

# Seductions of the Caliphate: A Cultural Criminological Analysis of Online Islamic State Propaganda

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Justice Degree

Ashton Rebecca Kingdon

# Statement of Originality

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Dissertation submitted as partial requirement for the award of MSc in Criminology and Criminal Justice

Title: Seductions of the Caliphate: A Cultural Criminological Analysis of Online Islamic State Propaganda

Submitted by: Ashton Rebecca Kingdon

Declaration: I confirm that, except where indicated through the proper use of citations and references, this is my own original work. I confirm that, subject to final approval by the Board of Examiners of the Institute of Criminal Justice Studies, a copy of this Dissertation may be placed upon the shelves of the library of the University of Portsmouth or made available electronically in the Library Dissertation repository and may be circulated as required.

Signed: Ashton Rebecca Kingdon

Date: 23/08/2017

# Abstract

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The Islamic State is an impenetrable world; what we know is what propagandists want us to see, and, over the past four years, the Islamic State has developed not only as orchestrators and performers of attacks, but also as professional storytellers, setting out to hijack the popular culture of the west and seduce its youth. The Islamic State has successfully industrialised its propaganda machine, and is thus now deemed to possess a more powerful propaganda apparatus than that seen in Nazi Germany (Aly et al, 2017). The research presented here took an interpretivist epistemological approach, utilising qualitative data-gathering techniques, embedded within grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Methodologically, this study incorporates non-participant observation of online spaces, and a semiotic content analysis of 100 propaganda videos, in order to explore the visual persuasiveness of terrorist imagery, and, more importantly, the subcultural elements of radicalisation evident within Islamic State propaganda.

By stripping away the Islamic State's exhortative veneer, this research has effectively exposed its propaganda, and identified the themes of seduction, grievance, utopia, military warfare, and theatrical displays of violence, all of which serve as powerful recruitment strategies, and add tangible power to an ever expanding jihadist organisation. A key finding of this study shows that one of the perverse successes of the Islamic State is that, with each video released, it finds a way continually to escalate the violence, and depict seductive images of power, comradeship, and an ascendancy of brotherhood that legitimise power and sadism in the name of a higher goal. Ultimately this research argues that Islamic State propaganda bears resemblance to a medieval reality show, in which the media is as much as part of the jihad, as the jihad itself, and its most effective recruitment tool is its own seductive savagery.

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# Introduction

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In June 2014, an unprecedented competition for dominance within the global jihad movement erupted, when the former Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda rebranded itself the Islamic State, confirming it had established a caliphate and demanded that competing jihadist groups disband with their members and pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi (Holbrook, 2015). The Islamic State (IS), (also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), or by the Arabic acronym DAESH), is a Sunni Islamist group, having its roots in Jihadi Salafism, an ideology that strives towards traditional and conservative Islam (Bunzel, 2015; Cockburn, 2015). However, whilst the Islamic State is considered a fundamentalist organisation that seeks to establish a seventh century replica of Islamic statehood, it is surprisingly current in its use of pop-cultural technology. Moreover, as a terrorist organisation, the Islamic State philosophy emphasises that commitment cannot be affirmed through words alone, but rather through one of two actions: by making Hijra, emigrating to the caliphate in order to defend and expand territorial holdings, or by waging Jihad at home (Fishman, 2016). Thus actions are considered vital in affirming support and allegiance, and the manner in which the Islamic State conveys its message centres on its ability to encourage violence effectively.

Additionally, emerging nations, like all great nations, are, to some extent, built on propaganda, which can be defined as the intentional deception through information that is communicated to a large number of people in order to manipulate their attitudes and behaviour (Bates & Mooney, 2014). The idea of a global jihadist movement has been developing since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which also instigated both the world Sunni movement, and the revolution in Iran, effectively leading the Muslim world into a virtual civil war (Atran, 2016). Consequently, jihadist organisations have been using audio-visual and print media in increasingly sophisticated ways to publicise their plight, although it was Al Qaeda which first used video propaganda to threaten the west (Weimann, 2011). Over the past four years, the Islamic State has effectively industrialised its propaganda machine, and is thus now deemed by some to possess a more powerful propaganda apparatus than that seen in Nazi Germany (Aly et al, 2017). Its strategy is to hijack the popular culture of the west, and its goal is to seduce the youth (Christine, 2016).

## Research Aims

The aims of this research are:

- To critically explore the subcultural elements of radicalisation presented in online Islamic State propaganda.
- To establish how cultural criminology can assist in unmasking the seductive appeal of Islamic State propaganda, and how it is attracting western youths to its cause.

These aims will be explored under the following objectives:

## Objectives

- To undertake a thematic analysis of Islamic State propaganda, to assess what methods it is using to attract western youths to join them in establishing a caliphate.
- To undertake an analysis of 100 contrasting Islamic State propaganda videos, to identify the techniques the Islamic state are using, and how these resonate with and attract the youth subculture.
- To undertake a semiotic content analysis to explore the visual seductions of terrorist imagery.
- To undertake a cultural criminological analysis, to identify the cultural script shaping the public's perception of the Islamic State, and the visual and symbolic motives of its propaganda.

Traditionally, the majority of academic research into terrorist organisations has focused on the wider issues of recruitment, including issues of national security and geo-politics, as well as the ideological and religious components (Cottee, 2009; Atwan, 2015). However, fragmented changes to the structural and interpersonal environments behind jihadist recruits has resulted in a much greater emphasis being placed on constrained, cultural and situational factors (Hegghammer, 2017). Similarly, recent work into the subcultural elements of terrorism and radicalisation has identified a postmodern rise in radical hybrid street culture, and an introduction of new terminology, Jihadi Cool, which suggests that global jihadist organisations are now spawning local and subcultural forms (Cottee & Hayward, 2011; Hegghammer, 2017).

The Islamic State, like other jihadist organisations has found the internet to be of paramount importance when it comes to disseminating propaganda (Campbell, 2010; Gates & Podder, 2015). Moreover, terrorist organisations have increasingly been using social media as a platform for psychological warfare, raising capital, and recruiting foreign fighters (Weimann, 2011; Rothenberger, 2012). The Islamic State, in particular, has become expert in utilising social media as a technique for radicalising and recruiting thousands of foreign fighters, for disseminating its violent ideology, and for inciting others to commit lone-wolf attacks in its name (Berger & Morgan, 2015). The Islamic State propaganda circulating online projects an image of comradeship and strength, which has proved critical to its success as a jihadist movement (Farwell, 2014; Morgan, 2016). Research concerning the Islamic State's utilization of social media, to recruit and radicalize, western youths has been increasing (Klausen, 2015; Gates & Podder, 2015; Farwell, 2014). Likewise, there is an abundance of existing literature focusing on the correlation between the media's portrayal of terrorism, and the ways this has influenced public opinion (Hoffman, 2006; Campbell, 2010; Doran, 2008; Fuerdi, 2007; Croft, 2006). However, existing research appears to focus on the mass media's representation of the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, and the ways in which this depiction has altered public perceptions regarding the threat of global terrorism (Hoffman, 2006). Moreover, current research on jihadist organisations appears to concentrate on news print reports exposing the threat of Al Qaeda, rather than the threat of the Islamic State, or their use of social media to disseminate propaganda.

The purpose of this cultural criminological analysis is to explore the ways in which the propaganda shapes the perceptions of the caliphate, and, in turn, the ways in which the portrayal of the caliphate shapes the propaganda, thus reflecting the hypothesis that there is no linear progression within the propaganda, but rather a shifting interplay between the real and the virtual, the fictional and fact (Hayward, 2009). Such issues have become particularly important because, in contemporary society, the story of crime is told as much through the image as it is through the word. The strength of this type of analysis is that cultural criminologists have a longstanding interest, in both symbolic interaction and the ways in which meaning and power are displayed and negotiated through the effervescence of mass-produced imagery.

Thus, whilst existing research shows that the Islamic State is casting its fishing nets of propaganda to ensnare the masses, a knowledge gap has emerged that invites criminological research to shine a light into the ways in which these images are being internalised by the wider population, and how they are resonating with the youth subculture. Therefore, this dissertation

has taken an interdisciplinary approach in an attempt to shape a new theoretical underpinning, supporting the theory that western youths are seduced by the thought of a new and expanding caliphate. Moreover, the utilisation of cultural criminology has suggested the hypothesis that it is the subcultural elements within the propaganda that stimulates the terrorism and crime control relationship, and draws in potential recruits.

This dissertation is divided into five main segments. Firstly is a review of existing literature, focused on the progression of radicalisation, the dissemination of online Islamic State propaganda and the theoretical components underpinning this study. Secondly is a description of the methodology used, and the justification for adopting these approaches, including the sampling techniques, the data collection process, the analysis, and the ethical implications. Thirdly is a presentation of the results of the analysis, including the key themes that emerged from the propaganda, and the underlying strategic elements that enable the Islamic State to convey its messages effectively. Fourthly, is a discussion of the results and their correlation with the relevant theoretical components, identifying the reasons how and why so many western youths are seduced into joining the Islamic State. Finally is an assessment of the conclusions to be drawn from the results, an analysis of how far these agree with current theory and suggestions on how this research can be expanded upon in the future.

# Literature Review

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Embedded within an abundance of contemporary literature is the notion that the internet has become a virtual forecourt for extremist ideology (Awan, 2017; Klausen, 2015; Conway, 2017; Wiktoriowicz, 2005). Terrorist organisations have increasingly used the internet as a platform for psychological warfare, raising capital, and recruiting foreign fighters (Weimann, 2011; Rothernberger, 2012, Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015). The Islamic State, in particular, has become expert in utilising social media as a technique for radicalising and recruiting thousands of foreign fighters, for disseminating its violent ideology, and for inciting others to commit lone-wolf attacks in its name (Berger & Morgan, 2015). The Islamic State propaganda, circulating online, projects images of comradeship and strength, which has proved critical to its success as a jihadist movement (Farwell, 2014). Cultural criminologists seek to explore the ways in which cultural dynamics intersect with practices of crime control, and thus have begun to explore the institutional interconnections that exist within jihadist subcultures, and how their values are internalised through the propaganda they disseminate (Ferrell & Saunders, 1995; Cottee & Hayward, 2011).

This literature review will present a criminological analysis of the origins of radicalisation, and explore both historical and contemporary studies examining the distribution of online terrorist propaganda. Additionally, this analysis will introduce the theoretical components of Elias (1994), Katz (1988), Cohen (2001), and Goffman (1959), as a way of explaining the foundations that underpin this research dissertation. A systematic review of the methodological and theoretical perspectives has revealed a distinct gap to which further research can contribute. Thus this research will be exploring the ways in which cultural criminology can assist in unmasking the subcultural elements hidden within Islamic State propaganda. Ultimately, this literature review will argue that changes in the organisation and relational nature of terrorist activity, has resulted in a greater emphasis being placed on localised and situational factors.

## The Origins of Radicalisation

To begin with, this literature review will explore existing criminological literature promoting the idea that radicalisation develops from a complex process of socialisation, in which group dynamics are considered more important than ideology (Wark, 2004; Kleinmann, 2015). Research from Coolsaet (2015) indicates that radicalisation is the result of interactions between

personal trajectories, group dynamics and an enabling environment. Embedded within these developments are feelings of inequality and frustration; these feelings are then internalised, leading to a mental separation from society (Atran, 2003; Coolsaet, 2016). It is the impression of persistent expansion conveyed in Islamic State propaganda that emphasises the existential threat it poses to the west, and reinforces its appeal as a global jihadist movement (Moghadam, 2017; Crone, 2016).

Building on this awareness, Hegghammer (2013) explored the variations between jihadists who attack on home soil, and those who join insurgencies to fight abroad. His analysis of open-source data concluded that jihadists favoured fighting abroad, and those who did commit attacks on home soil had previously been radicalised, in person, by jihadi veterans. Similarly, the research of Hamm and Spaaij (2017) tested the validity of a succession of empirically-based commonalities associated with the pathways of radicalisation for lone-wolf terrorists. Together, they created the most extensive database of lone-wolf terrorism in America, focusing predominantly on the specific locations where radicalisation occurred, including within the military, in the workplace and online. The motivation for their study centred on their ability to provide the police and policy makers with a single document that could help identify the potential signatures of a terrorist attack.

Another theme that emerged from contemporary literature is that radicalisation has been facilitated by the growth of the internet, and the consequent emergence and popularity of online social networking (Stevens & Neumann, 2009; Crone & Harrow, 2011; Rineheart, 2009). Sheikh (2016) conducted 16 in-depth interviews with returned Islamic State fighters from Denmark, in an attempt to uncover how foreign fighters comprehend their own actions and behaviour. His research concluded that online propaganda had a significant pull effect on Danish jihadists, and thus the internet should be considered a driving force behind the radicalisation process. Expanding upon this idea, Kirby's (2007) research into home-grown radicalisation highlighted the importance of the internet in helping to form self-starting terrorist cells that radicalise disillusioned youths. Likewise, Ashour's (2010) research demonstrates that the internet plays a crucial function in home-grown terrorist radicalisation, and, as a result of this, it has become vital to devise strategies to counter online jihadist narratives.

However, existing studies have also indicated that the internet does not independently lead people to become extremists, although it has changed the ways in which people are becoming radicalised (Neumann, 2013; Carr, 2006). Therefore, when researching the online jihadist

ecosystem, it is important to remember that face to face interaction remains a vital part of the radicalisation process (Neumann, 2016). Thus the significance of existing literature is that it informs us that, rather than being a one-off event, radicalisation is, in fact, the result of a carefully socially-crafted process (Taylor & Horgan, 2006; Borum, 2011).

### The Evolution of Jihad Online

Leading on from the early stages of online radicalisation this literature review will next explore the evolution of Jihad online. Existing research illustrates that, throughout the 1990s, online jihadism, which had previously been confined to websites, began gravitating towards utilising jihadist forums (Combs, 2006; Weimann, 2011). Consequently, the increased use of forums transformed online jihadism into a stable, self-sustained community, where members could meet to discuss religious and societal issues (Martin, 2009). This perception has been extended by Neumann (2009), whose research indicated that the online developments in the way jihadists were communicating, turned potential recruits from passive consumers of information to people who could interact with one another on an international scale, leading the forums to be labelled the 'Town Squares' of jihad online.

However, research conducted by Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) revealed that, despite an increase in the use of jihadist forums, many members were found to have low levels of trust in them and were paranoid they were subjects of surveillance from the authorities. As a result of this paranoia, many jihadist forums and websites are now only accessible on the dark web, a part of the World Wide Web that is only accessible through special software that allows users to remain anonymous and untraceable (Neo, 2016). Moreover, throughout the 2000's, increasing amounts of extremist content became available online in western languages, and were seen to appeal to the cultural habits of western youth (Weimann, 2006; Sivek, 2013). Thus the significance of existing research in this field is that it shows the internet to be a transformative technology that extremists have learned to exploit, for the radicalisation of new recruits and to spread their propaganda (Combs, 2006; Martin, 2009; Neumann, 2009). The Islamic State, in particular, is conducting a modern and sophisticated media campaign centred on online social networking (Aly et al, 2017).

## The Islamic State's Use of Social Media for Recruitment and Radicalisation

Having established that very large amounts of terrorist propaganda are now distributed and accessed through the internet, this literature review will next consider the ways in which the Islamic State is utilising social media for recruitment and radicalisation. A review of research, focused on the operational strategies of the Islamic State, emphasises the extent to which terror organisations have been utilising social media, in order to incite violence and recruit foreign fighters (Aistrope, 2016; Klausen, 2015; Gates & Podder, 2015; Farwell, 2014; Thompson, 2011; Rothenberger, 2012). Furthermore, existing studies have concluded that the Islamic State contrast with other jihadist groups, due to their refined understanding and use of social media to achieve their goals (Bunzel, 2015; Berger & Morgan, 2015). Moreover, western society has been inundated with media reports sensationalising the Islamic State's ability to recruit and radicalise western youths through a variety of social media platforms (Klausen, 2015; McBride, 2011; Mahood & Rane, 2016). Thus existing studies appear to have concentrated their efforts into exploring the ways in which the Islamic State exploit social media in order to disseminate its propaganda (Klausen, 2015; Gates & Podder, 2015; Farwell, 2014; Mahood & Rane, 2016, Ingram, 2016).

To support this claim, Awan (2017) analysed the social media profiles of Islamic State foreign fighters, in an attempt to uncover the ways in which their propaganda resonated with western youths, and thereby enticed them to support their extremist ideology. His analysis of 200 Facebook accounts and 50 Twitter profiles led to the realisation that the Islamic State had been exploiting social media for radicalisation purposes, portraying extremism as an outlet that is both glamorous and cool. In a complementary study, Carter, Maher and Neumann (2014) created a database that contained the social media profiles of 190 foreign fighters. Their research demonstrated that, for many combatants, social media is no longer confined to a solely virtual role, but is considered an essential facet for events happening on the ground. The significance of this is that a large majority of fighters now received their information from disseminators, who are often unaffiliated, but sympathetic individuals, offering moral and intellectual support. Consequently, the Islamic State's ability to exert control over the information being relayed is eroding, and private disseminators now possess the primary influence over people who are actively involved.

As a result of research conducted by Bunzel (2015), and Berger and Morgan (2015), many social media platforms began to suspend the accounts of Islamic State sympathisers and

fighters. These suspensions led jihadists to use other communication platforms, specifically Telegram, a much smaller and heavily encrypted application where data is transformed into codes to prevent unauthorised access (Conway, 2017). The significance of this transition was that it highlighted that censorship, whilst it may temporarily disrupt online extremist activities, does not necessarily eliminate them (Farwell, 2014; Atran, 2015). Expanding upon this finding, Prucha's (2016) research suggests that the Islamic State's shift to Telegram has been essential in helping to recruit fighters and launch attacks across Europe. The strength of Telegram lies in the privacy and encryption it offers, allowing users to interact with each other from mobile phone devices or computers. Thus it is clear that the rise of social media has presented new opportunities for terrorist groups to radicalise their audiences, romanticise their conflicts, and manipulate the thrills and pleasures of those who participate.

### The Subcultural Elements of Extremism

A central theme emerging from the literature is the increased marginalisation of those who are engaging in acts of terrorism in a post 9/11 society. Existing research has demonstrated that the majority of Muslims joining the jihad are young men in transitional stages, often seeking excitement, comradery and brotherhood (Cooley, 2002; Hegghammer, 2011; Atran, 2016; Van San, 2014). Expanding upon this finding, Cottee and Hayward (2011) explored the existential motivation for those engaging in acts of terrorism, identifying the three specific desires of meaning, glory and excitement. Moreover, they determined that many western youths suffer from a form of existential frustration, proposed that acts of terrorism provide an outlet for the basic existential desires that many youths cannot express through legitimate channels. Furthermore, extremist organisations are seen to equip members with bonds of solidarity and intimacy, as well as unlocking a world of violence and exhilaration (Cottee & Hayward, 2011). Similarly, Cottee's (2009) research maintains that jihadist subcultures not only provide compelling terminologies for expressing contempt for western values, but also offer heroic status for their members, legitimising violence against the sources of their frustration. Thus the significance of existing studies is that they indicate that vast amounts of extremist acts are committed by young people seeking adventure, self-esteem, glory and acceptance (Atran, 2010; Cottee, 2011; Presdee, 2000).

To further understand the subcultures of jihadism, Atran (2016) and Hegghammer (2017) focused on the idea of jihadi culture, and their research explored extremist practices and the

semantics of their cultural products. Atran's (2016) extensive interviews with ex-militants exposed the need for local authorities to focus on developing a counter narrative for jihadism that targets the elements of emotions. This perception has been extended by Huey (2015), who explored the phenomenon of 'Jihadi Cool', the process whereby terrorist recruiters manipulate illusions of terror, transforming them into something current and fashionable for its online audiences. Huey's (2015) research concluded that the Islamic State has utilised social media to disseminate propaganda portraying itself as a seductive subculture aimed at disaffected youth. Moreover, Borum's (2014) analysis indicated that individuals become involved in extremism because of the prospects of excitement, adventure and glory, and maintained that it was these sensation-seeking opportunities that provide the motivational factor for recruitment, regardless of the ideology.

In comparison, Atran's (2016) research explored the ideological factors that persuaded integrated western youths to fight and die for the Islamic State, not for their own gain, but for a transcendent moral conception. His study incorporated structured interviews and mass surveys, conducted to analyse the restrictions of rational choice in political and cultural conflicts. His results indicated that the Islamic State offers a celebrated counter-cultural movement, which young men can join to project their frustrations. Moreover, the Islamic State merges the paradigms of sacred values and individuality, which, in turn, provides a visceral sense of unity and strength (Dawson & Amarasinham, 2016; Dawson, 2010). Furthermore, Bartlett and Miller (2012) carried out a two year fieldwork study, comparing permissive factors between radicals that become terrorists and those who do not engage in violence. Their results concluded that those who turn to violence are attracted by the thrill, excitement and coolness, and these are the elements of radicalisation that need further research.

### The Seductions of Jihadism

The theoretical underpinning of this research is the seminal work of Jack Katz (1988), *'Seductions of Crime: Moral and Sensual Attractions in Doing Evil'*, in which he examined the customs and behaviour of the 'Badass', an archetypal adolescent and intimidating tough guy, who is often willing to resort to violence. According to Katz (1988), being considered a 'Badass', or an individual who overtly embraces symbols of deviance, is regarded as a positive mechanism. Criminals who are considered 'Badasses' often have cold personalities, are indifferent to others, and are unaffected by emotion. Likewise, they embrace a way of living that is hostile to any form of civilisation, and will engage in violence without the limiting

influence of utilitarian considerations or concern for self-preservation. The research in the following dissertation is based on the assumption that the paradigmatic 'Badass' is still present in contemporary society, yet contrasts with Katz (1988), as it will argue that his/her face no longer represents that of an adolescent gangster, but that of a jihadist, and that the Islamic State is the ultimate 'Badass'.

To attempt to bridge the gaps in existing research, this dissertation will focus on the glamorised portrayal of the Islamic State emanating from its propaganda; this analysis will hopefully be the key to understanding why so many western youths are abandoning their lives to join the Islamic State. Moreover, the attractions of jihadist groups' use of 'Badass' iconography within their propaganda is due to its resonance with what is existentially missing from the lives of young men, namely a sense of belonging, purpose and identity. Similarly, there is also the promise of spiritual redemption, the sense that pledging allegiance to the Islamic State will purge young men of their sins, allowing them to become martyrs and guaranteeing themselves a place in paradise. Furthermore, this research will address the notion that jihadist groups emphatically provide the answer to western youths' most visceral desires, with promises of excitement, adventure and unrestrained violence. Thus this research will ultimately explore the rhetoric, currently emerging from Islamic State propaganda, that places emphasis on westerners pledging allegiance in order to become martyrs, strike terror into the hearts of infidels, and, in turn, become the ultimate 'Badasses'.

### The Process of De-Civilisation

In addition to the subcultural attraction of extremism, this research will also explore the idea that society is in a process of de-civilisation, evidenced by the graphic, public and theatrical nature of Islamic State execution videos, and how extensively available they are in mainstream western media. This opinion is theoretically supported by Elias's (1994) thesis, entitled '*The Civilising Process*', in which he maintained society saw a period of increasing civilisation between European medieval and modern times. Throughout these 500 years, multifaceted cultural, psychological and social changes occurred, that resulted in the reduction of interpersonal violence. Elias maintained that the growth of an increasingly well-mannered society coincided with an increased intolerance of violence and cruelty (Ray, 2011). Repugnance towards physical violence corresponded with evolving thresholds of shame and embarrassment surrounding the body, and acts once performed publically became intensely private (Hughes, 2008). Moreover, existing literature confirms that pleasure in medieval

society was derived from cruelty, destruction and torment, evidenced by the public displays of torture and executions (Elias, 1994; Ray, 2011). In contrast, modern society increasingly limited the acceptable use of violence to the state only, and this monopolisation led to a growth in personal restraint and well-mannered conduct. So Elias's (1994) thesis becomes theoretically relevant when offering insights into the formation of the modern self through the regulation of violence. However, this research will aim to offer a contradiction to this perspective, and argue that the increasing use of violent execution and torture videos created by the Islamic State demonstrates that, as a self-proclaimed society, it is in a process of de-civilisation.

### States of Denial

Cohen's (2001) seminal work, entitled '*States of Denial*', offered a theoretical foundation for the understanding of the mechanisms of denial, that enables simultaneous knowing and not knowing about events that are too threatening to confront, but impossible to ignore. Cohen (2001) was interested in how ordinary individuals may not react appropriately to knowledge of the terrible, and how, when faced with the knowledge of the suffering of others, their reaction can take the form of denial, avoidance, passivity and indifference. He focused on the importance of examining the denial of bystanders to the crimes of human suffering and distinguished between two contrasting categories of denial, literal and interpretive- literal being the perception that the suffering is not real and therefore not happening, and interpretive attributing different meanings to what appears apparent others. Cohen (2001) was critical of public reactions to inhumane acts and violations of human rights, suggesting denial theory can be correlated with the subcultural elements of Islamic State propaganda. The mass circulation of propaganda can be linked to this concern with the ways in which information regarding atrocities and suffering are transmitted to larger audiences, and how various participants rationalise these atrocities.

Moreover, Cohen (2001) maintained that it is incorrect to assume that increased visibility and public knowledge of atrocities and suffering will always provoke public outrage and encourage intervention. On the contrary, images of suffering can work to further strategies of denial among both non-state and state actors. Furthermore, Cohen's (2001) literature makes reference to governments actively shaping the interpretations and reactions of the public to visual propaganda of conflicts and war. Many powerful images, most notably, to Cohen (2001), those portraying the atrocities of World War 2, cement the memories of past events, which then limit

the public's general understanding of, and responses to the visual coverage of contemporary outrages. When correlating Cohen's theory with Islamic State propaganda, it is most helpful to reference his understanding of the mechanism of denial employed by bystanders, particularly those who bear witness to these atrocities, or governing states, who are aware of atrocities without intervening. Thus it appears that society is guilty of being a bystander, engaging in forms of denial that range from a failure to acknowledge the occurrence of violence, to dismissing the magnitude of the impact it has on the victims.

### The Presentation of Self in Islamic State Life

*"All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify"* (Goffman, 1959, P. 78).

Goffman's (1959) study, entitled *'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life'* is his dramaturgical account of human interaction, in which he argued that individuals gain their sense of self through their interactions with others. These exchanges are, in fact, theatrical metaphors, and individuals will construct their roles and perform them to an audience, based upon the values, beliefs and habits they have learned from prior interactions and social institutions. Goffman (1959) maintained that, within social life, we play a range of different roles, determined by the situations we take ourselves to be in, and how we think we should be coming across. These roles are then revised, depending upon with whom we are interacting, and the performance we think we should be giving. Moreover, Goffman (1959) considered the idea that we do not always present a constant and centred identity, but engage in a process of impression management relevant to particular contexts and audiences. In situations when we do not know the others in the scene, or are not familiar at an intimate level, we depict our front-stage selves, the version of ourselves we believe to be favourable to others. In contrast, our backstage self is the reserved component of our identity, and only presented to those with whom we are familiar. However, Goffman (1959) believed that behind these theatrical masks, there is no true self, no identifiable performer behind the roles, and the roles themselves comprise the performer.

Building on from the awareness that we give particular performances of self to particular groups of people and social institutions, it will be argued in this research that the Islamic State utilises a form of impression management within their propaganda, by providing illusions of a utopian society, in which there are many social roles to perform. Recruiters will often engage their backstage selves as a way of targeting disillusioned youths who have deficiencies in their

current social roles, or believe their role does not conform to western ideology. Islamic state propaganda will often target those with a grievance (Moghadam, 2017; Berger & Morgan, 2015; Farwell, 2014), people who are lacking something in their identity, giving the illusion that the caliphate will have a role for them as a social actor, thus influencing the direction of the performance. Literature from Hogan (2010), and Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) highlights that the more socially connected we are, the more we tend to manage those parts of ourselves we think society would see as favourable, and this can be demonstrated through the use of social media, where large amounts of Islamic State propaganda are being viewed. Therefore, it is evident that Goffman's (1959) concept of dramaturgy is not confined to the theatre, and its ideas can frequently be employed to organise the actions of real life. Thus, after reviewing the existing literature, it seems relevant that this research should endeavour to explore the ways in which the Islamic State presents its backstage self through its propaganda, with the internet providing a platform where these images can be seen on a vast global scale.

## Conclusion

To conclude, previous literature has indicated that much is known about the Islamic State's use of social media to disseminate its propaganda, but little is known about how audiences, and potential recruits make sense of its messages. What has become clear is that the Islamic State has become skilled in utilising social media in order to spread propaganda, incite fear and advance its political aims (Badar, 2016). In addition, existing research, exploring the core components of radicalisation, has highlighted that rather than being a singular event, stimulated by interactions online, radicalisation is, in fact, the result of a carefully constructed process of socialisation (Taylor & Horgan, 2006; Borum, 2011). The importance of research conducted by Atran (2016) is that it shows that many western youths who affiliate themselves with terrorist organisations are self-seekers, rather than individuals who have purposefully been recruited. In the case of the Islamic State, studies indicate that recruits are predominantly young men in transitional stages in their lives, seeking a particular ideology that offers significance, glory and adventure, and it is the Islamic State's portrayal of being a global jihadist movement that offers this (Christine, 2016; Peresin, 2015; McCabe, 2016).

To further understand the subcultural elements of radicalisation, it is necessary to explore the contribution of cultural criminologists, who maintain that terrorism is a subjective process of perception. Thus the ways in which foreign fighters and potential recruits visualise the Islamic State's message is shaped by a cultural narrative, a cultural script, which informs society of the

visual and symbolic motives of their propaganda. A cultural criminological analysis of online propaganda is considered to be highly relevant, as it may shine a light on the reasons as to how and why people join and remain in extremist groups, and why some terrorist movements last longer than others (Hegghammer, 2017). The application of Katz's (1988) study, in particular, rests on the ability for future research to capture the subtle negotiated and situational dynamics of terrorist groups, and to demonstrate the attractions and seductions that develop within their propaganda. The next chapter will present the research design created to address the gaps that are present within existing literature, and the ways in which cultural criminology can contribute to the understanding of radicalisation.

# Methodology

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Cultural criminologists are increasingly concerned with the power of the visual, and, as images of terror proliferate online, there is a growing recognition that criminology needs to reconsider its association with the ascendance of the spectacle (Hayward, 2009). This research explored the visual persuasiveness of terrorist imagery, and, more importantly, the subcultural elements of radicalisation evidenced in online Islamic State propaganda.

This study took an interpretivist epistemological position, utilising qualitative data-gathering techniques, embedded within grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). It was necessary to utilise research methods that would enable the exploration of the structure, meaning and underlying messages embedded within the propaganda. Methodologically, this research incorporated non-participant observation of online spaces, as well as a semiotic content analysis, the primary method for analysis visual text (Rose, 2012; Willis, 2007). This chapter will outline the methodology used within this study, and present the justifications for adopting these approaches. The sampling techniques used, the data collection process and the thematic analysis will also be described. Finally, the ethical implications that arose throughout this research, particularly those from the data collection process will be included, as well as details of how these concerns were addressed.

## Data Sampling

This research utilised non-probability sampling techniques, to construct a sample giving the greatest insight into Islamic State propaganda. Initially, convenience sampling was used, and videos were selected on the opportune basis of their accessibility and proximity (Bryman, 2012). Thus the first samples of videos selected were all publically visible. The main rationale for using this sampling method is that to gain access to Islamic State propaganda can be notoriously difficult, and thus samples needed to be gathered in locations that were convenient (Litchman, 2014). Therefore within this research, there was no inclusion criteria identified prior to the selection of propaganda videos used within this study. Sampling began with a search of Islamic State propaganda videos on social media fora, including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, as well as a more generalised search online. These searches provided roughly a third

of the videos included in the analysis, and, unsurprisingly, tended to be the more publicised videos, having previously been circulated in the western media following their release.

In order to gain access to more samples, it was decided to integrate the snowball technique, as a way of viewing videos that were rare or hidden to the general population. The snowball sample was considered the most appropriate for research such as this, when members of the sample population are difficult to locate (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). In order to utilise this approach fully, a search for videos was initiated using the Islamic State online propaganda magazines, the *'Dabiq'* and *'Rumiyah'*, each issue of which advertised approximately 30 Islamic State propaganda videos. As access to many of the videos were restricted, searches and analyses were undertaken by process of elimination. This sampling method enabled the changing themes and emerging messages within the propaganda to be tracked throughout the years.

### The Data Collection Process

The data collection process involved the viewing and transcribing of 100 Islamic State propaganda videos, produced from 30 different media outlets, from 2015 to 2017. The complete list of the videos used in the analysis, and the media outlets from which they were produced is included in the reference list. It is important to note that, due to the sensitive nature of this research, and the arrangements outlined in my ethical clearance, no direct links are provided to the location of any of the videos viewed. However, these locations are readily available upon request. Furthermore, as little time was spent actively searching the propaganda as possible. Therefore, to minimise exposure, the research was completed within a 2 week time period from the 31st of March 2017 to the 14th of April. Moreover, throughout this time frame, the laptop used was constantly connected to the University's Virtual Private Network (VPN), a network technology that ensured that any computer access undertaken around the Islamic State, located its position as being at the University, rather than a private computer, thereby avoiding arousing suspicion from the authorities, or being located by anyone uploading propaganda to the sites while being viewed.

Due to the semiotic nature of the analysis, attention was paid to the visual components of the videos; the music, imagery, editing, techniques of productions, and, more importantly how these resonated with popular culture. Many of the videos viewed were narrated in Arabic, and thus it was felt unnecessary to transcribe the videos verbatim, as this method could never be truly consistent. However, words and phrases were selected that were found to be of particular

interest at the time, or stood out as being powerful and seductive, and these were included within the coding process. In terms of the transcription process, the titles of the videos were placed in a Microsoft Word document; the videos were then watched and any significant details were marked in a bullet point format. Although a time-consuming method to use throughout the data collection, it was felt beneficial to transcribe like this, to make it easier to return and reflect on the data during the coding process. An inductive analysis was chosen, rather than any attempt to code the data into a pre-existing framework, which was beneficial as it allowed themes to emerge naturally throughout the analysis (Chamberlain, 2013; Jupp, 1989). This method also allowed for the reduction of larger amounts of data, whilst maintain the validity of the sources (Bachman & Schutt, 2014).

In order to complement the textual analysis of the videos, it was of interest to interpret subcultural narratives through visual elements. Thus, while viewing the videos, a separate document was used to store Print Screen shots of imagery selected as being particularly interesting and visually stimulating. Print Screen shots were chosen predominantly as a protective measurement, to avoid downloading or storing any videos on a computer, due to the sensitive nature of their content. Moreover, the correlation between textual transcriptions and visual data would allow for an easier comparative analysis when it came to the coding.

### Thematic Analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, grounded theory appeared most appropriate, as any knowledge generated would be solely from the data collected throughout the study, not from external sources (Charmaz, 2014). The aim was to create meaning from the data that would provide an in-depth perspective from which theory could arise and be coded into categories. This technique bore resemblance to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, as the coding process was highly detailed and inclusive. Moreover, a thematic analysis enabled the identification, analysis and reporting of the key themes that emerged within the data.

To code the data as thoroughly as possible, the analysis was started with main categories, with further additional categories into which the data would be merged. The videos, transcripts and print screens were worked through singularly, information found to be relevant extracted, and notes made in a separate document under the different headings. In a similar vein to Boyatzis (1998), features of the data were identified that were of interest and assessed to be a significant way of regarding the subcultural elements of Islamic State propaganda.

Once the data relevant to each code had been gathered, and the codes adjusted to provide an adjacent fit, the next stage of the analysis involved identifying the key themes that had emerged from the data. Throughout the coding process, classifications were constantly revised to accommodate new issues of importance; these modified groupings were stimulated by the increased interaction and understanding of the data. Moreover, codes were constantly adjusted to enhance various sections of the data, and many codes were merged as topics mirrored similarity. I was considering themes that were both distinctive and recurrent, and themes that would integrate groups of codes, so that the final categories would describe the most important aspects and components of the research. It was important when defining the themes that they represented the significant elements of the data in a logical way, fully describing the codes underpinning them.

Once the initial themes had been established, a list was made of the videos viewed so that the amount of data of which each theme consisted of could be recorded. This process was done by colour coding the themes, and then highlighting each subject that occurred in each video; this provided an indication of the themes that were more prevalent. At the end of this process, certain themes that had initially been considered important throughout the coding, for example the use of children in propaganda, were merged with more significant thematic areas when written into the results. Thus the final themes chosen, and highlighted within the results section, are the product of considerable analytical effort, and are deemed to be distinct from each other.

### Ethical Considerations

The ethical concerns associated with this research have been carefully considered (see Appendix 2). A brief outline of the issues, and how this research will adhere to them, is detailed below:

#### Public or Private Data

A prominent concern when collecting data from the internet and social media is whether or not the sources are considered public or private, and to what extent researchers are ethically bound to seek informed consent (Fossheim & Ingierd, 2015). As this research has explored Islamic State propaganda found on the social media platforms of Facebook and YouTube, it was reasonable to assume that the users of these forums had agreed to any pre-set terms and conditions, detailing how their data may be accessed by third parties (Hogan, 2008). In order to safeguard the researcher throughout this research, and ensure any data collected was public

and legally accessible to third parties, all the relevant terms and conditions of the chosen social media platforms were carefully read through.

### Risks to Researcher

This research was conducted into extremism and radicalisation, and thus videos and images of a distressing nature would be accessed. To safeguard against undue distress, familiarisation with the guidelines set out by the British Criminological Society in their '*Statement of Ethical Practices*' was ensured, as was awareness of the support offered by the University, including the accessibility of their counselling services. Moreover, close contact was maintained with my supervisor throughout the research, and, although it was not necessary, I knew I could alert her and seek advice if I came across data that was psychologically distressing. In order to minimise any psychological issues, all the propaganda videos were viewed within a two week period. Furthermore, it was recognised that researching certain websites containing propaganda on radicalisation and extremism could be subject to police surveillance, and that accessing those videos could lead to police inquiries. In order to prevent this, the process in order to gain ethical clearance ensured that the head of the ethical committee for the University was aware of this research, and that my laptop was connected to the University VPN whenever any propaganda was being viewed.

# Results

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In contemporary society, terrorist organisations have developed not only as orchestrators and performers of attacks, but also as professional storytellers (Hegghammer, 2017). Specialised media departments produce a constant stream of jihadist propaganda, in which the romanticised notion of the Islamic State brotherhood is aesthetically mixed with ultra-violence, and broadcast freely online. Islamic state propaganda, in particular, can be considered a virtual invitation to violence, and much of its extremist content is about the enactment of fantasies, fantasies which have not only a religious element, but also a caliphate dimension, that effectively draws the audience into the theatrical arenas of terrorism. Therefore, in considering the foundations supporting these theatrical displays of violence, it is significant that the Islamic State deems its media operation just as important as its military operation.

An analysis of Islamic State propaganda indicated that, as an organisation, a complex narrative is directed to a number of audiences, including potential recruits, current foreign fighters, sympathisers and antagonists. Islamic state propagandists fuse the foundations of its propaganda together in order to communicate the same core narrative- of a triumphant and thriving caliphate, and a utopian society that offers a community to all who desire it, and destruction to those who do not. Thus the theatrical components employed by the Islamic State spark attention on a global scale, helping it recruit and draw the masses into its terror through the appeal of bloody spectacles. This section in the dissertation will explore the key themes of seduction, grievance, utopia, military warfare, and the theatrics of execution, which were considered the key components extracted from the propaganda. All images evidence within this section can be found in Appendix 1.

## Seduction

The results of this investigation show that Islamic State propaganda is targeting the entirety of the global jihadist movement, and is seeking out potential recruits to join the caliphate. Its marketing is a display of raw power and fanaticism, which is embedded within the seductive narrative of its videos. The notion of seduction is the foundation for the theoretical underpinning of this research, as propaganda has been uncovered that is not only explicit and primal, but also gratuitous. Many western recruits are represented as the chosen few, when, in

fact, their deaths are orchestrated for the purpose of recruitment videos, with seductive images of military warfare being cherry-picked for maximum effect.

The majority of propaganda videos analysed are a seductive smorgasbord of enticing imagery, haunting Nasheeds (vocal music), choreographed action and extreme violence. Battle scenes are shot in homage to Hollywood Movies, with slow moving cameras zooming in on the actions, as flames engulf the screen (Images 1-2). A prominent element of seduction centres on the comradery and the unity that the Islamic State offers, the notion of acceptance, that everyone is embraced regardless of race and ethnicity (Images 3-10). This focus on belonging conveys a story of friendship and power, and this camaraderie lures marginalised and disenfranchised western youths into joining the caliphate.

The visual images used are powerfully stimulating, and the use of graphs showing Islamic State advancement, fire, battles, and military perceptions of warriors and heroes, coincides with the imagery of attractive males, having fun and relaxing in an illusion of a perfect society (Images 11-20). A recurring theme within the production is that all scenes are shot in slow motion for dramatic effect; every gun shot fired, every rocket launched is slowed down, so the audience can experience the impact as if they were present (Images 21-24). Explosive battle scenes are accompanied by ear ringing sound, and every speck of dust, every segment of ash draws the viewer in, giving them a front row seat to the experience. The fighters used in this particular stream of propaganda develop an almost personal relationship with the audience throughout the film; they are good looking, dressed in enticing military clothing, and are carrying powerful weapons, radiating the impression that they are heroes (Images 25-37). Its sole goal is to keep the audience entertained, thus very large quantities of slickly produced propaganda are circulated to keep the audience locked in.

Another captivating theme emerging from the propaganda was the use of sequences designed to look like a first person shooter video game, an effective tool when trying to attract young men, giving the illusion that they are shooting the gun and are part of the action (Images 38-39). Likewise, recent propaganda advertises the creation of a video game that will be used to recruit and train children, providing them with skills to aid them in its battle against the west. It plays out like an adapted version of the extremely popular commercial video game '*Grand Theft Auto*', accompanied by a printed over image of the notorious black flag of the Islamic State (Image 40). The video features appealing scenes of armed men pulling police officers from their cars and shooting them to death, explosive attacks on military convoys, and civilians,

hiding behind buildings and in trees, shooting the enemy with assault rifles; all of these clips are interspersed with the Islamic State logo (Images 41-42).

Furthermore, the video entitled '*The Chosen Few of Different Lands: Abu Muslim from Canada*', is an example of a seductive technique employed by the Islamic State, portraying western fighters as supreme and the most commendable of all Muslims, because of their loyalty to the cause. This practice gives the illusion that fighters are selected because they are superior to all others, they are the chosen few, and those Muslims who do not make hijra, are too cowardly. Although there are many other videos in the same vein, this video, in particular, portrays the life of a normal Canadian teenager, observing his hobbies of playing hockey and fishing in the countryside, concurrently with images of spectacular scenery and peaceful music (Images 43-46). The recruit in the video describes himself as an everyday western youth, making reference to the fact that before travelling to Syria, he had plenty of money, a good job and supportive kinships (Image 47).

Recruitment videos such as these give the illusion that fighters in the Islamic State are not social outcasts, anarchists or people who want to destroy the world. In contrast, they are living regular lives in the caliphate, getting married, starting families and, just like regular soldiers, they have prosperous lives outside of their careers. Upon analysis of these videos, it is evident that the sole purpose of these men is to be killed in action; they are not scholars, and consequently will not be taken seriously when they talk about Islam, thus their only value, is as cannon fodder, to be killed and used in propaganda videos (Image 48).

## Grievance

Another core theme central to Islamic State propaganda is its grievance narrative, where it describes its operations and its reasons for them. It is in these videos that it conveys its disdain for the west, and, in this case, the west is everybody, Muslim or not, who does not follow its ideology. Considerable amounts of the propaganda analysed centre their narrative on victimhood, and the notion that Sunni Muslims are being subjected to persecution. In many of the more widespread videos, the victimhood narrative is methodically intertwined with the retribution that follows. So, whilst the most highlighted theme of many videos is brutality, the victimhood narrative plays a crucial role as a justifier, and a means of legitimating Islamic State acts of terror. Images of suffering and death are not solely reserved for the execution videos, but are used by the Islamic State to justify its most atrocious acts by emphasising the anguish

of its nationals. Detailed evidence of civilian casualties offers one of the Islamic State's most persuasive arguments, and the more graphic the confirmation, the more powerful the propaganda. Critical interjections of the victimhood narrative serve not only as justifiers for the group's existence, but are indicators of the martyrdom endured, as the Islamic State suffers on behalf of Sunni Muslims globally. The suggestion of mercy, and the notion that the Islamic State is prepared to grant clemency to those who repent, is featured within numerous propaganda videos. The incentive for this strategy is self-evident, as conveying that if past beliefs are recanted there is the opportunity to be forgiven, would clearly facilitate the Islamic State's expansion.

The propaganda entitled the '*The Islamic State's National Health Service*' is a good example of the use of the grievance narrative. This video, in particular, plays the hero card, and interweaves itself with popular culture, modelling its content on an episode of the BBC programme '*Casualty*', or the British reality medical documentary '*24 Hours in A & E*'. Each scene is shot in fast action-packed motion, there is heart-beat monitors flashing across the screen, all to persuade the audience that Islamic State is providing its citizens with extensive healthcare, and running a host of medical facilities with state of the art equipment, which helps the victims of the coalition force's aggression (Images 49-52). Moreover, it shows the audience many images of destruction caused by the west, as a way of resonating with the vulnerable.

When discussing the grievance narrative, it is important to take note of the multiple propaganda videos featuring John Cantlie, a British journalist, who has been a captive of the Islamic State since 2012. Rather than merely being portrayed as a submissive object of captivity, he has been incorporated into a media strategy for the Islamic State to convey its wider aims. The imagery and aspects of his propaganda portray a very different picture of the Islamic State than that presented in the mainstream press. In a series of videos entitled '*Lend me your Ears*', Cantlie outlines his contempt for the west and sympathy towards his captors, which appears to increase with each plot in which he is cast, as he vows to show the public the truth that is being kept out of the western media (Images 53-55). For example, in the video entitled '*Inside Mosul*', Cantlie discusses the destruction of the bridges and waterworks, caused by the coalition airstrikes. He introduces the grievance narrative by emphasising that it is the ordinary citizens of Mosul who are suffering, that there are no Mujahideen in Mosul- they are on the front lines, and that it is the general public, rather than Islamic State fighters, who are the victims (Images 56-58).

When discussing the grievance narrative, it is important to note of the large amounts of propaganda feature refugees leaving the Islamic State for Europe. These videos emphasise the fact that those who do escape find themselves suffering under the unjust rule of Europe, or perishing during their journey. This particular type of propaganda contains news clips and interviews discussing the harsh treatment that refugees have faced in Europe, warning Muslims of what awaits them should they flee the Islamic State, and forfeit their reward in paradise. Videos also show how the Islamic State has been caring for the refugees from the Syrian regime, and thus providing a further powerful recruitment tool calling out for all Muslims to join the caliphate.

### Utopia

A major theme emerging throughout this research was propaganda portraying the Islamic State as a genuine functioning nation, a growing and effective state, where normal civilian life is possible. The imagery portrays a conventional society by claiming that the Islamic State is operating effective public services, schools, nursing homes and hospitals, and this notion of the ordinary lives of its citizens plays a big part in its propaganda (Images 59-62). Thus it appears that the Islamic State is not just keen to present a vision of success on the battlefields, but it is keen to show it is achieving progress in all areas of society. The tone of the public service videos is intriguing, as they are almost yearningly nostalgic, as if the organisation is recognising that its territorial hold on places is becoming more contested.

The focus on the utopian narrative is unambiguous, and conveyed above all else in the initial propaganda. It is seen to be both expected and necessary, as statehood is its principle appeal on both a domestic and international level. With the caliphate narrative as its exclusive selling point, the group is able to denounce the narrow-mindedness of jihadist competitors, and claim that the Islamic State is the most sincere in the eyes of Allah. Therefore, regardless of how naive the propaganda might appear, whether it is videos of ceremonies, children playing or the celebrations of community events, utopian events are of existential importance to the Islamic State. It is these videos of fighters relaxing and enjoying themselves in the caliphate that predominantly conveys an engaging picture of the collective (Images 63-77).

Moreover, many of the videos of utopian events focus on the religious dimensions of life in the caliphate, which is central to the Islamic State's projection of itself, and its proclamation that it is the sole implementer of exact Islam universally. Therefore a vast percentage of Islamic

State propaganda depicts religious activities, such as people praying, breaking fast together, or demolishing other religions' symbols and shrines. Likewise, the utopia narrative stems from the portrayal of a flourishing economic life under the Islamic State. The appeal of such propaganda is that it resonates with those who are outside the Middle East, who interpret such videos as evidence that there is a feasible alternative in the caliphate to extreme violence. Economic-based propaganda is also used to alleviate national concerns, and convince others within the region of the benefits of making hijra, to an economically self-sustaining community.

Additionally, utopia-themed events depict civilian social gatherings within the caliphate, to demonstrate that life is joyful and needs to be protected and cherished by all who live there. This pleasure is intimately entwined with the Islamic State's implementation of its Theopolitical agenda. Likewise, the principle of governance, and the Islamic State's bureaucracy and provision, prove popular, leading to the emergence of videos, particularly throughout 2015, showing the group administering its civilian population, providing education and healthcare, fixing structural damage, collecting blood donations and purifying water (PIimages 78-85). Determining why there is such a preponderant emphasis on this facet of the Islamic State's existence is important to the understanding of its appeal both as an organisation and as a feasible alternative to the status quo. The emphasis on governance enables it to present an aura of defiance in the face of the coalition, and credibly argue that it is the only realistic option for Sunni Muslims. This type of propaganda gives the impression that the Islamic State is working hard to protect and defend its citizens and clear up the destruction caused by the coalition forces.

### Military Warfare

Whilst at the height of its territorial strength, the Islamic State's propaganda appears to focus on the utopian dream of the Islamic Caliphate, presenting peaceful landscapes that were less geared towards military action. However, throughout 2016, an alternation in propaganda can be seen, with videos communicating with foreign fighters in a qualitatively different way, as military warfare becomes their primary focus. As the Islamic State lose territory in Iraq and Syria, its propaganda has changed, and it has become apparent they are making that loss of territory as expensive as possible for the coalition. Without military-based propaganda, the Islamic State would lose its core focus, because to support and perpetuate its apocalyptic momentum, it must always appear triumphant. The message conveyed by the Islamic State

needs to be a winner's message, hence, while fighting is occurring on both the offensive and defensive fronts, it is the offensive that will gain the most propagandistic attention, as no supporter, dedicated or otherwise, receives gratification from witnessing their own army collapse. Thus the majority of military-based videos featured drone footage of suicide bombers and their targets, with the camera following them to film the explosions (Images 86-89).

### Theatre of Execution

The Islamic State has truly industrialised its propaganda machine in its efforts to hijack popular culture and seduce the youth. One of its perverse victories as propagandists is that, with each video released, they find a way to continually escalate the violence. The executions of western civilians is the epitome of global jihadist warfare, as the gruesome beheadings do not only inflict terror on the victims, but also radiate a potency that excites and stimulates, both the fanatics who engage in acts of terror, and those on the fringes, who are awed by the spectacle of jihadist bloodletting. Moreover, the narrators of the majority of execution videos are western, with American or British accents, which could be viewed as a way to disseminate dread and unease among the citizens of the west. As the execution videos are released, it is almost as if the audience are being encouraged to see how executioners can surpass themselves, how will they kill someone this time. The execution videos throughout the years clearly demonstrate the escalation of violence, from the initial execution videos, that resembled a scene from the Hollywood movie 'Seven' (Images 90-93), to recently released videos displaying more gruesome and shocking tactics- mass executions, crucifixions, or making children executioners- each time are more extreme, and thus more likely to be discussed (Images 94-113).

Throughout the years, the Islamic State have used its propaganda to boast that it is training children to fight, and using them as executioners and in suicide operations. It is a strategy used to polarise people, to create as much outrage as possible, and to secure as much publicity. It is clear, from its videos, that there are schools being run within the caliphate that is institutionalising violence for the next generation of children being recruited as child soldiers. They are being trained to move through houses in tactical formations, with live ammunition, and to execute trapped prisoners (Images 114-125). Thus it is clear the Islamic State is conveying the message that it is preparing the next generation of fighters, and that if there is an invasion by the coalition forces, there will be children firing back at them.

The brutality of the Islamic State execution videos indulges ideological supporters on home soil, attracts fighters from abroad, and positions the group as a powerful entity to political sympathisers. However, it is evident that propaganda prioritising violence is not solely produced for the purpose of securing support. In fact, the documented executions of enemy soldiers or spies are also intended to intimidate opponents, polarise communities and provoke reaction from the media.

The theatrical aspect of the execution videos can be demonstrated in the video entitled '*Healing the Believers Chests*', in which the Jordanian Pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh was burned alive. The video is shot in eerie silence and in slow motion, all that can be heard is the sounds of birds, the camera rotates slowly to show the audience the militants standing around the victim holding guns, there are many close up shots of the victim and the cage. The familiar Nasheed (vocal music) used in most videos, begins to play when the militant lights the stick that is about to ignite the trails of petrol, and the camera then films the prisoner being burnt alive (Images 126-131). Another video entitled '*A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross*' opens with a scene of Islamic State fighters marching prisoners, in the stereotypical Guantanamo Bay Orange Jumpsuits along a beach. There is no music at this point and all that can be heard is the wind and the sound of the ocean; the music eventually kicks in as the men drop to their knees to be executed (Images 132-134). These videos are merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the theatrical nature of Islamic State execution propaganda, as its media wings constantly release extremely disturbing and expertly edited execution videos projecting fundamentalist teachings.

## Conclusion

What can be seen from an analysis of the propaganda is that the caliphate has a compelling story to tell, which it delivers in a sophisticated and seductive way; what cannot be overlooked is the underlying strategic element that enables the Islamic State to convey its messages effectively. Although the majority of videos paint themselves in an ultra-violent light, the Islamic State propaganda viewed is extremely varied. The caliphal narrative combined positive and negative themes that can be assumed to appeal to both ideological and political supporters. The videos analysed have portrayed the illusion of a utopian civilian life, have ruminated upon the concept of mercy, and have highlighted the visceral camaraderie demonstrated among its members. The next chapter of this dissertation will explore how the results of the analysis coincide with the theoretical underpinning of the research.

# Discussion

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To speak of crime in the context of its culture is to recognise that much of what we deem to be criminal behaviour is simultaneously subcultural behaviour (Cottee & Hayward, 2011). Thus the ways in which the Islamic State has portrayed itself as a terrorist organisation, through its propaganda, are collectively organised around a network of symbols, rituals and shared meaning. An analysis of 100 videos has demonstrated that the Islamic State manipulates the radicalisation process by offering a new perspective of violence, which includes elements of adventure, belonging and recognition. Specifically, focus has been placed on representations of a utopian society, which provides moral absolutes, and an alternative to poverty stricken western societies that are corrupt with drugs and crime. In contrast, the propaganda portrays the caliphate as a society with clear and straightforward rules, power, and material wealth. More importantly, the videos analysed depict an image of power and comradeship, as well as the ascendancy of a brotherhood that enables power over others and sadism, in the name of a higher goal. This discussion will specifically correlate the results of this dissertation with the theoretical components offered predominantly by Katz (1988), Cohen (2001), Goffman (1959) and Elias (1994), in an attempt to identify how and why so many western youths have been seduced into joining the caliphate.

## The Seductions of Jihadism

To begin with, this discussion will make reference to Katz's (1988) theoretical stance, which explored the ways in which men are seduced into constructing tough and alien identities by crime and violence. Katz's application is helpful when focusing on the style, social status and personal identities of Islamic State militants, and, more importantly, when exploring the notion of the Jihadi Badass. Thus, when applying Katz's (1988) theory of seduction to the deviant subculture of the Islamic State, it is important to note that this emergent culture of violence not only places emphasis on the situational factors perpetuating violence, but also the style and symbolism concealed within the propaganda. For example, Katz's (1988) initial theory centred on the moral and sensual attractions for young men of doing evil and committing crime. At the same time, the results of a semiotic analysis established that many young western men became the focus of a seductive narrative, and thus emphasis was being placed on their stylistic preferences in propaganda. This included the use of soldiers in appealing clothing that portrays

them as warriors, gangsters and thugs, fighters always being positioned with guns, machetes and bomb belts, affirming the illusion that the Islamic State is not only notorious, but also sexy on the battlefield, reflecting that they are a successful and alternative deviant subculture. Thus, a main finding of this research is that a combination of factors helps explain the seductive appeal of the Islamic State, particularly for western gang members in search of redemption or spectacular forms of excitement and violence.

Moreover, the results of this study concur with the literature of Cottee and Hayward (2011), as the seductive nature of the propaganda analysed suggests that, as an organisation, the Islamic State zealously provides an outlet for the more visceral desires of its recruits, through assurances of excitement, escape and unrestricted violence. The results show that the message the Islamic State is depicting is clear; that affiliation to its cause allows ordinary youths to become terrorist infidels on a wide-spread scale, to live out their violent fantasies, and to prove their worth in the eyes of Allah, thereby becoming the ultimate Badasses. In keeping with Katz's (1988) theory of seduction, the propaganda focusing on execution is inundated with Badass iconography, and with each video released, the seduction is magnified, as the scenes become more graphic, effectively satisfying the audiences' craving for a continual escalation of violence. In addition to the violence, a semiotic analysis of the Islamic State militants' style deconstructed the inferred meanings attached to subcultural entities and practices. For example, men brandish their Kalashnikovs, knives and handhold rocket launchers, as weaponry used to entice the youth into joining; this seduction is mixed with the extreme violence of militants torturing or gunning down victims, or menacingly waving the decapitated heads of their prisoners, whilst portraying a frenzied delight. So, unquestionably, these men project an overwhelming and ominous presence, cloaked in a mythology of virtue that is integral to the aura of the jihadi Badass.

Popular culture is a primary weapon for the Islamic State, and an analysis of propaganda has demonstrated that the media outlets of the caliphate are expert in speaking the language of western youths, taking seductive imagery from the video games they play, programmes they watch and music to which they listen, and lacing them with subliminal and seductive imagery that provides youths with a sense of purpose. Moreover, the propaganda viewed was in accordance with the research of Moghadam (2017) and Borum (2014), and showed that the Islamic State manipulates its grievance narrative, offering a message to western youths, informing them of what they should be doing with their lives, and making them feel guilty for not joining the jihad. Additionally, the semiotic analysis provided a focus on specific attributes

and the different signs that could be assigned, based on subcultural ties. For example, battle footage that is shot from the first person fighter angle allows the audience personally to associate these violent acts with power, comradery, glory and excitement, all of which are conveyed through the structure of the propaganda. Thus this study has shown that Islamic State propaganda instils the idea of jihad not only with conventional concepts of honour and virility, but also a resilient undercurrent of oppositional postmodern cool.

Despite the obvious flare for portraying gore in propaganda, simple acts of violence alone cannot be the sole seductive element, as the audience needs something further with which to connect, and thus it is essential that each video has a story (Hegghammer, 2017). This is one of the biggest innovations of the Islamic State; its propaganda has a story, which is why the caliphate appeals on an international and wide-spread scale (Coolsaet, 2015). When vulnerable and disillusioned individuals watch the videos, it is apparent how easy it is for them to be manipulated into believing that the societies in which they currently reside play host to dictators, corrupt rulers and infidels; thus they see the caliphate as a positive and attractive alternative to their current failed systems. Moreover, in a similar finding to Katz (1988), the badass iconography is combined with the subcultural elements of comradery, excitement and adventure. The results show that many of the videos portray images of soldiers killing with smiles on their faces; they are often embracing each other, and celebrating with the community after every military victory.

What has become clear, from the propaganda analysed, is that many elements contrasted with the brutal image of the Islamic State portrayed in the media. In fact, militants were shown to have a rich and aesthetic culture, with scenes depicting them immersed in their writing and recital of poetry, having perfect manners, interpreting dreams, and taking a pride in their appearance, all of which make potent contributions to helping their world view to resonate with audiences. Similarly to the research of Hegghammer (2012), a recurrent theme within jihadist propaganda is that they are prone to romanticise their adversity through a grandiose and sentimental style, for instance scenes offering an aura of authenticity, in which each element has a historical component.

### The Process of De-Civilisation

Elias (1994) maintained that the majority of people in modern society now regard carnivals of violence, including public executions, as deeply repugnant. Part of Elias's thesis centred on the

increasing sensibility and repulsion towards violence; however, the rise in terrorism in contemporary society, and, more recently, the rise of the Islamic State, has led to an increase in the acceptance of violence, violence as entertainment, and the relationship between fantasy violence and real violence. Therefore the notion that the public sensitivity to violence is being reduced needs to be considered. This research has demonstrated that the Islamic State media performances operate in a similar fashion to those reality shows which so effectively mobilise the consumerism of visual media. In the videos and photographic imagery that present horrific acts of violence orchestrated by the Islamic State, whether it be against sacred buildings, prisoners, innocent victims, or archaeological sites, it is the production that is the real area of interest. Moreover, many execution videos contain highly salient cultural images, which effectively transform the victims of terrorism into actors in western popular culture, thereby engaging with their global audiences and makes terror popular. Thus it could be argued that the fact that society is consistently being exposed to the horrific images broadcast daily through Islamic State propaganda, and is increasingly ignoring the public executions that have become common practice, shows that, in contrast to Elias (1994), society is actually in a process of de-civilisation.

### States of Denial

Cohen's (2001) analysis is applicable to this discussion primarily because, as society flourishes in an electronic age dominated by the visual, information is immediate and dependable, and visual images have a visceral and public impact that no other medium can make. Likewise, Cohen (2001) was interested in the idea of spatial proximity, an element of denial he maintains is vital when exploring how ordinary individuals are more likely to show concern for those suffering who are closest to them, or for events happening in their own society, in comparison to the suffering of strangers, or atrocities that occur transnationally. It is clear, from the production of the Islamic State propaganda used in this research, that there has been an introduction of what Cohen (2001) would deem psychic numbing across society, as the media relay slickly produced propaganda in order to make a moral point. However, when the masses are exposed to this moral point too frequently, and too graphically, they will enter a process of demand overload, and the internal factors processing the imagery will be atrophied by a culture of interminable and remorseless imagery of extreme violence and execution. Therefore, the images become too familiar to retain, and the general public desensitise to the horrors committed by the Islamic State.

## The Presentation of Self in Islamic State Life

What has been uncovered, in relation to Goffman's (1959) research, is that Islamic State propaganda often targets those with an existing grievance, and will manipulate those who are already lacking something in their identity, by offering them an opportunity, as a social actor, to enact the fantasy of a caliphate society. Thus a prominent narrative throughout the research was that many disenfranchised and disillusioned youths join the Islamic State because they crave an identity, and the caliphate provides them with a social role in which they can perform. The propaganda viewed has the ability to manipulate and impact on individuals who have deficits in their current social roles, or who believe their social role does not conform to the western ideology of their existing society. Consequently, the propaganda is conveying that these people will be given new social roles when they join the caliphate; whether as a fighter, a father, a husband or a friend, there are simultaneous roles to perform, all of which influence the internal feelings of potential recruits.

Additionally, Goffman (1959) maintains that individuals actively construct themselves through a form of impression management, seeking to present a particular image to their audiences by controlling the impression their performance gives. A semiotic analysis of the propaganda correlates with Goffman's (1959), thesis as it is clear that the Islamic State employs a variety of impression management tactics, that include props, beautiful and seductive scenery and backgrounds, powerful tones of voice, and violent gestures that ooze a seductive quality. Therefore Islamic State propagandists provide the perfect front stage illusion- that powerful combatant lifestyles, and violent and sadistic fantasies can be achieved, and a utopian community of brotherhood can be established. Moreover, the propaganda offers backstage roles which encompass the religious and caliphate dimension. Thus after the audience has been exposed many times to extreme acts of violence, the Islamic State shines a light into the backstage arena of the caliphate, where the soldiers portray scenes of unity and peace, thus showing the viewer the distance between themselves and the roles they could perform, which are loosely scripted by their society. For example, the first person fighter footage enables the viewer to immerse themselves in the lifestyle, and the role they could perform through the propaganda. Therefore, despite the seductive and utopian depictions conveying a life of power and martyrdom, there is no imagery that can solely be relied upon as an honest depiction of life

in the caliphate, as it is clear the Islamic State are experts in manipulating audiences into accepting an idealised impression that conceals the reality.

Moreover, this research has shown similarities to the work of Neumann (2016), Hegghammer (2017) and Maher (2016), as the conclusions stemming from the propaganda reviewed suggest that the Islamic State is far beyond being only a terrorist organisation, but is a social movement, consistently portraying a narrative of grievance, that resonates with western youths because it is based in fact, as well as the Islamic State's interpretation of world events. For example, videos describe the Islamic State's grievance with western foreign policy, stemming from the persistent bombing of Muslim countries by coalition forces, which is not a fabrication, but is actually happening. In videos designed to gain sympathy, imagery is utilised to traumatise the viewers, projecting images of death and destruction which depict the killing, torture and oppression of innocent Muslims. In a sense, a type of vicarious deprivation is being experienced by the viewers, who are quite often battling with their identity; watching videos detailing the oppression of Muslims feels like a sharing of deprivation and thus the audience gets drawn in into the message.

## Conclusion

If the results and discussion of this dissertation can tell society anything it is that many people gain their understanding of the Islamic State through the distorted lens of propaganda and contemporary western media. Islamic State propaganda videos are extremely successful in recruiting western youths to join their ranks, by combining graphic imagery, codes of western entertainment and fragments of Hollywood productions, effectively flipping the script on popular culture and using it to attract new recruits. It is clear that the cultural products conveyed early on in the recruitment trajectory are the key to emphasising the attraction of jihadism; individuals are drawn in more by the narrative and seductive mechanisms than they are by the ideological components. Hence, it is clear why the Islamic State exploits cultural products specifically for recruitment purposes. The Islamic State is religious in nature, and it conveys this message through a sophisticated audio-visual strategy, consisting of massive elaboration and distribution of audio-visual images that are highly salient and resonate in the culture of its target audiences. The final section of this dissertation will draw conclusions from the results, discuss the limitations of the research, and indicate how this research could be expanded upon in the future.

# Conclusion

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This dissertation set out to unveil the subcultural elements hidden within online Islamic State propaganda, and expose the methods of seduction that are successfully attracting western youths for radicalisation and recruitment. The results of this qualitative exploration centre on an inclusive semiotic content analysis of 100 Islamic State propaganda videos. A key finding was that propaganda, whilst it cannot be the sole agent of radicalisation, or the only means by which disillusioned individuals are recruited to its cause, plays a central role in these processes, and thus should not be underestimated. When it comes to the management of its savagery, the Islamic State appears extremely effective in manipulating the deceptive media halo, and its carefully constructed media image that portrays a society of invincibility, utopia, and an all-encompassing power to which many are subservient. The key findings of this study have shown that, over the past four years, the Islamic State has systematically created an absorbing, widespread and effortlessly accessible image of itself, which saturates social media and the online world. Thus a holistic exploration of Islamic State propaganda has facilitated an understanding of just how vital propaganda is to its success as a jihadist organisation. Moreover, it is both evident and unsurprising that the Islamic State has drawn its propaganda from totalitarianism, as evidenced by its narratives that bring symbolic influence and tangible power, and create content and barbarity for the consumption of an ultra-violent craving audience.

By stripping back the Islamic State's exhortative veneer, this research has revealed a number of important insights into the strategic underpinnings of the group's success, both in terms of its ability to seduce recruits, and its multifaceted approach to the dissemination of propaganda on a wide-spread scale. Furthermore, this research has identified that the Islamic State has documented many facets of its existence as part of an extensive branding exercise. The five composite narratives that have been identified throughout the analysis- of seduction, grievance, military warfare, theatrical displays of violence, and illusions of utopia- are effectively the veins running through the propaganda machine, and are the lifeblood of the Islamic State's democratised recruitment strategy. Thus the results suggest that the Islamic State has exploited the above themes, thereby adding to its tangible power as an ever expanding terrorist organisation.

Previous research conducted by Klausen (2015), Farwell (2014) and Bunzel (2015), has shown that Islamic State propaganda not only promises military adventure, but a utopian lifestyle. Similar findings were discovered in this research, as the circulating video and photographic content painted a seductive picture of jihadism to which no other terrorist organisation has come close. However, existing literature has advocated the importance of challenging the Islamic State through creating a counter narrative that, once identified and delivered, will undermine the group's sympathisers and potential recruits (Coolsaet, 2016; Moghadam, 2017). In contrast, the results of this study have led to the conclusion that, when it comes to combating radicalisation, no single solution exists, and, in order to meaningfully challenge the Islamic State's media strategy, it must be realised that different narratives appeal to different people, and that success in combating radicalisation can only be obtained through a variety of approaches. Another key finding shows that the inducements for recruitment offered by the Islamic State are flexible, and have been constantly subject to change throughout the years, from an initial focus on utopia, to the current focus on military warfare. The audience has been exposed to a widespread vision of what life would be like within the caliphate, and theatrical displays of violence, although playing an important role in the Islamic State's image, are by no means the only key to unlocking its appeal. Rather, the results show that more conspicuous is the reinforcement of the victimhood narrative, and the portrayal of life in a utopian society.

A further significant finding of this study, was that for many individuals, the journey to jihad begins online, and social media has become a hunting ground, to which recruiters gain a front seat invitation into the homes of vulnerable and disenchanting youths. What has become apparent, from existing literature, is that the internet has profoundly changed the way in which individuals, particularly from the west, have come to embrace and understand violent extremism (Neumann, 2009; Combs, 2006; Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015). Thus the results of this research complement the concept that the phenomenon of lone-wolf terrorism and radicalisation are fundamentally linked. Moreover, in a similar vein to the research of Hogan (2010), Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), and Goffman (1959), this study has shown that the more socially connected individuals are, the more they can promote the parts of themselves they want the audience to see as favourable, and the increased use of social media for the dissemination of propaganda has only escalated this manipulation. Likewise, the slick and choreographed Islamic State execution videos feed the construction of a larger cognitive pattern, with audiences recognising the narratives as being the result of a specific dramaturgical strategy. It is the soft lighting used, the western accent voiceover, the seductive sounds of the

wind and ocean, combined with the discrete portrayal of violence, which gives the impression that the reality is more shocking than what the audience is actually seeing.

Moreover, one of the perceptions, outlined in existing research exploring the foundations of radicalisation, is that people who join terrorist organisations are brainwashed, and, in a sense, are not fully aware of in what they are getting involved (Atran, 2003; Wark, 2004; Kirby, 2007). Thus to test this hypothesis, this research focused on the subcultural elements of radicalisation, (an under-researched area within academic discussions about violent extremism), and, more specifically, on understanding the emotions through which young people, who may be struggling with their identity, are going through. The findings also suggest that radicalisation, whilst to some extent is about the ideology, is also about young people feeling the excitement of being affiliated to extreme groups and networks. Thus, not only do they feel prestigious and cool because of this attachment, they also feel they hold a significant place in the caliphal society. The propaganda released is inviting potential recruits to associate with like-minded individuals, almost like a band of brothers; this unity and the notion of fighting against a common enemy holds romantic connotations, and the prospect of handling powerful military hardware provides a rush of adrenaline. Moreover, if this research has shown anything, it is that radicalisation, rather than being the result of a single motivational process, is the combination of social, political, cultural, and religious appeals that effectively seduce and recruit western youths. Likewise, the cultural and subcultural elements of propaganda play a very large part in the radicalisation process, encompassing jihadism with feelings of excitement, adventure and existential superiority.

The results of this dissertation have also shown that the Islamic State appeals to western youths because of the seductive connotations of its propaganda, which portray a powerful, utopian society, offering comradeship, excitement and prestige. However, a major limitation of this study is that it cannot approach a comprehensive assessment of the propaganda, as such large quantities of propaganda have been released and very many of these videos are unobtainable. Thus a suggestion for future research would be to conduct a similar research project on a much wider scale, in order to review more propaganda and scrutinise further the emerging narratives. A limitation of using a solely qualitative methodology is that the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population, in the same way a quantitative analysis could. Therefore, the addition of a quantitative survey in future research could provide more concrete evidence of the trends and strategic methods of the Islamic State's message across a much wider spectrum. However, as the aim of this research centred on a cultural criminological analysis, the intention was to

move away from more positivistic forms of criminological analysis, toward analytic sensibilities of culture, to tell the story of crime from the ground up.

Furthermore, in expanding research into the reasons why people are recruited to organisations such as the Islamic State, it would be valuable to focus on propaganda aimed solely at the recruitment of women. Such a study to compare and contrast female-specific seductive techniques with those evidenced within this study, would determine whether or not similar narratives emerge within propaganda geared towards the recruitment of women. Moreover, future research could investigate the defectors and disillusioned returnees from the Islamic State, and consider them as a resource for an integrative and counter-narrative solution, rather than a group of deviants who should be outcast and demonised. In terms of developing the cultural criminological element, and further exploring the power of the visual in aiding radicalisation, a key question for future research would be to explore why Islamic State recruits experience a type of existential frustration, characterised by particular and overwhelming vehemence, and analyse the deeper structural dynamics and forces to which disillusioned youths are subject. Furthermore, it is important for future research to focus on why individuals who experience acute feelings of existential frustration, respond by joining terror organisations and how propaganda portrays the caliphate as a suitable outlet in which to release this emotion.

This study has shown that Islamic State propaganda conveys the message that it is talking about ideology, but dealing in sheer brutality, that it is seeking the oxygen of publicity, and that it will use public outrage to its atrocities as part of a polarisation strategy, to turn people against one another. The videos analysed have not only portrayed the illusion of a utopian civilian lifestyle, but have also ruminated upon the concept of mercy, and highlighted the visceral camaraderie demonstrated among its members. Moreover, the subcultural elements within the propaganda portray a rise in badass iconography, combined with promises of excitement and adventure, portraying the caliphate as sexy, powerful and uniting. These results suggest the hypothesis that existential desire may figure among the spectrum of motives for engaging in jihadism, and that a greater sensitivity towards this need is necessary for a broader understanding of the elements attracting recruits to the Islamic State. It would be beneficial for future research to focus on humanising, rather than demonising Islamic State foreign fighters, in an attempt to understand the desire behind the moral despicability of their actions, given they are undeniably human actors, with dreams, passions and yearnings. Addressing these factors could be the key to unlocking the subjective and cultural processes of radicalisation.

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