

“I will tell you a story about jihad”: ISIS’s propaganda and narrative advertising

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Abstract

This article further broadens the understanding of ISIS propaganda and its effectiveness by looking at the group’s social media through the prism of marketing. The group was found to rely on a narrative type of advertising while creating its propaganda. Specifically, ISIS was using stories to appeal to its recruits’ emotions and desires. The use of stories helped ISIS to establish a strong connection with its target audience, and increased the group’s success in promoting its ideas.

I. Introduction

Research on jihadist movements, especially on those that attract recruits from the West, has always been concerned with the question: “Why would a person be attracted to an idea to kill people or sacrifice their own life for the sake of a mythical reward after death?”

This question became particularly pressing in 2014–2017, when a group that called itself Islamic State, generally known in the West as ISIS, emerged and not only shocked the public with a variety of unspeakable crimes, but also did so with the scale of support it gained in a relatively short period of time. Researchers connect the group’s success with several factors, including sophisticated use of social media, the particular type of message it used, momentum gained from the chaos of the Syrian civil war, etc. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how ISIS managed to gain such overwhelming support

in such a short period of time,¹ and how it managed to convince potential recruits to join despite the public demonstration of its brutality. To understand this, I am going to examine the group's propagandist magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* through the framework of narrative advertising – a type of advertising based on storytelling. I will examine how the group built its propaganda through stories, which helped it form an emotional connection with its potential followers, and encouraged them to suspend rational judgement in favor of the fantasy world offered by the group.

This article contributes to the field of terrorism studies by offering a framework that allows us to analyze contemporary terrorist groups' propaganda and understand why it works, using ISIS (during the 2014–17 period) as an example of its particular efficacy. It also contributes specifically to research on ISIS by examining the group's content-building strategy through a focus on emotions and establishing a connection with recruits, rather than focusing on the existing grievances of ISIS supporters. It also provides several policy recommendations that can be used to produce more effective messages to counter those used by terrorist groups.

The article is organized as follows. The next section presents a review of the literature, explaining specific reasons for ISIS's propaganda being so successful. Section III will present the notion of narrative advertising and storytelling, and the theoretical framework used in this paper. Section IV presents the methodology. Section V presents the results. Section VI discusses the findings, and section VII concludes.

II. Literature review: keys to ISIS's propaganda success

There are several groups of explanations on the question of why people would join terrorist groups. One of these, specifically developed by Martha Crenshaw, Edward

¹ Karen J. Greenberg, "Counter-Radicalization via the Internet," *Annals AAPSS* 668, (November 2016): 165.

Newman, Jeffrey Ian Ross and others, refers to the notion of “root causes”, and argues that there are specific problems and factors existing in society that provoke the emergence of terrorist groups, as people see terrorism as the only way to resolve existing grievances.² Several researchers – for example, Louise Richardson, Clark McCauley, and Sofia Moskalenko – refer to psychological and emotional motivations (such as revenge, “the power of love”, and others).³ Mark Sageman and Quintan Wiktorowicz similarly argue that many people become terrorists because they look for social connection, and normally already have either a friend or family member in the group.⁴ Specifically in relation to jihadism, Olivier Roy and Farhad Khosrokhavar argue that this phenomenon emerged as many young Muslims felt alienated and discriminated in Western countries, and used radical Islam and, consequently, jihadist groups as an escape gate from the unhappy reality in which they lived.⁵

A lot of researchers, while considering the problem of terrorism recruitment, have focused primarily on the “object” of recruitment, i.e. a potential terrorist. However, undoubtedly, if some people were just prone to become terrorists based on personal issues, terrorist groups would not have to put so much effort into creating propaganda. This became particularly evident in the case of ISIS, the success of which is often attributed to the specific characteristics of its propaganda. In the past six years,

² See Martha Crenshaw, “The Causes of Terrorism,” *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): 393; Jeffrey Ian Ross, “Structural Causes of Oppositional Political Terrorism: Towards a Causal Model,” *Journal of Peace Research* 30, no.3 (1993): 320; Edward Newman, “Exploring the “Root Causes” of Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 8 (2006): 749–772.

³ See Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray, 2006), 100–105; Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (2008): 418–421.

⁴ See Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Joining the Cause: Al Muhajiroun and Radicalism,” *Department of International Studies, Rhodes College*, (2003): 1–12.

⁵ Farhad Khosrokhavar, “Terrorism in Europe,” in *Terrorism and International Relations*, ed. D. Hamilton (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2006), 25–27; Olivier Roy, “Why Do They Hate Us? Not Because of Iraq,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 2005, 2.

researchers have come up with several explanations for the striking success of ISIS's propaganda.

The first important aspect of ISIS's success is the "product" of the group's social media strategy or *what* exactly ISIS offers. Unlike other terrorist groups, ISIS did not simply offer "the holy war against infidels" with no clearly defined goal. As Charlie Winter's states, ISIS offered a utopian notion: promising to build the Caliphate. According to Winter, the group succeeded in convincing many that it could transform this vision into a tangible reality.⁶ Moreover, for a short period of time, the group managed to demonstrate that this Utopia was indeed a reality. Thus, according to several scholars and journalists (e.g. Fawaz Gerges, Jürgen Todenhöfer, and Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan), ISIS was not only well-functioning but was actually more efficient in providing public services than the Syrian and Iraqi governments.⁷ This ISIS government was not only presented as effective, but, most importantly, it was presented as religiously legitimate and adhering fully to the word of the *Qur'an*.⁸

The second important factor is the "wrapping", or the way in which the group presented that Utopia. Apart from the purely rational arguments mentioned above (effective government), the group portrayed the journey to the Caliphate as an adventure. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger showed how slick magazines and video-game-like reports of fights in Syria and Iraq combined with cozy and fun evenings with fellow

⁶ Charlie Winter, "Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no.1 (2018): 103–121.

Jacob Sheikh, "I Just Said It. The State': Examining the Motivations for Danish Foreign Fighting in Syria," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no.6 (2016): 59–67.

⁷Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 266;

Jürgen Todenhöfer, *Inside IS: 10 Tage im "Islamischen Staat"* (München: Bertelsmann, 2015), 202–203; Michael Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of the Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), 208.

⁸ Graeme Wood, *The Way of The Strangers. Encounters with the Islamic State* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), 217; Erkan Toguslu, "Caliphate, Hijrah and Martyrdom as Performative Narrative in ISIS Dabiq Magazine," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no. 1 (2019): 94–120.

jihadists made jihad look “cool”⁹ – something that ISIS’s predecessors had not thought to offer.¹⁰

Other scholars specifically emphasize the method of content-sharing and content-building. Donna Farag, for instance, shows how ISIS was using different types of content (memes, videos, songs, video games, etc.) and various ways of disseminating its messages: from relying on “activists”, i.e. supporters who would share the group’s propaganda across different platforms, to bot accounts aiming at maximizing the reach of a particular message. ISIS was also using so-called “baqiya” (shout-out) accounts, the aim of which was to introduce new supporters to the pro-ISIS community and make previously suspended accounts visible again.¹¹ Haroro Ingram, in his turn, argues that there are two groups of factors that played a central role in ISIS messaging: pragmatic and perceptual factors. Pragmatic factors appeal to security, stability, and livelihood – all things that Middle Easterners might have been deprived of for a long time. Perceptual factors are characterized by “the interplay of in-group identity, out-group identity, crisis and solution construct”.¹² This means that ISIS tried to portray itself as a “representative of interests” of a certain group (devout Sunni Muslims), whose interests had been undermined, and the only force that could change this situation. This idea gave the group’s activities (committing crimes, atrocities, torture, etc.) legitimacy, as its members portrayed it as the only way to resist unfairness. Usually, ISIS used these two aspects together in its narrative, and this combination led to the ultimate success of its

⁹ Jessica Stern and J. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: William Collins, 2015), 127.

¹⁰ Greg Simons, “Brand ISIS: Interactions of the Tangible and Intangible Environments,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 17, no. 4 (2018), 330.

¹¹ Donna Farag, “From Twitter to Terrorist: Combatting Online Propaganda When Jihad Goes Viral,” *American Criminal Law Review* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 853.

¹² Haroro J. Ingram, “The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operation,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 69 (2015): 730.

campaigns. ISIS also exploited online hatred that existed in relation to Muslims,¹³ and used Islamophobia to corroborate its arguments about the war between the West and the Muslim world and the necessity of jihad. This narrative was combined with Islamist narratives,¹⁴ selectively used by the group in order to justify its actions by religion and its following of Allah's path, therefore, ensuring its legitimacy as a representative of the interests of the Muslim world. Moreover, as already mentioned, the relevance of the messages was decorated with an element of "cool"¹⁵ – with ISIS being known to share such content, which would be "liked" and "shared" among its potential followers.

Another important finding made by Akil Awan, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin concerns the way in which ISIS builds and operates its propaganda. By looking at the group's use of strategic narratives, researchers argue that ISIS achieved "strong narrative alignment"¹⁶ in its propaganda, i.e. the group was using strategic narratives that resonated with its target audience. The narratives were used with a purpose of strengthening recruits' pro-ISIS identity. This goal was achieved through three steps: 1) attachment, which is the actual reinforcing of the followers' group identity; 2) deracination, aimed at weakening potential recruits' identity related to their countries of residence; and 3) polarization, aimed at strengthening the conflict between these two identities.¹⁷

The most recent development in the study of ISIS propaganda shows that, in many ways, it resembled a brand's advertising. Thus, Charlie Winter and Jacob

¹³ See Imran Awan, "Cyber-extremism: ISIS and the Power of Social Media", *Social Science and Public Policy* 54 (2017): 138–149.

¹⁴ See Samantha Mahood and Halim Rane, "Islamist Narratives in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda," *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no.1 (2017): 15–35.

¹⁵ Magdalena El Ghamari, "Pro-Daesh Jihadi Propaganda. A Study of Social Media and Video Games," *Security and Defense Quarterly* 14, no.1 (2017): 85.

¹⁶ Akil N. Awan, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, "The Battle of the Battle of Narratives: Sidestepping the Double Fetish of the Digital and CVE," in *Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism* ed. Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment (New York: Routledge, 2019), 157.

¹⁷ Awan, Miskimmon O'Loughlin, "Battle of the Battle of Narratives": 163–164.

Sheikh,¹⁸ Jad Melki and May Jabado,¹⁹ and Gregory Simons²⁰ all argue that ISIS created an ultimate experience and a lifestyle for its followers, and relied on recognizable visual symbols that made the group resemble, in its operation, any big brand, like Apple or Nike. Moreover, Simons argued that “ISIS propaganda was designed to catch the emotional attention of their target audience by seemingly being able to fulfil an emotional need in an individual or a group”.²¹

The idea of branding became a starting assumption for this article. If ISIS was consciously using marketing techniques in its propaganda, it is then possible to use a marketing analytical framework to gain a better understanding of that process.

III. Narrative advertising, storytelling, and narrative transportation

The case of ISIS is not the first time researchers have found similarities between propaganda and advertising.²² Both phenomena attempt to persuade people into doing something (e.g. buying a product or joining a terrorist group), and employ various techniques to ensure that the target audience will not only hear the message but will listen to it. Specifically, a brand’s advertising employs two main techniques. According to several researchers, depending on the method of creation, advertising can be argumentative or narrative.²³ Argumentative advertising is based on facts and logic and

¹⁸ Charlie Winter, “Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand”; Jacob Sheikh, “‘I Just Said It. The State’: Examining the Motivations for Danish Foreign Fighting in Syria”.

¹⁹Jad Melki and May Jabado, “Mediated Public Diplomacy of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: The Synergistic Use of Terrorism, Social Media and Branding,” *Media and Communication* 4, no. 2 (2016): 99.

²⁰ Gregory Simons, “Brand ISIS: Interaction of the tangible and intangible environments,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 17 (2018): 321.

²¹ Gregory Simons, “Brand ISIS”: 329

²² Vian Bakir, Eric Herrig, David Miller and Pierce Robinson, “Organised Persuasive Communication: A New Conceptual Framework for Research on Public Relation, Propaganda, and Promotional Culture,” *Critical Sociology* 45, no.3 (2019): 320.

²³ See Jennifer Edson Escalas, “Narrative Processing: Building Consumer Connections to Brands”, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 14, nos. 1 and 2 (2004): 168–180; Rashmi Adaval and Robert S. Wyer Jr., “The Role of Narratives in Consumer Information Processing”, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 7, no.3 (1998): 207–245; Russell K.H. Ching, Pingsheng Tong, , Ja□Shen Chen and Hung□Yen Chen, “Narrative Online Advertising: Identification and its Effects on Attitude toward a Product,” *Internet*

appeals to the rationality of a customer. While it may be effective, Dan Padgett and Douglas Allen demonstrate that this type of advertising is more likely to provoke, in a customer, a desire to argue, and may consequently diminish the likelihood of a positive response from them.²⁴ Narrative advertising relies on a customer's emotions. "Narrative" here means the following: "one or more episodes consisting of actors engaged in actions to achieve goals" and contains a "sequence initiated by some events and actions result[ing] in outcome(s)".²⁵ Narratives "are organized in terms of a series of events occurring over time, and these events are structured in a way that the causal relationship among them can be inferred".²⁶ A narrative is simply a story told by someone to describe a certain event or development. Consequently, narrative advertising tells a story, which allows a customer to envision themselves in the shoes of advertisement's character and thus match their experience. A story is "the storyteller's production and the account of an event or sequence of events from an initial state or outcome".²⁷

Storytelling is a very powerful tool that has a strong influence on our world perception. People make sense of the world through stories.²⁸ Consequently, stories in a brand's advertising help customers to understand that brand better through a particular context, and to construct their own stories through the interaction with the brand's product.²⁹

Research 23, no.4 (2013): 414–43.

²⁴ Dan Padgett and Douglas Allen, "Communicating Experiences: A Narrative Approach to Creating Service Brand Image," *Journal of Advertising* 26, no. 4 (1997): 57.

²⁵ Jennifer E. Escalas, "Advertising Narratives: What Are They and How Do They Work?" in *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views, and Visions*, ed. Barbara Stern (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1998), 273.

²⁶ Chingching Chang, "'Being Hooked' by Editorial Content: The Implications for Processing Narrative Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 38, no. 1 (2009): 22.

²⁷ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2004): 54.

²⁸ Nai-Hwa Lien and Yi-Ling Chen, "Narrative ads: The effect of argument strength and story format," *Journal of Business Research* 66 (2013): 516.

²⁹ Nwamaka A. Anaza, Elyria Kemp, Elten Briggs and Aberdeen Leila Borders, "Tell me a story: The role of narrative transportation and the C-suite in B2B advertising," *Industrial Marketing Management*

Usually, in their stories, brands either show the positive consequences of a product consumption or link their products with what people particularly desire – for example, “romance, achievement, adventure or hopes”.³⁰ A typical story consists of a plot, characters, and the ending, and normally has a certain drama in it, meaning that it describes a certain “tension between protagonist and the main characters”.³¹

Eventually, stories help a customer to form a strong emotional connection with a brand. Research shows that storytelling works particularly well for experiential brands, i.e. brands that offer a particular experience as they allow a customer to directly immerse themselves into that experience.³² This process – “a mental process in which people become absorbed in a story and thus transported into a narrative world where they temporarily lose access to the real world facts”³³ – is called narrative transportation. Narrative transportation is considered to be an alternative, more powerful route to persuasion,³⁴ and is the key to the success of a brand’s advertising, because it reduces a target audience’s capacity for critical thinking and formulating counter arguments, and eventually gives a brand several positive outcomes:

- 1) brands tend to be evaluated by customers more favorably,³⁵

(2019): 1.

³⁰ Chingching Chang, “Imagery Fluency and Narrative Advertising Effects,” *Journal of Advertising*, 42, no.1 (2013): 55.

³¹ Nwamaka A. Anaza, Elyria Kemp, Elten Briggs, Aberdeen Leila Borders, “Tell me a story”: 2; Van Laer, T., de Ruyter, K., Visconti, L. M., and Wetzels, M., “The extended transportation-imagery model: A meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of consumers’ narrative transportation,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 40 (2014): 797–817.

³² Anna S. Mattila, “The Role of Narratives in the Advertising of Experiential Services,” *Journal of Service Research* 3, no. 1 (2000): 35.

³³ Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, “Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000): 709.

³⁴ Jae-Eun Kim, Stephen Lloyd and Marie-Cécile Cervellon, “Narrative-transportation storylines in luxury brand advertising: Motivating consumer engagement,” *Journal of Business Research* 69 (2016): 305.

³⁵ Rashmi Adaval and Robert S. Wyer Jr., “The Role of Narratives in Consumer Information Processing”: 215.

2) narrative advertising sparks warm feelings and emotions in customers and can encourage them to suspend rational judgments;³⁶

3) the link between a customer's "self" and the brand becomes stronger, forming an emotional bond between them.³⁷

Another important finding was made by Nai-Hwa and Yi Ling Chen, who discovered that narrative ads can help companies to mitigate the negative effect of a weak product argument.³⁸ This means that even if a company produces a product that may be of a lower quality than that of its competitors, it might still be able to convince customers to buy it by using stories in the product's ads.

The notion of narrative advertising, therefore, can help us understand the success some brands have, and the seemingly overwhelming success some of them have in gaining new customers.³⁹ This article argues that the same framework can be applied to ISIS propaganda to understand its striking success. As Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger argue, ISIS was promoting an experience – that of becoming a jihadist⁴⁰ – which is, as has been shown, an area in which narrative advertising can be particularly effective.

³⁶ Chingching Chang, "'Being Hooked' By Editorial Content": 31.

³⁷ See Jean Marie Brechmana and Scott C. Purvis, "Narrative, Transportation, and Advertising," *International Journal of Advertising* 34, no. 2 (2015): 366–381; Nai-Hwa Lien and Yi-Ling Chen, "Narrative ads: The effect of argument strength and story format"; Nancy B. Stutts, "The use of narrative paradigm theory in assessing audience value conflict in image advertising," *Management Communication Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1999): 209–244; Chingching Chang, "Imagery Fluency and Narrative Advertising Effect," *Journal of Advertising* 42, no.1 (2013): 54–68; John Deighton, Daniel Romer, and Josh McQueen, "Using Drama to Persuade," *Journal of Consumer Research* 16, no. 3 (1989): 335–343.

³⁸ Nai-Hwa Lien and Yi-Ling Chen, "Narrative ads: The effect of argument strength and story format," 521.

³⁹ See Andrew D. Brown, "A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities," *Journal of Management Studies* 43, no.4 (2006): 731–753; Barbara B. Stern, Craig J. Thompson and Eric J. Arnould, "Narrative Analysis of a Marketing Relationship: The Consumer's Perspective," *Psychology and Marketing* 15, no.3 (1998): 185–214; Akil N. Awan, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, "The Battle of the Battle of Narratives: Sidestepping the Double Fetish of the Digital and CVE," in *Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism* ed. Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment (New York: Routledge, 2019), 156–172; Ben O'Loughlin, Alister Miskimmon and Laura Roselle, "Strategic Narratives: Methods and Ethics," in *Forging the World Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, ed. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 23–56.

⁴⁰ Jessica Stern and J. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 129.

IV. Methodology

In this research I am going to answer the following questions: What kind of stories does ISIS use in its propaganda? And how does ISIS use storytelling to establish a stronger connection with its recruits?

To study ISIS's propaganda through the framework of narrative advertising, I will examine the group's official propagandist magazines published between 2014–2017 (i.e. the period of ISIS's greatest success and the beginning of its decline): 15 issues of *Dabiq* and 13 issues of *Rumiyah* – 28 issues in total. The reason for this choice is that these magazines are the only part of ISIS's propaganda that is available in full (on the website Jihadology.com). This means that in contrast to social media posts and/or videos that were deleted by Internet providers, it is possible to obtain a full picture of how ISIS was building and promoting its propaganda via these magazines.

For these magazines, I will conduct narrative analysis, which, as researchers argue, is an effective tool in analyzing human experiences.⁴¹ Narrative reasoning is described as “configuration of the data into a coherent whole”⁴² while preserving the richness of the story told.⁴³ I am going to follow the model suggested by Polkinghorne, who explained it like this: “Narrative analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot. The story constituted by narrative integration allows for the incorporation of the notions of human purpose

⁴¹ Donald E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); P. Ricoeur, *From text to action: Essays in hermeneutics*, II (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

⁴² Donald E. Polkinghorne, “Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis”, *Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 8, no.1 (1995): 16.

⁴³ Jeong-Hee Kim, *Understanding Narrative Inquiry: The Crafting and Analysis of Stories as Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2016): 197.

and choice as well as chance happenings, dispositions, and environmental presses.”⁴⁴

Polkinghorne also notes that there are two main genres of stories we can discover while conducting narrative analysis: tragedy and comedy. “Tragedy” refers to a story in which a protagonist does not achieve the goal, and “comedy” to a story where a protagonist does achieve the goal.⁴⁵ The main question the researcher should ask themselves is: How did a protagonist come to a specific outcome (ending of a story)?⁴⁶

For this research, I will use the following steps: first, I will familiarize myself with the data to have an initial idea of its content. Then, as Polkinghorne’s version of narrative analysis is inductive (i.e. the stories are the final product of it and not the source), I will conduct preparatory analysis to be able then to construct the stories. At this stage, I will conduct thematic analysis of each magazine’s issue to identify the themes that are most prominent in each of them. For the thematic analysis, I will follow the algorithm offered by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.⁴⁷

For both elements, the procedure of analysis was the same:

1. Familiarization with data – reading all issues of magazines (28 in total);
2. Identification of articles of interest – as the author approaches the data with a specific question and task, the initial familiarization with data allowed her to eliminate articles that are irrelevant to this analysis;
3. Coding;

⁴⁴ See Polkinghorne, “Narrative Configuration”: 16.

⁴⁵ Polkinghorne, “Narrative Configuration”: 16.

⁴⁶ For more on narrative analysis, see: A. de Fina and A. Georgakopoulou, *Analyzing narrative: Discourse and sociolinguistic perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); J. Hostein and J. Gubrium, eds, *Varieties of Narrative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012); C.K. Riessman, *Narrative Method for the Human Sciences* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008).

⁴⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, no. 3 (2006): 84, 87. See also: Cath Sullivan and Michael A. Forrester, *Doing Qualitative Research in Psychology: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage Publications, 2019), 161; Dietmar Janetzko, “Nonreactive data collection,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*, ed. Nigel G. Fielding, Raymond M. Lee and Grant Blank (London: SAGE Publications, 2017), 77.

4. Searching for specific themes;
5. Reviewing themes to make sure they correspond with codes;
6. Naming themes.⁴⁸

The coding was conducted manually to ensure a correct interpretation of Arabic terms.⁴⁹ To ensure rigor at this stage of the research, I have created a codebook with a detailed description of the codes and themes emerging from the sources (for an example of the coding, see Appendix 1).

The “specific themes” that I will be looking for are going to be those that contain a certain element to a story; thus, they should refer either to a description of a character or to the development of a plot. Then, I will organize them chronologically, to identify which elements of the data contribute to the development of the story (plot) and find the connections between them (why and how certain actions were undertaken)

Then, at the final stage, I will organize them according to the basic story structure, where we have a protagonist and events forming a plot. A plot develops in climax and then an ending event comes.⁵⁰ By “protagonist”, I mean the actors of a story; by “plot”, I mean a series of events happening to the actors; by “climax”, I mean the moment of highest tension; and by “ending”, I mean the certain logical conclusion, the result of the characters’ actions. Following this, I will join all these elements together to create several stories that ISIS was creating and promoting in its magazines for its followers. These stories will be written in a generalized way, i.e. as a “typical” story that

⁴⁸ J. Fereday and E. Muir-Cochrane, “Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no.1 (2006): 84–89. See also Greg Guest, Kathleen M. MacQueen and Emily E. Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications, 2012), 89–93.

⁴⁹ Roel Popping, “Online Tools for Content-Analysis,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*, 331.

⁵⁰ Nwamaka A. Anaza, Elyria Kemp, Elten Briggs and Aberdeen Leila Borders, “Tell me a story”: 2; L. Van Laer, K. de Ruyter, L.M. Visconti and M. Wetzels, “The extended transportation-imagery model: A meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of consumers’ narrative transportation,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 40 (2014): 797–817.

can be encountered across the issues, rather than a story that has specific details about the characters (e.g. names) or their actions. At the final stage, I will analyze these newly constructed stories and identify recurring narratives that the group is spreading through them, and analyze their role and impact on the audience's perception of the group and its ideas.⁵¹

V. Results

The examination of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* did indeed allow me to draw the connection between different events, characters, and actions into coherent stories. In this section, I will present the final outcome of my analysis, i.e. stories that I have constructed after having examined the data.

The analysis of the magazines shows that they contain several coherent stories that re-emerge regularly throughout the issues. I have selected four main stories that can be encountered regularly throughout the magazines (in at least half of all issues/articles). It is important to note that not all of the stories are always developed within one article, but they can develop throughout a magazine's issue. Most often, it is the case that several articles refer to certain parts of a story. Finally, there are articles in the magazines' issues that are constructed according to the classic story format, and are used to render a particular idea to the reader. I have given the stories the following titles:

1. Awakening and finding the path to Khilafah;
2. Finding mujahid's glory;
3. Finding female destiny;
4. Remaining and expanding.

⁵¹ For an example of a research examining narratives see Erkan Toguslu, "Caliphate, Hijrah and Martyrdom as Performative Narrative," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 20, no.1 (2016): 94–120.

Story №1: Awakening and finding the path to Khilafah

This story is constructed throughout the magazine issues with the use of articles depicting different stages of a plot, and it appears in 50% of all the magazines. This story can be rendered like this: A Muslim person lives in the West but is constantly suffering; they feel alien there, they are unhappy. But then something great happens – the Caliphate is established. The Caliphate shows them that the West is a sinful place, where people are “filthy” and immoral, and this is why Muslims feel alien: they are “strangers” in this sinful world. That is why they need to move to the Caliphate, a place where they can finally feel at home, as it is pure and welcoming and free from sins, and it takes care of the people who live there.

In Polkinghorne’s typology, this first story can be characterized as a comedy. While, of course, there is nothing funny in its content, it follows the idea described in his article: it describes how a protagonist overcomes certain obstacles to achieve something and eventually succeeds.

Protagonist: The protagonist in this story is a Muslim living in the West. ISIS rarely accompanies this image with any physical description of this character, which is understandable: it attempts to appeal to as many people⁵² as possible and, therefore, it presents the protagonist in the most generic way. However, when the group describes some of its potential experiences in the West, it becomes much more specific and precise:

The modern day slavery of employment, work hours, wages, etc., is one that leaves the Muslim in a constant feeling of subjugation to a kāfir master. He does not live the might and honor that every Muslim should live and experience. It is

⁵² It should be noted, however, that when we say that ISIS tries to appeal to “all Muslims”, it normally means Sunni Muslims; Shiites are considered enemies.

as if Bilāl (radiyallāhu ‘anh) never were emancipated to live a free man, the Islamic State of Madīnah were never established, and the verses of jihād, jizyah, and war booty were never revealed upon the Prophet of the Muslim Ummah!⁵³

Here, one can see how ISIS refers to the experiences of Muslims on the job market in the West, which, despite all visible improvements, remains one of the most problematic areas. Research shows that a Muslim employee is less likely to find a high-skilled job even if their education and experience should enable them to. They also face discrimination and are more likely to reach the “glass ceiling”, where their promotion is slowed down or by-passed in favor of non-Muslims.⁵⁴ Another topic ISIS often refers to in this narrative is the “sexual deviance” of the West,⁵⁵ referring to pretty much everything from sexual relations before marriage to homosexuality. This would talk to people who come from families where the norms of Islam are followed strictly, where men and women are not allowed to have a relationship before the wedding. This may cause frustration among young people, especially if they want to have marriage based on love – meaning that it may take a long time for them to find “the one”.

These are just two examples where ISIS, while presenting its story’s protagonist, refers to various negative experiences common to Muslims and offers a comforting solution: an idea of Muslims being “strangers”. The concept of a “stranger” appeals to Western Muslims’ different and possibly negative experiences. ISIS, in a way, uses an argument that were it used by a non-Muslim person would sound racist: Muslims are

⁵³ Islamic State, “Dabiq. A Call to Hijrah,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no.3 (Shawwal. 1435): 29.

⁵⁴ See Anushka Asthana, “Islamophobia Holding Back UK Muslims in Workplace, Study Finds,” *The Guardian*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/sep/07/islamophobia-holding-back-uk-muslims-in-workplace-study-finds>; Sundas Ali, *British Muslims in Numbers* (London: The Muslim Council of Britain, 2015), 63; Claire L. Adida, David D. Laitin and Marie Anne Valfort, *Why Muslim Integration Fails in Christian-Heritage Societies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 14.

⁵⁵ Islamic State, “Dabiq. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no.7 (Rabi Al-Awwal, 1436): 42.

fundamentally different from Westerners. They are better, purer, more moral, more spiritual, etc. They do not feel right where they live, because they deserve a better place:

Strangeness is a condition that the Muslim living in the West cannot escape as long as he remains amongst the crusaders. He is a stranger amongst Christians and liberals. He is a stranger amongst fornicators and sodomites. He is a stranger amongst drunkards and druggies. He is a stranger in his faith and deeds, as his sincerity and submission is towards Allah alone, whereas the kuffār of the West worship and obey clergy, legislatures, media, and both their animalistic and deviant desires. For them it is strange that one manifests sincere submission to His Lord in word and deed.⁵⁶

This concept represents an interesting paradox: while ISIS victimizes Muslims and often refers to their sufferings from Western airstrikes in the Middle East, the group presents this situation as an attempt by “crusaders” to destroy people who are so much more superior than they are.⁵⁷ This idea can be summed up in the following quote: “And the kuffār can never be the equals of the Muslims even if both were to come from the same land.”⁵⁸

Across the magazines, ISIS also refers to its potential followers’ important social connections, such as parents or spouses. The group does seem to be mindful that relatives and social connections may be a powerful reason for its potential followers not to go anywhere. Therefore, ISIS continues using the same idea of superiority in regard to its recruits’ inner circle. ISIS emphasizes that while each Muslim has an obligation towards their families and parents, they must neglect them if they realize that the latter

⁵⁶ See Islamic State, “Dabiq. The Failed Crusade,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no.4 (Dhul-Hijjah, 1434).

⁵⁷ Islamic State, “Dabiq. The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no.10 (Ramadan, 1436): 15.

⁵⁸ Islamic State, “Dabiq. Shar’iah Alone Will Rule Africa,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 8 (Jumada Al-Akhirah, 1436): 4.

are lost and cannot be “saved”. The group makes it clear that the recruits are so much more morally superior than the people close to them, and thus they cannot stay with them if they prefer to remain oblivious regarding the truth that has been made clear to ISIS recruits.

Plot: The plot of the story consists of two main narratives: awakening and the move (hijrah) to the Caliphate. The first idea was particularly strong in the first three issues of ISIS’s magazines, as the group’s main purpose was to enlarge its membership:

The time has come for the Ummah of Muhammad (sallallahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew.⁵⁹

Later, the idea of awakening would be rendered through the articles, describing the “deviance” of the West and the obligations of truthful Muslims. The main idea is that a truthful Muslim cannot stay in a land full of sin and disbelief, as it will turn them into a sinner as well:

Living amongst the sinful kills the heart, never mind living amongst the kuffār!
Their kufr initially leaves dashes and traces upon the heart that over time become engravings and carvings that are nearly impossible to remove. They can destroy the person’s fitrah to a point of no return, so that his heart’s doubts and desires entrap him fully.⁶⁰

A narrative of traveling to the Caliphate has been expressed in several ways. In earlier issues, ISIS tended to use a lot of references to religious texts that served as an inspiration or corroboration of the idea of “hijrah” (migration):

⁵⁹ Islamic State, “Dabiq. The Return of the Khilafah,” *Al-Hayat Media Centre*, no.1 (Ramadan, 1435): 9.

⁶⁰ Islamic State, “Dabiq. A Call to Hijrah”: 31.

It is migrating from the places of shirk and sin to the land of Islam and obedience” [Ad-Durar as-Saniyyah]. So dārullislām is the place ruled by Muslims, where the Islamic laws are executed, where authority is for the Muslims, even if the majority of the population are kuffār from ahlul-dhimmah. As for dārul-kufr, this is the place ruled by kuffār, where the laws of kufr are executed, where authority is for the kuffār, even if the majority of the population is Muslim.⁶¹

Later, the group occasionally started using actual stories that replicated the one I have constructed here: they would be told by people who migrated to Syria and followed the same scheme: awakening, migration, finding the Caliphate. In these stories, the narrator would often describe the difficulties he/she had to overcome to reach the Caliphate (e.g. being detained by Turkish guards, having to travel while pregnant, etc.). This narrative resembles many classical storylines: a character has to struggle and experience difficulties to find their happiness.

My hijrah to the Islamic State was a journey not unlike that undertaken by many others who sought to leave the lands of kufr and reside in the lands of tawhid. I was forced to disavow my strength and ability, and to place my trust in Allah and rely on Him alone in order to find a way out from the dangers and difficulties I faced along the way.⁶²

Ending: ISIS continues to follow the classic storyline: the ending of the first story is presented in two ways: in two thirds of all magazines there are “reports” from the Caliphate that show the great life people have there, smiling children, joint celebrations, and an overall effective ruling by the group within the captured territories. The story of a rightful Muslim who suffered so much in the land of sin and disbelief ends happily in the magic land of true belief and purity:

⁶¹ Islamic State, “Dabiq. Shar’iah Alone Will Rule Africa”: 32.

⁶² Islamic State, “Rumiyah,” *Al-Hayat Media Centre*, no. 13 (Dhul-Hijjah, 1438): 30.

The Khilāfah was revived, and muhājirīn were now pouring into Shām from all corners of the Earth at a rate much greater than ever before. One no longer felt the strangeness he would experience in the lands of the crusaders nor that in the lands of the tawāghīt nor that in the territories of the nationalist factions. He now had his own land, where his creed was upheld and his methodology was enforced, the creed and methodology of Islam, the Sunnah, the Jamā’ah. No ikhwānism, no irjā’, no hizbiyyah.⁶³

Story №2: Finding mujahid’s glory

This is one of the most well-developed stories and it comes up throughout all issues of the magazines. Here, this idea is expressed via a selection of articles referring to different stages of the plot development: articles about Muslims’ lives in the West, the experiences of fighters with ISIS, and practical and moral benefits of being part of the group. ISIS (or rather, unnamed members of the group writing on the group’s behalf) eventually also started writing actual stories with the same plot idea, under the title “Among the believers are men” – stories of real fighters who die during military operations or who committed terrorist attacks (or in the group’s terms – “martyrdom operations”). The story can be formulated as follows: A young Muslim man leaves a land of disbelief (which can be either the West or a Muslim country), travels to the Caliphate, and becomes a mujahid (jihadist fighter). He fights enemies bravely and dies as a hero. He becomes a martyr and Allah awards him with Paradise.

Protagonist: The protagonist of this story is always a young Muslim man, who either lives in the West and suffers from its immorality and sinfulness, or lives in the Middle East, where he has to deal with hypocrites and apostates. He is always described

⁶³ Islamic State, “Dabiq. Just Terror”: 33.

as a person who has a very good personality, a nice character and, most importantly, is a devoted Muslim.

Although Abū Qudāmah’s joking nature was known to always entertain his brothers, he would take his relationship with Allah very seriously, never missing the fast of Dāwūd (‘alayhissalām) nor enjoying a single night’s sleep without spending a portion of it remembering his Lord either through prayer or recitation of the Qur’an. He was known to seek the correct Islamic rulings in everything he did, and would never knowingly allow any doubts or falsehood to hold firm in his presence.⁶⁴

Even if the protagonist’s past was not quite as religious and pure as the story demands it, ISIS storytellers decorate these facts and make them sound flattering. For example, one of the characters used to be a petty criminal and part of a gang in France. Here is how this aspect of his biography was presented to the reader:

He was a fierce gangster, who acquired an enormous amount of money through numerous raids on the wealth of the mushrikin, until he obtained a beautiful car, and began to join Paris’s rich and famous in their clubs and celebrations, and that is the highest achievement for individuals of that diseased world. He was a man whom people would fear, as he was known amongst his peers as brave and fearless, and that he wasn’t afraid of confrontation, nor would he run from a fight, especially in the ongoing and never-ending strife between the vile neighborhoods – in the gloom of jahiliyyah – of France’s suburbs.⁶⁵

There is a big emphasis on the role of social connections between the protagonist and his “brothers”. An idea of kinship and brotherhood is extremely strong in these kinds of stories: the protagonist is always depicted as part of the group of other young men who

⁶⁴ Islamic State, “Dabiq. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy”: 47.

⁶⁵ Islamic State, “Rumiyah,” *Al-Hayat Media Centre*, no. 11 (Shawwal. 1438): 45.

follow the principle “All for one and one for all”. It is particularly visible when there are descriptions of battles of various kinds: very often, a mujahid becomes a hero not only because he is eager to fight for Islam, but also because he tries to save his brothers from being killed. Alternatively, his “brothers” attempt to save him against all odds:

The sniper was not shooting, so the mujāhidīn knew it was an old technique to draw in a medic and get more kills. Abū Qudāmah didn’t care. He said, “Well we have to do something, we can’t just leave him there. You guys cover me and I’ll go get him.”⁶⁶

So, a typical character in this type of story is very likable: he has a good nature, he is a good friend, he is brave, and loved by everyone. At the same time, he is depicted as special because he was blessed with his belief and devotion to Allah, and this distinguishes him from all other people who were around him in this country of residence. Through his experience, ISIS also renders again an idea that the West (or other Muslim countries) is not the right place for true believers: the group uses examples of these real people to make them as relatable as possible to its potential recruits, and to spark the seed of recognition, doubt, and eventually desire to join the group.

Plot: The plot of this story is quite simple. The protagonist realizes that as a devoted Muslim he must migrate to the Caliphate. He becomes a mujahid and fights for Islamic State and Islam. He fights heroically, crushing all enemies of Islam, but eventually some crafty enemy reaches him and dishonestly kills him. These events are always described very dramatically, and create an impression of an adventure novel where emotions are very high:

⁶⁶ Islamic State, “Dabiq. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy”: 48.

Prior to heading out for the inghimāsī operation, Abū Jandal wrote the following letter to his brothers in Islam: ... “This is a sincere message from your beloved brother living in the blessed lands of the Islamic State. Verily it is Allah’s laws and the sacrifice of the brothers that makes a land blessed. Yā ikhwānī fillāh, four or five months ago I was in the same position as you. I didn’t have any plan as to how to avoid the fitnah surrounding me. I didn’t know how I would ever be able to do jihād fī sabīlillāh. I thought that all my family and friends would boycott me. I was drowning in the same obstacles that you might be going through now. But it is only the promise of Allah, the promise of that Garden in which rivers flow, that kept me going. And it was enough, inshā’allāh.⁶⁷

As mentioned, usually at this moment, there will be a strong emphasis on brotherly connections between mujahideen: these stories portray ISIS fighters somewhat as musketeers, who always support each other. As many scholars have shown in previous research, social connections are a very important driving factor for terrorists,⁶⁸ so it is not surprising that ISIS makes such a strong emphasis on that. In addition, however, one can notice again an idea of exclusivity being rendered throughout these stories: mujahideen are not simply brotherhood; this is brotherhood that is very special and united, due to their exceptional personal characteristics and a special call from Allah, who “chose” them to serve Him and fight for His cause.

It is important to remember that the mujāhidīn are from the people with the most proper creed, especially concerning Allah’s names, attributes, and actions.

Because their creed is that of Ahlus-Sunnah, they believe that Allah’s actions

⁶⁷ Islamic State, “Dabiq. The Murtadd Brotherhood,” Al-Hayat media Centre, no.14 (Rajab, 1437): 51.

⁶⁸ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 63; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 117; Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Joining the Cause: Al Muhajiroun and Radicalism,” *Department of International Studies, Rhodes College*, (2003): 3–5.

are truly characterized by justice, wisdom, mercy, and grace, contrary to the Ashā'irah who believe that wisdom "limits".⁶⁹

Ending: This story has a predictable end. The glorious mujahid dies like a hero, but his death is rewarded by the great mercy from Allah. He is given Paradise and eternal happiness. Often, a picture of a dead body of a fighter is attached and one can see a happy smile on his face, which is claimed to be proof that the fighter is now in a better place. Therefore, this type of a story can also be characterized as comedy according to Polkinghorne's typology: even though the story describes the death of the protagonist, death is presented as a happy end, something that the protagonist was actually striving for all that time.

Story №3: Finding female destiny

At a certain point, ISIS realized that the Caliphate needed women in order to survive, and from that moment, its propaganda machine started targeting potential female recruits. For them, the group introduced a special column in which it would discuss issues relevant to women. One can notice that all these articles are also constructed as a story; however, it is less developed and nuanced than the stories aimed at men or the general population of believers (such as the first story, which can be relevant to both men and women). Nevertheless, it is present in 80% of all issues. Its content is quite simple: A woman is a misfit in her country of residence (usually, it refers to the West), because women there have forgotten their female identity. But in the Islamic State, she finds her real feminine destiny and the treatment she deserves.

Protagonist: Again, as in previous cases, ISIS is very generic regarding the main character and, in this case, refers to her as a Muslim woman. This is understandable as,

⁶⁹ Islamic State, "Dabiq. The Flood," *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no.2 (Ramadan, 1435): 23.

similar to other stories, the group attempts to appeal to as many potential followers as possible. It mainly does this by describing the feelings that young Muslim women living in the West may have, and also through an idea of what a “good Muslim woman” should be. The first narrative mainly refers to the so-called sexual freedom of the West, which ISIS presents as deviance and sin.

And as the fitrah continues to be desecrated day by day in the West and more and more women abandon motherhood, wifhood, chastity, femininity, and heterosexuality, the true woman in the West has become an endangered creature. The Western way of life a female adopts brings with it so many dangers and deviances, threatening her very own soul. She is the willing victim who sacrifices herself for the immoral “freedoms” of her people, offering her fitrah on the altar of secular liberalism. If she feared for her soul, she would reflect on where the paths of Christian paganism and democratic perversion continue to lead her, contemplate on how the world would have been had its women adopted the path of the vile West centuries ago, and liberate herself from her enslavement to hedonistic addictions and heathenish doctrines. The solution is laid before the Western woman. It is nothing but Islam, the religion of the fitrah.⁷⁰

A good Muslim woman must be pure; she cannot allow the dirt of the society in which she lives to touch her. ISIS makes the same claim in regard to Muslim women as it does about men: they are special, they are not like others, and that is why they do not feel right where they live, and why they need to be in Islamic State to wholly fulfil their destiny.

⁷⁰ Islamic State, “Dabiq. Break the Cross,” *Al-Hayat Media Centre*, no. 15 (Shawwal, 1437): 25.

Plot: A good Muslim woman then travels to the Caliphate, and this is usually accompanied by great obstacles that she has to overcome, which she successfully does as, despite being delicate and feminine, she is also incredibly strong:

They are as fragile as glass bottles but their souls are those of men with ambitions almost hugging the heavens. Yes, these are the muwahhidah muhājirah sisters who performed hijrah to the lands of the Islamic State. They inherited this ambition from the Mother of the Believers Sawdah Bint Zam'ah (radiyallāhu ‘anhā), the wife of their Prophet (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam).⁷¹

The plot of the female-oriented story is not as well developed as well as the stories for men, where the reader can actually follow the adventures of mujahideen fighting against enemies and finding glory in death. Partially, this can be explained by the fact that ISIS was a military organization, and while female recruits were important, nevertheless, they would not be allowed to fight (at least, not in the early years of the group's existence); consequently, there was not much of a story for them to offer. The group chose a different path and provided a very well-developed ending, which, in the case of the female target audience, represents the benefits they can have while in Islamic State.

Ending: The ending of this story can be formulated as follows: The Muslim woman becomes a “real” woman and obtains everything she deserves: power, respect, influence. Many researchers have pointed at the fact that young women did not travel to ISIS for the sake of finding love,⁷² but for the sake of empowerment and finding meaning in life. Indeed, the group gives them that; it offers them an idea of a beautiful

⁷¹ Islamic State, “Dabiq. Shar’iah Alone Will Rule Africa”: 34.

⁷² Hind Fraihi, “The Future of Feminism by ISIS is in the Lap of Women,” *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018): 28; Alice Martini, “Making women terrorists into ‘Jihadi brides’: an analysis of media narratives on women joining ISIS,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018): 469; Galit M. Ben-Israel, “Telling a Story Via Tumblr Analytics: Europe’s Young Muslim Female Attraction to ISIS,” *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018): 62.

princess with a sword: she is feminine, yet she is also strong and powerful and fully equal to men, but has a different function in society:

How great Allah made these women! They did not sit and cry, lamenting during the hours of hardship and tribulation. Instead, they carried the weight of the religion and the Ummah on their shoulders, helping a husband, inciting a son...⁷³

My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujāhidah, and if the weapon of the men is the assault rifle and the explosive belt, then know that the weapon of the women is good behavior and knowledge. Because you will enter fierce battles between truth and falsehood.⁷⁴

All narratives used in female-oriented stories are, therefore, used to spread a message to Muslim women that they are very important, they are an indispensable part of a new and better future of the community, and they play an active part in it. Again, here, the group uses the genre of comedy to demonstrate that if its potential recruits decide to join, only success and happiness await them.

Story № 4: Remaining and expanding

ISIS dedicated a lot of attention and a large proportion of its magazines' content to this story, and it can be encountered in all issues. It is embodied through several types of articles: description of battles, articles dedicated to malicious deeds of the group's "enemies" (the rest of the world), the stories of other groups recognizing its excellence

⁷³ Islamic State, "Rumiyah," *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 2 (Maharram. 1438): 30

⁷⁴ Islamic State, "Dabiq. From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the war of Coalitions," *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 11 (Dhul-Qa'dah, 1436): 44.

and accepting its superiority. The story can be formulated as follows: ISIS is a righteous state, the only goal of which is to protect the believers, and it is being constantly attacked by enemies who want to destroy it. ISIS fights fiercely, more and more people recognize its status as the protector of believers, and eventually it defeats its enemies.

Protagonist: As is clear from the story's description, ISIS uses itself as the protagonist. It presents itself as the only place on Earth where believers can be protected and respected. Its only desire is to follow Allah's will and its only purpose is to follow His orders.

Raise your heads high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and khilāfah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. It is a khilāfah that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shāmī, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribī (North African), American, French, German, and Australian. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another.⁷⁵

This is the only type of story that also has an antagonist: the West (kuffar or crusaders), hypocrites, and apostates (Muslims who do not support ISIS). Interestingly, the group focuses less on developing its own character than on developing the character of the antagonist. This latter is described as a hostile power that hates everything that is holy and pure, hates and disrespects Allah, and its only purpose is to kill, torture, and humiliate Muslims (because they know that they are much better people), and destroy the Caliphate as a stronghold of true faith.

⁷⁵ Islamic State, "Dabiq. Shar'iah Alone Will Rule Africa": 4.

So the kuffār – whether they are Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christians, whether they are Orthodox, Conservative, or Progressive Jews, whether they are Buddhists, Hindus, or Sikhs, whether they are capitalists, communists, or fascists – they are ultimately allies of one another against Islam and the Muslims. This is because Islam – the religion of truth and fitrah – is the greatest threat to their religions of falsehood, all of which are at war with the inborn nature of man. This is also because the tawāghīt and dajājilah (plural of dajjāl) of these false religions fear losing control of their flocks of blind sheep and the wealth contained in their woolly pockets.⁷⁶

ISIS, therefore, emphasizes the crucial difference between it, its supporters, and the rest of the world: again, one can notice the narrative of exclusivity and specialty being used very often to depict the struggle between itself and the rest of the world.

Plot: The “enemies of Islam”, therefore, do everything to attack and destroy Islamic State. However, the truth reveals itself: more and more people join the “Khilafah”, and it is fighting with fearlessness. The enemies also only look strong, but in reality, since they are not supported by Allah, they display their weakness:

The crusaders will ultimately find they cannot face the Islamic State except directly, face-to face, or else – due to their nonstop bleeding – the crusaders will be forced to disengage from their war against the Muslims until the time decreed by Allah for al-Malhamah al-Kubrā.⁷⁷

Ending: All of these fierce battles end, of course, with the victory of Islamic State. The fighters of ISIS are supported by God and this will give them almost a supernatural power, making them invincible and unstoppable when it comes to eliminating the enemy.

⁷⁶ Islamic State, “Dabiq. Just Terror,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 12 (Safar, 1437): 44.

⁷⁷ Islamic State, “Dabiq. They Plot and Allah Plots,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 9 (Sha’ban, 1436): 59.

Only a month after a much-vaunted “victory” in Bījī against the mujāhidīn, the Safawī forces found themselves being chased out of the very town that they falsely claimed to have completely liberated.⁷⁸

It is interesting to note that when ISIS started losing on the battlefield, its rhetoric changed slightly, but not much. The main change in the story was an idea that victory comes to the patient, and Allah is testing them in their resilience and devotion.⁷⁹ When it became clear that the victory was not going to happen, the group started resorting to twisting the facts, trying to present losses as victories (for example, with the battle of Falluja). Another alternative trope the group used was describing its losses in the most dramatic ways, often through fighters’ testimonies (e.g. the battle of Mosul), which emphasized the narrative of the righteous being brutally attacked by the enemies of Islam. Here, one can see how the group moved from the genre of comedy to tragedy (an untypical genre for ISIS), to use it to reinforce sympathies for the group, and make its cause stronger through reference to its losses.

VI. Discussion

In the previous section, I have constructed and described the four main stories that ISIS was transmitting to its target audience. What was the role of these stories and how did they help the group to gain support?

As discussed earlier, the benefit of narrative advertising is that it encourages the target audience to “get lost in the story”. This means that customers (or in this case, potential recruits) will apply the narrative from the stories to their own experiences and

⁷⁸ Islamic State, “Dabiq. Al-Qa’idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from within,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 6 (Rabi Al-Awwal, 1436): 32.

⁷⁹ Islamic State, “Rumiyah,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 2. (Maharram, 1438): 26; Islamic State, “Rumiyah,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 4. (Rabi al-Awwal. 1438): 28.

associate themselves with them. Stories offer something valuable for customers – for some people, it can be success, for others, adventure, and for others again, love.

The examination of the four ISIS-produced stories shows that the group had, indeed, a very wide reach. It spoke to a large audience of Muslims, particularly those living in the West, and appealed to experiences almost every person may have had – discrimination, anger over the events that happen in the Middle East, difficulties in finding a job, etc.; this concurs with a great deal of existing research.⁸⁰ ISIS, therefore, used a popular storytelling trope, in which the narrator starts off with a description of a protagonist’s sad and meaningless or unhappy life. The group positioned itself as a way to change this situation and give its followers what they desire. The stories discussed above have several recurring themes that serve as “hooks” for its followers (i.e. things that grasp their attention and appeal to their inner desires), and facilitate a strong connection between them and the group:

1. The feeling of exclusivity and specialness

In all stories, ISIS strongly emphasizes the fact that Muslims, and particularly those Muslims who support the group, are unusual, special, not like other people. They are better than people in the West and they are better than their fellow Muslims, as they are true believers, unlike those fellow Muslims who mix Islamic principles with a Western lifestyle, or who neglect their obligations. They are also better citizens (in a general sense) as they, unlike other Muslims, feel the pain of the “ummah” (global Muslim community) and want to do something to change the life of their co-believers for the better. There is also a strong emphasis on the “strangeness” of these people: as shown in

⁸⁰ Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 190; Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors. Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean: Advances Press, LLC, 2016); Shane Brighton, “British Muslims, Multiculturalism and UK Foreign Policy: ‘Integration’ and Cohesion in and Beyond the State,” *International Affairs* 83, no. 1 (2007): 13; Moamen Gouda and Marcus Marktanner, “Muslim Youth Unemployment and Expat Jihadism: Bored to Death?” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no.10 (2019): 879.

stories, ISIS always stresses how the exceptional moral characteristics of those Muslims who support its principles make them misfits in society. This idea goes hand by hand with an idea of “chosen-ness”, which is particularly prominent in the stories about mujahideen. Here, one can also see the role of the narrative of brotherhood and special bonds. As ISIS followers are special, they can only be understood by other special people. They can only be themselves among their “brothers and sisters”. Their relationship is then deep and strong, their devotion to each other is exceptional, and thus “ordinary people” will not get it.

2. The moral transformation

This is also a typical story trope that “hooks” a lot of people. We tend to like stories in which a good but awkward character, who is not liked or appreciated by those around them, changes dramatically and then impresses everyone with their new physique/skill/job/knowledge, etc. Or, alternatively (and this seems to be the ISIS choice), the character takes revenges on everyone who did not treat them well before. The same logic works in the ISIS stories. In the first three stories, there is a narrative of humiliation and the lack of appreciation that Muslims experience all over the world, and particularly in the West. Joining ISIS in this sense is portrayed as a gateway for this transformation. Muslims are offered a chance to take up the place that they deserve, to take revenge for mistreatment, and also – for particularly special people – to gain the highest reward, which is Paradise. As the group states: “This revival of the Khilāfah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater.”⁸¹

3. Superpower

⁸¹ Islamic State, “Dabiq. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy,” *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 7 (Rabi Al-Akhir, 1436): 57.

This idea is particularly strong in the stories about mujahideen and ISIS's struggle against the enemies. The group presents its fighters and itself as a very powerful agent, possessing almost supernatural skills that are given them by Allah. These skills make them invincible, unstoppable, scaring the enemies almost by the very appearance of them alone. This narrative has a parallel with superhero stories, in which the characters are given special powers to fight against evil and save the world. In these stories, good always wins, even if it experiences difficulties, and there is always a happy ending. The same applies to ISIS: it tries to make its followers feel like superheroes who have not just escaped their lives because they were unsatisfied with them and could not adjust to the society they live in, but were called upon for a special mission, because only they have the power to perform it. Here, the idea of exclusivity plays out as well – being part of ISIS is presented as being part of a secret club like the Marvel comic “Avengers”, the members of which may not be understood by the general public due to its narrow-mindedness, but who are, nevertheless, secretly working towards a greater good.

4. The strength in femininity

While previous “hooks” can be relevant to both men and women, this one is specifically for women. It is about the idea that a woman can maintain her femininity and, at the same time, be powerful. Of course, this is possible outside ISIS; however, for many young Muslim women, there are more obstacles to that: they are often forced to choose whether to adopt Western values and give up on some of their cultural and religious norms, or resort to following their traditional role, as required by their family, for example.⁸² ISIS offers them both. The group emphasizes the fact that a Muslim woman

⁸² See Mariam Khan, *It's Not About the Burqa: Muslim Women on Faith, Feminism, Sexuality and Race* (London: Picador, 2019); Heidi Safia Mirza and Veena Meeto, “Empowering Muslim girls? Post-feminism, multiculturalism and the production of the ‘model’ Muslim female student in British schools,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39, no.2 (2018): 233; Katherine Brown, “British Muslim

is, first of all, a woman, meaning that she is beautiful, tender, delicate, and soft – like a princess from a fairytale. She is also unique and special (unlike Western women or other “bad” Muslims), and, like a beautiful flower, she should be guarded and also restrain herself from some rough male jobs (e.g. fighting). At the same time, despite being very feminine and fragile, she is enormously strong, she is a superwoman, as she is involved in crucial activities, helping to build the Caliphate and a happy future, and she is also the Queen in her husband’s house. It is she who defines the success of her husband on the battlefield, she is the one who will give birth and bring up the future generation of glorious fighters, she is the one who rules the house, and her husband is aware of her power. So, SIS offers its female recruits an idea of a typical Disney princess, who is 100% feminine but, at the same time, unlike other women, possessing some special characteristics, power, and influence that make her unique.

These four “hooks” transmitted through the ISIS stories make its followers, in a manner similar to a brand’s customers, absorb the group’s narrative, become fascinated with it, allow themselves to dream about the ideal image that the group offers them, and form a strong emotional connection with it. While I did not attempt to identify who exactly the target audience of this type of message was, it would probably be correct to think that it would work better with younger people, who are still concerned with self-expression. This happens as ISIS offers them something extremely attractive and desirable, which speaks directly to their personalities. As shown in the previous section, all “hooks” appeal to the recruits’ psychological needs, such as self-image and self-perception, rather than to their political and/or socio-economic grievances. As with other brands, for

Women: Islamic Identity and Strategies for Acquiring Rights in the UK,” *Huqūq-i Bashār* 10, no. 2 (2015): 39.

some of the people among the group's target audience, this connection becomes strong enough to make a decision whereby they want to make the story a reality.

VII. Conclusion

This article examined ISIS's magazines through the prism of marketing and narrative advertising, and uncovered another propagandist technique used by the group. It demonstrated that the group relied not only on the polarization of opinions and sparking anger,⁸³ or offering a utopian idea of a righteous state,⁸⁴ or religious rewards,⁸⁵ or promising some material benefits and an exciting adventure;⁸⁶ it was also speaking to its followers' desires to be a certain type of people, to create a certain image of themselves – powerful, special, strong, etc. – and it successfully used marketing to satisfy this desire. The group presented itself as a way to achieve a more attractive self-image and reach a certain level of personal development.

A terrorist group, therefore, does not always need people to be angry and frustrated, or curious, to join it. The example of ISIS shows that the use of marketing techniques may allow it to present itself as an elite club, which is only open to exclusive members, and thus attract recruits who may not have an initial inclination to extremism.

This study comes with certain limitations. First, as I was the only coder of the data, there is a risk of bias. To reduce this, I kept the codebook with the detailed description of codes, their definitions, and cases when they should be applied. Second, only one

⁸³ Haroro J. Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operation": 730; Haroro J. Ingram, "An analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq* magazine," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2016): 461. See also: Ian R. Pelletier, Leif Lundmark, Rachel Gardner, Gina Scott Ligon and Ramazan Kilinc, "Why ISIS's Message Resonates: Leveraging Islam, Sociopolitical Catalysts, and Adaptive Messaging," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no.10 (2016): 1–66; Stephen Chan, *Spear to the West: Thought and Recruitment in Violent Jihadism* (London: Hurst and Company, 2019).

⁸⁴ See Winter, "Apocalypse later".

⁸⁵ Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 102; Samantha Mahood and Halim Rane, "Islamist Narratives in ISIS Recruitment Propaganda," *The Journal of International Communication* 23, no.1 (2017): 15–35.

⁸⁶ See Speckhard and Yayla, *ISIS Defectors*; Gerges, *ISIS: A History*; Peter R. Neumann, *Radicalized: New Jihadists and the Threat to the West* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 56.

type of ISIS propaganda was examined; therefore, other types of ISIS-produced materials (videos and social media posts) may offer a different set of stories, or not contain them at all. Second, in this article, I focus exclusively on ISIS's propagandist techniques, without its recruits' reactions to them. Both limitations can be addressed by conducting further studies to broaden our knowledge of terrorist propaganda and people's reactions to it. Further research can also be carried out across other groups' materials, to compare their strategies to that of ISIS.

This study also offers recommendations for counter-terrorism practices. Specifically, it shows that unlike many online efforts to counter the ISIS propaganda that are very straightforward and can be limited to an idea "don't join, ISIS is lying", ISIS propaganda is constructed in a much more sophisticated ways and thus requires a more sophisticated response. As mentioned earlier, appealing to the audience's logic and rationality works less effectively compared to narrative messages that establish an emotional connection with the audience. Counter-terrorism professionals should, therefore, consider using this technique in an effort to produce counter-narratives.

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Appendix 1: A Codebook Sample

Code 1	
Label	Mujahid
Definition	A holy fighter
When to use	Use when talking about ISIS fighters who joined the group
When not to use	Not to use when talking about pro-ISIS scholars and commanders
Code 2	
Label	Sick of sins and filth
Definition	The description of the emotional state of ISIS recruits
When to use	Use when talking about the how ISIS recruits feel living in the West
When not to use	Not to use when talking about the reasons to join ISIS
Code 3	
Label	Finding military glory
Definition	The description of fights

When to use	Use when talking about the fights of mujahideen
When not to use	Not to use when talking about ISIS's fights against the enemies
Code 4	
Label	Brotherhood
Definition	Description of relations between ISIS recruits
When to use	Use when talking about the fighters
When not to use	Not to use in relation to women
Code 5	
Label	Making hijrah
Definition	Description of moving to ISIS
When to use	Use when talking about the problems and obstacles recruits faced on their way
When not to use	Not to use when talking about the reasons for the move
Code 6	

Label	Stranger
Definition	The uniqueness of Muslims
When to use	Use when talking about ISIS supporters' special status
When not to use	Not to use when talking about other Muslims