engagement, and outcomes observed in this evaluation are likely influenced by the research and theory-driven approach underpinning the program. The program was iteratively informed by research with end-users which influenced all aspects of the project. This approach ensured the program resources were engaging and meaningful to the target audience. Our findings underscore the importance of co-designing programs with young people. Programs aimed at preventing extremism must be underpinned by user research and should be embedded within a coordinated, multi-component approach that provides options for engagement suited to individual

preferences and capabilities. There is a unique opportunity for online strengths-based programs that support protective factors to address social issues, like extremism, at a population level. Further, we propose that there is opportunity for online prevention programs which embed personalisation to tailor support to individual needs.

This evaluation had some limitations. Firstly, due to the timing of the project and the evaluation, a baseline measurement was not captured, and therefore, attributions of causality are not possible. The anonymous and online nature of the program also impacted the choice of evaluation methods possible. The reach and engagement metrics relied on channel-specific analytics, some of which assume each metric represents one individual, which may have inflated the reach and engagement figures. Finally, it is also important to note that this evaluation ran during a period of unprecedented uncertainty and stress for young people due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which may have contributed to increased feelings of frustration, isolation, and loneliness.

Given the brief nature of this intervention, the notably hard to reach audience, and the high burden of psychosocial risk factors in the population at large, the findings of this evaluation are promising. The program effectively reached and engaged young people in the target audience and validated their sense of powerlessness, inadequacy, and loneliness. Moreover, the program was able to improve young people's identity and self-worth to improve their resilience and wellbeing in a relatively brief amount of time. The results illustrate the potential benefit of online approaches to reaching and impacting large numbers of people and further speak to the benefits of a universal and wide-scale prevention approach.

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