Identity and Narrative Persuasion: How ISIS Western-Directed Propaganda Works

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an identity-centered narrative theory of high-risk political activism to explain how narratives engage with social identities, and how variation in narratives can be strategically deployed by political actors to engage different mobilization pools. Narratives are stories that persuade through identification with plot and characters, with mobilization bringing expressive payoffs. Narratives tailored to identities maximizes their recruitment potential. Our empirical case is the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's Western-directed video recruitment campaign. We argue that ISIS's use of tailored narratives explains its success in mobilizing diverse social identities within the community of Muslims living in the West. We present evidence for the theory from an online survey experiment with 139 US and Canadian Muslims and analyses of narratives in 16 ISIS propaganda videos and motives in 148 US ISIS perpetrators. The paper helps explain how appeals targeting identities can mobilize, including under circumstances of widespread social disapproval.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

Can narratives persuade individuals to engage in high-risk political activism? If so, are the effects of narratives necessarily a product of social structures within which individuals are embedded? Or can narratives persuade individuals to pursue personally risky political action based on factors independent of community pressures and inducements? The answers to these questions have important implications for the dynamics of social movements and contentious politics, mass mobilization in civil wars, and the impact of social media on political activism.

This study offers an identity-centered narrative theory of high-risk political activism and tests it in an environment that separates the role of narrative from reinforcing community pressures. For decades, scholars of social movements, mass mobilization, and international politics have given two main explanations for why and how narratives induce individuals to pursue risky political action. The first is social network theory, in which "strong communities produce mechanisms that are able to drive individuals into these dangerous roles" (Petersen 2001, 15). Indeed, numerous scholars have found evidence of the mechanisms by which social networks produce these effects, such as peer pressure from friendship groups (McAdam 1986), norms based on real or fictive kinship circles (Atran, Sheikh, and Gomez 2014; Parkinson 2013), or social information that filters collective threat perceptions (Kaufman 2015; Shesterinina 2016). The second is framing theory, which uses the selective presentation of information to depict a reality in which action is both necessary and efficacious. Framing the overall circumstances surrounding an event or issue (such as social injustice, economic progress, demonic threat etc.) can lead to the alignment of the constructed reality with individual values, biases, or ideologies to produce changes of opinion and action (Gamson 1988; Snow et al. 1986).

Social networks and framing often go together in theories of (McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Shesterinina 2016), making it challenging to isolate their independent effects.

Narratives are distinct from frames and treating "narrative" as a subset or equivalent to the category "frame" would mask differences between how the two variously represent reality, relate to identities, and engage audiences (Polletta 1998, 421). What is special in our narrative theory is that people's absorption into a story leads them to identify with the main character and take on his or her social identity. In this way narrative is distinct from what is often called episodic framing, the use of stories to trigger emotional responses that enhance attitude change toward an issue that subsequently motivates action (Aarøe 2011). Narratives, by contrast, appeal to, and indeed help to craft, social identities whose recognition demands action. As such, identity-centered narratives focus on the experience of an individual in a story that persuades and potentially mobilizes through the viewer's identification with plot and characters, triggering processes of imagined role-playing where the viewer is encouraged to "try on" the narrated role vicariously and identify (or not) with that role. The affinity between the identity of the viewer and the identity narrative is critical to the process of engendering a strong sense of individual responsibility to take action -- the stronger the affinity, the deeper the identification, the greater the narrative's persuasive effect.

This paper focuses on identity narratives instead of frames because narratives, especially video narratives, are increasingly salient in our world as a mode of communication and persuasion including in the context of mobilization to high-risk action. Moreover, narratives persuade in ways distinct from the overall framing of the circumstances surrounding an issue and so the choice to focus on narratives helps to identify the impact of narrative specific effects. Scholars have made significant progress in showing that narratives have important persuasive

effects that are distinct from the effects of framing (whether thematic or episodic) in a wide variety of contexts, including political advertising (Vafeiadis, Li, and Shen 2018), product marketing and branding (E. Kim, Ratneshwar, and Thorson 2017), military recruitment (Maartens 2020), and public health initiatives (M. Kim, Shi, and Cappella 2016). Our aim is to extend this progress to the field of high-risk action and so understanding how narratives trigger imagined role-play as motivation is both theoretically and practically valuable.

Specifically, our goal is to investigate how a specific social identity at a given point in time impacts the persuasiveness of narratives that are designed to appeal to various social identities, not to theorize the determinants of any one social identity. We follow Kalin and Sambanis (2018, 240) in defining social identity distinct from personal identity as the "the part of one's self-concept that is informed by one's membership in groups defined by some shared attribute, such as language, religion, or race." Social identity "offers a foundation for understanding how group membership affects the individual desire for esteem, as well as a social reference for individual behavior" (2018, 242), even as individuals vary in the strength of their identification with specific social groups.

To mobilize support, political actors can deploy strategies to engage identities most likely to benefit this goal, and recruitment propaganda is one way to do so. For individuals with such engaged identities, acting in accordance with them brings expressive payoffs (McLean and Syed 2015). Indeed, scholars have long recognized that non-rational expressive payoffs are driving part of the real-world motivations for mobilization, at least when these are reinforced by the predominant social norms (Kruglanski et al. 2009; Pape 2005; Wood 2003). As we show in this study, these expressive motivations may be important when they are either independent of or even running against the predominant social norms surrounding society, since potential recruits

for ISIS in the US and West more generally occur in an environment strongly condemning support for the group.

To demonstrate how narratives work through social identity to encourage high-risk activism, this study investigates the effect of Western-directed propaganda by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on recruitment to terrorism. From 2014 to 2017, 62% of all individuals in the United States who either carried attacks in the name of ISIS or were prosecuted in US courts for ISIS-related offenses were born in the United States. This contrasts sharply with the earlier pattern of Al Qaeda recruits in the US between 1997 and 2011, 64% of whom were foreign-born. This US-born pool of ISIS recruits is either second generation Muslims or recent converts to Islam who lived their entire lives in the US, with weak or no ties to established Muslim communities abroad and few if any known ties to radical Islamic networks prior to exposure to ISIS Western-directed propaganda that these individuals routinely self-report as the principal vehicle recruiting them to high-risk political activism for the group (Pape et al. 2017).

What explains why ISIS has been able to draw heavily from a pool of Western-born individuals with weak ties to established Muslim communities while simultaneously drawing on a significant pool of Muslim immigrants with strong ties to them? How did ISIS Western-directed propaganda play a role?

We argue that ISIS Western-directed recruitment propaganda works through narratives that persuade individuals that they can realize personal aspirations through supporting specific political causes. ISIS produced multiple, distinct narratives that appealed to multiple, distinct social identities within the overall community of Muslims living in the United States. Two mobilizing narratives are important. The first is a "social martyr" narrative featuring "good Muslims" who fulfill their religious obligation to protect embattled communities based on strong

ties to those communities. The second is a "heroic martyr" narrative that casts its heroes as ordinary individuals who discover their true potential through extraordinary action, trading on tropes common to Western literature and action movies more than religious exegeses and sincerity of belief, and so potentially attractive to individuals with weak ties to embattled Muslim communities. Narratives conveyed through videos may not be the only means by which narratives are propagated, a point we return to later, but as videos have become prominent in ISIS propaganda, the study focuses on these. Our study, thus, examines how narrative and pre-existing social ties are integrated, extending how scholars of conflict approach pre-existing ties and frames are combined to understand action.

We conduct two empirical tests to examine which of the above narrative types –social or heroic – is more likely effective at mobilizing Western recruits with varying strength of ties to Islam and established Muslim communities overseas, recognizing that recruitment into radical milieus is a complex process that can involve more than social media and internet messaging.

First, we conduct an online survey experiment with a relevant population in the West – 139 Muslims living in the United States and Canada. Subjects rate non-violent social and heroic martyr narratives in ISIS Western recruitment videos on their absorption into the narrative (narrative transportation) and two measures of persuasiveness. We proxy the strength of identity ties to Islam and established Muslim communities by whether respondents were immigrants from overseas Muslim communities (strong), Western-born Muslims (medium), or converts to Islam

(weak).[1] The analysis finds evidence of two relationships that both support our theory: (1) The persuasive appeal of the heroic narrative is moderated by the strength of ties to Islam as predicted: it is highest among converts to Islam and lowest among Muslim immigrants, with born into Muslim families in the US in the middle. (2) The impact of a narrative, whether heroic or social, operates though the mechanism of narrative transportation, with a video's recruitment appeal significantly enhanced by its ability to "draw in" the viewer.

Second, we examine observational data from ISIS relevant to our theory. We compare the relative weight of heroic and social narratives in ISIS western directed videos and find that ISIS used both the social and the heroic martyr narrative in its Western directed videos from 2014 to 2017. We also analyzed the motivations of 148 Muslim converts, US-born Muslims, and Muslim immigrants arrested in the US for ISIS-related offenses. Consistent with the experimental evidence, motives aligned with the heroic narratives predominated among converts, motives aligned with the social narrative predominated among immigrants, while those with mixed ties (US-born) fell in between.

Taken together, the empirical results explain why ISIS propaganda could appeal to individuals with significantly different social identities within the Muslim community. ISIS's use

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[1] In reality, the strength of identity-ties to Islam can vary within these categories as well as across them. Research shows that these groups have common experiences specific to them likely to be reflected in similar social identities with respect to Islam (Dancygier 2017; Fodeman, Snook, and Horgan 2020). Our proxy allows us to develop a snapshot of identity ties within each group at a given point of time which can then serve as an independent variable for the impact of the treatment.

of the heroic narrative explains the group's relative success in attracting US-born convert supporters. ISIS use of the social narrative explains the group's continued success in attracting immigrant recruits. The two narratives complement each other to maximize recruitment potential across diverse Muslim audiences in the West.

Overall, the theory and empirical evidence advanced in this paper make an original contribution to understanding the impact of identity on narrative persuasion for high-risk political activism. It also contributes to our knowledge of the evolving ways that militant organizations persuade individuals to pursue high-risk action for causes opposed by vast portions of their surrounding society, and the growing study of the relationship between narratives and international outcomes (e.g., Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017).

2. AN IDENTITY-CENTERED NARRATIVE THEORY OF HIGH-RISK POLITICAL ACTIVISM

If narratives of high-risk political action are tailored to different social identities, then these narratives can persuade different kinds of people to adopt similar high-risk political action in situations of weak as well as strong social ties, especially if individuals expect social recognition or personal fulfillment for the depicted behavior.[2]

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[2] Our theory of high-risk political activism is compatible with the same assumption underneath the social network model, that individuals may willingly pay costs for others if they expect social recognition for these acts (McAdam 1982; McAdam and Paulsen 1993). Our claim is not that this assumption is wrong, but that some individuals may value altruism or personal fulfillment separate from social recognition from peers or strangers.

Identity and the Logic of Narrative Persuasion

Narrative persuasion rests on the mechanism of narrative transportation, as distinct from persuasion through cognitive or rational mechanisms, and can be more likely, the more there is an affinity between the existing identity of the viewer and the identity portrayed in the narrative. Following Braddock and Dillard, we define narrative as a "*cohesive, causally linked sequence of events that takes place in a dynamic world subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful actions performed by characters*" (2016, 447, emphasis in original). A narrative is essentially a story that links elements and sequences together to imply specific meanings that help us to interpret the world. Narratives have one or more central characters with which viewers identify and plots that connect sequences of events to a point or moral that the author of the narrative seeks to convey – though always subject to interpretation by the viewing audience (Patterson and Monroe 1998; Polletta 1998; Polletta et al. 2011).

The power of narratives comes from their potential to draw viewers into a story, transporting them "into a narrative world" (Green and Brock 2000, 701). Following Green and Brock, "narrative transportation" is a "convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative" (2000, 701). The more transported are viewers, the more likely they are to accept the narrative reality and develop strong feelings toward both the story and characters, the greater the potential that viewers will persuaded (Dal Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2004). Scholars measure absorption using the Narrative Transportation Scale (Green and Brock 2000) that captures different elements of the immersion process including the degree to which viewers imagined themselves in the narrative, whether the narrative held their attention, and whether the narrative was easily remembered. The more

viewers of a narrative score highly on these elements, the more absorbed and therefore transported they are by it.

Two central mechanisms enhance the likelihood of narrative persuasion in ways distinct from rational argumentation: immersion into a narrative 1) enhances resistance to counterarguments; and 2) induces positive identification with characters and their actions in the story (Bilandzic and Busselle 2013, 201–2). In combination, these mechanisms lower resistance to the persuasive appeal in a narrative and increase the chances it will change beliefs and behaviors. Indeed, research has found that narratives can be especially useful in cases where the persuasive demand is likely to encounter strong cognitive resistance.

The identity of the protagonist to the viewer can facilitate (or frustrate) transportation into the narrative and, through this, evaluation of the protagonist's behavior. Research finds that the effect of narrative transportation on persuasion is enhanced when viewers and characters in the narrative share a common social identity (Polletta and Callahan 2019). Although people may have overlapping and intersecting identities, a narrative can speak to a specific identity in order to compete for salience among subsets of identities, enhancing the likelihood the narrative will resonate. Presenting the character in a positive light signals esteem and so can play an important role in the process (McLaughlin 2020). Under such circumstances, viewers are more likely to find the message personally relevant and engaging, increasing the likelihood that they will adopt beliefs consistent with the intent of the narrative and behave accordingly (M. Kim 2019).

From Narrative Persuasion to High-Risk Political Activism

What is the link the relationship between narrative persuasion and high-risk political activism? Our focus is on establishing that narratives can make high-risk action more likely and under what identity conditions. Our theory does not seek to solve the further question of the exact

distributions of individuals with the same identities exposed to the same narratives, engaging or not engaging in high-risk political activism. Indeed, studying the latter issue only makes sense if the core relationship between narrative persuasion and high-risk political activism is established.

High-risk political activism is a form of extreme self-sacrifice in which an individual knowingly takes high personal risks, perhaps even loss of life, to support the political goals of a group or organization. As such, it forms part of a much larger class of extreme behaviors that involve sacrificing oneself for a group, ranging from non-homicidal forms of action (such as jumping on a grenade to save a group or hunger strikes) to so-called "suicide missions" in conventional armies and militant organizations (Gambetta 2005; Pape 2005).

There is now a substantial body of literature explaining the normative separate from purely instrumental reasons for high-risk activism in the context of armed conflict (Pape 2005; Sanín and Wood 2014; Wood 2003). Whether as "heroes," "martyrs," "freedom fighters" or "terrorists," the decision to engage in extreme self-sacrifice for a political cause cannot be reduced to material incentives and egoism but also include other-regarding motivations and altruism.

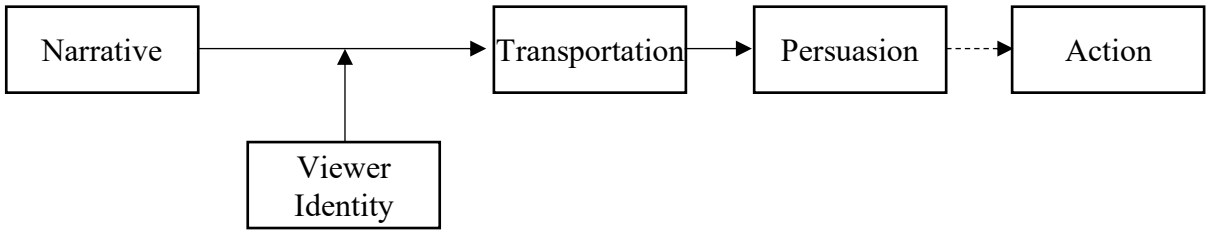
We identify three distinct motivational pathways through which high-risk activism may occur. First, we agree that other-regarding motivations and altruism can be a powerful motivator for individuals to accept risk to themselves for political causes. Beyond altruism, however, the need for social recognition and esteem can be a second motivational pathway for high-risk activism, because, for some individuals, the promise that a community will honor or praise personal sacrifice can encourage self-sacrifice (Whitehouse 2018). Third, personal glory and enhanced self-respect can also be powerful motivators, since glorious action may promise to restore personal feelings of significance and so the need for self-respect may outweigh concerns

for personal safety (Kruglanski et al. 2009). While these pathways have distinct logics, all three may operate simultaneously and even reinforce each other in some individuals.

Militant groups can use narratives as to develop stories with plots and characters as concrete manifestations of one or more of these mobilization pathways, and so create opportunities for the pathways to resonate with and motivate specific subpopulations of potential recruits. For example, narratives can be constructed that glorify specific identities for individuals to inhabit and emulate through their own actions. In militant propaganda, narratives of past martyrs – those who have willingly sacrificed for a cause – identify the circumstances of a person's life story that qualify for communal approval, personal self-respect, or satisfy feelings of compassion for others, and so connect with one or more of the normative pathways to self-sacrifice for a political cause.

Narratives are excellent for mobilization to high-risk activism because, by their nature, they can link a description of the identity of an individual to an action undertaken by the individual to actual images of others respecting the individual for taking the action. Importantly, the key to using narrative to mobilize sacrifice is not that the narrative is locked into an historical, scriptural, or other idea of "martyrdom" divorced from contemporary experience, but the opposite. Successful narratives will connect with the identities and desires of the target audience, creating an affinity through shared ideals that can be put into practice by emulating the protagonist's behavior in support of the militant group. Transported into the narrative, the viewer is more likely to evaluate the strength of an argument for sacrifice separately from the facts being presented, based not on logic but by the feeling that comes through immersion.

Figure 1: Identity-Centered Narrative Theory of High-Risk Political Activism



Limits of Narrative Persuasion

While narratives can have an effect independent of countervailing factors, they do not overwhelm all other factors. Our theory does not expect that all individuals with the same identities will engage in high-risk political activism having been exposed to the same narratives. Scholars of insurgency and civil war have long recognized that competing obligations and commitments (e.g., to family, friends, jobs etc.) as well as prior experience in addition to mobilizing propaganda are all important inputs in individual decision making about high-risk political (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007; Shesterinina 2021). Predicting actual individual outcomes and rates of recruitment fall outside the scope of our theory.

What our theory of narrative mobilization does explain is how and why narratives inspire some individuals to *want to act*, even if the decision and ability to act is also influenced by a host of other factors. In short, as Polletta and Chen (2012, 493) suggest, "Tell an absorbing story...and you can win people to your cause."

3. HEROIC AND SOCIAL MARTYR NARRATIVES IN ISIS PROPAGANDA

Our theory suggests that narratives can inspire high-risk mobilization by constructing roles that allow individuals to link values and identities to the scope of personally costly action for the benefit of a community. We call these mobilizing narratives "martyr narratives." Martyr narratives are a category of master narrative, those "culturally shared stories that tell us about a given culture and provides guidance for how to be a 'good' member of a culture" (McLean and Syed 2015, 320). Martyr narratives are such story archetypes about self-sacrifice that involve characters and plots that, as a form, are sufficiently flexible and inclusive that they can be used across cultures and identity groups while still retaining their meaning. In any specific case, a persuasive narrative will need to address the specifics of culture and history in order to maximize narrative transportation in specific target audiences.

We distinguish two ideal-type martyr narratives. The first is the "social martyr narrative" based on duty or social obligation arising from established membership in a threatened community. The second is the "heroic martyr narrative" based on the achievement of personal glory and renown for any person benefiting a community, even outsiders. These master martyr narratives are easily recognizable and relatively stable and can also be called "cultures of martyrdom"— shared ideas within a given community about the appropriate basis and rewards for political sacrifice that are crucial in today's militant propaganda. Below we describe the narratives in general and how they are applied in the specific context of Islamist militant groups.

Within the social martyr narrative, the identity of "social martyr" embodies deep integration of the individual into the social categories that comprise the fabric of the community, encapsulated by the dimensions of injustice; need to correct injustice; duty and self-abnegation; and empathy.

Emile Durkheim's altruistic suicide provides a useful basis for understanding the social martyr identity. According to Durkheim (2005, 175), individuals who commit altruistic suicide are characterized by "insufficient individuation," which leads to self-abnegation, the most acute form of "social integration." Such individuals feel that they exist "in [the group] and in it alone…[striving] so violently to blend [themselves] with it in order to have being…and have no life of [their] own" (Durkheim 2005, 183). Individuals who perform altruistic suicide primarily identify with the group, putting their national, ethnic, or religious identity before their personal identity. Sacrifice on behalf of their community is a source of "social prestige" as well as a means to "escape the stigma of insult" should the duty or obligation be refused (Durkheim 2005, 227).

In the context of ISIS recruitment videos, the social martyr character inhabits the role of pious and dutiful Muslim expressing outraged by harm to an embattled community and acts to defend the community out of a sense of duty because he is a member of it. Belonging to the community, the martyr empathizes with those within the community who suffer and seeks to alleviate the suffering of the community with the act of individual sacrifice for the cause of community defense. Under this narrative logic, the social martyr's sacrifice is viewed positively by his community, and the individual receives recognition for such sacrificial acts.

In contrast, the principle defining feature of the heroic martyr narrative is the identity of the "hero" who takes pride in differentiating him or herself from other members of the embattled community as an individual capable of achieving extraordinary feats. While the social martyr promotes an identity suffused with duty and obligation stemming from membership in a threatened group, heroic martyrs are presented as set apart from the community, either as outsiders or as extraordinary individuals from within. These are the archetypal heroes identified

by Joseph Campbell (1949) as on the journey of self-discovery, overcoming personal fears and reluctance to achieve greatness and glory under extraordinary circumstances to which they are called to sacrifice. They are special people by virtue of their extranormal capabilities or qualities. In mythology, examples include Hercules, King Arthur, and Thor, and in more contemporary culture Luke Skywalker, Indiana Jones, and Wonder Woman. In the context of ISIS recruitment videos, the heroic martyr is often venerated as coming from the "few of the few", who rise to the challenge and make extreme sacrifices to those who are incapable of saving themselves.

The key dimensions of the social and heroic master martyr narratives are summarized in Table 1 below. Importantly, these two mobilizing narratives, while conceptually distinct with respect to form and structure, often draw on overlapping themes and story components. For example, both social and heroic narratives can involve an individual called to defend a community from implacable enemies, mixing appeals to glory and empowerment with duty and obligation. Nevertheless, the heroic and social narratives differ in the balance of these appeals and in the central underlying premise: transformation into a hero (heroic) vs. realization of one's duty to perform heroic deeds (social).

Table 1. Dimensions of the Social and Heroic Martyr Narratives

DIMENSIONS	SOCIAL	HEROIC
Call to Action	Harm to One's Community	Opportunity for Own Glory
Ultimate beneficiary of action	Community	Self
Primary goal	Eliminate perpetrator of Harm	Overcome personal insignificance
Master motive	Social Duty	Personal Empowerment
How the story ends	Becomes one with community	Rises above community

4. HYPOTHESES

We argue that militant narratives (whether heroic or social) persuade via narrative transportation such that the more an individual is absorbed in a video and identifies with protagonists, the more the video has recruitment potential. Based on our narrative theory of propaganda, the above martyr narratives lead to the following empirical expectations for the appeal of a recruitment video and the motives of individuals likely to become terrorists for the group:

1. Social martyr narrative is most likely to resonate with and motivate individuals whose identities are closely intertwined with the community under threat, i.e., individuals with strong ties to established Muslim communities.
2. The heroic martyr narrative is most likely to resonate with and motivate individuals who, like the hero character, come from outside the community under threat, i.e., individuals with weak ties to Islam such as converts.
3. When viewers have medium ties or mixed identities, as in the case of Muslims born in the West to Muslim families, we expect the influence of social and heroic narratives to fall between the extremes.

5. EVIDENCE FOR THE THEORY

The case of ISIS recruitment in the West allows us to examine the effect of narratives on high-risk activism when important countervailing factors such as community networks, societal institutions, and most public opinion strongly opposes rather than reinforce the activism in question. Both experimental and observational evidence supports our hypotheses that the appeal of martyr narratives is conditioned by the identity of the viewer as the theory expects.

5.1. Experimental Evidence from a Relevant Sample

To examine the effect of the specific martyr narrative and the narrative transportation mechanism on the appeal of militant group recruitment narratives, we conducted a behavioral study in which 139 Muslim participants far from the zone of conflict and varying in ties to Islam and established Muslim communities rated ISIS video clips featuring heroic or social narratives on each clip's perceived persuasiveness and effectiveness for recruitment. We conducted the study online, recruiting self-identified Muslims living in the United States and Canda Muslim using the Prolific.ac online platform, via anonymous link to our survey, hosted on the Qualtrics platform.[3] The study was approved by the University and funder IRBs.[4]

Our objective is to estimate the degree to which watching a specific recruitment narrative translates into attitudinal support for the group. To assess the effects of video narratives on perceived recruitment potential, participants in the study viewed and rated a randomized set of 6 short English-language ISIS video clips (mean length 0.97 minutes, sd = 0.24 minutes): 3 heroic narrative clips and 3 social narrative clips. Both heroic and social clips feature a variety of narrative elements: statements by fighters, scenes of fighters in action, and footage of destroyed buildings and injured civilians blamed on the group's enemies. No clips containing executions or

[3] Prolific is an online crowdworking platform specifically designed for research. Subjects are explicitly recruited for research studies, and researchers are afforded great flexibility in the application of research-specific criteria in selection of subject pools (Palan and Schitter 2018).

[4] [Anonymized IRB information]

personalized violence were included in the study.[5] Our strategy of using multiple real-world clips for each narrative type may introduce "noise" from variation in other factors across clips but does control for the effects of each individual clip in the analysis. The experiment thus seeks to balance internal and external validity concerns while testing for consistent narrative-type effects despite noise introduced by other factors.

We used two separate measures to capture complementary aspects of attitudinal support: whether a clip (1) was persuasive, and (2) would help the group recruit. After watching a clip, subjects were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the statements "This video was persuasive" (*Persuasive*) and "This video would help the militant group recruit" (*HelpRecruit*). For each clip, subjects answer each question in order on a scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. These variables measure a subject's perception that a given clip would help ISIS attract recruits, not the real-world effectiveness of recruitment. Each is designed to elicit meaningful evaluation of a clip's attractiveness as a recruitment message and capture the direction of subject's attitudinal change due to exposure to different narratives without the need for subjects to feel, let alone express, sympathy for a terrorist group.

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[5] The six clips used in the study are taken from a previous study with a non-Muslim population at a medium-sized university in the United States. In that study, subjects rated seven social and seven heroic clips on two central dimensions associated with each narrative: a) duty and b) compassion (social narrative); and c) personal empowerment; and d) glory (heroic narrative). We used these ratings to create a single index ranking clips from most heroic to most social and selected the three highest scoring (heroic) and lowest (social) scoring clips for the online study.

We use a combination of two measures – (1) whether a subject was born into or converted to Islam (*Convert*) and (2) born in the US or Canada versus a Muslim majority country (*US/Canadian-born*) -- to proxy participant's relative strength of ties to Islam and established Muslim communities overseas. Converts to Islam, because they were not born into the religion, were coded as having weak ties. Muslims born in the West into Muslim families were coded as having ties of medium strength. Finally, Muslims born outside the US in Muslim-majority countries were coded as having strong ties. Our proxy rests on strong assumptions; future studies will measure strength of ties more directly.

To measure the degree to which subjects were transported by each video clip (*Transportation*), we adapted three questions from Green and Brock's (2000) narrative transportation scale. Participants rated each clip on the degree to which they 1) could imagine themselves in the video; 2) could put the video easily out of their minds after viewing, and 3) found their mind wandering while watching the video. Each dimension is measured on a seven-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), the latter two reverse scored. To create the Transportation score, the three dimensions were averaged to create a single measure, with higher values indicating greater levels of transportation.

Finally, we collected information on participant age, sex, income, and education to serve as standard demographic controls.

A total of 144 participants completed the online survey and were paid $20 for their participation. All participants confirmed their inclusion criteria (identify as Muslims, currently reside in the United States or Canada) and completed a consent form that explained the purpose of the research, the task, the rights of the participant and included contact information for the research team and IRB. After giving their consent to participate, subjects completed a

demographic survey before moving on to the video evaluation task. Participants watched all 3 heroic and 3 social clips in randomized order, rating each clip on the dimensions of narrative transportation and two measures of persuasiveness, resulting in 864 total video-level observations. Subjects were shown a debriefing message at the conclusion of the survey that included contact information in case of concerns.

Of the 144 respondents, 139 fit the criteria for inclusion in our analysis. We dropped five subjects because they did not fit into one of the three tie strength categories (all five were non-convert Muslims born abroad in non-Muslim-majority countries). Response quality is a known issue in online surveys, but we found no evidence of carelessness using two standard measures of time to completion and long strings of repeated answers (Curran 2016).

The assessed pool of 139 subjects (63% male, mean age 28) is comprised of 35 converts to Islam (weak ties), 64 born in the West into Muslim families, and 40 Immigrants from Muslim-majority countries. Based on power calculations, the distribution is sufficient to identify medium-sized effects across the three TieStrength categories at 80% power.

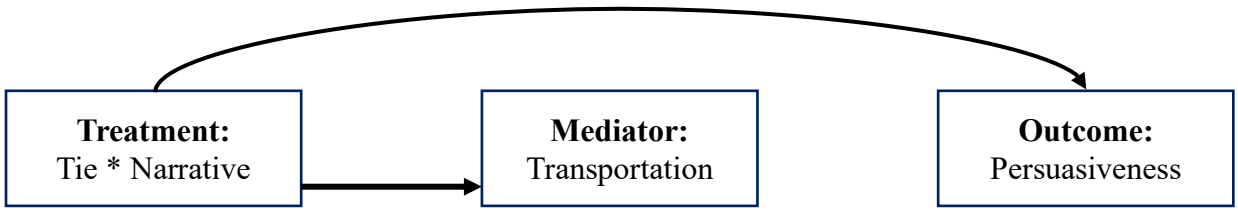
Our subjects approximate several features common to populations known to have engaged in high-risk activism for groups like ISIS, most significantly age in the mid-twenties and college education. Data from a recent study on US ISIS offenders, for example, shows an average age of 26 (vs 28 in our sample) and over 60% college attendance (vs. 94% in our sample) (Pape et al. 2017, 10, 13). Although more research is important, our study's subject pool thus provides a basis for initial assessment for how strength of ties to Islam and established overseas Muslim communities affects perceptions of the different recruitment narratives.

Analysis Strategy

First, we assess the relationship between narrative type and strength of ties for our two outcome variables (1) Persuasive and (2) HelpRecruit. To model the treatment, each model includes an interaction between ClipType (Social/Heroic) and TieStrength (Weak/Medium/Strong). The models also include controls for demographic factors sex, age, income, and education. The outcome variables and continuous covariates are standardized for ease of interpretation as the effect of a one standard deviation from the mean of the given variable on standard deviations from the mean of the respective dependent variable. Descriptive statistics are presented in the supplementary information, Table SI-2.

Second, we assess the theorized role of narrative transportation in the outcome using an approach motivated by causal inference. Both the mediator and the outcome variables are measured after treatment, and so estimating the mediation effect directly runs afoul post-treatment bias (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018). In our repeated-measures mediation research, it is not possible to randomize the post-treatment mediator, and so defining one post-treatment measure as an outcome and the other post-treatment measure as the mediator relies on theory. Instead of making overly strong or implausible assumptions, we investigated the subset of causal paths that are crucial to verifying our theory (Gerber and Green 2012, Ch10). This strategy is depicted in figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Empirically Evaluated Causal Paths



We expect the type of narratives that a person is exposed to will lead to different judgements about persuasiveness, and that different narrative types affect narrative transportation as well as persuasion. Given that we cannot manipulate the mediator subjective narrative transportation, we instead verify that exposure to different narratives leads to changes in narrative transportation in the directions expected by the theory. While this does not tell us the full specification of causal pathways, it does provide preliminary support for the accuracy of the theoretical model.

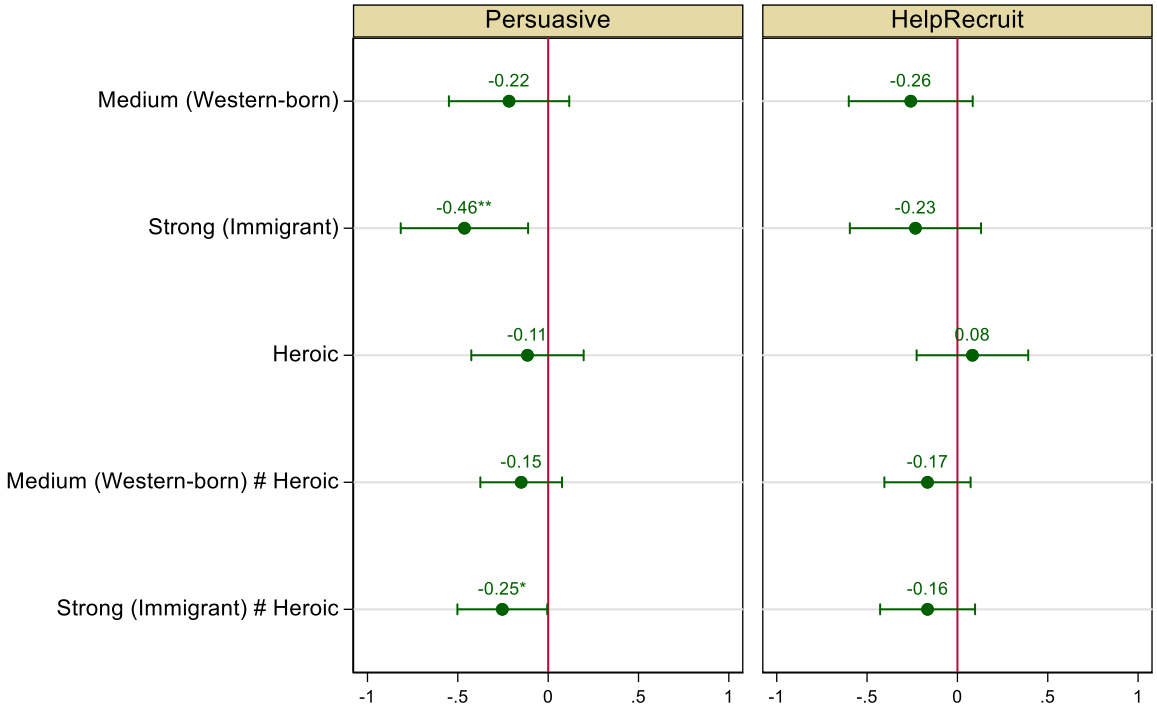
Analysis of Primary and Implicit Mediation Effects

Analysis is conducted using mixed effects linear regression, with main variables of interest and demographic controls in the fixed portion while subject and clip level effects are included in the random portion. Mixed effects models are preferable to ordinary linear regression for repeated measure data where measurements are likely subject to random, subject-level effects, explicitly modeling subject-level variation to reduce the risk of Type 1 errors (Huta 2014). We also include a control for each of the six clips in the random effects portion of the model to account for clip-specific effects across all subjects (a crossed random-effects specification).

The results of both primary and implicit analyses are presented in Figure 2 below, which shows only the fixed portion and omits controls for clarity.[6]

Full model summaries for models with and without controls, and with and without interactions, are in the supplementary information, tables SI-3 (Persuasive) and SI-4 (HelpRecruit).

Figure 3. Estimates for Effect of Narrative on Measures of Persuasiveness Conditional on Strength of Ties (95% Confidence Intervals)



Note: Results from mixed effects linear regression on standardized values of Persuasive (left panel) and HelpRecruit (right panel), showing fixed portion only and excluding controls for clarity. All continuous variables standardized to mean 0 and standard deviation 1.
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Evaluating Effect of the Identity-Narrative Interaction

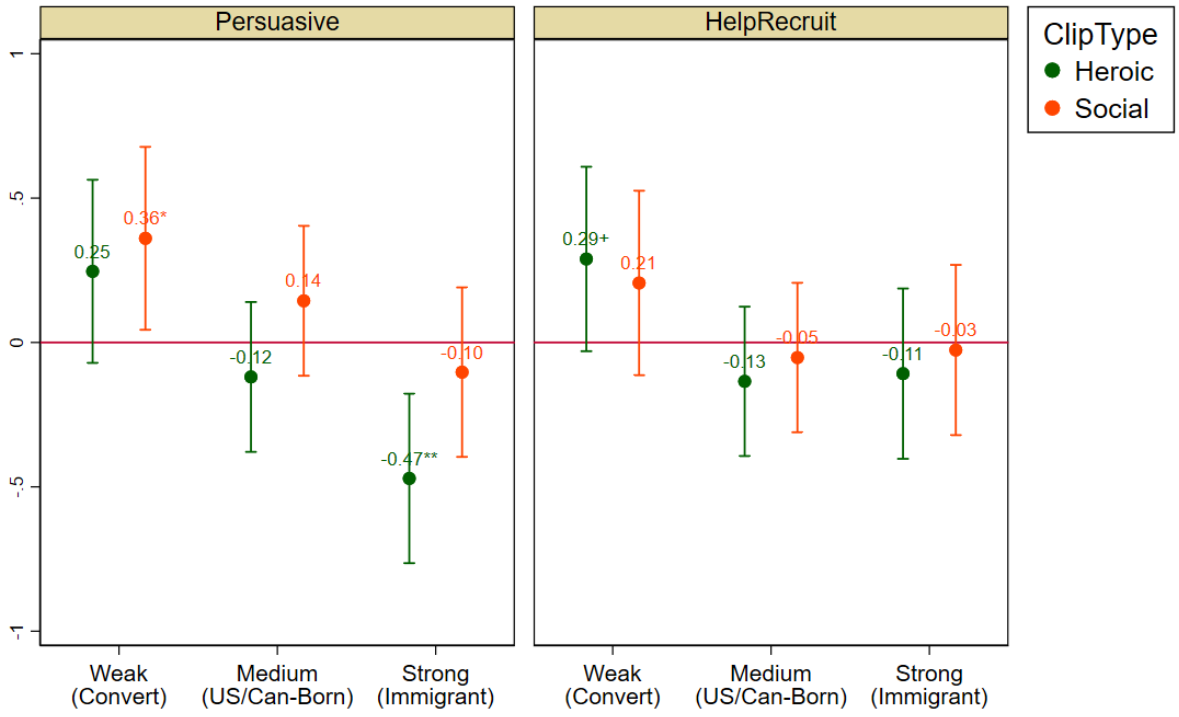
As expected, the heroic narrative's effect on persuasion (Persuasive and HelpRecruit) is greatest for weak ties and, with one exception, least for strong ties. Importantly, the interaction between ClipType and TieStrength is significant for Immigrants for Persuasive, suggesting that narratives work differently in our three subject pools. At the same time, the effect of ClipType on Persuasive and HelpRecruit is not statistically significant in either model, indicating the effect of narrative is not independent of the interaction with identity.

For Persuasive, the interaction between tie strength and heroic narrative is statistically significant and negative, indicating that, in comparison to Converts (weak ties), the relative

effect of ClipType=Heroic is lowest for Immigrants (B = -.25, p < .05) as expected. The estimate for US/Canadian-born (medium ties) falls between Converts and Immigrants also as expected but falls below conventional measures of statistical significance (B = -.15, p < .196). HelpRecruit shows a similar pattern to Persuasive, but none of the estimates achieve statistical significance. This may be a consequence of sample size, which is a challenge for this subject pool.

To further facilitate interpretation, we calculated marginal effects of ClipType conditional on TieStrength for each of the dependent variables. Figure 4 below visualizes results.

Figure 4. Predicted Effect of Narrative Type on Measures of Persuasiveness Conditional on Strength of Ties (95% Confidence Intervals)



Note: $^{+}p<.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

The patterns identified in the coefficients is visible in the plots and provide further support that the appeal of the heroic versus social narrative is conditional on strength of ties.

First, we compare predicted values for heroic narrative clips. For Persuasive, predicted values for heroic clips decline as strength of ties increases from weak (Converts) to strong (Immigrants) .71 standard deviations, statistically significant at $p <$. 001 correcting for multiple comparisons. The differences for heroic clips going from Convert to Western-born and from Western-born to Immigrant show incremental declines as expected but are not statistically significant. The predicted effect of heroic clips on HelpRecruit is positive for Converts and relative higher than for US/Canadian-born and Immigrants in line with theoretical expectations, although those differences are not statistically significant.

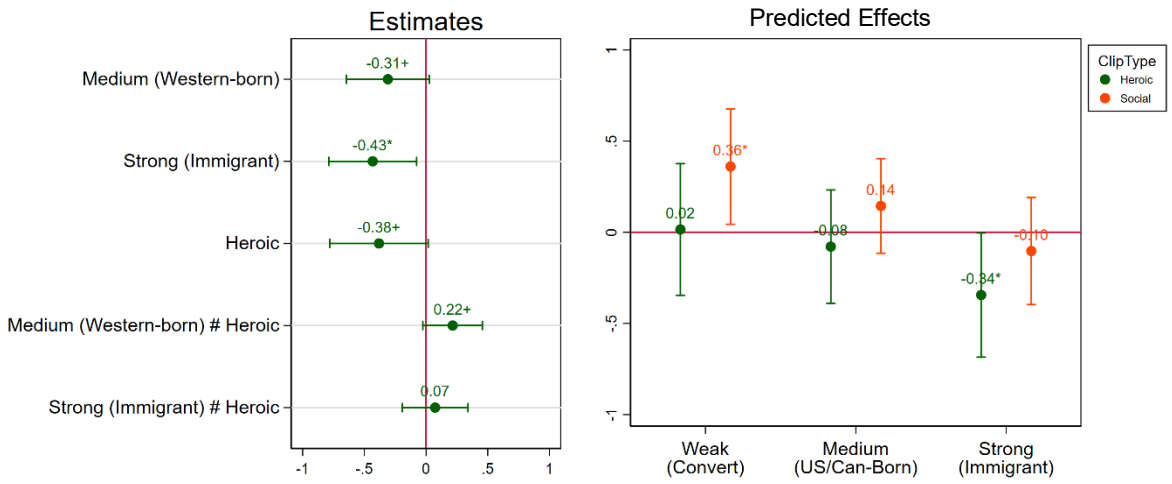
Second, we compare the difference in effect of the two narratives on outcomes across each identity/strength of tie subject group. Figure 4 above suggests that individuals with weak ties were the only group to rate heroic clips as higher on average in HelpRecruit than social clips as predicted by the theory – though post-hoc comparison found the difference not statistically significant.

Evaluating the Transportation Mechanism

Figure 5 below presents the estimation and marginal effects results for the Transportation mechanism.[7]

[7] Full model summary for Transportation with and without controls, and with and without interactions, is in supplementary information, table SI-5.

Figure 5. Regression Estimates and Predicted Effects for Strength of Ties and Narrative on Transportation



Note: Results from mixed effects linear regression on standardized values of Transportation. Estimate (left panel) show fixed portion only and excluding controls for clarity. All continuous variables standardized. $^{+}p<.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.

Consistent with narrative transportation as mediator, we see almost identical pattern of coefficients for the treatment on Transportation as for Persuasive and HelpRecruit. The results show that, while subjects were more likely to be transported by social clips irrespective of identity group, Converts had the highest estimated transportation for heroic clips as expected, .74 standard deviations higher than Immigrants ($p<0.053$).

These findings support the causal mechanism is in fact narrative transportation. In all cases, the social narrative is more transportive and more persuasive than the heroic narrative while Immigrants are neither transported nor find persuasive the heroic narrative. Specifically, that converts are more likely to report being transported, rate videos as persuasive, and rate videos as helping the group recruit. In contrast to converts, immigrants rated heroic videos significantly less persuasive than social videos. Converts more persuaded by any video, converts most likely to rate heroic videos as helping the group recruit, immigrants least transported, persuaded by heroic videos.

Hence, the behavioral study offers important evidence that heroic and social narratives contribute to attitudinal support for ISIS and that the effect is moderated by the strength of ties to Islam and established Muslim communities. Further, narrative transportation is also enhanced by the interaction between ties and narrative, suggesting the narrative's ability to "draw in" the viewer (narrative transportation) – even when subjects have little obvious basis (beyond being Muslim) for identifying with the group and its cause.

5.2. Observational Evidence

Observational data also supports our theory and explains why ISIS was able to recruit US born individuals effectively: 1) ISIS relied heavily on heroic narrative videos in Western-directed propaganda; 2) motives consistent with the heroic narrative were more prevalent among convert and US-born ISIS recruits in the US.

5.2.1. ISIS Western-Directed Video Recruitment Campaign

In this section we present evidence that western directed video propaganda by ISIS relied heavily on the heroic narrative. To be included in our study, these videos had to be released and branded by each group's official media arm; have a call to action, appealing to the audience to support the group; are distinguished by the dominance of English and Western European languages as their primary mode of communication and prominently feature individuals from the United States, Canada, Australia and Western Europe, strong indicators of the target audiences intended by the groups for these videos.

We collected and cataloged all official ISIS videos from 2014 to 2017 for ISIS's Al Hayat media arm. In addition, we have collected and cataloged official videos released by both groups targeting non-Western audiences for the same periods. These are part of a larger database

of militant propaganda cataloging all known propaganda videos produced by AQ, ISIS, AQAP, and other groups allowing us to assess the scope of each group's propaganda production and the recruitment videos we identified and analyzed in the study.

Table 2 below presents counts of the official videos produced by Al Hayat from its founding in 2014 to December 31, 2017, in the context of the group's total video production over the same period. We classified videos into four categories: 1) Western Recruitment (the focus of this study); 2) directed at the West but not recruitment; 3) not directed at the West; and 4) any official video produced by the group not accounted for otherwise.

Table 2. Overview of Video Production

Year	West Recruit	West Non-Recruit	Non-West	ISIS Non-Al-Hayat	Total
2014	6	15	2	192	215
2015	5	12	2	776	795
2016	2	3	9	342	356
2017	3	8	4	141	156
Total	16	38	17	1,451	1,522

ISIS video production peaked in 2015 and comprised al Hayat and 34 additional official media arms. While Al Hayat is ISIS's most prominent producer of Western-directed videos, as Table 4.B. shows, Al Hayat's 71 videos only account for a fraction (5%) of ISIS's total output of 1,522 official videos released in this period. Of 54 Al Hayat videos directed at the West, 16 (30%) focused specifically on recruiting Westerners. They comprise 23% of the Al Hayat total and only 4% of ISIS's overall video production.

To assess the primary master narrative type for ISIS Western recruitment videos, we analyzed the 16 ISIS Western-directed recruitment videos using a framework based on the degree of correspondence to characteristics of the heroic and social master martyr narratives

identified above. Two independent teams of coders coded narratives in each of the 16 videos, achieving 82% agreement. Differences were reconciled in a final step to produce the primary narrative type for each video. The coding procedure allowed for the possibility of videos having multiple and/or indeterminate narratives.[8]

Our analysis, summarized in Table 3 below, confirms that ISIS made extensive use of both the heroic master narrative (in addition to the social narrative) in its efforts to mobilize in the West. Half (8) featured the heroic martyr narrative, six the social narrative, and 2 were indeterminate. This strongly indicates that both heroic and social narratives are key components of ISIS's Western recruitment campaign.

[8] Additional detail on narrative analysis procedure and results is presented in the supplemental information.

Table 3. ISIS Western-directed Recruitment Videos

Date Released	Title	Primary Language	Subtitle	Length	Narrative Type
2014-06-02	Soldiers of Truth, Let's Go	DE	EN	2:32	Heroic
2014-06-15	Let's Go for Jihad	DE	EN	5:26	Heroic
2014-06-19	There Is No Life Without Jihad	EN	None	13:27	Social
2014-07-11	Al-Ghuraba': The Chosen Few of Different Lands: Abu Muslim from Canada	EN	None	11:07	Heroic
2014-10-15	Wait. We Are Also waiting.	EN, FR, DE	EN, AR	8:32	Indeterminate
2014-11-19	What Are You Waiting For?	FR	EN, AR	7:10	Social
2015-03-07	Stories from the Land of the Living: Abu Suhaib al-Faransi	FR	AR	15:38	Heroic
2015-04-21	Stories from the Land of the Living: Abu Khaled al-Cambodi from Australia	EN	AR	12:35	Heroic
2015-05-15	To the Enemies of Allah	DE	EN	3:10	Social
2015-05-18	Extend Your Hand and Pledge Allegiance	FR	EN	4:05	Heroic
2015-08-29	Legacy of the Prophetic Methodology	EN	None	54:58	Heroic
2016-04-29	Blood for Blood	FR	None	3:41	Indeterminate
2016-07-29	My Vengeance	FR	AR, EN	4:31	Social
2017-08-07	Inside the Caliphate #2: The Victory from Allah is Near	AR, EN	EN, AR	5:04	Social
2017-12-27	Inside the Caliphate #6: Rise O Sons of Islam Answer the Call	EN	AR	4:16	Social
2017-12-31	Oh Disbelievers of the World	FR	EN, AR	4:02	Heroic

5.2.2. Assessing Motives and Social Structure of Recruitment Pools

What evidence is there for our theory from the population of individuals in the United States known to have taken high-risk actions for ISIS? This population comprises Converts, Western-born Muslims, and Muslim immigrants that made the decision to mobilize for a terrorist group. Studies have also identified watching ISIS recruitment propaganda, and especially videos, as a feature in the vast majority of US ISIS cases to date (Pape et al. 2017).

To assess our theory, we created a dataset comprising cases of US ISIS affiliated terrorism offenders from a database of 156 ISIS cases from 2013 to 2017. Beyond an affiliation

to ISIS, to be included in our study offenders had to be either 1) born in the US, 2) committed their offense in the US, or 3) lived in the US prior to committing their offense. Of the 148 qualifying cases, 81 percent are confirmed exposed to the respective groups' propaganda, likely a minimum threshold.

The available data does not allow us to assess the relative weight of propaganda videos or the effect of specific narratives in individual mobilization decision. However, our data does allow us to assess the correspondence of perpetrators' motivations to the two master narratives. This evidence is useful (if not dispositive) since the correspondence between motives and master narratives is an indicator of the types of narratives most likely to resonate. If expressed motivations within the three identity groups correspond to the social or heroic narrative as expected, it lends plausibility to the claim that recruitment videos featuring these corresponding narratives are potentially important to mobilizing from these different social identity pools.

For each case, we produced detailed case studies drawing on open media sources and court records to code variables on: whether the individual was born inside or outside the US; whether the individual was a convert to Islam or born into a Muslim family; the year in which the individual began engaging in terrorism-related activity; whether or not the individual consumed group propaganda; and the degree to which the individual's primary motivation for supporting the group fits the social or heroic narratives, a mixture of the two, or some other factor (e.g. family loyalty) was at play.[9] Eight cases were dropped due to missing data preventing

[9] Motives were coded as follows: Heroic: the perpetrator was motivated by a sense of adventure, personal transformation, excitement, a desire to reform themselves, and/or the chance to face a

us from categorizing them in one of the three strength of tie groups. The remaining 148 that fit our inclusion criteria are the basis for the following analysis.

Motives are central to our analysis and extremely difficult to assess reliably. To reduce bias inherent to post-arrest justifications by perpetrators, evidence for motives draws on court records detailing pre-arrest statements and behaviors as reported by law enforcement, informants, and other witnesses, typically in the affidavit in support of the arrest warrant, as well as critical reading of both government and defendant's sentencing memoranda summarizing evidence of motives presented at trial. Nevertheless, in some cases only post-arrest information is available, likely introducing a bias toward the more socially acceptable social motivation. However, we have no reason to believe the distribution of such cases is biased in a way that would work for or against our theory. The findings are as follows:

First, the social structure of US recruits for ISIS differs significantly from the distribution of Muslims in the US, confirming the puzzle animating the paper and adding additional detail. As Figure 6 below shows, Converts and US-born Muslims account for 63% of US ISIS recruits, a notably greater proportion compared to the US population where Converts and US-born comprise 44% (Pew Research Center 2017). Indeed, it is Converts, not Muslims born into

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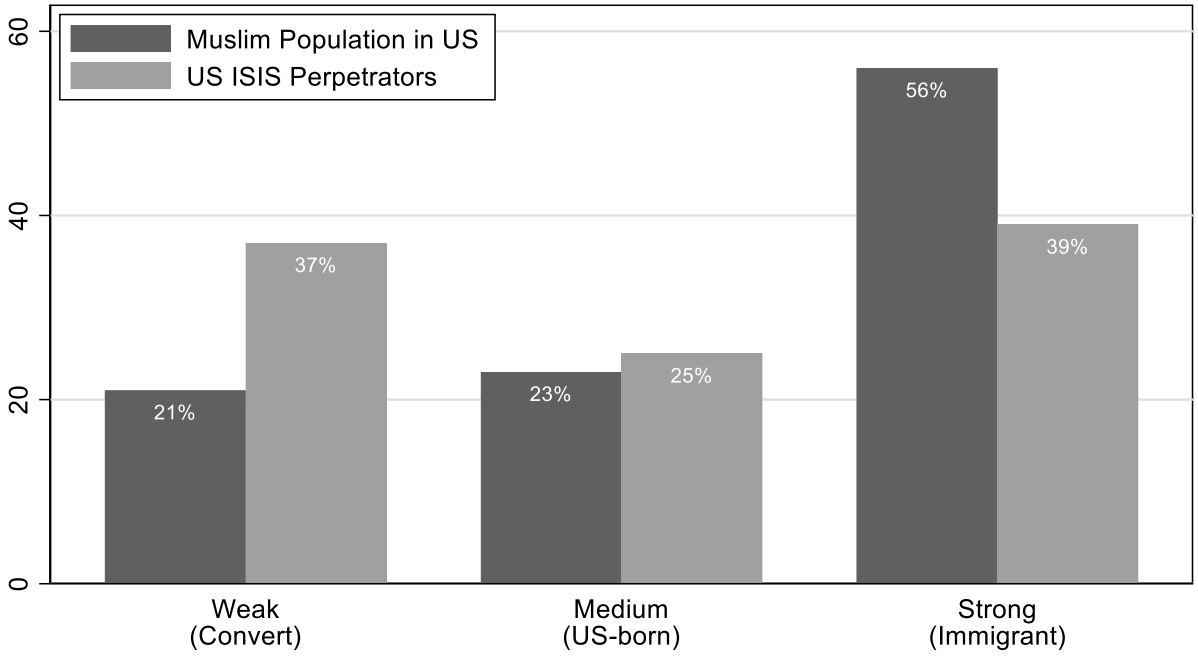
supreme ordeal. Social: the perpetrator was motivated by altruism, self-sacrifice, duty to a community, anger at harm to the community, religious duty, and/or a desire to defend a community. Mixed: there is clear evidence that the perpetrator had elements of both the social and heroic logic. Other: they were an accidental perpetrator or had a motive that does not fit within the heroic or social scheme. Unknown: there is not enough information about the perpetrator to assess a motive.

Muslim families in the US, that account for the difference, making up 21 percent of the US population but 37 percent of perpetrators. This suggests that ISIS does indeed appeal to individuals with weak ties to Islam and established Muslim communities specifically.

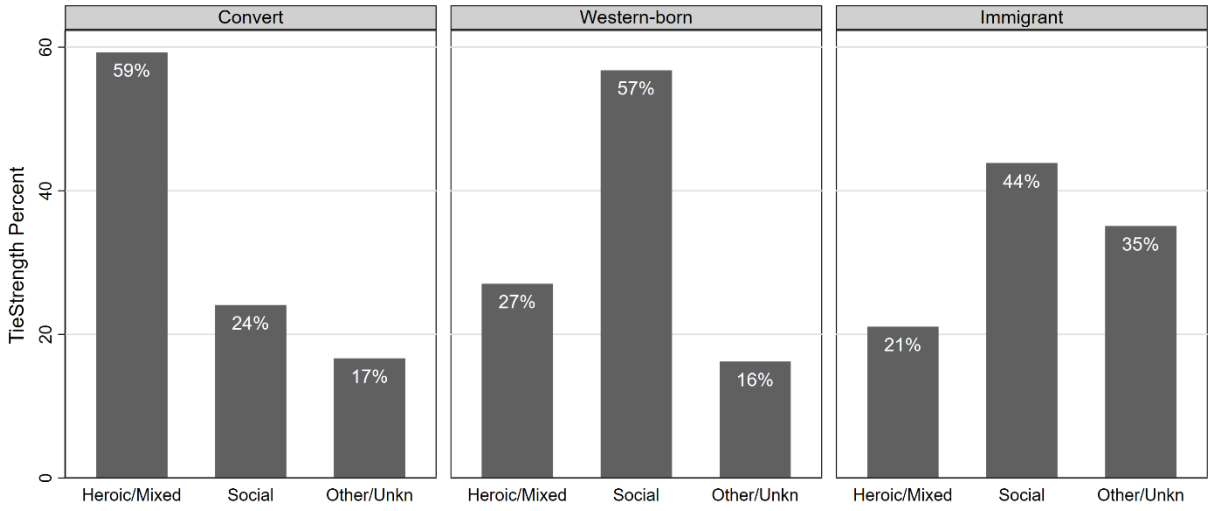
Figure 6. Distribution of Strength of Ties, US ISIS Perpetrators Compared to US Muslim Population



Note: Data on US Muslims from Pew (2017).

Second, terrorist offenders with weak ties (converts and US born Muslims) are most likely to have motivations consistent with the heroic narrative. As Figure 7 below shows, heroic motives are nearly three times more prevalent among converts (59%) than immigrants (21%), with US-born Muslims in-between (27%) as expected by the theory.

Figure 7. Distribution of US ISIS Perpetrator Motives, by Strength of Ties



The paradigmatic example is Nicholas Teausant, a convert from California, who pleaded guilty in 2015 to attempting to join ISIS. According to the criminal complaint, Teausant texted a confidential informant prior to his arrest that joining ISIS would bring meaning in his life: "I don't know how much longer I'll be alive in this dunya [earthly life/world] and before I die I want to do SOMETHING." (USA v. Teausant, Complaint 2014, 9). He told the same informant his desire to achieve fame through joining ISIS, fantasizing his appearance in an ISIS propaganda video in which he would be "the one white devil that leaves their face wide open to the camera" He wanted to be "on every news station in the world" and his "face on FBI's top twelve most wanted. Because that means I'm doing something right" (15-16).

The distribution of social motives is also consistent with our expectations: social motives are far more prevalent among our proxy for strong ties (immigrants, 53%) and mixed ties (US-born Muslims, 60%) than those with the weakest ties (converts, 35%). An example of the social motive is Mohammad Hamza Khan, born into a Muslim family in Chicago, who was arrested for attempting to join ISIS in 2014. In a letter he left for his parents, he gave three reasons for

joining ISIS. First, he argued that paying taxes in the United States would make him complicit in killing his "Muslim brothers and sisters." Second, he argued that it was "obligatory upon every able-bodied male and female" to move to the Islamic State, and that "living in comfort while my other family are getting killed is plain selfish." Finally, he decried the decadence of Western society and expressed the desire to raise his children in a land governed by Sharia law where they could be "the best Muslims."[10]

6. DISCUSSION

How do these findings support the steps in our identity-centered theory of high-risk activism? The above findings provide empirical support for key steps in our hypotheses about the relationship between identity, narrative persuasion, and high-risk activism.

Both experimental and observational evidence lend credible support to our narrative theory of high-risk political activism. Specifically, our online experiment with 139 Muslim subjects provides evidence that individuals with weak ties to Islamic communities find the heroic narrative more compelling, while individuals with strong ties to the social narrative find the social narrative more compelling and those with mixed ties fall in between. Our observation study of 148 ISIS US perpetrators supports that the heroic narrative makes recruitment of weak-tie individuals more likely while the social narrative makes the recruitment of strong-tie individuals more likely, and again with those with mixed ties in between.

Overall, our empirical evidence shows how and why ISIS propaganda was able to use multiple and distinct narratives, with fundamentally different underlying moral logics, to recruit

[10] The full text of the letter was published online by the Chicago Tribune (2014).

multiple and distinct sub-populations for a common cause -- part of a deliberate Western-directed propaganda campaign. The overarching implication is that appropriately tailored propaganda strategies can not only appeal to single audiences, but multiple audiences at the same time, with the potential to not only add numbers of recruits but draw from sub-populations who may not be socially integrated with each other.

Evidence shows that ISIS's use of heroic and social narrative has the potential to expand the group's appeal beyond Muslims with strong ties to Islam and established communities to individuals with weak ties (and those in between). The link between propaganda narratives, identity (strength of ties) and appeal is supported by our observational findings that motivational profiles of actual ISIS perpetrators follow the same expected pattern -- with motivations consistent with the heroic narrative concentrated among converts and motivations consistent with the social narrative concentrated among immigrants. ISIS's propaganda strategy thus likely enhanced its Western recruitment using this multi-narrative recruitment strategy.

However, our findings also have important limits. First, our research design is not set up to observe the causal impact of viewing specific videos on actual individual decisions to engage in high-risk activism for ISIS, or the effects of temporal elements such as why some narratives have lasting effects and others do not and whether repetitive viewing impacts the likelihood of mobilization. As mentioned, there are numerous psychological, sociological, and political factors that are likely also at work in such decisions. While our approach does substantiate that social identity and narratives are playing an important role, it does not allow us to assess the relative weight of these versus other factors or estimate rates of recruitment from exposed populations.

Second, our research design also does not allow us to investigate the antecedents to the impact of social identity and narrative transportation on high-risk political activism. Beyond the strength of ties or identity groups, there are significant factors such as prior psychological predispositions, political beliefs, and personal experiences may well cut across them.

Third, non-narrative materials that do not rely on a plot or character can also communicate reasons why individuals should sacrifice for political causes, making a logic argument for why people should step up to their roles as heroes or live up to their obligations as Muslims. ISIS competitor Al Qaeda is famous for hours long lectures ordering Muslims to do their duty. At the same time, non-video media can tell stories of both heroes and dutiful Muslims. Our study focuses on one cell of the two-by-two of narrative/non-narrative and video/non-video. While our study finds good theoretical and reasons to believe video is a powerful medium for narrative persuasion, future research should explore the other possibilities to assess the relative effectiveness among them.

7. CONCLUSION

This article provides a narrative theory of high-risk mobilization that is a credible explanation for the rise of a new class of Western recruits for Islamic groups, Muslims with weak ties to radical Islamic organizations or overseas Islamic communities. The heart of the theory is the power of narrative to mobilize categories of individuals to high-risk action for specific political causes, particularly important when social and community pressures point in the opposite direction. In the case of ISIS, our theory explains how the group's innovative use of the heroic martyr narrative successfully recruited more US-born individuals with weak ties who could be nudged toward the group by the promise of personal glory and empowerment. It more general terms, it helps to explain the rationality of ISIS's propaganda strategy and how appeals targeting identities

as opposed to material incentives can mobilize, including under circumstances of widespread social disapproval.

The theory we advance is important beyond the study of Islamic terrorism. When narratives and community pressures point in opposite directions, this is where the power of propaganda is at its height. This situation clearly applies to Middle East terrorist groups mobilizing in the West, but also to white supremacist and other groups advocating and seeking support for violence to achieve their political objectives. Indeed, campaigns using both heroic and social narratives in their recruitment appeals may generally create opportunities for many political and social movements to expand beyond their traditional recruitment pools, even as it creates possible challenges by inspiring action not motivated by the cause, but by personal motives (Bakke 2014).

The implications also extend to mobilization to risky political action more generally. Groups -- militant and otherwise -- may seek to mobilize broadly and beyond those with direct ties to the population and deploy social and heroic narratives accordingly. Knowing what narratives are deployed can also help predict the kinds of populations most likely to respond, and because martyr narratives as a category are general, the expectations will generalize to different contexts where mobilizable audiences vary in their ties to a victimized community and groups deploy narratives tailored to maximize transportation and persuasion.

Further research is needed to improve our understanding of the relationship between individual predisposition and the persuasiveness of narratives in international politics in general and under varying conditions of political opportunity. Recent IR scholarship has begun to energize research agendas around the role of individual factors in producing international outcomes – at least in the case of leaders and elites (Colgan 2013; Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer, and

Renshon 2018). This growing research program should be expanded to include micro-mobilization to both violent and non-violent political action across borders, with goal of understanding the role of politically motivated communication – whether called propaganda or issue advocacy – relative to other causes of action.

An important question remains about the specific role of propaganda in actual cases of mobilization to ISIS, the role of temporal sequences of videos and narratives, and how the patterns of video consumption – including preferences for specific narrative types -- affect the appeal of taking high risks for militant groups. Answering this question is challenging but could be accomplished with ethnographic research combined with first-hand reports on how the different narratives mattered (or not) in actual cases would contribute important new insights into the interplay between propaganda narratives and mobilization to high-risk political action.

In the specific case of militant propaganda, our study suggests the value of experimental behavioral studies that would allow us to more precisely investigate the conditions and mechanisms by which specific narrative and other targeted messages persuade individuals to become attracted to high-risk political action. For example, research is needed to better understand why converts are overrepresented among US ISIS recruits, and specifically whether personality dimensions associated with religious conversion might also explain attraction to heroic narratives and an increased tendency to mobilize (Fodeman, Snook, and Horgan 2020).

Social neuroscience methods will also be important in the future to determine the psychological and neurological mechanisms by which propaganda works as well as the distinction between narratives (Decety, Pape, and Workman 2018). For example, research should explore the effects of varying degrees of how attraction or repulsion of one video narrative affects subsequent viewing in order to understand whether the main effect on recruitment appeals

is in the initial versus repeated viewings of videos with the same or different narrative types. imagined role play including the temporal element of how long viewers felt absorbed into narratives to assess the effects of repetitive viewing of a single narrative and viewing sequences of different narratives. This research agenda would continue to advance knowledge on the role of militant media and recruitment, building on the current study to continue building a scientific and valid baseline necessary for meaningful engagement with policymaking in the counterterrorism space.

Perhaps the clearest policy implication of our study is an important note of caution. For years, the United States and other governments have reacted to the growing role of militant propaganda with counter-messaging campaigns, but to little evident effect (Miller and Higham 2015). Our research suggests that a core reason may well be the impetus to develop policies to counter-act the effects of propaganda prior to a solid understanding of the how and the why the propaganda in fact mobilizes individuals to take risky actions on behalf of militant groups. The solution is more science, not only to aid understanding of the causal processes at work, but also to create baselines to understand whether the messages developed in counter-messaging campaigns correspond to those causal processes. As our knowledge grows, the most successful solutions may well move in completely different directions, such as educating community leaders and state authorities on militant recruitment strategies to avoid policies that play into hands of militant propagandists and to develop genuine political alternatives for individuals who might otherwise be nudged toward high-risk activism by militant propaganda.

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