

September 2017

Jihad and Hashtags: Women's Roles in the Islamic State and Pro-Jihadist Social Networks

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Recommended Citation

Inch, Rachel K., "Jihad and Hashtags: Women's Roles in the Islamic State and Pro-Jihadist Social Networks" (2017). *MA Research Paper*. 13.

https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/sociology_masrp/13

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Abstract

Over a one-year period from January 2015 to January 2016, a team of researchers collected nearly 100,000 Tweets from female operated Twitter accounts that exhibited pro-Islamic State (IS) affiliations. The following exploratory research paper aims to address two questions: (1) will identifiable patterns of engagement be revealed through a thematic analysis of Tweets posted by pro-IS women?, and (2) do these patterns illuminate the roles pro-IS women occupy online and in real-time social networks? This research paper intends to challenge the gendered assumption that women play strictly supportive roles within the boundaries of the IS, and demonstrate that IS female supporters fulfill multiple roles in online and real-time social networks. This paper will outline the eight roles identified using a thematic content analysis of pro-IS women's Tweets. The main findings reveal that pro-IS women primarily fulfill supportive roles, but that they also play a variety of non-traditional roles as well, such as recruiters and even terrorists. This knowledge of how women are using Twitter to support the IS, and the roles they play online and in real-time social networks, can be used to develop more effective counterterrorism strategies to deter the radicalization and recruitment of individuals online.

Keywords: Islamic State, jihad, radicalization, women, gender, social media, Twitter

Introduction

“The only regret I have is not making Hijrah to the Islamic State earlier.”

- IS Supporter Tweet

Tweets like the one above are common among Twitter users who support the Islamic State¹ (IS). Numerous individuals utilize the social media networking site as a platform to spread propaganda and encourage people to make *hijrah*² to the IS. One such example is an American woman who was given the moniker “ISIS Superstar” after flooding Twitter with pro-IS propaganda (Zavadski, 2016). Her comments frequently violated Twitter’s terms and conditions for use, and prior to her arrest in February 2016 for threatening two FBI agents, she had created nearly 100 different Twitter accounts (ibid). Although the “ISIS Superstar” never migrated to Iraq or Syria to join the IS, various other individuals have – several encouraged by these types of propagandist messages via Twitter (Huey & Kalyal, 2015).

Whereas numerous Western males have made passage to Syria and Iraq to become foreign fighters, less is known about the reasons why women choose to migrate and the role they play once in IS-held territory (Hoyle, Bradford, & Frenett, 2015). A meta-analysis of terrorism literature revealed merely fifty-four publications on female terrorism over a twenty-three-year period between 1983 and 2006 (Conway & McInerney, 2012). Another study notes that of the 7,590 articles on contemporary terrorism, the large majority focus on men’s roles in

¹ The Islamic State (IS) is a group of radical pro-jihadist Sunni Muslims who operate primarily out of Syria and Iraq. In 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the IS leader) self-proclaimed himself as the ‘Caliph Ibrahim’, and declared the IS as the worldwide caliphate. By doing so, al-Baghdadi believes to have political and religious authority over all Muslims (Laub & Masters, 2016; Brajawidagda, Chatfield, & Reddick, 2015). The IS is sometimes referred to as the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS), the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL), and/or Daesh (the Arabic acronym) (Reding, 2016).

² *Hijrah* (Arabic) meaning to migrate, in this context referring to migrating to the IS.

terrorist groups, with merely “cursory attention” devoted to women’s roles (Hoard & Makin, 2014, p. 532).

This research paper challenges the gendered assumption that women play strictly supportive roles within the boundaries of the IS, and demonstrates that IS female supporters fulfill multiple roles in online and real-time social networks. To do this, the researchers³ collected data from ninety-three Twitter accounts belonging to pro-IS females over a one-year period. Analysis of this data reveals that IS women do not exclusively fulfill supportive roles, but a variety of non-traditional roles as well. I will first review the current literature regarding women’s roles in pro-jihadist groups, as well as their roles in online pro-jihadist social networks. I will then outline the research methods, data collection, and analysis used, and present the research results with an explanation of the eight roles identified providing real examples of pro-IS women’s Tweets. The paper will then conclude with a discussion of the main research findings and how these findings can be used to develop more effective counterterrorism/anti-radicalization strategies.

Women’s Roles in Jihad

Traditionally, popular notions of what it means to be a “woman” have not been associated with violence. Rather, femininity and terrorism are treated as antithetical to one another and therefore much of the early literature on women’s roles in pro-jihadist groups has focused instead on their supportive roles as wives and mothers (Conway & McInerney, 2012; Gentry & Sjoberg, 2011; Robison, 2010). The tendency for women to maintain traditional roles

³ The researchers for this project included Dr. Laura Huey (Professor of Sociology at Western), Hillary Peladeau (Ph.D. Candidate at Western), and myself, a M.A Candidate and member of the Countering Violent Extremism Lab at Western University. As a member of this team, I was involved in the data collection and coding process and am using the data collected for my M.A research paper.

within pro-jihadist groups arises from the patriarchal structure of radical Salafism doctrine. The *Shari'ah*⁴ outlines the proper familial structure for Islamic members and incorporates a patriarchal bias which remains to this day within pro-jihadist groups (Wadud, 2006). Between 1980 and 2002, a study of the FBI's data on all terrorism investigations found that 67% of women held subordinate roles within their domestic terrorist groups (Hoard & Makin, 2014). The passive roles some women hold within these groups are adopted from the traditional roles fundamentalist Islamic women are typically expected to hold within the larger society (Gentry & Sjoberg, 2011; Ness, 2005; Schneider, 2014; Wadud, 2006).

Violent jihad is not typically viewed as a female pursuit (Cook, 2005). While male martyrdom⁵ is honoured, female martyrdom is often viewed critically because women are perceived as not being “pure enough...to be offered up as suicide bombers in Islam” (Ness, 2005, p. 359). However, this opinion has weakened since the emergence of Islamic feminism which has challenged the traditional understanding of the female jihad. As a consequence of these shifting attitudes, growing numbers of women have been engaging in more active roles in their pro-jihadist groups (Cook, 2005; Holt, 2010; Lahoud, 2014; Ness, 2008; Von Knop, 2007). For example, in her analysis of seventy-two women residing in IS-held territory, Spencer (2016) concluded that women in IS-held territory are “performing a myriad of activities in moral and logistical support, state-building, and tactical operations” as well as “roles in leadership, domestic affairs, and acts of violence” (p. 75).

⁴ The *Shari'ah* (also spelt *Sharia*) is the legal system of Islam which governs those with Islamic faith.

⁵ Martyrdom, in this context, is form of honorific death whereby a person has willfully sacrificed themselves in the name of jihad or Islam.

Social media has been vital to increasing the visibility and popularity of the IS. The IS has been far more successful in online jihad⁶ than any other jihadist organization, so much so that it has been given the label ‘online jihad 3.0’ (Cervone & Peresin, 2015). In 2014, it was estimated that anywhere between 46,000 to 70,000 pro-IS affiliated Twitter accounts were active; however, the IS’s social media success can be attributed to a smaller number of very “hyperactive” users (Berger & Morgan, 2015, p. 3). Some IS media campaigns have shown to be more effective than anti-IS counterterrorism media campaigns. For instance, an IS recruitment Tweet received 32 favourites⁷ whereas a counterterrorism Tweet posted at the same time received zero positive responses (Sorenson, 2014).

Cervone and Peresin (2015) contend that social media holds three main functions for the IS and its users: identity formation, radicalization, and recruitment. The IS has created very effective media campaigns targeting potential sympathizers from the West, promoting propaganda, and portraying the IS as a legitimate state – as a sort of “Disneyland for Muslims” (Cervone & Peresin, 2015, p. 504). In Hoyle, Bradford, and Frenett’s (2015) study of female migrants to IS-held territory, they explained that one of the reasons women choose to make *hijrah* was to contribute to the construction of the IS’s utopic version of an Islamic Caliphate. The utopic portrait of the IS is reinforced by propaganda via Twitter and other social media sites (Huey & Peladeau, 2016). Online campaigns have shown to be particularly effective at recruiting young Western females, but these campaigns have gained high visibility and support

⁶ Online jihad refers to the use of the internet (principally social media networking sites) to communicate, raise funds, spread propaganda, or otherwise support violent jihadist groups.

⁷ A “favourite” on Twitter signifies that a particular user likes or enjoys the content of the Tweet.

from both female and male recruits all over the globe⁸ (Cervone & Peresin, 2015; Huey & Kalyal, 2015).

There has been increasingly more online support for women's roles in jihad. Women are taking to the Internet to write about their experiences, encourage other women's involvement in the IS, and show solidarity for their "sisters"⁹ (Huey & Peladeau, 2016; Lahoud, 2014). In his exploratory analysis of female IS affiliated Twitter users, Varanese (2016) found that female Twitter users are more influential than males – females are disseminating more propaganda and keeping IS Twitter members more informed than male users. As a consequence, pro-IS women have a stronger ability to radicalize individuals via Twitter than their less influential male counterparts (Varanese, 2016). Another sign of support for women's role in jihad is online pro-jihadist magazines like *al-Khansaa*¹⁰ which encourage women's activity in jihad (Peladeau, 2016). Although it is not clear if the authors of these publications are female, since many are written under a pseudonym, it is evident that attitudes towards women's roles in jihad are changing (Lahoud, 2014). Nevertheless, Cervone and Peresin (2015) argue that as of yet, there is little evidence to suggest that the IS is "embracing women's empowerment and their involvement in fighting, even if the women seem attracted by such a possibility" (p. 503). Furthermore, in their analysis of women's participation in online pro-jihadist networks, Huey and Peladeau (2016) found that Twitter does not act as a platform to encourage or empower women to take on significantly more active roles within

⁸ The "2016 Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada" estimates since 2011 (the onset of the Syrian Conflict), at least 6,600 people have migrated to Syria from a Western country, and a minimum of 180 Canadians (20% of those being female) have made *hijrah*.

⁹ Pro-IS Twitter users frequently refer to their IS compatriots as their "sisters" and "brothers", but they are not typically biologically related.

¹⁰ Al-Khansaa was launched by a branch of the al-Qaeda – the IS has not yet publish a female-centered magazine; however, they do have a variety of online magazines such as *Inspire* and *Dabiq*.

their pro-jihadist groups; however, the use of social media sites like Twitter does provide women with an opportunity to engage in online jihad with fewer gender norm constraints. Many of these women live in social spaces within which they may not be able to actively participate in pro-jihadist groups or the wider community as much as they would like, and the anonymity of social media can be used to help emancipate them from these gender-based constraints (Von Knop, 2006; Witmer, 2016). Social media also enables women to express their pro-IS thoughts and beliefs more freely than in the real world. This may especially be the case for individuals outside IS-held territory where pro-IS ideologies are viewed negatively. Twitter allows women who may be interested in jihad the opportunity to connect with other IS sympathizers and recruiters with anonymity and little to no suspicion from family members, or even authorities (Huey & Kalyal, 2015; Huey & Witmer, 2016).

Our understanding of the roles pro-IS women occupy in these online social networks remains incomplete. Few studies have analyzed women's roles in pro-jihadist groups, and those which have typically include a small number of cases or are over a short time frame. For instance, Alexander (2016) examined twenty-five American jihadi women and revealed that each individual fit into three overlapping categories: 'plotters' (those who develop and/or carry out attacks), 'supporters' (those who distribute propaganda and other information regarding their jihadi group), and 'travelers' (those who migrate to join the group). Another example is a study by Klausen (2015) which explored pro-jihadist social media accounts over a three-month period and revealed that one of the main roles women have is to disseminate knowledge. Klausen (2015) also found that the content women posted was often targeted towards making "extremism appear like a normal life-style decision" (p. 17). The aforementioned studies have done much to increase our understanding of the female jihad's role; however, they have been

restricted by limited time frames and small sample sizes. The roles women fill within the IS community, both online and in real-time social networks, have expanded beyond those which have been previously observed, and therefore there is a need for a more in-depth analysis of the multifaceted roles women can occupy in pro-IS networks.

Methodology

Twitter is the most popular social networking site among pro-jihadist groups, and it is especially favoured by the IS and their supporters (Marcu & Balteanu, 2014; Weimann, 2014). Twitter is the ideal research ground for this study because the short 140-character limit on posts makes the analysis of Tweets easier than the longer posts available with other social media sites. Furthermore, Twitter accounts are public unlike other social networking sites¹¹. Through an analysis of nearly 100,000 Tweets collected over a one-year period, this paper will address the following research questions:

1. Will identifiable patterns of engagement be revealed through a thematic analysis of Tweets posted by pro-IS women?
2. Do these patterns illuminate the roles pro-IS women occupy online and in real-time social networks?

Data Collection

The study began in January 2015 with one popular pro-IS Twitter account that had 605 followers. Using snowball sampling (a non-random research technique) the researchers used the initial account to identify other pro-IS accounts to follow. The accounts were only included in the sample if they met three criteria: (1) the account holder identified as female, (2) her

¹¹ Anyone is able to search, view, and save public Tweets; nevertheless, for ethical reasons, this study has blacked out all Twitter usernames included in the Tweet examples to ensure anonymity.

account showed signs of an affiliation with the IS, and (3) her posts were primarily in English. To determine whether the account holder was female, the researchers looked at biographical information, pictures, and avatars present on their Twitter profile; the content of their Tweets; and the account holder's Twitter handle¹². For example, many of the female pro-IS Twitter account holders operate under a pseudonym beginning with the title "Umm¹³" meaning "mother". To determine whether the woman was affiliated with the IS, the researchers looked at the content of the users' Tweets, for example, if they Tweeted IS propaganda or other pro-IS content. We also looked at pictures on the users' Twitter account – many pro-IS Twitter accounts use the IS flag as their profile picture. The researchers looked for other social media accounts on sites such as Facebook, Tumblr, ask.fm, and YouTube to gather more information about the account holders.

In total, ninety-three Twitter accounts were followed, and nearly 100,000 Tweets were collected during a one-year period from January 2015 to January 2016. At the conclusion of the study, thirty-five accounts were still being actively followed. Given Twitter's policy for not condoning violent content, some of the accounts were suspended over time and were not relocated. Other users blocked the researcher's account, and some accounts were simply deleted by the account holder. When accounts disappeared, new accounts were followed in their place.

The profile of each Twitter account added to the list of those being "followed" was captured in a PDF using Adobe Acrobat. The account holder's Tweets were collected every

¹² The Twitter handle is the name the account holder operates under, in the case of pro-IS Twitter accounts, it is often an alias.

¹³ While the title "Umm" assumes the female gender, it may also be used by men as an alias to impersonate the female gender (Klausen, 2015).

day using Twitonomy, a software used to backup and store Tweets. This way, if an account suddenly disappeared or was suspended, a record remained of all Twitter activity.

Data Analysis

The researcher applied thematic analysis to analyze and code the Twitter data collected. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify themes within a set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for this study because of its relative flexibility which allowed the researcher more freedom to analyze the complex Twitter data in a way that made the most sense for the purpose of this study.

An inductive approach was used in the initial stages of coding to compose a data set based on the account holder's basic demographic factors, such as their estimated location and age. The researchers took detailed notes on the Twitter data primarily focusing on posting patterns and any identifiable roles women adopt within the IS network, and then began to develop an understanding of those roles. Literature regarding women's roles within pro-jihadist networks was also used to help guide the thematic analysis and coding.

Eight roles emerged from common themes that appeared in the content of the Tweets, the eight roles are: Fan-Girls, Baqiya Members, Propagandists, Recruiters, The Muhijrat, Widows, Terrorists, and Leavers (these roles will be further explained in the research results).

Summary of Women's Roles in Pro-IS Networks	
Fan-Girls	Active online female supporters of IS and part of pro-IS networks. Typically, they are young females (15-25) and view belonging to a subversive network as 'cool'. They tweet a range of content, from family and school issues to support for hardcore violence. They produce no propaganda content themselves, but retweet material produced by others in the network.
Baqiya Members	They see themselves as members of a community and view their participation online as supporting their 'brothers' and 'sisters' – both ideological and emotional bonds. They are not only potential migrants and financial supporters of IS, but also function to pass along IS

	propaganda/messages (retweets).
Propagandists	They are ideologically committed to IS and espouse strong religious views. Their posts are largely, if not exclusively, promoting pro-IS propaganda; they post little to no personal information or inter-personal content. Their goal is to help convert potential recruits to their cause.
Recruiters	These women serve as contact points, providing information, emotional and other support to females seeking to migrate to Syria to join IS. They have a strong ideological commitment and public espousal of strong religious views.
Muhijrat	They serve both practical and ideological functions within IS: they represent ‘success’ stories within IS propaganda aimed at recruiting women (‘she made hijrah, you can too’). They are the women necessary to building the IS (a state requires a population, particularly one contributing to its support); they are wives and mothers, as well as workers (when required).
Widows	These are women whose husbands have been killed fighting for the Islamic State. As widows, they hold a highly regarded status, which they take from their husbands who are now “shaheed” or martyred for the cause.
Terrorists	Individuals who have been charged with terrorism-related offences.
Leavers	Individuals who leave IS-networks for any reason, whether it be through abandonment of pro-jihadist causes or to join another group.
Note. Reprinted from “‘Support for Sisters Please’: Comparing the Online Roles of Al-Qaeda Women and their Islamic State Counterparts” by H. Peladeau, 2016, MA Thesis, Western University, London, ON.	

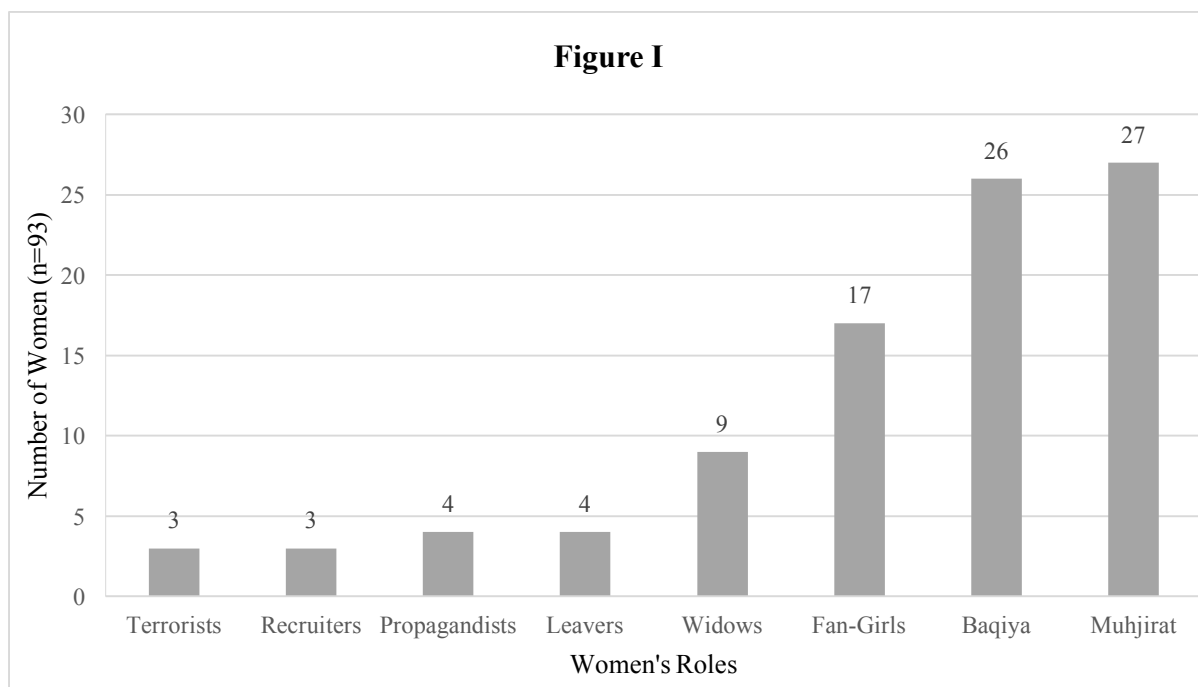
After analyzing the content of a user’s Tweets, the accounts were coded as belonging to one or more of these roles. For example, if a woman posted few independently written posts, shared personal information, used a lot of emoticons, and posted content that contradicted IS dogma, she may be coded as a Fan-Girl (Huey & Witmer, 2016). To illustrate how the data was coded, consider the following Tweet: “Oh! Tomorrow I’m going to be a year older 🎂 ➡➡➡🐱🐱🐱🐱”. This Tweet exhibits personal information and a heavy use of emoticons which are characteristics of a Fan-Girl, and if this user’s other Tweets further illustrated themes typical of a Fan-Girl, she would be coded as such.

The eight roles are not mutually exclusive – the content of a user’s Tweets may exhibit characteristics associated with more than one role. For instance, a woman may fit the role of both a Baqiya member and a Propagandist. In this circumstance, the Twitter user would be coded as both roles. The content of a user’s Tweets may also change over time as her position changes in real-time and online social networks. As an example, a Twitter user might be coded as a Fan-Girl when we first begin to follow her, but with time she may adopt the role of a Muhajirah (a woman who has migrated to the IS), and would be coded accordingly. The intention of this study is not to suggest that these eight roles fully encompass the many roles women can occupy within IS social networks; rather, the intention is to begin the process of better identifying women’s roles within the IS and help expand our knowledge of the ways in which gender, social media, and pro-jihadist identity interrelate – an area of research which has been greatly understudied.

When the final stages of coding were complete, the codes were verified by a number of research assistants who work in the Countering Violent Extremism lab at Western University. This was done to ensure inter-coder reliability. Each researcher independently analyzed the content of a user’s Tweets and coded them according to the themes they thought the individuals exhibited.

Research Results

The following sections include a breakdown of the study’s sample (Figure I), and explains the eight roles that have been identified to further the understanding of pro-IS women’s roles online and in real-time social networks. The roles will be explained in order by the extent of radicalization – from the least radicalized to the most.



Classification of Women's Roles

Fan-Girls. A “Fan Girl” is defined as a “girl or woman who is an extremely or overly enthusiastic fan of someone or something” (Huey & Witmer, 2016, p. 1; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2016). In this case, a Fan-Girl is an individual who is overly enthusiastic about the IS because she believes it is “cool” to belong to the subversive IS-network. To determine whether a Twitter user is a Fan-Girl, the researchers looked for young women who primarily retweet what other IS supporters have posted and do not produce their own propaganda content. Fan-Girls will often Tweet about their home and school life, and celebrate extreme violence (Huey & Witmer, 2016). There are seventeen Fan-Girls in this sample who range in age from approximately fifteen to twenty-five years old, and they are the least radicalized group in this research study.

The term Fan-Girl has been adopted by IS social networks to describe women and girls who identify with the IS subculture but who are not considered devoted members (Huey &

Witmer, 2016). More established members, like the Baqiya, tend to dismiss Fan-Girls and consider them “wannabes”. In comparison to the other roles, Fan-Girls are not strongly religious and are the least ideologically committed to the IS. Their posts typically do not conform to the fundamentalist beliefs they are expected to hold as a member of the IS social network, and therefore they are not as strongly radicalized as the other roles in this study. The content of a Fan-Girls Tweets often has less to do with IS ideology, and more to do with their everyday lives, for example, Fan-Girls may post content that shows disrespect for their elders, or posts about boys:

Giving dawah to those much senior to you is so harddddddd.. their arrogance is based on age. - Fan-Girl Tweet

These boys have ruined everything for me. - Fan-Girl Tweet

One of the most defining characteristics of a Fan-Girl is her belief that violent extremism is “cool”. They will often speak about violence and IS extremism in a childish fashion, and they tend to use a lot more emoticons than other pro-IS Twitter users:

someone buy me a gun 🙏🔫 - Fan Girl Tweet

Someone give me the evidence that burning alive is allowed? :) - Fan Girl Tweet

Huey (2015) asserts that the “cool” factor of online jihad appeals to disaffected youth¹⁴. Fan-Girls believe being part of a violent counter culture makes them “edgy”, but it also provides them with a sense of community and belonging.

While Fan-Girls do generate their own original Tweets, they are more likely to retweet the posts of other more established users in the IS social network. Fan-Girls follow these more

¹⁴ See Huey’s (2015) article “This is Not Your Mother’s Terrorism” for more information about “jihadi cool” and the practice of political jamming.

established members with deep devotion and respect. They will retweet them, cite them in their posts, and give them “shout outs”:

Shoutout to @██████████, suspended again, but he's back. - Fan Girl “Shout Out”

I'm just a kitten but even kittens know to follow lionesses. So do it!
@██████████ @██████████ @██████████ - Fan Girl Follow Request

Fan-Girls treat their Twitter accounts being suspended as an achievement. In his research of male foreign fighters, Amarasingam (2015) interviewed a member of the Baqiya family who said that “one of the prerequisites to be *baqiya* is to have your Twitter account suspended”. Fan-Girls view account suspensions as Twitter “martyrdom”, and believe it demonstrates their devotion to the IS and may help their acceptance into the Baqiya family:

Where the heck is my suspension, I been speaking the haqq & doing absolutely everything wrong according to twitter & I'm still here 😊 o wells - Fan Girl Tweet

Unlike more devoted members in the IS online subculture, Fan-Girls may use a real photo of themselves as their Twitter profile picture. More dedicated members, like the Baqiya and Recruiters, believe women’s faces should not be viewed in public and disapprove of using real photos on Twitter (Huey & Witmer, 2016). Fan-Girls’ use of “selfies”, and their tendency to post a lot of personal information reveals their lack of ideological commitment to IS doctrine¹⁵.

Baqiya (Baqiyah) Members. When identifying Baqiya members on Twitter, the researchers looked for women who: view themselves as a member of the IS online community, refer to themselves as belonging to the Baqiya “family”, and demonstrate support and encouragement for the Baqiya. Twenty-six of the women in the sample are Baqiya members.

¹⁵ For more information on Fan-Girls see Huey and Witmer’s (2016) paper “#IS_Fangirl: Exploring a New Role for Women in Terrorism”.

While most of the individuals are in their twenties, some of the women are in their late forties to early fifties, and they reside in areas such as Canada, the U.S, and France. While some Baqiya members were raised Muslim, others have converted to the Islamic faith. Baqiya members share ideological and emotional bonds with other members whom they address as their “brothers” and “sisters”:

Baqiya familia let's stick together no matter what the kufri try, follow and support our brother @██████████ @██████████ - Baqiya Retweet

This online “family” is very important to the female members. They receive love and support from their “sisters” and share emotional bonds that they believe will help keep their Baqiya family strong and protected against from outside threats. For example, women will offer “shout outs” to those members whose accounts have recently been reactivated, and ask for *duas*¹⁶ for their “sisters” which shows they are being supported and prayed for. The members are very protective over their Baqiya family and they show their solidarity through posts that convey their devotion:

@██████████ Try not to suspend Baqiyah Family or else.....:)
- Baqiya Retweet

Although Baqiya members primarily retweet pro-IS content, some members will also post their own material. Typically, the content they produce has to do with religious doctrine or supporting their Baqiya “family”. Baqiya members not only serve the function of passing on propaganda messages, but they will also financially support the IS. For example, one woman Tweeted:

List of groups who support / pledged allegiance to the Islamic State #ISIS
#ISIL #baqiyya ██████████ - Baqiya Tweet

¹⁶ Prayers.

Baqiya members are more radicalized than Fan-Girls because they are more dedicated to the IS ideology – the content of their Tweets conveys more religious and ideological commitment than is demonstrated in Fan-Girl Tweets. Baqiya members are very outspoken about their devotion to the Baqiya “family” and the IS, which makes them very susceptible to recruiters who may target them as potential migrants.

Propagandists. A Propagandist is a female who predominately Tweets pro-IS propaganda, religious doctrine, and posts little to no personal information about themselves. We have identified four women in our sample who fit the role of a Propagandist. These women show evidence of a strong ideological commitment to the IS ideology. They vary in age from early twenties to late forties, and are located all over the world, including the U.S, Iraq, and Syria. Some of the Propagandists in our sample are also part of the Baqiya family:

To my baqiah family... @ me if you need shoutout for your new account.
In sha Allāh will help to spread your account - Propagandist Tweet

This particular Propagandist is extremely popular on Twitter and other social media sites like Facebook and Tumblr, and a number of articles have been written about her¹⁷. This Propagandist uses Twitter to write about her experience of moving to IS-held territory and marrying an IS fighter. She disseminates so much propaganda and other pro-IS content that Ram (2014) has called her “one of the most active ISIS members on the Internet”.

The Propagandists identified rarely post personal information about themselves – this is likely to protect themselves from being identified by authorities. For instance, the previously

¹⁷ See “Married to An ISIS Fighter, A 26-Year-Old 'Muhajirah' Claims To Be A Malaysian Doctor” (Says.com), “An ISIS Love Story: “Till Martyrdom do us Part”” (Buzzfeed.com).

mentioned Propagandist posted on Facebook that she does not tell “personal details to strangers”, and that it is merely speculation that she originated from Malaysia (Ram, 2014).

The IS Propagandist’s main goal is to convert potential recruits, and they do this by disseminating pro-IS propaganda that encourages individuals to make *hijrah*:

Good news for all of you. Islamic state is expanding. If you cant fly to Syria or Iraw.. then go to Libya! Or Nigeria or Somalia. - Propagandist Tweet

They will also post Tweets espousing their strong religious views, and prayers to Allah:

May Allah blind the kuffar and shield the mom and her kids from their evil and oppression, Ameen - Propagandist Tweet

These women’s Tweets may help to recruit vulnerable individuals by using propaganda techniques such as posting content that make jihad look “cool”, posting violent scenes to evoke emotional appeals, and conveying the belief that it is a Muslim’s duty to support the IS (Huey & Kalyal, 2015).

Recruiters. A Recruiter is a female who provides emotional, informational, and logistical support to women who are interested in, or preparing to migrate to IS-held territory. When identifying recruiters on Twitter, our researchers were looking for women who predominantly Tweeted recruitment strategies, pro-IS propaganda, and posts about their strong religious views. Recruiters are extremely committed to the IS ideology which makes them more radicalized than Fan-Girls, Baqiya members, and Propagandists. There are three Recruiters in this study’s sample who have been identified by the IS as being among their recruiters.

Recruiters primarily post Tweets that encourage individuals to make *hijrah*:

Whoever settles amongst the disbelievers, celebrates their feasts and joins in their revelry and dies in their midst will likewise be #NT - Recruiter Tweet

These women will also post information and tips on how to successfully make *hijrah*. For instance, one woman posted “DON’T tell anyone about your hijrah” to protect others from being found out by reporters or authorities online. Another woman posted these three tips:

1. Take a Mahram¹⁸ with you
 2. don't think that the reality on ground is what you see on YouTube videos
 3. don't marry any Tom Dick or Harry
- Recruiter Tweet

Recruiters not only post recruitment Tweets, but will also speak with potential migrants through Twitter’s direct messaging service. They may offer them support regarding what plane to take, where to go once they arrive, who to talk to, who to avoid, and they may even serve as a contact point. Recruiters may also direct individuals to helpful resources, for example, an unknown author affiliated with the IS produced an e-book titled *Hijrah to the Islamic State* (2015) which outlines how to make *hijrah*.

Recruiters also provide migrants with emotional support through their *hijrah* journey, for example, this woman congratulated her “sister” on her migration:

Wallahi ...My sister has just messaged me she has just got into the Islamic State! Alhamdulillah ♥May Allah accept her hijrah aameen! - Recruiter Tweet

Recruiters will post about these “success stories” to further encourage others to follow their path. The main role for Recruiters is to persuade people to migrate to the IS, but they will also post Tweets enticing individuals to support the IS in their home countries if they are not able to migrate:

Sisters if you cant make Hijrah, you too should go forth in the cause of Allah wherever you are. - Recruiter Tweet

Recruiters make it very easy for women to contact them and obtain all the information they need to migrate to the IS. Without their help, it is likely that some of the Muhijirat (migrants)

¹⁸ A male relative.

in our sample may not have successfully made *hijrah*. This makes Recruiters one of the biggest security threats to which authorities should pay attention. By noting who follows them on Twitter and retweets or favourites their posts, security professionals may be able to flag and deter potential migrants.

The Muhajirah (pl: Muhijrat). The Muhijrat are women who have publically announced on Twitter that they have migrated to IS-held territory. These women have made the difficult migration to the IS proving that they are extremely religiously and ideologically committed; therefore, the Muhijrat are more radicalized than the aforementioned roles. There are twenty-seven women in this role, most of them are in their early twenties, but some are older. The roles these women play are very important to the IS because they represent “success stories” of women who have made *hijrah*, and they act as living proof that the IS propaganda that aims to recruit these women is effective. The Muhijrat are a main focus of Western fears because large numbers of women have, and continue to make attempts to migrate:

It feels like I never left the West. Im surrounded by so many Brits and Europeans its unbelievable. - Muhajirah Tweet

Many of the women post about how many people have already migrated to the IS, and they Tweet about how nice it is to meet all these people from different countries who share the same ideology. They frequently post religious doctrine and talk about how they can freely and openly practice Islam. The Muhijrat Tweet about how pleasant their lives have become since they made *hijrah*, and they question what everyone else’s excuse is for not making the journey:

The muslim ummah has no excuse to make hijrah now. The khilafa is established, the flag is raised and the shariah put into practise. - Muhajirah Tweet

These women not only use Twitter as a platform to share their stories of *hijrah*, but they also use it to help recruit other women by advertising assistance to those who are interested in migrating to the IS:

@ [REDACTED]: For help with Hijrah you can come to me or any of my beloved brothers @ [REDACTED] @ [REDACTED] @ [REDACTED]
@ [REDACTED] - Muhajirah Retweet

The Muhijrat contribute to, and help build up the IS community by marrying IS fighters, working when needed, and raising the next generation of IS supporters. Some women will post Tweets that discuss how they have been married since arriving in the IS – typically these marriages are arranged quickly after their arrival since marriage and child bearing are necessary for building the legitimacy of the IS. The Muhijrat will also write posts about how the IS has the same “luxuries” as their home land. They want to encourage *hijrah* by showing women that the IS has a wide variety of commodities like baby food, vitamins, produce, chocolate, and even fast food (see Figure II).



Figure II: Muhajirah Photo Tweet

The Muhijrat will also talk about the IS’s facilities, such as how good their health care and schools are. One woman posted a prayer for her “sisters” who were writing a medical exam

that day with the hashtag “#women_under_isis”. They want women to know that their lives in the IS are not as they have been depicted by the media and journalists. One woman wrote:

And never believe what the kuffar write about Doula, saying the women don't see the sunlight and are only there to give birth to children. Lie. - Muhajirah Tweet

Muhijirat “success stories” act as a recruitment tactic by showing other individuals that migration is possible, and they promote the IS as a legitimate state where women happily live and raise their children.

Widows. A Widow is a woman who has migrated to IS-held territory and married an IS fighter who has since deceased. Although the researchers only identified nine Widows in the sample, it is not uncommon for women in IS-held territory to lose their husbands. In fact, male martyrdom is viewed as honorable and is praised by IS members:

Ya Ibn ash Shaheed, be proud of your Father. He sacrificed his life for the One who created you. May Allaah unite us all in Jannah. - Widow Tweet

A male jihadi seeks to gain *sharaf* (male honour) through martyrdom; however, it is said that a woman cannot obtain *sharaf* and therefore her honour is gained through her association with male martyrs (also referred to as *Shaheed's*), primarily her husband and son(s) (Ness, 2005; Von Knop, 2007):

"I already have a beautiful dress to wear the day when my Son will go SHAHEED. I would be the proudest& happiest." The mother of a Mujahid. - Widow Tweet

The Widows typically post a Tweet declaring that it has been confirmed their husband has got *shahada* (that they have been martyred):

May Allah accept my husband [REDACTED], it's been confirmed he got shahada please make dua for him that Allah accept him. - Widow Tweet

After a woman becomes a Widow, the content of her Tweets often expresses how proud she is and how blessed she feels to be the wife of a *Shaheed*. Their posts typically include a lot of religious content – they will ask for *duas* that their husbands will be accepted by Allah, and that they will be reunited with them in the afterlife. These Widows have a very high status within the IS online and real-time communities because of their husband’s sacrifice for the IS cause:

The shaheed has fought for Islam and Muslims. He gave up his life for me and you. Therefore the families of the shaheeds need to be honored...
- Widow Tweet

Widows are considered to be very radicalized and extremely ideologically committed to IS ideology. This dedication is demonstrated through their commitment to not only migrate to the IS, but marry an IS fighter and celebrate their martyrdom.

Terrorists. Over the course of this one-year study, two individuals engaged in pro-terrorist activities and have been charged with terrorism-related offences. The first is a fifteen-year-old British female who may be facing up to twelve years for attempting to make *hijrah*. Migration to the IS is against the law in many countries including Britain, the United States, and Canada. For example, in Canada the *Criminal Code* prohibits any person from “leaving or attempting to leave Canada, or boarding or attempting to board a conveyance with the intent to leave Canada” to participate in, or contribute to a terrorist group (Bird & Valiquet, 2012 p. 7; *Criminal Code*, 2016). Though the Muhijirat who successfully migrated to IS-held territory (from a country where it is illegal) are technically guilty of a terrorism-related offence, only individuals who were charged with attempting to make *hijrah* are included in this role. The British teenager denied that she was travelling to IS-held territory to participate in the terrorist group and instead claimed that she was going on a “holiday”:

I was just going on holiday fam. I have to sit in court for an hour and listen to people lie about me. [REDACTED] - Terrorist Tweet

The British female posted various Tweets about her arrest stating that she was due in court in August, and that the judge decided her passport should be held to prevent her from attempting to flee. She also Tweeted that she has “never supported be headings [sic] or terrorism”, and that the “stupid counter terrorism officers” were accusing her of things she did not do.

The second individual is a sixteen-year-old British female who was charged with two terror offenses related to documents in her possession which contained “information of a kind likely to be of use to a person preparing or committing an act of terrorism” (McKeegan & Mercer, 2015). The girl posted various Tweets denying that she had any affiliation with the IS, for example, she wrote: “WHEN DID I EVER SUPPORT IS???”. The British teenager Tweeted that she was suspected of being a “conspiracy theorist” and a “hacker for IS”, but that she was released on bail. Although she denies any affiliation with the IS in her earlier Tweets, the last Tweet she posted said:

I was once a conspiracy theorist who was then radicalized....but now im just a conspiracy theorist. Seriously. - Terrorist Tweet

After the conclusion of the study period, a third woman was charged with terrorism related offences – she is the noteworthy “ISIS Superstar” who was mentioned in this paper’s introduction. She was arrested for conspiracy and issuing a threat towards FBI agents via Twitter. Her friends and family were interviewed claiming that she was not a terrorist, that she had never left the country, and that she was merely a reclusive mother who retweeted what others had posted (Zavadski, 2016). In 2015, she posted this Tweet: “Get this, I don't know anyone in Syria or Iraq. Not a soul. I report the news and voice a few unsavory opinions.” Except the “ISIS Superstar” did produce a large amount of original content, and she had a huge

following on both Twitter and Facebook. Her case has raised issues regarding freedom of speech and what online activity can be considered criminal (Hong, 2016; Spencer, 2017).

Leavers. A Leaver is a woman who was previously a member of the IS Twitter social network but then left. Only those women who publically posted about their departure on Twitter were coded as a Leaver. The researchers identified four Leavers in the sample, however it is likely more than four women left the IS social network because Twitter accounts frequently disappeared.

Leaver's have varying levels of radicalization depending on their reason for abandoning their IS commitment. Some women may choose to leave the IS for another pro-Jihadist group and therefore they are still radicalized to an extent. For example, this woman left her IS social network to join an Al Qaida one:

♥ Al Qaida ♥ - Leaver Tweet

In other cases, it appears that some women have chosen to abandon pro-jihadist affiliated networks altogether:

may Allah destroy IS, Amîn... - Leaver Tweet

This is the adab of the so-called islamic state! And they wonder why Muslims don't support them! [REDACTED] - Leaver Tweet

The author of the above Tweet stopped supporting the IS, but remained committed to radical jihadist thought. This Leaver was in contact with Elton "Ibrahim" Simpson, one of the men who attacked a "Draw Muhammad" event in Garland, Texas in 2015¹⁹ (Amarasingam, 2015). Simpson dedicated his attack to the IS, and was shot by authorities at the scene. It is possible that this Leaver abandoned her pro-IS ideology because she believed Simpson was set up. She

¹⁹ See Amarasingam's article "Elton "Ibrahim" Simpson's Path to Jihad in Garland Texas" for more information.

Tweeted that her “...problem is with the instigator of the #garlandshooting sending our bros to a death trap!...”, and that they had “no training what’s [sic] so ever” to “[face] over 50 police officers”.

Other account holders did not provide a specific reason for their departure. As an example, this woman simply posted that she would no longer be active on Twitter:

I know the acc is still active during 30 days but I won't be here. So if you have any messages I can answer now in sha Allah. - Leaver Tweet

Understanding the reasons why women are choosing to leave IS social networks can help develop ways to deter the path to extremism and encourage individuals to abandon their pro-IS ideology.

Discussion

The research questions for this paper were (1) will identifiable patterns of engagement be revealed through a thematic analysis of Tweets posted by pro-IS women?, and (2) do these patterns illuminate the roles pro-IS women occupy online and in real-time social networks? The answer to both of these questions is yes. Eight identifiable patterns of engagement were revealed through the thematic analysis of the women’s Tweets, and these patterns have helped to explain what roles these women play within pro-IS online and real-time social networks.

In the past, women’s roles within pro-jihadist networks have been largely overlooked. Much of the literature has suggested that women fulfill primarily supportive roles as wives and mothers (Conway & McInerney, 2012; Hoard & Makin, 2014); however, more recent research has suggested that social media can empower women and influence more gender equality within pro-jihadist groups (Peresin, 2015). The various roles women play online demonstrates that the assumption women only fulfill supportive roles in pro-jihadist networks is partially a

misconception. Although this study has revealed that women are sometimes involved in more active, typically “male-oriented” roles such as recruiters and terrorists, it was nevertheless found that women principally fulfill supportive roles. Women are primarily using their Twitter accounts to provide ideological and emotional support to pro-IS members (Huey & Peladeau, 2016). They are also Tweeting propaganda, educating others about the appropriate dogma of the IS, and celebrating male violence and martyrdom. Although women operate many roles online, this study has revealed that women within the IS Twitter social network continue to be largely absent from more direct action and support.

While women who fulfill supportive roles may not promote gender equality within their pro-jihadist group, these supportive roles are not dismissed as unimportant within the IS community. Propagandists, Recruiters, and even Fan-Girls are vitally important for maintaining existing IS social networks by posting and sharing Tweets that help promote the IS ideology and encourage *hijrah*; and the admiration the Muhijirat, Widows, and Baqiya members receive for their contributions to the IS community illustrates that women’s non-military support is both praised and relied on for the success of jihad (Lahoud, 2014).

Pro-jihadist networks are among the most challenging groups to study because of their status as a hard-to-reach population and their distrust towards researchers. Nevertheless, pro-jihadist groups like the IS are highly present on social media networking sites like Twitter, and thus social media research remains one of the best ways to study this difficult to reach population. The “2016 Public Safety Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada” calls advances in technology and women’s participation in terrorism-related activities two of the leading “emerging issues” changing the “counter-terrorism landscape” today (p. 16). Although male foreign fighters continue to make up the majority of IS migrants and remain the focus of

terrorism related research, this study has demonstrated that women are also at a very high risk of being radicalized and making *hijrah*. However, as the “2016 Public Safety Report” states “it is often unclear which roles women who travel to Syria perform” (p. 16).

The present study contributes to much needed knowledge on women’s roles in the IS-held territory and online affiliated communities, and its findings can be utilized to help understand what attracts women to the IS. For example, reviewing Fan-Girl Tweets and understanding the “jihadi cool” factor (Huey, 2015) can help anti-radicalization experts recognize why youth perceive belonging to a pro-jihadist group as “trendy” and “cool”. Furthermore, analyzing Muhajirah Tweets can help us understand why women chose to make *hijrah*, while Recruiter and Propagandist Tweets can teach us how individuals are being radicalized and recruited to the IS through Twitter. This knowledge can also be used to develop more effective counterterrorism strategies to deter the radicalization and recruitment of individuals online. One potential strategy could be targeting Fan-Girls for de-radicalization programs before they are accepted into the online Baqiya “family” where their emotional and ideological bonds to the IS may be strengthened therefore making the de-radicalization process more challenging.

To further deter online radicalization and recruitment, Twitter and other social media networking sites need to be vigilant in suspending accounts that show pro-IS affiliations and block users from creating new accounts. Berger and Morgan (2015) note that account suspensions do limit the IS’s influence on social media; however, they argue suspensions are also ineffective because IS propaganda is still available on Twitter and that widespread account suspensions can actually pose a risk:

[W]hile suspensions appear to have created obstacles to supporters joining ISIS’s social network, they also isolate ISIS supporters online. This could increase the speed and intensity of radicalization for those who do manage to enter the network, and hinder organic social pressures that could lead to deradicalization. (p. 3).

Berger and Morgan (2015) also discuss pro-IS Twitter user’s ability to control particular hashtags to disseminate their propaganda “outside of its own social network to harass and intimidate outsiders, as well as to attract potential recruits” (p. 12). Hashtags like #IS, #jihad, and #khilafah²⁰ were popular among the women in our sample, and their widespread use by IS supporters sometimes results in these hashtags “trending”²¹ on Twitter and being seen by users outside of the IS social network (Berger & Morgan, 2015). Future anti-radicalization efforts should examine the use of hashtags to disseminate propaganda, and investigate Twitter’s capacity to block the use of specific IS-related hashtags.

Conclusions

No research is without limitations, and research using social media is particularly challenging. When including profiles to follow for this study, the researchers were limited to primarily English-posting account holders. Future research that incorporates Tweets in multiple languages (specifically Arabic) will help draw more detailed conclusions. This research is also limited by the possibility of “sock puppet” accounts. Sock puppet accounts are accounts that are created to manipulate or deceive a particular audience. They are operated by people who are pretending to be someone they are not – in this case a person with a pro-IS affiliation. Since there is no way to authenticate the identities of the individuals operating Twitter accounts, social media research runs the risk of collecting fabricated information

²⁰ Referring to the IS Caliphate.

²¹ A “trending” hashtag is a hashtag that has been frequently used and is popular on Twitter at a particular point in time.

created by sock puppet accounts, and drawing false conclusions²² (Huey & Kalyal, 2015). Non-random snowball sampling was used to collect the data for this study, which means the sample is not representative of the entire population, and thus the findings of this research study cannot be generalized. Future research that investigate women's roles in pro-jihadist social networks will continue to help focus anti-radicalization efforts and expand our knowledge on how social media, gender, and pro-jihadist identity interrelate.

The assumed subordinate status of women in pro-jihadist groups has led to the misconception that they have little to no role within extremist groups (Bloom, 2011; Huey & Kalyal, 2015), but this study has demonstrated that women play various roles in the IS online social network. Women are becoming increasingly important contributors to pro-jihadist networks, and although they may not appear on the front lines, their support online is strengthening the IS ideology. If researchers and counterterrorism specialists disregard women's influence in these groups it will result in ineffective counterterrorism strategies, and an incomplete understanding of the threat the IS poses. By paying attention to the messages being disseminated through Twitter, and those individuals targeted by pro-IS propaganda and recruitment techniques, it is possible that radicalization and potential migrants can be deterred.

²² See Huey and Kalyal's (2015) study for more information about how sock puppet accounts interfere with online terrorism research.

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