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## A Cultural Criminology of 'New' Jihad: Insights from Propaganda Magazines

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### Abstract

*The backgrounds and modus operandi of more recent jihadi terrorists tend to share factors and characteristics more typically associated with non-political violence such as mass-killings and gang violence. Their attacks, moreover, seem to have been precipitated not by the direct instructions of a formal hierarchy but by the encouragement of propaganda produced and disseminated by networked, media-savvy terrorist groups. It is necessary to explain how these 'recruitment' efforts work. Cultural criminology with its understanding of the relationship between mediated meaning and individual experience, can provide such an analysis. The paper presents a qualitative document analysis of 32 propaganda magazines produced by the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. It demonstrates that they contain significantly more than religious rhetoric and military strategy. Rather, they are part of a process that crystalizes a jihadi subculture that appeals to disaffected and/or marginalized, excitement-seeking youths. The magazines cultivate violence by constructing a militarized style that celebrates outlaw status, where violence is eroticized and aestheticized. They idealize the notion of a jihadi terrorist that is tough and willing to commit brutal violence. The lifestyle portrayed offers the possibility of heroism, excitement, belonging and imminent fame, themes often espoused by conventional, Western consumer culture. The magazines occasionally draw on street jargon, urban music, fashion, films and video games. The subcultural model of jihadi propaganda we explicate provides a novel way of understanding terrorist recruiting tactics and motivations that are not necessarily in opposition to contemporary conventional criminal and 'mainstream' cultures, but in resonance with them.*

**Keywords:** jihadi terrorism, terrorist propaganda, cultural criminology, subculture, qualitative media analysis

## Introduction

The young men recently involved in jihadi terrorism in Western Europe tend to share a background in street crime and violence (Basra and Neumann, 2016). As opposed to exhibiting a deep and sophisticated understanding of and devotion to the Islamic faith, they are more notable for recent histories of hedonistic partying (Cottee, 2017) and alleged street gang membership (Verkaik, 2016). Social media accounts coming out of the former Caliphate show jihadists posing with decapitated heads, boasting about murders, and telling stories animated by the tales of slaughter. Characteristically, a jihadist was found with a copy of 'Islam for Dummies' in his backpack (McCants, 2015). This 'third wave' of jihadists, as Marc Sageman (2008) describes them, are noted for being European-born, disaffected and marginalized, and linked into terrorist organizations through networks as opposed to command-and-control, hierarchical organizations. Groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda are nevertheless able to reach into European countries to recruit fighters and incite domestic attacks, and it remains necessary to explain how they are capable of doing this. Questions are rightfully emerging around the extent to which contemporary jihadi terrorism can be fully understood through conventional models of radicalization.

Indeed, most scholars have focused on personal or political grievances (e.g. McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008) in the individual's 'staircase' (e.g. Moghadam, 2005) or 'pathway' (e.g. Horgan, 2008) into radicalism (for thorough literature reviews, see Borum, 2011a; 2011b; Schmid, 2013; du Bois, 2019). We argue that analyzing the complex cultural architecture of jihadi propaganda and motivation makes sense of what might otherwise seem senseless. It can help by "stressing the importance of human experience and agency in the conduct of war, insurgency and counter insurgency" (Ferrell, Hayward & Young 2015: 128), and show how (seemingly) trivial matters such as storytelling, clothes, music, rituals and adrenaline are in fact powerful forces within a subculture. By emphasizing the immediacy, rush and positive emotions related to being jihadi, we energize the sociological background factors, psychological individual grievances, social movement-like peer-relations, and political, religious and ideological beliefs, and introduce a phenomenological understanding of why some people become jihadists.

Utilizing cultural criminology, with its interest in the dynamic between power-relations, meaning and experience (Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2015; Ilan, 2019), this paper provides such an understanding. Analyzing a sample of propaganda magazines produced by ISIS and Al-Qaeda, we argue that these organizations appeal to potential jihadists along lines

that resonate with the subcultural themes more usually associated with street culture (Ilan 2015, see also Andersen and Sandberg, 2018; Ilan and Sandberg 2019). Readers of *Inspire*, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are exposed to particular modes of being explicitly tied to participation in a violent and masculinity-fueled jihad: excitement, ‘cool’, fame, and embodying and transcending death. The power of these magazines should not be understood as only direct and didactic, but rather as ‘cultural’ where they portray lifestyles that potential recruits then aspire to. Promising a global “brotherhood”, the magazines are flashy, cool, violent and exciting to read, and the power of these magazines are the subcultural values the readers draw upon and cultivate, as well as statuses and feelings they hope to experience. In this way, they operate in a matter that is not too different from mainstream commercial branding, but obviously with significantly more grim results.

We start by setting out how cultural criminology has become increasingly utilized to understand contemporary terrorism (for an overview, see Ferrell, Hayward & Young, 2015: Chapter 5), and argue why it is particularly useful to understand contemporary practices of jihadi terrorist propaganda. We then offer an empirical, inductive and qualitative analysis of jihadi propaganda magazines to substantiate cultural criminological arguments advanced by earlier scholarly works on terrorism (see, e.g., Cottee, 2011; Cottee and Hayward, 2011). Combined, our paper demonstrates how the subcultural model of jihadi propaganda we explicate provides a novel way of understanding the nature of the relationship between terrorist networks and the potential recruits who operate remotely from them.

## **A Cultural Criminology of Western Jihadism**

Research has increasingly reflected on the nature of contemporary jihadist attackers. Whilst what Nesser (2015) describes as “misfits” have long been part of the terrorist recruitment pool, they seem to have become more central to it in recent years (Basra, Neumann and Brunner, 2016; PST, 2016; Rostami et al. 2018). In contrast to the educated, ‘elite’ recruits noted in previous generations, they are characterized by being socially and economically marginalized, displaying violent tendencies from early adolescence, and having backgrounds or interest in Western street cultures. The French police have declared their concerns about such “gangster-jihadists” (The Guardian, 2018), and at the same time, criminology is increasingly reflecting on the nexus between conventional and political violence. The mixing of street culture and jihadi networks include “embodied transformations” when gangsters turn

jihadists (Crone, 2014; see also Walklate and Mythen, 2016; Ilan and Sanderg, 2019) and “aesthetic assemblages” when jihadi style is combined with street style (Crone, 2016; see also Cottee, 2015).

Although some researchers have argued that it is premature to talk of a new paradigm in recruitment (Nesser, Stenersen and Oftedal, 2016) these are some developments that should be followed closely. They may also demand some other perspectives and theoretical frameworks than those usually applied in terrorism research. We believe that terrorism research dominated by political scientists, historians and religious scholars, may benefit from an analysis that recognizes the role played by subcultural dynamics to understand the techniques and appeal of contemporary Western jihadism – and the propaganda strategies employed by jihadi terrorism organizations.

Cultural criminology is specifically concerned with the ways in which meaning is intertwined with issues of crime and its control (see e.g. Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2015). It can analyze broad geo-political and socio-economic issues alongside the attribution of meaning at the group level and the ways in which criminal behaviors and images are subjectively experienced (Hayward, 2011; Ilan, 2019). Arguably, the somewhat limited cultural criminology of terrorism literature has tended to focus at the meso- and micro-levels, studying in that context the effects, more than the nature, of macro-level structures. On questions of terrorist motivation thus, its focus has been on matters of subculture and experience. This paper has a similar emphasis, but we argue that these factors are crucial to understand the efficacy of jihadi terrorist propaganda.

Mark Hamm’s (2004) study of motivations amongst white-supremacist skinheads is a good example of a cultural criminological approach to terrorism. For them, the desire to participate in spectacular violence sits atop a set of subcultural beliefs and practices that glorified the experience of committing atrocity. A combination of celebrity (and thus status within their subculture) and surging feelings of power (affirmative experience) was found in this study to precipitate motivations towards violence amongst individuals who harbor a deep-felt sense of marginalization. There are echoes of these findings in a paper by Simon Cottee (2009) who analyses the case of Dutch jihadist murderer Mohammed Bouyeri. Cottee’s psychosocial analysis draws on the classic subcultural theory of Albert Cohen (1955) to argue that jihadism harnesses the ‘status frustration’ of second-generation Muslim immigrants who feel like ‘losers’ despite their best efforts to thrive. Blocked from achievement within mainstream socio-economic life, they couch negativistic blows against perceived symbols of

their oppression as heroic rather than delinquent. Once again, terrorism becomes a ‘solution’ in the Birmingham School sense (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976): a means for the marginalized to feel like they are transcending structured predicament.

In a theoretical intervention Keith Hayward and Simon Cottee (2011) urge research to go beyond simplistic and stock explanations, to recognize the complex motivations that can underpin acts of violence. Specifically, they argue that an emphasis on destructive ideologies can obscure the role played at an individual level by the quest for excitement and glory and for more significant meaning. In other words, political ideologies can be claimed, adopted and espoused by those who have a far more ‘conventional’ (or non-ideological) drive to violence. If excitement and glamour are recognized as components of terrorist motivation (Silke, 2008; Borum, 2011) it becomes necessary therefore to analyze the propaganda of jihadi groups, not to interrogate the ideology present, but to examine the extent to which it implicitly understands this part of terrorist motivation. Does jihadi propaganda harness the power of subculture and the desire for status, pleasure and excitement to communicate messages and ultimately to precipitate violence? Whilst the literature has considered the issues of propaganda, subculture, marginalization and excitement seeking separately, there is arguably scope to better understand the relationship between them.

Andrew Silke (2008) describes how propaganda magazines “often attempt to portray the jihadi lifestyle as an exciting, dangerous and meaningful one” (p. 116). Whilst cultural criminology has long analyzed the ‘commodification of transgression’ (Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2015) what arguably is occurring here is the harnessing of consumer culture to precipitate transgression, in this case of the most destructive and murderous variety. Participation in jihadi violence is not only instrumental and political but also expressive involving emotions such as excitement, grief, humor, and a search for greater meaning in life (Cottee and Hayward, 2011; Hegghammer, 2017). To an extent, the lifestyle of jihadi cool is also offered to women, through what Joanne Picart (2015) terms ‘jihadi chic’. Here, subcultural appeal is feminized through portrayal of “good” women living the virtuous life in the “jihadi girl power subculture” (p. 366). Overall however, the subculture revolves around extreme portrayals and enactments of masculinity and this paper focuses on this where the vast majority of attackers tend to be male.

Although sometimes criticized for being out-of-date and for neglecting variation and fragmentation in youth style (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003; Benneth and Kahn-Harris, 2004), subcultural theory retains analytical purchase and is particularly suitable for tracing the

links between image, identity, the search for excitement, pleasure and politics (Dimou and Ilan, 2018). Importantly, subcultures can share concerns with present but ‘subterranean’ elements in ‘mainstream’ or ‘parent’ cultures. This has been shown to be the case for jihadi terrorist cultures that are masculinist and steeped in the logic of status and sensation seeking (Cottee, 2019).

We analyze jihadi propaganda content to show three important areas where subculturally relevant themes are active, and argue that cultural criminology is a fruitful framework to theoretically embed our results. First, subcultural studies and cultural criminology have emphasized the importance of brotherhood, rituals and belonging, often signaled through the adoption of common meanings and practices (see e.g. Fraser, 2017). Secondly, subcultures and especially those emerging from the street are frequently seen as celebrating or embracing “cool” and the persona of the “bad ass” (Katz, 1988). This trope and its significance, forms an effective thread of propaganda. Finally, cultural criminology and subcultural studies often emphasize how crime can be seen as edgework, in which behaviors generally, and participation in extremist subcultures more specifically, are understood through their seductive appeals (Lyng, 1990; see also Hamm, 2004). Combined, these three cultural criminological themes provide analytical purchase for understanding contemporary jihadi terrorism generally, as well as the efficacy of contemporary jihadi propaganda specifically.

## **Method**

This study is based on a qualitative document analysis of 32 propaganda magazines published by Al-Qaeda (15 magazines) and IS (17 magazines). *Inspire* vary in length from 23 to 112 pages and *Dabiq* from 38 to 83 pages. In total 2001 pages of jihadi propaganda was accessed and downloaded through the jihadi propaganda clearinghouse website [www.jihadology.net](http://www.jihadology.net). At the time of selection, our dataset contains the entire catalogue of these e-magazines. This was done to ensure our analyses’ validity and representativeness. We opted for these titles because they were the groups’ main propaganda creations available in English. As in all qualitative analysis, not all editions are cited or referenced directly in the paper (there is only space for representative quotes), but all are all included in the material that was coded and used as background for the analysis.”

Step one of the analysis was organizing and initially coding the data into inductive descriptive main segments. First, we noted general information on each magazine, and noted



important themes and words, phrases and jargon such as length and the names of recurring and important sections. This was done to gain an overview of the data, which enabled more thorough coding. We then did a “careful, more focused re-reading and review of data” (Bowen, 2009: 32) following Presser’s (2010) encouragement to “generate themes of interest based on intuition as well as past research on the topic” (p. 439). In doing so, we inductively identified and analyzed certain jargon, clothing, expressions, actions and ideals we conceptualized as “the jihadi subcultural style”. In step three, we employed the insights of cultural criminology to analyze these elements of style. Here we aimed to investigate, analyze and present how the jihadi subculture “produce[s] complex circuits of communication ... and expose[s] the dynamic cultural situations out of which crime ... is constructed” (Ferrell, 2015: 401-402).

The analysis provides thick descriptions of how the style is constructed and how it is performed and expressed within the e-magazines studied. Using propaganda magazines as data has several benefits. Primarily, this approach allows for a readily available dataset. As Silke (2008) notes, nearly all studies of jihadists have been conducted using second hand material. Few studies have used actual first-hand, qualitative data (see Della Porta, 1995; Oliver and Steinberg, 2005; Speckard, 2012; Hamm, 2013) and jihadi e-magazines provide an important insight into the constructed realm of jihadi subcultures (Huey, 2015). They are produced, moreover, by leading jihadi strategists and ideologues providing unrivalled insight into the rhetorical and media strategies used to recruit new members.

### **Subcultural elements in Jihadi propaganda**

It is logical for terrorist organizations to seek publicity and to issue propaganda material and jihadist terrorists are no exception. Al-Qaeda and especially IS propaganda has included an extensive online presence including pictures, magazines, videos, music and videogames (Al-Rawi, 2016). Arguably, e-magazines have been among the most influential media with *Inspire* and *Dabiq* crucial vehicles for jihadi propaganda aimed at a Western audience. *Inspire* is produced by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s (AQAP) media foundation, *al-Malahem*. As the very first English publication associated with Al-Qaeda, it hit the internet during summer of 2010. The magazines focus on encouraging attacks on the West, reliving 9/11, celebrating Osama Bin Laden (both in life and death), and feature classic reoccurring columns like “Open Source Jihad” and “What to Expect in Jihad”. The production is slick, and

strikingly Westernized, characterized as “The *Sports Illustrated* of jihadi” (Picart, 2015: 361). Its impact is undisputable; indeed, an edition of *Inspire* was found in the backpack of one of the Tsarnaev brothers after the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013.

IS’ *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are clearly inspired by their Al-Qaeda sister version. Published by the notorious *al-Hayat*- Media Center, it has French, German, Russian, English and Arabic versions (Christien, 2016). *Dabiq* was launched July 5<sup>th</sup> 2014, with its final edition on July 31<sup>st</sup> 2016. Being named after the town of Dabiq in North-Syria, the magazine changed its name to *Rumiyah* after the Caliphate lost control of the symbolically important city. The first release concurs with IS “Caliph” Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declaration of the Caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and focuses around this. The following editions frequently commented on recent developments from the battlefield in Syria and Iraq and news coming out of the Caliphate, which vested the magazine with an immediacy and urgency.

We study these magazines exploring, in particular, depictions of a jihadi brotherhood and rituals, “cool” or “bad ass” symbolism and jihadism as edgework. These elements of subcultural style all point towards the importance of subcultural analysis and the possible benefits of cultural criminology in studies of terrorist organizations.

### ***Part of the ‘Gang’: Rituals and Brotherhood***

*‘Subcultures incorporate - indeed, are defined by - elaborate conventions of argot, appearance, aesthetics, and stylized presentation of self and thus operate as repositories of collective meaning and representation for their members’* (Ferrell, 1999: 403).

The magazines focus on in-group feelings of warmth, togetherness and solidarity. These are particularly valuable feelings to those who feel marginalized and excluded. Bakker and de Bont (2016: 846) argue that membership of jihadi groups can provide “a sense of belonging, fraternity and comradeship, respect, recognition, acceptance by a group, identity, adventure, heroism”. Indeed, affirmative feelings are arguably a basis around which communities of shared meaning coalesce and from which inchoate political desires and collective actions can potentially emerge (see Dimou and Ilan, 2018). By framing violent jihad as a kernel of positive feeling and depicting a range of practices and rituals that promote in-group solidarity and subcultural meaning, the propaganda embodies a powerful message that can prompt an individual to perceive of political violence in positive terms. In other words, by foregrounding affective comforts and bonding rituals around shared meanings, the

propaganda can be significantly more effective than a simple promotion of violent ideology. Jihadists are depicted and described as small groups where palpable affection between members, expressed as unity and brotherhood, is foundational. Throughout the e-magazines, we have found a clear tendency to frame everyone who wants to join the cause as a worthy and accepted *akhi* [brother]. As such, violence can be constructed in positive terms as the defense of one's fictive kin: the only other people who are similar to and share understandings with the jihadi.

In *Dabiq*'s first edition *The return of the Khilafah* [Caliphate] the combination of affective solidarity, shared meaning and subcultural practice is writ large. On its fourth page, a large group of jihadists are depicted on top of cars, tanks and in the streets with one finger pointed towards the skies. This 'one finger salute' is a well-known symbol and represented in all kinds of jihadi propaganda – the magazines, videos with fighters declaring their allegiance to the Caliphate, social media posts, and others. The one finger salute draws upon the *tawhid* – the declaration of the oneness of God. It is widely known in Muslim communities and utilized by jihadists, for example in pictures of Caliphate children, jihadi foot soldiers and in imagery of leaders like bin Laden and al-Baghdadi. This 'one finger salute' appears in nearly every single magazine analyzed in this study. Although a simple gesture, it is a powerful image which in its repetition serves to remind the viewer of the shared solidarity and understanding of jihadi terrorists across the various contexts in which they exist. It resonates with "street cool", being reminiscent of "gang signs". It marks a difference between beloved comrades (who share feelings for the gesture) and the enemy who does not. As both ritual and propaganda, it can achieve significantly more than simple text.

*Rumiyah*'s first edition shows seven uniformed jihadists together in what appears to be a combat ritual. Resembling the chanting-in-huddles some sports teams do during breaks or before games, the jihadists seem to "energize" by putting their hands together, suggesting that that they will soon shout in unison. This is a common visualization throughout the dataset – in fact, the vast majority of pictures of jihadists outside of combat, resemble this in some way. *Dabiq*'s second edition shows the same ritual, and it appears again in the fourth. In Islamic tradition, this ritual is known as *bay'ah*, and is another way to pledge allegiance to the cause. More than this, it confirms the immediate commitment to one another. Just like the salute, this "chant" appears in both Al-Qaeda and IS propaganda, and is present in about half of the e-magazines studied.

In *Rumiyah*'s second edition several jihadists are depicted together. One specific warrior is the focus of the picture, underlined by the text "there is much good in *jama'ah*" [prayer in congregation]. In this way it is explicitly communicated to readers that prayer and togetherness are cherished and valued. *Dabiq*'s 12<sup>th</sup> edition shows uniformed child soldiers in a similar ritual. The images directly link religious rituals, connected to acts of political violence, to a sense of deep camaraderie – communicating that the acceptance of jihadi subculture provides a space for individuals to form an intimate bond and experience feelings of solidarity. Bonding rituals feature significantly in jihadi culture, for example in poetry readings, singing and dream interpretations, often connected to strong emotions (Hegghammer, 2018). *Inspire*'s 12<sup>th</sup> edition shows an image of a jihadist hugging another, and it is described as an event happening prior to an attack on the Yemeni government institution (p. 57). Love and affection to the fellow *mujahideen* [holy warrior], both before, during and after attacks, connote strong in-group bonds and feelings. The propaganda magazines supplement ideological encouragement to violence with a more emotional basis, communicating that however much jihadist warriors fight for their cause – they do so mostly for their brothers (see also Cottee and Hayward, 2011). Such positive emotions are representative of how the magazines frame the feeling and atmosphere within the group. The representation of these rituals serves to implicitly frame participation in violent jihad as a means of accessing affirmative sensations.

Of course, sociology has long noted that affective power of ritual to generate a sense of inclusion and to guide individual experience and behavior (Durkheim, 1976). The way the rituals are presented in the magazines communicates a welcoming invitation to join a greater endeavor. Whilst this will require brutal and violent behavior the propaganda seems to hint that not only will the group's shared meanings interpret these acts positively, but the individual will feel good by partaking of the warm solidarity that will be made available to him. Cottee and Hayward (2011: 975) argue that most research on terrorists' feelings are focused on negative emotions such as grievance and hate – however, these subcultures are, perhaps paradoxically, filled with "*positive* emotions, such as love, solidarity and compassion". The propaganda magazines we have studied show this clearly.

Ferrell (1995; 1999) has shown that common aesthetic and ritual practices are a means by which disaffected individuals can form communities of shared meanings. In jihadi subculture, dedication to the "brotherhood" involves accepting a worldview where indiscriminate violence is celebrated. The rituals not only enforce a dedication to this meaning

but symbolize it. Further symbols include a range of stylistic practices by which the misfit and frustrated “loser” can socialize himself with other (cool) people, and as will become clear in the next section, boost his status. Singing along to *nasheeds* [acapella songs, often battle hymns] about cutting the heads off *kuffar* [non-believer] and wielding the AK47-Balaclava combination offers the possibility of trading “loner”, “loser” or “emasculated” status for the kind of “cool” described in the section below. The existential frustration of being un-cool and alone is solved through solidarity and style (Hebdige, 1979; Pisoiu, 2015). The propaganda viscerally communicates to readers that such status and experiences are open to them – they need only join.

### ***Jihadi Cool: Celebrating the Badass***

Jihadists in social media and propaganda representations “look cool – like ninjas or video game warriors” (Cottee, 2015). Indeed, Sageman has written of a “jihadi cool and jihadi talk in Europe where it is fashionable to emulate terrorists” (2008: 159). The material below anatomizes this concept in greater detail and traces its deployment within the propaganda material analyzed. Key to understanding its effectiveness is the way in which a particular conception of “cool” is constructed, conveying a sense that the status and identity of the jihadi warrior is desirable for men to attain. Such symbolism might have a particular appeal to those sometimes described as the “misfits” (Nesser, 2009; 2015) in jihadi terrorist organizations. The extent to which this echoes certain youth marketing techniques (see Ilan, 2015) cannot be ignored and it is an irony that this promotion of violence against ‘the West’ owes so much to the most Western of institutions: advertising and the consumer culture.

The conjuring of jihadi cool requires overcoming what might be first thought of as contradictions. Although militarism might more conventionally be associated with the formal armies fighting against IS and other terrorist organizations, it is curious that the trope of militarism features prominently in the stylistic markers of cool featured in the sample reviewed. Certainly, army surplus clothing and military wear has a distinguished history in street fashion (see e.g. Hebdige, 1979), potentially drawing on notions of potent masculinity and the potential for violence (see Ilan, 2015). The style depicted in the magazines of course is not of the standard uniform, but the hybrid, combats and keffiyeh wardrobe of the *mujahideen*, who are generally glorified in accompanying text. Adorned often with utility pockets and heavy weaponry, the style and bearing of the men communicates their

masculinity, heroic identity and capacity for violence. The aesthetic does not conjure the drill-step order of the formal state army, but the revolutionary chic of the freedom fighter. This is a powerfully virulent trope itself within Western culture as the ubiquitous image of Ernesto Che Guevarra suggests (see Potter and Heath, 2006).

The jihadi hero depicted in the magazines conforms to the template for cool identified by Pountain and Robins (2000): that an individual can project an air of emotional detachment, appear to be comfortable and in control of self and the immediate environment, dedicated to a rarified set of tastes and aesthetics and clearly indifferent to common social expectations and mores. Jihadi cool is moreover inherently gendered – with the warrior most often a male. One can identify within the magazines, furthermore, a complementary concept – Jack Katz’ (1988) notion of the ‘badass’. The devil-may-care boldness and toughness embodied by seasoned street criminals tightly maps on to this notion of cool (Ilan, 2015), and it is this attitude that the magazines attribute to the jihadists they celebrate. In doing so, the magazines construct a subcultural frame of meaning by which heroic status is presented as well within the reach of readers. This message is likely to prove particularly seductive to marginalized individuals who feel that they have few economic or mainstream cultural routes to achieving a level of success and recognition. Throughout the sample, the magazines depict the *mujahedeen* clearly in these terms.

The jihadists behind the 2015 Paris attacks are, in *Dabiq*’s 13<sup>th</sup> edition, depicted posing with guns and their uniforms under the banner “JUST TERROR”, creatively cast as jihadi rock stars who have just conquered Paris. Similarities to the iconic slogan of a ubiquitous and highly cool sportswear brand may be coincidental or something more. The names of the attackers are highlighted, and images of rescue workers and victims are blended into the background. The words “Let Paris be a lesson for those nations that wish to take heed” round out the magazine’s very morbid feel. This page has little informative value in itself and resembles a poster. It is characterized by high production values that present the violent jihadists as heroes, elevated into the foreground of their carnage. The message to readers is that violent acts are a route for individuals to obtain recognition and status not simply as obedient soldiers of organization and ideology, but as cool, rebellious heroes who’s very being merits emulating. Thus, the images of “men in long robes and shemaghs roam the desert with swords in sheathe. Sand swirls in the air as riders atop of black horses charge into the distance carrying the Black Standard” provoke feelings of “excitement and a spike in adrenaline due to the “badness” of the faceless soldier” (Vallee 2015: 20). Likewise, Sageman

(2010: 130) argues that these depictions are part of what make these jihadists “the rock stars of young Muslim militants”.

It is in this context of the idolization of the cool jihadi that more didactic instruction can then be offered. In *Dabiq*’s 7<sup>th</sup> edition, an article called “advice for the leaders of the Islamic State” (pp. 9-16) features sincere instruction such as: “You should not have more than three fighters in any car”, and “The leader should appoint a commander for each squad”. Operational suggestions are couched in the visual imagery of heroic, weapon-toting *mujahideen*, not for example instructional diagrams. The men in the photographs with their aesthetics, body language and facial expression communicate their embodiment of cool providing seduction to the propaganda whereas practical considerations are relegated to accompanying text, it is unlikely that the reverse would have the same impact in propaganda terms.

The magazines invoke specific people and places to concretize the cool and to associate it with particularly significant icons. Al-Qaeda’s *Inspire* in its 15<sup>th</sup> edition shows Anwar Al-Awlaki, smiling whilst carrying a heavy rifle and a knife in his belt (p. 90). He was, until his death in September 2011, the editor of the magazine. Awlaki is widely recognized as an important figure for recruitment and radicalization in the West, and it was his idea to create an English magazine to branch out and reach new audiences (Picart, 2015). Rendering his image in a poster five years after his death seems to elevate him to a status akin to “gang leader”, providing a heritage and mythology to the subculture whilst at the same time idealizing the posture of jihadi cool. “O AQSA WE ARE COMING” is printed on the lower end of the page. This became something of a slogan for Al-Qaeda and is often accompanied by pictures of high-profile jihadists like Osama Bin Laden, the 9/11 hijackers and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Several editions of *Inspire* use it as a “sign-off” towards the end of the magazine. This highly ideological aspiration to capture the city of Jerusalem is not presented in such a way as to promote geopolitical reflection, but instead as a defiantly cool catchphrase that might be uttered by the heroes of jihad. It is through conjuring cool rather than winning political arguments that this type of material seeks to win new followers to its cause.

The e-magazines consistently invoke the courage of violent jihadists. *Dabiq*, for example, tends to describe their “warriors” as brave, proud and strong, addressing child soldiers as “cubs” (e.g. *Dabiq* 8: 18-20). Amedy Coulibaly, one of the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attackers, is praised at length in *Dabiq* 7 (pp. 68-71). He was, they claim, “a lion”. The invocation of bravery resonates with the mastery of emotion and circumstances demanded by

the template for cool cited above. The bravery of jihadists is, however, contrasted to that of the formal state soldier (for similarities, see Haggerty and Bucerius, 2018), in that there is an outlaw element to it, yet a further marker of cool. In an interview with the very first *Inspire* magazine, Abu Basir, a leader of AQAP, describes the *mujahideen* as dangerous. He states that wherever they go, “you would find fear and terror spreading in that place” (p. 14). Jihadists are being celebrated not for the discipline and order that is idealized amongst conventional armies, but for their unpredictability and potential casual cruelty. Not only might these traits align with elements of the template of cool, but they can have currency within the hyper-cool world of street culture (see Ilan, 2015). With this message, moreover, the magazines seek an audience beyond those interested in geopolitics and theology to include those fascinated simply by violence and destruction (Andersen and Sandberg, 2018).

The power of subcultural jihadi cool is its occupation of the symbolic realm. Its invocation at the level of image ensures maximum appeal where there is sufficient ambiguity to conceal from potential recruits dogmatic ideology, murderous violence and crushing infamy. By utilizing subcultural style (through the creative mix of clothing, symbols, *nasheeds* and rhetoric), jihadists can emphasize their identities instead as masculine rebels, who are tough and ready to fight. For those with less appetite for actual violence, there is always the possibility that discussing and promoting it will move them close enough to it without actually requiring blood to be spilled (see also Decker and Pyrooz, 2015: 106). With the magazines sitting within a wider ecology of communication and propaganda which spans other online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter and Telegram, using subtle seduction and reaching out to potentially wider audiences, the “jihadi cool” subcultural element of jihadi propaganda has much to offer terrorist organizations. This may be particularly important when targeting disaffected individuals, who might thus be introduced to a host of subcultural understandings and practices that offer the possibility of meaningful life and elevated status.

### ***Jihadi Edgework: Thrill-seeking and Excitement***

The e-magazines reviewed contained references throughout to experiences of excitement and danger in relation to political violence. The subculture thus constructs itself as an arena of thrills and adrenaline, in which members are promised a culturally appropriate rush of pleasurable sensations to accompany violence and murder. We argue that there is a direct appeal made, via Stephen Lyng’s (1990) notion of edgework. Here, the focus lies on the sensational immediacy of crime, through voluntary participating in high risk activities that “involve a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an



ordered existence” (p. 857). The three primary aspects of edgework are the activity itself, the skillset required to perform it and the individual subjective sensations in the performance of it. In these acts of “extreme voluntary risk taking” (Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2015: 74), individuals negotiate the threat of damage or death by using their skills and individual abilities (Lyng, 1990).

The jihadi propaganda magazines appeal to readers who can see terrorism as an exciting and fulfilling alternative to feeling like a ‘loser’ with lives that are “dull, unexciting, unfulfilling, meaningless and solitary” (Cottee, 2011b: 456). Instead, they are presented with images and accounts of the exhilarating ‘moral transcendence’ (see Hamm, 2004: 335) of one’s own limits, society’s restrictions and the practical challenges of security and logistics (all within the desirable frame of jihadi cool). Cottee and Hayward (2011: 966) note that the carnage of terrorism may for some be experienced as “pleasurable, arousing, stimulating, exciting and novel” (Zimbardo and Boyd, 2009: 106; see also Haggerty and Bucerius, 2018).

The propaganda magazines frame terrorism thus as a lifestyle of high-stakes risk-taking and emotionally satisfying triumph, available only to those with the capacity to grasp it. Lyng (1990: 859-60) notes that successful edgeworkers require the skills and innate temperament, the “survival capacity” to “maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos”. Successfully thriving at this edge between life and death produces feelings of “self-realization, self-actualization or self-determination” (Lyng, 1990: 860). By transcending fear, individuals can compensate for perceived deficiencies and becomes more of a “whole” and “real” person, allowing them to reach a true sense of authentic identity and wholesome participation in one's own life. Society and advertising glorify this general way of being (Lyng, 1990, 2004; Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2015), as does the street culture of the marginalized (Ilan, 2015). The terrorist propaganda thus follows those youth marketing tactics that seek to add an edge of transgressive glamour and excitement to what is being sold.

Early editions (1, 2, 4 and 5) of *Inspire* feature a column entitled “What to Expect in Jihad” offering descriptions of the jihadi lifestyle. They state, for example, that Western jihadists should expect to hide in plain sight, through blending in with the enemy’s culture and way of life. As such marginalized readers can reinterpret themselves, not as failed Westerners, but as canny secret agents who use their skills and mastery of self to overcome challenges and camouflage their true intentions until they decide to initiate violence. The canny spy of the James Bond variety is of course a trope highly glamourized by Western culture (see Cottee, 2019). The columns furthermore explain that other techniques of evasion

may be required: escaping to rural or outdoors areas to live “off grid”. Potential jihadists are warned that they may be forced to live in the wild for extended periods to achieve their missions. These descriptions are accompanied by visuals depicting a range of exotic landscapes. Readers are instructed in the art of moving between points on foot, and the matter of challenge is highlighted – emphasizing how obstacles must be overcome. Once again, the rugged outdoorsman or camouflaged commando is a trope found throughout Western culture and advertising.

Preparing for terrorism is thus constructed as the ultimate edgework experience. Evading detection is a classic example of the “sneaky thrill” described by Jack Katz (1988), an exciting pretense that nothing is amiss whilst transgressions are building with catastrophic risk always a potential (see also Cottee and Hayward, 2011). Jihadists risk long prison sentences or death on the one hand and the psychological strain of concealing themselves on the other. Survival as a jihadist whether in plain sight or off grid is represented as thus as constantly playing at the line between “life and death, full functionality and permanent disability, consciousness and unconsciousness, or sanity and insanity” (Lyng, 2014: 449). With this said, the magazines establish combat itself as more thrilling and affirming still.

The e-magazines are filled with the accounts of operations. *Inspire*’s second edition, for example, shows in visual form “the mujahidin walking a very long distance in search of terrifying the enemies of Allah”, the moment of attack and the subsequent and successful retreat after “tearing apart the base of the murtadin [apostate]” (p. 28). The pictures are flanked by sensationalist titles: “intense explosions”, “cleaning the streets” and “base ambush”. The theme is danger and combat and the *mujahideen* are cast in the role of triumphant action heroes. Their search is characterized as a challenging invocation of danger, their success as the correct application of skill and inherent capacities. The images and text directly communicate the intensity of the violent experience, the visceral satisfactions of conquering challenges as chaos reigns in the fog of war.

Likewise, *Dabiq* has many articles, interviews and columns about the dangerous jihadi lifestyle in the Caliphate. *Dabiq* edition 5 shows pictures from the “fight from wilāyah al-anbar” (pp. 10-11), where jihadists are depicted blowing up enemy infrastructure, “hunting the *murtad*” and “pounding the *sahwat*” [Muslims fighting against IS]. Later, the magazine shows *mujahideen* “advancing against the *Sahwah* factions in Yarmūk” (edition 9: 35). Indeed there is a frequency and consistency to the ways in which graphic, detailed, action-orientated reports of “operations” around the world (including Europe) are featured (see e.g.

*Dabiq* editions 12: 26-29; 13: 26-29; 15: 40-45). The visual presentation and charged language of these reports resonate with familiar tropes from Western culture: the highly marketable action movie and popular “shooter” video game. In this way the magazines can go beyond the mere explicit communication of information, at the affective level they implicitly communicate a feeling (see Young, 2009) of excitement, intensity, affirmation, even pleasure. Drawing from the subcultural meanings and frames established, the magazines thus construct these feelings as accompanying the acquisition of status. There is a clear offering here to those who might be more interested in violence, thrill-seeking and/or self-affirmation than they are in theology or geopolitics.

## **Conclusion**

In order to be most effective, jihadi e-magazines must balance different audiences, for example broader Muslim audiences and young excitement seeking (usually men) fascinated by violence (Andersen and Sandberg, 2018). They can maintain a more “general” appeal through harnessing existing tropes from popular media and culture. There is jihadi imagery that invokes superheroes (Ostovar, 2017), and jihadi videos and video games that adhere to familiar action genres and frames (Lakomy, 2017; Al-Rawi, 2018). Jihadi groups have harnessed styles and tropes from counterculture (Hemmingsen, 2014) and subcultural style (Pisoiu, 2015; Andersen and Sandberg, 2018). Whilst this content might seem counter-intuitive given the austere religious convictions professed by members of these terrorist groups, they arguably demonstrate an inherent awareness of the kinds of individuals who may prove motivated to commit political violence in contemporary times and the kinds of media that might most effectively carry a message to them.

Hemmingsen (2014) argues that the outlaw elements of jihadi culture provide the space for those involved in it to build a common identity together. We have shown that the cementing of a common identity and affective solidarity underpins shared understandings of what kind of behavior is valuable and why. The propaganda defines violent jihad as a space of in-group feelings of warmth, togetherness and brotherhood (Cottee and Hayward, 2011). There is the construction of a subcultural style where “being bad is good” (Colvin and Pisoiu, 2018), and the tough bad-ass or “cool” persona, broadly appealing in contemporary youth culture is embraced. We demonstrate finally that the magazines are full of representations of

edgework, excitement and danger (Lyng, 1980), which are presented as pleasurable experiences worth pursuing.

All these three elements of subcultural style present in contemporary Western jihadist propaganda may appeal particularly to socio-economic excluded youths, those who perceive themselves to be in a hopeless situation of continuous marginalization and stigmatization (whether or not these perceptions are more objectively justifiable). The offer of brotherhood (being part of the “gang”), the status that accompanies being “cool” or “bad” and powerful edgework experiences are likely to be tempting to those who feel they lack the conventional means to acquire them. These are similar to the mechanisms that draw marginalized urban youths to street culture (Ilan, 2015), and many of the new jihadi recruits have a background in urban marginalization (Basra and Neumann, 2016). There may be a thin line between violent subcultures and politico-religious extremism, and between “gangsters” and violent jihadists (Ilan and Sandberg, 2019).

Jihadi propaganda might be successful in the recruitment of marginalized (and other) people not through didactic ideological conversion so much as an inherent subcultural seduction. Importantly, by constructing this particular jihadi subcultural style, we argue that the magazines go beyond instructing their readers in how to live and act – they construct particular notions of what might be considered cool, sought-after and idolized. By harnessing these techniques, consciously or otherwise, the jihadi magazines effectively echo the devastatingly effective tactics of the cultural industries who sell a wide range of products worldwide (see Ilan, 2015). Subcultural analysis and cultural criminology can thus be useful, if not indispensable, tools for understanding contemporary jihadi propaganda and may provide insights for those working to counter all forms of religious and political extremism.

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