



Centro di Ricerca sui Linguaggi Specialistici
Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes

Stefania M. Maci
& Michele Sala (eds.)

**REPRESENTING AND
REDEFINING SPECIALISED
KNOWLEDGE: VARIETY IN LSP**

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Stefania M. Maci & Michele Sala (eds.)

Representing and Redefining Specialised
Knowledge: Variety in LSP

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CERLIS

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MARGARET RASULO

Contagion and Tactical Diffusion of Radicalization Discourse

*The time has come for someone to say, Stop it.
Stop sensationalizing the violence.
Stop triggering violent behaviors now.
(Coleman 2004)¹*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the terrorist groups Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have demonstrated remarkable ability in effectively exploiting digital media to recruit and radicalize young Muslim and non-Muslim men from around the world. Online materials containing terrorist propaganda narratives have garnered attention from researchers (Michael 2013) who have focused their investigations on the role of modern technology of all forms, the Internet in general, and digital magazines in particular, in facilitating the radicalization process at a time when both extremist groups have begun to progressively lose their territorial strongholds along with their direct control of recruitment activities (McFarlane 2010). Specifically concerning the general aim of this study, the starting point is to unravel the narratives that are embedded in the visual and verbal meaning-making resources (Kress/van Leeuwen 2006) of *Inspire* and *Rumiyah*, the two English-language

¹ Coleman 2004. <<http://www.lorencoleman.com/copycateffect/recommendations.htm>>. Retrieved March 2017.

digital magazines published respectively by AQAP and ISIS. At a more granular level, the study explores how the pre-existing beliefs of potential recruits are expertly steered into echo chambers² with the purpose of amplifying *jihadi* ideology and its extremist messages.³ The *jihad* concept underpins this investigation as it is the principal instigator of the terrorist activity described herein; for this reason, it is to be understood not in its original spiritual meaning in Islam, but as the violent-based ideological distortion of the word operated at the hands of the militant groups who have aligned the military and offensive aspects of *jihad* with its more religious conceptualizations.

The groundwork necessary for the realization of this study, whose core issues are centered around the concept of ‘contagion through persuasion’, was prepared by conducting a close scrutiny of two mainstream news media tenets: guaranteeing the ‘telling of the truth’ (Rendall 2018),⁴ and the conceptualization of knowledge as a way of getting at a ‘justified true belief’ (Plato in Boghossian 2006). The word ‘belief’ in the context of this study is a construct that refers to a sustainably true proposition of some kind that comes across as a fact occurring in reality (Dorsch 2016). The editors of *Inspire* and *Rumiyah* know only too well how to harbor a belief, turn it into a necessary truth, and spread it as necessary knowledge in the radicalization process.

Closely linked to the intricate process of the dissemination of truth is the concept of persuasion as it feeds on one of the main qualities of truth: credibility. Leveraging discursive features that

² <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/09/us/americans-attracted-to-isis-find-an-echo-chamber-on-social-media.html>>. Retrieved May 3rd, 2017.

³ By advocating the removal of *kafir* (those who disbelieve in Allah), *jihad* has two distinct typologies. The Greater *jihad* is a personal struggle to fulfill what is right. On account of human pride, selfishness, and sinfulness, believers must continually wrestle with themselves and accomplish what is right and good. The lesser *jihad* refers to the external, physical effort to defend Islam (including terrorism) when the Muslim community is under attack: <https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/.../51172_ch_1.pdf>. Retrieved January 24th, 2018.

⁴ Rendall 2018. <<https://fair.org/home/you-have-to-have-journalists-who-are-committed-to-getting-at-the-truth/>>. Retrieved February 7th, 2018.

appear to be credible, persuasion attempts to get people to act, and persuaders seek, for whatever purpose, to bring about change⁵. Indeed, terrorist groups are expert users of the art of persuasion to trigger contagious behavior, transmissible across countries and across cultures (Mozaffari 2007; Jowett/O'Donnell 2012: 7; Samuel-Azran *et al.* 2015) for radicalization purposes.

1.1. (Self)-radicalization and discourse

Radicalization is a layered concept and a problematic one to define due to its many different processes and manifestations. This is especially true of online radicalization, or self-radicalization, which is defined by the significantly diverse experiences each individual has with the virtual world. McCauley and Moskalenko provide a useful way to approach a broad definition of the phenomenon which best fits the context of this study. They (2008: 416) state that:

radicalization means change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence and demand sacrifice in defense of the group.

Self-radicalization conducted in the so-called *jihadispheres* (Conway 2012; Ducol 2012) requires accessibility to materials that display a particular kind of discourse which focuses heavily on legitimization processes in order to normalize a certain view of the world and pass it on as the truth. Radicalization discourse contained in the visual and verbal resources of this study's terrorist digital magazines is replete with indoctrination processes and condemnation of Western countries (crusaders) and their non-Western allies (infidels) (Anti-defamation League, 2014).⁶

However, initiating a process of radicalization does not necessarily lead to successful adherence to group values and ideology. It is this study's view that young potential recruits are guided towards

⁵ <<http://pathosethoslogos.com/>>. Retrieved January 2018.

⁶ <<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/myths-and-facts-about-muslim-people-and-islam>>. Retrieved January 5th, 2018.

full understanding and participation by means of popularization of contextual resources (Ciapuscio 2003; Calsamiglia/Van Dijk 2004; Gotti 2014; Bondi 2015). By leveraging strategies of relevance, frequency and accessibility (Chong/Druckman 2007) of resources, this process affords recruits the opportunity to familiarize with the rules, regulations, customs, and symbolism of this particular context thus ensuring full participation and commitment to the cause.

1.3 Research questions

The study is guided by an overarching research question which aims to investigate the extent to which media are responsible in provoking contagion processes. From this more general concern, the study focuses on how radicalization discourse is persuasively construed and disseminated in digital magazines through Western-like reporting style and design features.

Related to the role of narratives that are embedded in these features, the study also questions the extent to which popularization processes, involving the tactics of relevance, frequency and accessibility, transform these narratives into carriers of contagion. The importance of pursuing this research focus stems from the evidence that most radicalization activities are now being conducted away from terrorist territory (Kohlmann 2008; Venhaus 2010)⁷, implying that the endurance of these groups and their *jihad* ideology (Kohlmann 2008) heavily relies on the recruitment potential of indirect contact.

2. Contagion and learnable behaviors

Justification of what is perceived as the truth motivates the young recruit to the point of adhering to the teachings of the terrorist

⁷ Venhaus 2010. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR236Venhaus.pdf>. Retrieved January 3rd, 2018.

narratives fabricated as the perennial cosmic struggle of the *jihād* against the infidels.

The persuasive element that triggers contagion is woven into the pages of terrorist digital magazines by following two tactical steps: firstly, violent terrorist information is embedded within other seemingly less extreme narratives that are designed to legitimize, justify and inspire engagement in violence; secondly, encouragement to take action, especially following lone-wolf attacks or suicide bombings, is strongly reinforced. It follows that the ultimate aim is to induce copycat behavior and possibly copycat events (Nacos 2009).

2.1 Inspirational contagion and media responsibility

The media have a responsibility towards what they present to their audiences; they can shape reality and mold attitudes towards certain issues. This general view on media accountability, however, has been strongly debated throughout the decades,⁸ especially regarding the reporting of terrorism, which has attracted strong arguments and counter-arguments about the possible connections between media content and contagion. Some experts sustain that media outlets are carriers tout-court of contagion-inducing messages (Nacos 2009), and strongly uphold that susceptible individuals and groups imitate violence that they consider to be particularly heroic (Sageman 2009).⁹ Conversely, there are other experts who acknowledge a certain amount of media responsibility, but also hold that there is insufficient evidence to support any direct relation between media and contagious behavior, also owing to the fact that mitigating factors are often adopted in reports to restrain or dampen possible effects of contagion (Coleman 2004).

There are two contagion mechanisms that shed light on the role of the media in the reporting of terrorism; the first is known as copycat contagion, and the second is inspirational contagion

⁸ <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/terry-newell/a-citizens-view-the-respo_b_8855328.html>. Retrieved February 4th, 2018.

⁹ Sageman 2009. <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/10/08/the-next-generation-of-terror/>>. Retrieved February 4th, 2018.

(Sedgwick 2007; Nacos 2009; Kathman 2011). The former is described as being a cause and effect event provoked by mimicking a particular terrorist technique or a general terrorist strategy that has already been put into action. In fact, this type of contagion is thought to be mainly media inspired as it involves a high volume of news coverage about terrorist attacks (Picard 1991; Gunter 2008; Weimann/Winn 1994). The latter, originating from the establishment of Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Sedgwick 2007; Sageman 2008), is not only the most alarming as it has the power to manipulate thought processes, but it is also the most homegrown, or less confined to territorial spaces, thus more conducive to the formation of new groups and cells away from the direct control of the mother organization. This study focuses on this second and more dangerous type that relies on inspiration as agent provocateur of contagion.

3. Dissemination of narratives and recruitment drive

As mentioned in the introduction, for radicalization to occur, the 'truths' embedded in this kind of discourse must be accepted and interiorized by the recruits. This occurs by rendering the narratives accessible through a process of dissemination, which occurs through a process that is similar to the popularization of discourse-specific concepts to non-experts who have expressed a proclivity in becoming part of a community (Calsamiglia/Van Dijk, 2004). The process of popularization has often been described as a reformulation process "modeled to suit a new target audience" (Gotti 2014:19), so that the great popularizer becomes the liaison between what is hidden and complex, and what should be understood (Gotti 2014; Bondi 2015). Applying these important general popularization concepts to radicalization discourse construction implies re-contextualizing (Gotti 2014) the perceived needs of potential recruits in such a way that they become comprehensible versions of that religious ideology and symbolism that terrorist groups foreground for recruitment purposes. Thus, various strategies or semantic means that are used in other

contexts for the transformation of specialized knowledge into ‘everyday’ or ‘lay’ knowledge – such as explanations, reformulations, paraphrasing and definitions – are communicated through visual and verbal resources in the composition of images, and in the storytelling functions of their narratives.

But how does this actually happen? How is this knowledge reformulated, re-contextualized and actualized? By drawing on Chong and Drukman’s theory of frames in news reporting (2007) and Entman’s work on the persuasive force of frames (1993), this study posits that the credibility of terrorist narratives is tied to three main variables, considered in this context as dissemination facilitators: frequency, or the use of recurrent images and recurrent structures; accessibility, or the facilitation of message comprehensibility; relevance, or the perceived closeness to recruits’ motivational interests and goals (Chong/Drukman 2007). These three tactics construct a sort of apprenticeship model (Lave/Wenger 1991) which leads the recruit from peripheral (lay person) to full participation (expert). In this process, the reader becomes progressively engaged (Hyland 2005) by a language that is replete with sayings and pronouncements of the Prophet Muhammad, followed by dichotomies, word play, figures of speech, repetitions, analogies, puns and religious connotations which are put to play within captivating characterizations and narrative frameworks whose intricacies conceal contagion strategies (Rasulo 2018).

3.1 “*Terrorists are made, they are not born*”¹⁰

A full comprehension of how these magazines successfully disseminate their content must be backed by an understanding of the motivational drives or radicalization catalysts that induce potential recruits to embrace the *jihad* cause. The ones presented in this study fall into three broad categories:

¹⁰ Moghaddam 2006. <https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/>> . Retrieved September 2018.

1. Ideological: acquiring an ideal status compared to the current damaged status;
2. Personal: adhering to the common quest for significance (Kruglanski/Orehek 2011) as a means of self-actualization (Connell 1987; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005);
3. Social: conforming to duty and group obligations.

Radicalization discourse capitalizes on these causes by embedding them into *jihad* narratives which, according to Halverson *et al.* (2011: 14), are

coherent systems of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of [their] literary and rhetorical form.

The narratives contained in this study's magazines listed in Table 1 have been developed by the author of this paper. They perform different functions involving both tragic and apocalyptic elements (Smith 2005) used to frame Muslim suffering, invasion and destruction of Muslim lands, resulting in the representation of the world as two opposing factions: jihadism against the West; the former fighting through the mighty mujahideen¹¹ to establish the worldwide Khilafah (Caliphate); the latter waging an unjust war on Islam, led by crusader nations supported Muslim apostates (tawaghit¹²).

¹¹ The plural form of *mujahid*; holy knights of Allah who are willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Allah (cf. <<https://www.thoughtco.com/the-mujahideen-of-afghanistan195373>>. Retrieved January 8th, 2018.

¹² "People who rule by other than what Allah or His Messenger rule" (cf. <<https://salafmanhaj.wordpress.com/tag/tawaghit/>> Retrieved January 8th, 2018).

<p>The crusader/infidel narrative: destruction, revenge, hate, ridicule, shame, emasculation. <i>Accessibility of concept</i></p>	<p>Historical injustice due to the violence inflicted upon the forefathers in the name of Christianity. Unworthiness of those who either do not identify with Muslims or do not support or conform to ISIS's <i>jihad</i> ideology.</p>
<p>The superhero narrative: kill, avenge, claim, punish, instigate, threaten , vs. protect, rule by example, inspire, believe. <i>Frequency of character-building features</i></p>	<p>Role of the warriors and perpetrators of extreme violence and sacrifice in the name of Allah: - protectors of the faith, women and children - curators of superhero qualities - good heartedness, compassion, empathy, righteousness - lone-wolf: unbending, avenger, martyr</p>
<p>The brotherhood narrative: belongingness, (media)indoctrination, training, victory, dominance, power. <i>Frequency of behaviors</i></p>	<p>Familial patriarchal behavior in welcoming all brothers in <i>jihad</i>, in faith, in violence: - utopian representation of reality - self-celebratory actions</p>
<p>The quest for significance narrative: identity, status re-appropriation, responsibility, accountability. <i>Relevance of motivational drives</i></p>	<p>Re-appropriation of a downgraded identity at the hands of the Western world: - satisfying the powerful self-actualization drive - bearers of change: - info-shrewdness that safeguards tradition while including modernity</p>

Table 1. Narrative frames.

The narratives in Table 1 are compelling stories of the world according to the terrorist groups. Hence, the choice of describing them as frames which explicate functions that are similar to those found in news reporting as they are relatable and memorable in their explanations of ideas and conditions, exemplified in the manipulation of Islamic religious and historical sources. Each narrative listed in the left column is explained by using a set of verbs and nouns that best describe the narrative actions, emotions and behaviors, and further identified with the primary dissemination tactic that best expresses its function. The column on the right further expands on each narrative by revealing embedded meanings, values and beliefs.

4. The corpus

The corpus of this study ,described in Table 2, comprises a collection of 300 photographs selected from *Inspire* and *Rumiyah*. To facilitate the coding process as well as data readability, the images from both magazines were first grouped together as image sets according to the narrative frames and popularization tactics listed in Table 1, further referenced in footnotes in terms of magazine title, issue and page number.

<i>Inspire</i> : 16 issues Affiliation: Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) - <i>Al-Malahem Foundation</i> - publication date: June 2010 to November 2016;	<i>Rumiyah</i> : 13 issues Affiliation: the Islamic State - <i>Al-Hayat Media Centre</i> - publication date: September 2016 to September 2017.
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Table 2. The corpus: Issues of *Inspire* and *Rumiyah*.¹³

¹³ <<https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/mediagroups.html>>. Retrieved December 12th, 2017.

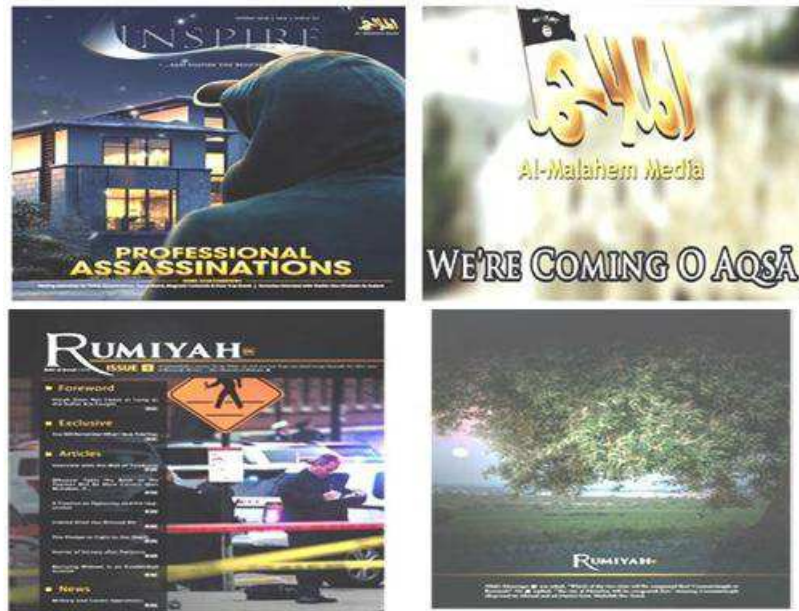


Figure 1. *Inspire* (Issue15) front and signature back cover; *Rumiyah* (Issue 4) front and signature back cover.

Inspire first came out in 2010 (Figure 1 - top). The magazine's language was English in order to reach out to the young Muslim men who were either born or living in the Western world. Created by members of AQAP, the purpose of the magazine is defined in the first few pages, where they quote a verse from the *Qur'an*: "Allah says: 'And inspire the believers to fight' (*al Anfal*: 65). It is from this verse that we derive the name of our new magazine" (*Inspire*, Issue 1, p. 2). With its Koran-style commentary and crude Al-Qaeda propaganda, as well as a slick strikingly-Western production (Atwan 2015), the magazine seems to be specifically concentrated on driving new recruits to action by emphasizing a do-it-yourself ethos which provides advice on bomb-making, encryption, manufacturing poisons

or conducting surveillance, regularly published in each issue in the ‘*Open source Jihad*’ section (Lemieux 2016).¹⁴

Rumiyah (Figure 1 - bottom) is the second official ISIS magazine published after the more famous *Dabiq*, both produced by the *al-Hayat Media Centre*. The name means ‘Rome’ in ancient Arabic, but they claim that this name is a reference to the entire “Christian” West, although the militant group has long been striving to conquer the Eternal City as it represents the continuation of the ancient civilization early Muslims fought against.¹⁵ *Rumiyah*’s aim is to disseminate to a greater extent the group’s ideology by making use of the same recruiting propaganda of the earlier magazines, while emphasizing the importance of increasing terrorist attacks, including the lone-wolf assaults recommended in *Inspire*.¹⁶

5. Methodological framework and procedure

As aforementioned, the study’s methodological model relies heavily on Kress and van Leeuwen’s social semiotic approach to multimodal analysis (Kress/ van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010) which draws on Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (1985) with its ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. Kress and van Leeuwen aligned Halliday’s metafunctions to their own representational, interactional and compositional model and applied it to the analysis of visual images. The interest in Multimodality has progressively included the core issues of other multidisciplinary approaches such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (van Dijk 2003; van Leeuwen 2008; Wodak/Meyer 2009; Fairclough 2010),

¹⁴ <<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dangerous-minds/2012016/inspire-magazine-and-the-rise-the-do-it-yourself-jihadist>>. October 9th, 2017.

¹⁵ <<https://clarionproject.org/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine>>. Retrieved September 9th, 2017.

¹⁶ <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-propaganda-terror-group-losssyria-iraq-a7228286.html>>. Retrieved September 9th, 2017.

making it possible to move beyond the describable aspects of multimodal discourse in order to raise awareness of the relationship between verbal and visual texts (van Leeuwen 2008, 2013). The result of this multidisciplinary perspective is the approach of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) which identifies how images, photographs, diagrams and graphics work to create meaning through specific choices made by the author of the visual or verbal texts (Machin/Mayr 2012; van Leeuwen 2008, 2013;). To this regard, it is important to clarify that this study’s critique is not extended to the discussion of specific political, religious or ideological interpretations that may be inferred from the findings; these issues alone deserve an extensive discussion in the complex area of terrorism.

The multidisciplinary analysis tool employed is a three-dimensional framework (Figure 2) which comprises the features of Kress and van Leeuwen’s metafunctions and the verbal resources provided by features of informative and imaginative language.

VISUAL	Representational Identity and action: participants, actors, goals, carriers	Interactional Vectors: eyeline, gaze distance/ Status: frame shots	Compositional Information value: given/new ideal/real Salience Framing Modality
	↔	↔	↔
VERBAL	Informative language: represents conveying ideas in a rational fashion, a call to action based on convincing arguments: religious sayings, pronouncements, connotations, jihadist terms; Imaginative language represents emotional drivers of motivation; deviates rationality: word play figures of speech, puns, hate terms;		

Figure 2. Visual and Verbal Resources Framework (From Rayson *et al* 2002).

Concerning the visual analysis, the representational resources will allow us to identify what is happening in the pictures in terms of actions, participants and structural functions embedded in both narrative and conceptual processes; the interactional resources illustrate the triptych relationship of image-viewer-producer on the

basis of vectors of contact and status positioning; the compositional metafunction represents the image as a whole whereby aspects of truth, credibility, influence and perspective are revealed. As for the analysis of the verbal resources, which are part and parcel of the structural elements of the image itself, the starting point is the repertoire of semiotic resources related to the metafunctions, supported by a more specific focus on the informative and imaginative functions of language as these resources afford the possibility to move towards a more specialized and critical interpretation of the data.

6. Findings and discussion

A full multimodal analysis on image sets such as the ones presented in this corpus requires space which is limited in this paper. Images do not structure and order the world in the same way as language does, which means that certain aspects of the image are made salient through semiotic choices such as gaze, light, and color as well as other contextual features of the situation. Therefore, by choosing the most significant and exemplary features of an image set, the underlying concept or idea is brought to light. In truth, analyzing every single feature, including the ones that do not add to that concept's understanding, would probably distract the reader from the intended focus.

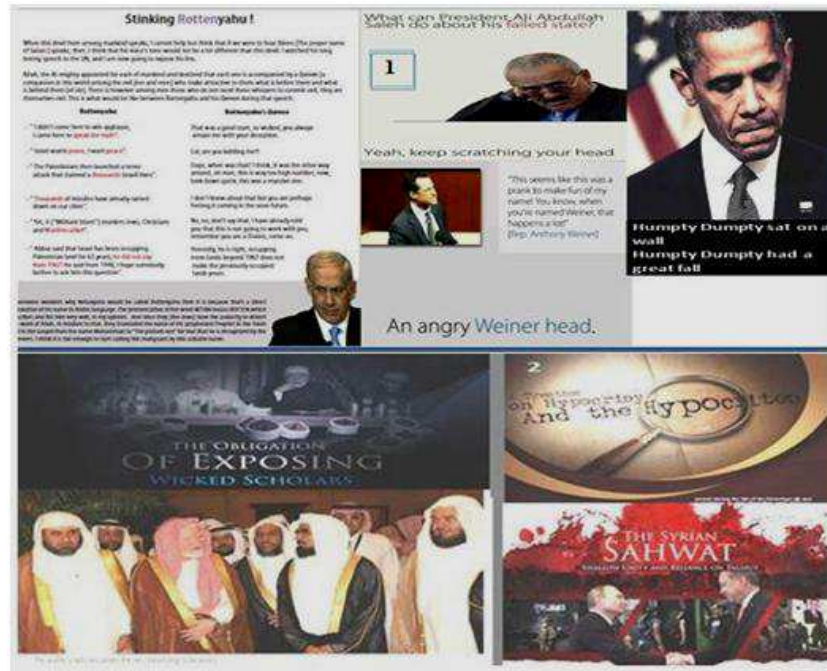
6.1 *Us vs. Them (Crusader/Infidel)*

The image sets 1 and 2 in Figure 3 represent the intention of the terrorist groups to subjugate and shame the Crusaders of the West for what they perceive as an unjust domination of the rest of the world. The main element in set 1 is how the actors are pictured: they are characterized as helpless individuals captured in awkward situations; scratching their head or looking angry or puzzled, as in the case of Obama. The second element draws on the resource of imaginative

language with word play and puns. President Netanyahu becomes 'Rottnyahu', Anthony Weiner's last name is ridiculed for its double meaning in English, while Obama is attributed the 'Humpty Dumpty' nursery rhyme, with a clear reference to a king who is about to fall and break. The masked instigation in this last image is strengthened by the high value in terms of 'credibility'. Indeed, it is placed in the lower half of the frame compared to the others in the set whose proposition occupies the 'ideal' or propositional top half.

Set 2 images portray the 'wicked' crusaders and the infidels (*kuffar*), the hypocrites who betrayed their own people. In the last picture, the two world leaders, whose handshake occurs 'outside' the frame, are labeled as '*sahwat*', which is a city in Syria, but used here to mean apostate.¹⁷ ISIS often uses discursive terms for shaping the world according to their own view and with the presentation of history through a unique lens.

¹⁷ Sahwa means awakening. It carries numerous meanings but currently it references the Sunni tribes of Anbar rising up against al-Qaeda in Iraq. It is also used as a derogatory term referring to Muslims (especially Sunni) who side against the jihadists. It can also refer to the major Salafi political block in Saudi Arabia that was heavily repressed by the Saudi government in the 1990s: <<https://historyxisis.com/tag/sahwat/>>. Retrieved September 10th, 2017.

Figure 3. Crusaders and Infidels.¹⁸

The third set of images emphasizes the anti-*murtad* (apostate) narrative (Figure 4). The conspiring gaze of the two political leaders, who are looking away from the viewer and from each other, indicates a sort of machination. These images, set against blurred backgrounds, focus on metonymic enactments using symbolic props. The broken cross indicates a long-gone struggle, while the flag and the gun in the hands of the lone-wolf warriors promise resolute action; the former, completely covered by the ISIS flag, is promising an Islamic State; the latter, whose silhouette is set against a fiery sky, is more of a utopian promise of regaining power at all costs: *We exterminate the*

¹⁸ Set 1: *Inspire*, 10(9); 3(12); 7(14); 13(24). Set 2: *Rumiyah*, 3(8); 4(20); 4(6); 5(2).

Mushrikin,¹⁹ or *Die Trying*. In reference to accessibility of message significance, image sets 1-3 in Figures 3 and 4 reiterate the crusader narrative whose annihilation can only be achieved at the hands of determined and convinced warriors.

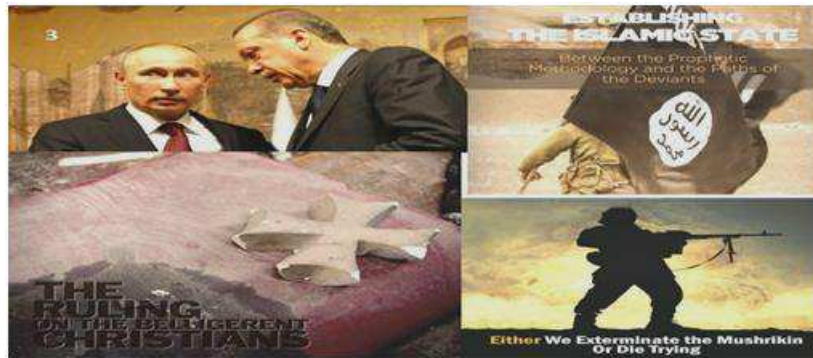


Figure 4. Destroying the crusaders and the infidels.²⁰

Set 1 of Figure 5 is a selection of images in which references to America are in abundance. The fixation with the USA and the strong will to destroy its over incumbent culture is attributed, to a greater extent, to Al-Qaeda's ideology, and thus more frequently portrayed in *Inspire* magazine. However, these references can also be found in ISIS's *Rumiyah*. The images in set 1 contain the element of threat emphasized by the large red number reporting lone-wolf attacks as well as by the warning expressed by *Ideas do not need VISAS* image. The texts 'Did you know that...', and 'I am proud to be a traitor to America', the latter written on a suitcase, highlight the 'us vs. them' polarization.

¹⁹ *Mushrikin*. One who associates, invokes or worships beings other than or with Allah: <<http://www.islamhelpline.net/node/534>>. Retrieved September 10th, 2017.

²⁰ Set 3: *Rumiyah*: 6(19); 7(6); 9(1); 10(4). Set 4: *Rumiyah*: 9(11); 11(60).



Figure 5. *Us vs. Them* polarization.²¹

6.2 The Superhero Narrative

The superhero narrative is one of the most popular in both magazines. It is repeatedly proposed in *Inspire*, but continued in *Rumiyah*, to highlight the superiority of the warrior who is endowed with special powers and qualities. The images in Figures 6-8 are mostly close-up shots that reveal a compassionate, joyful yet fearless warrior-hero who is against *kufir*²² acts.

In images set 1 (Figure 6), the close-up shot of the young child behind bars establishes a dialogue with the viewer although the gaze is turned away and focused on some other object or even a thought. This disposition indicates an association with the word *Palestine*, placed in the bottom panel where credible information is placed. On the whole, this is a symbolic conceptual structure which further explores the political nature of the image as a sort of instigation against the

²¹ Set 1: *Inspire*, 15(19); 15(22); 15(4); 2(45); 1(54). Set 3: *Rumiyah*: 6(19); 7(6); 9(1); 10(4). Set 4: *Rumiyah*: 9(11); 11(60).

²² *Kufir* in Arabic means covering and concealing something, but in the context of *sharia* law terminology it means “not believing in Allah and His Messenger”. Cf. <<http://www.islamicity.org/7691/understanding-kufir/>>. Retrieved September 8th, 2017.

infidels, strengthened by the use of the polarization of the pronouns *your* and *our*. The participants in set 2 (Figure 6) illustrate the relevance of the role of the *jihadi* superhero who is fearless and ready to die; his only guide is Allah, hence, the cry of the Islamic principle “*La Ilaha Illallah*”, which translates as ‘*there is no God but Allah*’²³. In these pictures the use of vectors, which define the kind of proposition that is intended between the actors and the action, supports warrior identity; indeed, the actor in the ‘*stand and die*’ image is set against the ISIS flag in the background whose blackness marks the realism of the proposition of sacrifice. The superheroes in the other images of the same set are portrayed using two similar vectors: a gun and the emblematic one-finger, both pointing to the sky, a gesture which means there is only one God who is Allah.²⁴ A different perspective is given in image of the praying soldier. The book in his hands emphasizes the more peaceful nature of faith which needs no weapons or intermediaries. By sitting sideways, the soldier deliberately becomes a mere object of contemplation, and faith becomes the actor.

²³ Definition of *La Illah Illallah*. <<http://www.danielpipes.org/comments/30463>> Retrieved September 8th, 2017.

²⁴ Crowcroft 2015. This salute is common in ISIS propaganda, both on the battlefield and in the final minutes before martyrdom. It refers to the first half of the *shahada*, the affirmation of Muslim faith that is recited before every prayer. The reference passage defines the Muslim faith in saying that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet: <<https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-what-story-behind-islamic-state-one-fingered-salute-1506249>>. Retrieved September 8th, 2017.



Figure 6. Superhero qualities: compassion, righteousness, sacrifice. ²⁵

Set 3 images of Figure 7 are yet another representation of the superhero as the protector of women and children. As color intensity draws attention to a specific feature in the image, this is the first element of modality to consider in the text that mentions women. The color scheme presents natural and soft shades of pink in naturalistic backgrounds. The image of the Book is placed in the top panel or what is usually presented as ‘new’ information in terms of proposition, which in this image is the renewal of life through faith. The picture with the plant in the background highlights the caretaking role of women, which consists in being *slaves* in the house of Allah and

²⁵ Set 1: *Inspire*, 8(13); 9(back cover); 9(36). Set 2: *Rumiyah*, 1(1); 3(14); 7(12); 7(22).

shepherds that tend to their flock. The caretaking role is also extended to the warrior as declared in the *Widows* fuchsia-colored picture.

Children are very often the favorite subjects of many images in both digital magazines; they are seen as potential recruits who need training and indoctrination, as shown in the pictures with the gun and the one-finger salute. Once again, the repetition of the symbolic gestures begins at a very young age, as a sort of protection measure against the 'other' culture. This is reinforced in the toddler-with-a-gun image, which reiterates the conceptual structure that children must be taught to walk in the path of the *Tawhid*, Islam's oneness concept of monotheism, and must do so as their duty towards their elders. They evidently do this willingly as their gaze in this image set demands attention from the viewer.



Figure 7. The Superhero qualities: protectors of women and children.²⁶

Perhaps the most notably infamous narrative of the superhero is its lone-wolf representation (Figure 8). The frequent and repetitive portrayal of this actor is its mysterious and cryptic identity; the lone-

²⁶ Set 3: *Rumiyah*, 12(35); 9(20); 9(18); 8(31); 4(32); 2(16).

wolf's identity must remain undisclosed so that lone attacks remain undetected. The gaze, when not hidden behind a hoodie, is never directed at the viewer, which generally indicates defiance, but it is turned away in sign of imminent threat. The actors in set 3 images (Figure 8) are dressed in Western-looking attire which allows them to blend in with the general public. They are *urban*, either businessmen or similar to hooded rap idols, and they are networked. Their environment is the large metropolis, as shown in the background of the *Jihad* picture. Backs turned, heads covered, eyes behind sunglasses: this is their communication strategy no one must know until they are ready to act.



Figure 8. The Superhero character: the lone wolf.²⁷

6.3 The Brotherhood Narrative

Violence is an assertion of power and is historically situated, “informed by material constraints and incentives” (Schmidt/Schröder 2001: 3) or instrumental retribution. The performance of violence is not just an act of barbarity devoid of meaning, but rather a changing

²⁷ Set 1: *Inspire*, 9(38); 10(25); 11(14); 15(22).

form of “meaningful interaction through which actors construct social reality based on available cultural templates (Juris 2005: 415). Violence, as pictured in image set 1 of Figure 9, is something to boast and brag about, and it comes in numbers and places. The result of violence is victory, symbolized by the use of props: the gun, the flag and the SUV truck. Set 2 images are taken from those magazine pages that are consistently part of the contents, and which talk about training tactics, terrorist strategies and advice. Set 3 images represent the many pages dedicated to the *how-to* techniques of making weapons and derailing trains. These are matter-of-fact illustrations that are similar to those featured in any Western-style magazine pages about making tree houses or planting flowers. To facilitate understanding, the images contain a concept map, notes and instructions accompanied by figures. It is in these pages that visual and verbal resources are expertly combined to achieve the desired effect: imitate - initiate - act.



Figure 9. Brotherhood in victory numbers and tactics.²⁸

²⁸ Set 1: *Rumiyaah*, 1(27); 2(18); 3(45); 2(26); 4(15); 3(41). Set 2: *Rumiyaah*, 2(12); 4(19); 4(8).



Figure 10. Brotherhood: how-to expectations.²⁹

6.4 The Quest for Significance Narrative

Inspire and *Rumiyah* magazines take great pains in drawing attention to the young Muslim men's personal cause which consists in the search for a re-appropriation of a lost role, a diminished status or a displaced identity. This narrative, known as the *quest for significance* (Kruglanski/Orehek 2011), represents the ideal of self-actualization and is indeed the leitmotiv running across the pages of the propaganda magazines. This quest is pictured in two different ways: as the continuation of tradition, as shown in image sets 1 and 2 (Figure 11), and the struggle towards modernity, represented in images set 3 (Figure 12). Traditional ideology is rooted in Islam, represented by the ISIS flag (set 2) and in *jihād* (set 1), away from materialism (set 1); if you enter *jihād*, you make a *pledge to fight to the death*, and you abide

²⁹ Set 3: *Inspire*, 1(18); 2(119); 5(1); 4(25).

by the *Holy Book* (set 1). The stories that are told by the *Shuhada*,³⁰ or the martyrs, are *stories of victory and patience* (set 1), and form the future *Leaders* (set 2) who travel on the path of the endless *hijrah*³¹ (set 2), or the holy voyage, also a symbol of the passage from childhood to manhood. All of the images in this set are placed in scenarios that are either naturalistic, with props placed in the foreground (guns, flags, horses, SUVs), or more symbolic, such as the ones representing a voyage (*hijrah*) or the acquisition of religious knowledge (the books). The one image which stands out from the rest is very similar to a child's pastel-colored drawing of a fairytale-like world, where the sun rises behind what looks like the Mecca. The quotation cited in the middle of the page, which reinforces the promise of a renewed Islamic dominance, is taken from the *Surah* of the Koran by *Al-Baqarah* (The Cow) and states: "*O you who have believed, seek help through patience and prayer – Indeed, Allah is with the patient*".³²

³⁰ *Shuhada*: <<http://hadithanswers.com/the-different-types-of-shuhada-martyrs/>>. Retrieved August 9th, 2017.

³¹ *Hijrah*, or *jihad* by emigration is the migration or journey of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Yathrib, later renamed by him to Medina, in the year 622 CE: <<http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/260019/hijrah-europe-robert-spencer>>. Retrieved August 9th, 2017.

³² *Surah Al-Baqarah* (2). This is chapter 2 of the Noble Quran (153): <<https://quran.com/2/153>>. Retrieved August 9th, 2017.

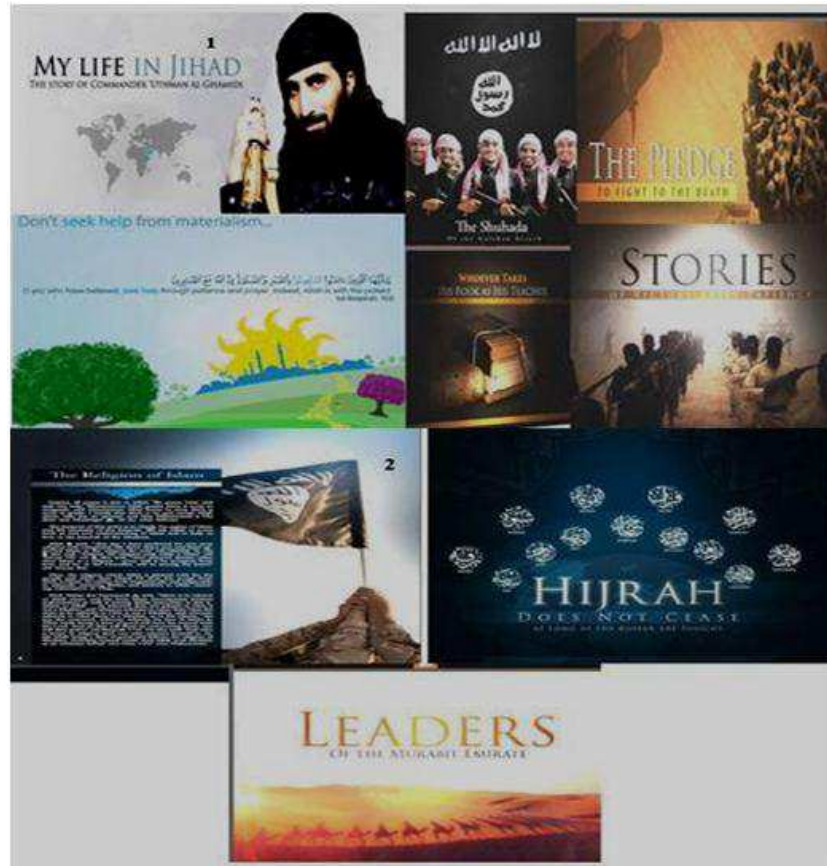


Figure 11. The quest for significance: tradition.³³

The final image set 3 (Figure 12) represents the effort of the terrorists to convey the idea that they are a modern organization, networking with the rest of the world and contributing to the cause with the use of technology, which corresponds to the truth, as argued previously. *Open Source Jihad* is the most famous page in *Inspire*, with its many featured networked materials available online such as magazines,

³³ Set 1: *Inspire*, 2(11); 5(1); *Rumiyah*, 2(8); 4(24); 4(16); 4(28). Set 2: *Rumiyah*, 1(2); 4(2); 4(16).

videos, podcasts and dedicated apps; the pages advertising the videos and mobile phone apps are *Rumiyah*'s digital favorites. Technological savvy is the protagonist in this image set: hooded lone-wolves are intent on planning attacks over breakfast as part of their daily routine; leaflets are distributed to families, videos are advertised like films or games; captivating cartoon-like apps motivate children towards religious indoctrination and education.



Figure 12. The quest for significance: modernity.³⁴

³⁴ Set 3: *Rumiyah*, 13(42); 6(2); 5(24). *Inspire*, 1(31); 13(4); 14(9); 16(12).

6.5 Relevance, Frequency, Accessibility

In this section, the findings presented above are re-contextualized within the popularization concepts of accessibility, frequency and relevance.

By far the most useful concept and tactic is accessibility as it draws on both relevance and frequency. The narratives (Table 1) that are expertly packaged by the savvy editors of the digital magazines reinforce accessibility of religious and historical concepts so as to strengthen the resentment against ‘the other’, whether infidels, apostates or crusaders. This complex process involves the impactful reiteration of visual resources that trigger a consequential *image-meaning* association often connoted by verbal resources. In fact, each image resemiotizes some of the information through informative and imaginative language devices often containing religious sayings and jihadist proclamations that facilitate the cementation of radicalization discourse.

The quantitative notion of frequency in images is measured by the recurrence of the actions deployed in the visual resources. As images are ‘read’ in particular ways, depending on the semiotic choices which are made within the image and the context, frequency of these choices is indeed the thrust of the popularization process which sparks radicalization drives. In the representation of the *superhero narrative*, for example, the contrasting nature of the warrior is exhibited by the multiple and at times contrasting representation of warrior roles, consisting in protective and extreme violent behaviors.

The *brotherhood* and the *quest for significance narratives* are both conduits of relevance as they nurture processes of self-realization and self-worth. The ideals of brotherhood belongingness propose a renewed image of the individual, a new collocation within a community, and a challenging mission to accomplish. Similarly, the *quest for significance* narrative leverages the ‘*continuity of Islam*’ argument in order to legitimize *jihad*. Significance or relevance in this context can only be found in the endless *hijrah* towards death and a life-after-death compensation.

7. Conclusion

In attempting to provide a general overview of this study's focus according to the research questions, it can be stated that the analysis and the ensuing discussion, to a good extent, draw attention to one of the study's initial expectations, that persuasion and contagion tactics as exploited in terrorist publications can spark tangible behavioral triggers that lead to committing terrorist attacks. In fact, the study has shown that in the hands of terrorist media outlets, these tactics can take on a multiplicity of slants, which is in itself an indication that it is nearly impossible to verify whether each attack or event is the actual result of copycat effect or based on inspirational contagion. Nevertheless, as conduits of contagion, these magazines and their appealing features are used to fabricate radicalization discourse which is then disseminated through strategies of frequency and repetitiveness to achieve accessibility of master narratives.

The study has also argued that the Islamist groups, who are more than readily aware of how to turn to their advantage the excessive and even obsessive coverage of terrorist attacks by mainstream media, mimic western-style modes of communication to disseminate their propaganda material which heavily contributes to the creation of a new generation of homegrown terrorist extremists. Indeed, not even the recent setbacks, such as the heavy loss of territory and the disaffection of many of their foreign fighters, has deterred the militant groups from exploiting the accessibility and practical use of online materials to continue their relentless training and recruitment activity in the hopes of regaining strength and credibility (Hoffman 2018). To this purpose, as argued in the findings section, the groups leverage the often underestimated personal *quest for significance* which is a lifetime endeavor for all individuals including the terrorist warriors, thus making the perils of virtual recruitment and self-radicalization a constant reality (Aly *et al.* 2016).

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