A New Age of Terrorist Recruitment: Target Perceptions of the Islamic State's *Dabiq* Magazine

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Abstract

More than half of current fighters for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, otherwise known as the Islamic State or ISIS) hail from areas other than Syria or Iraq, making foreign fighters a large force within the Islamic State. Additionally, a population of people that have historically been likely to have been recruited by terrorist organizations are young, educated and middle class people. The Islamic State today recruits using methods starkly different than what has been seen before. A newer recruitment method of the Islamic State's is their digital propaganda and recruitment magazine, *the Dabiq*. This study examined perceptions of university students of *the Dabiq* magazine via five separate focus groups, in efforts to gather opinions and perceptions of a the demographic group that is likely to be recruited by terrorist organizations. Experiences reported by the participants in this study demonstrate a lack of persuasion by the magazine, but also a lack of self-awareness of their role in the terrorist recruitment process.

Introduction

An estimated 31,500 new recruits have joined the expanding terrorist organization the Islamic State, (also commonly known as ISIL or ISIS) as of March 2015 (Bouzis, 2015). The International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence cite that at least 20,000 recruits come from places outside of Syria and Iraq, where most of the Islamic State is located (Bouzis, 2015). Berger (2011), whose book studied Americans who have joined jihadist organizations, discussed how the changing world of technology and the increase of online forums has also changed the dynamic of terrorist recruitment. This technology makes it easier to recruit internationally. In his research, Berger claims that in the past 30 years, at least 1,400 Americans have taken part in some sort of jihadist activity[bh1] .

The Islamic State poses an inherent threat that has increased global counterterrorism efforts.. British Prime Minister David Cameron has called the group an "exceptionally dangerous terrorist movement" (2015). Numerous world leaders have spoken out about the zero tolerance they have for the Islamic State.FBI Director James Comey deemed them a significantly more dangerous terrorist threat to the world today than al Qaeda was in its prime (Comey, 2015), and explains that the Islamic State's recruitment methods are very different compared to major terrorist organizations that preceded it. While al Qaeda typically did not directly recruit, the Islamic State is proactive in their member recruitment. They actively reach out to their potential recruits instead of relying on them to individually learn more about the group (Comey, 2015). The Islamic State utilizes a tool called *the Dabiq* in its recruitment efforts. *The Dabiq* is an online recruiting magazine published by the Islamic State monthly in multiple different languages, including English. The first volume was released to the world in the summer of 2014, and little research has been done on the communication of *the Dabiq* as a recruiting tool. Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) look at the Islamic State's leadership's statements within *the Dabiq* magazine to assess how large the threat is that they pose to Western countries, but no research to date has been published regarding public perceptions of the communication within the recruiting magazine. Once we know how the public perceives recruiting materials such as this magazine, it can help aid in counterrorism efforts.

Understanding how recruitment efforts operate is essential to being able to halt those efforts in their tracks. Once personnel supply to terrorist organizations has been suffocated, these groups will find it more difficult to achieve their objectives. In order to examine this critical national security issue, the literature review will examine previous scholarship on terrorist recruitment efforts, then the study will be set up, followed by a reporting of findings and discussion of future research.

[bh1] for purposes here, "jihadist activity" will denote activity by those who see a need for violent fights in order to restore Allah's rule. This term is not to be confused with Islamic activity.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate current literature on terrorist recruitment methods and strategies, while also collecting demographic characteristics and motivations of the terrorist recruits. While it can prove difficult to define a "terrorist organization" for many reasons (Ganor, 2002), for purposes here, a terrorist organization can be loosely defined as a group that publicly and intentionally incites fear into the general public by means of threats and violence. While this is a critical issue, little is known about perceptions of terrorist recruiting materials by those most likely to be recruited, even though there have been multiple studies on specific recruitment methods, recruit demographics and human motivation in joining terrorist organizations.

Recruitment Methods

Most literature about terrorist recruitment included vague overarching recruitment tactics and strategies, instead of specific methods. Previous research found that a majority terrorist recruitment takes place over social media (Comey, 2015). Further, in using the internet as a method to target recruits, terrorist organizations then can target younger people who utilize the internet most often for browsing (Weimann, 2006).

Other scholars such as Hegghammer (2012) explored *why* recruiters target specific recruits over others, but have yet to examine specific methods in which they do so. Gerwehr and Daly (2005) discussed different models of recruitment, such as using a "funnel" approach where the recruits undergo a personal identity transformation before they can become full members of the organization, but did not discuss specifically how they communicate to transform that particular identity. Blazack (2001) explained how hate groups specifically recruit and manipulate teenagers into the world of terror. Ozren et al. (2014) conducted an analysis of the Kurdistan workers' Party (PKK) recruitment. The PKK is a terrorist organization that was founded in 1980's that derived its ideology from the radical left. Ozren et al (2014), in their work, concluded that though there are many ideas, there is no overarching or almost always used method that terrorist organizations use to recruit prospective terrorists.

Erelle (2015) examined terrorist recruitment methods firsthand by entering the jihadist recruitment network herself. She explained the different ways that terrorists communicate with prospective recruits. Using social media, she connected with a jihadist member of the Islamic State that persuaded her to join him in Syria to fight alongside the Islamic State. This research explains the communication that transpires between the recruiter and the recruit, but was only studied one particular instance. It is still unknown if the vast majority of terrorist recruiters communicate in similar manners.

Occasionally, organizations use cartoons and colorful schemes to lure young people. Weimann (2006) studied the terrorist group Hezbollah, an Islamic militant group based in Lebanon and created in the 1985 and is also a political party within Lebanon that represent Shiite Muslims. Weimann (2006) explored Hezbollah's website, where users played virtual games that simulated various terrorist attacks. The simulations challenged the player to test their shooting skills on figures, such as the Israeli Prime Minister.

Bouzis (2015) explored specific terrorist communication with prospective recruits, but conducted her research from the perspective of the recruiter, not the recruit themselves. Bouzis is one of the few scholars who was able to discuss the specific Islamic State's recruiting methods. While doing this, she also discussed the ways in which the United States attempts to counter the Islamic State's social media recruiting efforts.

Though there is a substantial amount of research on recruiting methods of terrorist organizations, the gap that still remains in the research is that current literature doesn't discuss perceptions and reactions of the recruit to various forms of Islamic State recruiting material.

Jihadist Recruit Demographics

Demographics of recruits appear to be the most common subject of terrorist recruitment research. While world leaders often discuss how terrorist recruits are typically uneducated people who grew up with an impoverished environment, there is a significant amount of research that refutes that claim. Academic research has argued that the people most likely to be recruited by terrorist organizations are well-educated, younger in age and from stable economic backgrounds.

Education. In his research, Krueger (2007) contradicted statements by influential people such as President George Bush, First Lady Laura Bush and even former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who have insinuated that terrorism is directly linked with lack of education. Kreuger studied the demographics of deceased Hezbollah militants and found that, on average, fairly educated people. Bakker (2006) had similar findings. In his sample of terrorist recruits from Europe, they were also well educated. Similarly, Krueger and Maleckova (2003) found that

the recruits they studied had a "relatively high level of education." Mastors and Deffenbaugh (2007) pointed out that several 9/11 attackers were actually college students. They also found that education levels can vary from little formal education up to doctorate degrees and cite many examples of well-educated people as being a part of a terrorist organization.

Age. Ghosh, Warfa, McGilloway, Ali, Jones and Bhui (2013) claimed that radicalization typically takes place when young people are making big lifestyle transitions and their cognition and emotional responses are still in the process of developing. They argued that young people are the most vulnerable population because they are in a time when they are faced with questions, are challenged with figuring out how to make their own decisions. They are developing who they are and are doing other things that cause them to question the fundamental beliefs that they learned or were taught. It was also found in Bakker's (2006) demographic data that 83% of deceased militants were ages 18 to 25. Singer (2006) cited in his study that there were around 300,000 children under the age of 18 have fought in about 75% of the world's conflicts - largely including terrorism activity.

Mastors and Deffenbaugh (2007) point out while it is sometimes difficult to obtain exact demographic data on recruits, they are frequently recruited between their early teens and mid-thirties. Sageman (2004) concurred, finding that the average age of joining jihad organizations is 25.69 years old. From this research, the average age of terrorist organization recruits ranges from 18 years to the mid-thirties.

Socioeconomic status. Not only are young adolescents at risk of terrorism recruitment and possible radicalization, but Bakker (2006) claims that, in Europe in particular, radicalized persons typically have middle class backgrounds. Krueger (2007) found in his study of Hezbollah militants that they are also less likely to have lived in poverty-stricken environments than the counterparts he compared them to. Krueger and Maleckova (2003) found that recruits are "at least as likely to come from economically advantaged families . . . as to come from the ranks of the economically disadvantaged." (p. 141).

Not only is there little research on perceptions of terrorist recruiting materials overall, but almost no research looks at perspectives of those most likely to be recruited. More research needs to be done focusing on how educated, middle class people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five understand and perceive terrorist recruiting materials.

Human Motivation to Join Terrorist Organizations

Ozeren, Server, Yilmaz and Sozer (2014) concluded that there is no single determining factor that causes people to join terrorist groups. But, in their study of motivations of terrorist recruits, they found a number of motivations. Interviewees said things such as, "People around me were talking about these individuals as if they were heroes. I envied this situation. Thus, I also later decided to join the organization," (p. 337) and "Some friends told me that if I join the organization I would be able to become a commander. I joined for that." Recruits like this were mesmerized by the idea that they would someday be someone important, even a hero. Another interviewee wanted to escape their current reality, saying "I would commit suicide if it was not prohibited by our religion. I thought if I go to the mountains maybe they would kill me there, or I could die during an armed conflict so then it will be all over for me. Thus I decided to join." (p. 338). This research is similar to Blazak (2001), who concluded that youth were recruited by hate groups because of their desire for structure that the group could offer.

A young American boy named Adam Gadahn joined al Qaeda (through conversations over the Internet) said that he really just found discussions about Islam were intriguing, that eventually lead to his recruitment in the organization (Weiman, 2006). Adam's motivation to join was caused by the discussions that terrorist recruiters had started online. Adam was young when he first joined the al Qaeda terrorist network, and very susceptible to ideas that were posed on open internet forums. A parallel can be drawn between these forum and *the Dabiq* magazine. The magazine does not identify itself as a "terrorist recruiting magazine," and is really only intended to begin a conversation in the name of Islam, very similar to Adam's experience with the online forum.

Berger (2011) argued that despite diversity in their backgrounds, recruits usually show an attraction to violence, and feel alienated from their peers. He also mentioned that the enchantment of such a large and powerful group should not be ignored. Gates (2002) and Ghosh, Warfa, McGilloway, Ali and Jones (2013) also researched particular factors that would encourage a desire to join terrorist organizations. Gates (2002) stated that some important factors in recruitment motivation is geography, ethnicity and ideology. Ghosh et al. (2013) found that inaccurate media representations of the Muslim community leads to an intensification of their religious identity which in turn creates more radicalization and concluded that more accurate teachings would result in greater acceptance of the Muslim community, therefore less radicalization.

Motivations to join a terrorist organization are important to understand when analyzing terrorist recruitment. However, existing research does not reflect how potential recruits perceive recruiting material. Research on motivations of recruits explains the intent of terrorist recruits; while this research will aim to gather perceptions of those most likely to be recruited, as opposed to active recruits.

Elaboration Likelihood Model

Thus far, communication studies of terrorism have revolved primarily around media coverage of terrorism (eg. Bassiouni (1982), Dowling (1986); and Weimann (1983)). However, research has not yet been published on the perceptions of the terrorist communication in recruiting materials by the receiver. The Elaboration Likelihood Model, created by John Cacioppo and Richard Petty (1984), described two ways in how people receive persuasive messages, which are both effective in different ways. The first is the "central route" of persuasion, where the receiver is actively engaged in and affected by the message. The second is the "peripheral route" is where the receiver is significantly less engaged with the message.

Central route. When people are motivated to receive the message and motivated to be persuaded in some way, the message is received through the central route, thus the elaboration likelihood is high (Cacioppo & Petty 1984). The central route involves logical thinking and processing information by thinking critically about the arguments that it attempts to make and how strong the argument is based on its merit (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). Whether a person uses the central route of persuasion or not is determined by many factors, such as how the message personally affects the receiver, or who the message source is (Kitchen, et al., 2014). Additionally, those who use the central route of persuasion tend to have more knowledge on the subject beforehand, therefore feel more comfortable making a decision on how they have been persuaded by the message (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984).

Peripheral route. Elaboration likelihood, diversely, is very low when the peripheral route is used and the receiver is significantly less cognitively engaged with the message. The peripheral route does not utilize cognitive thinking and logic and typically takes place when the message receiver sees no real benefit or downfall of being persuaded either way by the message (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). In contrast with the central route of persuasion, the peripheral route is typically used by those who don't have any prior knowledge on the subject and therefore do not feel educated enough to make a decision and is more influenced by surrounding and external influences (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984).

This research will utilize both routes of persuasion as defined by the Elaboration Likelihood Model to determine university student perceptions to terrorist recruiting materials. Further study will look at groups of university students who are both engaged with the recruitment material to understand how and if they are persuaded by the message, thereby studying the central route of persuasion in terrorist recruiting, and groups of university students who are not engaged with the material to understand conversely how and if they are persuaded by the magazine, thereby looking at the peripheral route of persuasion within *the Dabiq* magazine.

Research Questions

Krueger (2007), Mastors and Deffenbaugh (2007), Ghosh (2013) and Bakker (2006) all claim that the those most likely to be targeted by terrorist organizations are of approximate middle class socioeconomic standing who also typically have some level of formal education and are younger in age. Understanding this, the first research question of this study is as follows:

RQ1: What is the general perception of university students of the terrorist recruiting magazine, *the Dabiq*?

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984) states that people are persuaded in different ways, one by logical thinking and persuasion based on merit and another by external factors and bases their persuasion on the overall and outward appeal of the message. Developers of the theory believe that both methods are equally persuasive in their own ways (Cacioppo & Petty, 1984). Therefore, the second and third research questions are as follows:

RQ2: To what extent are university students using the central route of persuasion persuaded by the images and/or texts present in *the Dabiq*?
RQ3: To what extent are university students using the peripheral route of persuasion persuaded by the images and/or texts present in *the Dabiq?*

Methods

Guided by the interpretive paradigm of social research, this study utilized focus groups as the method of research. Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) stated that "interpretive studies assume that people create and associate their own subjective and intersubjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (p.5)" which effectively aligns with the goal of this study to measure perceptions of *the Dabiq* magazine by university students. Focus groups can be successfully utilized to understand a wide range of opinions that people may have (Morgan, 1988). Also, focus groups can be helpful when the researcher aims to determine attitudes instead of specific behaviors (Esterberg, 2002). Focus groups provide an area for the participants to not only state their own opinion, but also expand upon their opinion and that of their fellow participants. Similarly, Krueger and Casey (2009) argued that focus groups are used to discover different reasons that influence motivations and behavior. The goal of focus groups is to gather a broad range of ideas from the group, and analyze and understand these differences (Esterberg, 2002). This research obtained and analyzed participant's meaning making of the Islamic State's international recruiting magazine, *the Dabiq*.

Participants

This study employed a convenience sample of Midwestern University students who fit within the demographics of previous studies. A population very likely to be targeted for recruitment by terrorist organizations are typically well educated, having some level of higher education (Berger, 2011; Krueger, 2007; Mastors & Deffenbaugh, 2007). Additionally, the age range of the terrorist recruits falls roughly between the late teenage years and early thirties (Bakker, 2006; Ghosh et al., 2013; Krueger, 2007; Mastors & Deffenbaugh, 2007; Sageman, 2004; Singer, 2006).

Measurement

The focus groups responded to questions pertinent to Research Question 1, which consisted of inquiring about the participants' general perceptions of the magazine, and asking them what they thought of particular photos and articles. The focus group interviews also included questions relevant to Research Question 2, which strived to determine if and how the participants were persuaded by the ideas, photos, layout or groups depicted within the magazine, and if they were not persuaded personally, how persuasive they thought the magazine was. The first questions and follow up questions that were asked aimed to answer Research Question 1, and the latter questions, Research Question 2. Each question aimed to uncover the participants' general understanding and interpretation of the magazine.

Central route groups. About halfway through the focus group interview and at the conclusion of the questioning aimed at Research Question 1, the participants observed using the central route of persuasion were informed of the purpose and intent behind the magazine as a whole. The participants were debriefed on why they were not informed ahead of time about the true intent of the magazine. The participants were to then answer questions about the persuasiveness of the magazine as a whole. Each participant was asked to answer what they thought was the intent and target audience of the magazine prior to the researcher unveiling the true purpose of the magazine.

Peripheral route groups. Participants observed using the peripheral route continued the same line and procedure of questioning as the central route groups, but were not informed of the true intent of the magazine until the conclusion of the session. At the conclusion of the study, the peripheral group was debriefed on the true meaning behind the magazine and why they were not informed initially on the true purpose of the magazine the same as the central route groups were informed in the beginning.

Both the central route and peripheral route groups during their debriefing were given a short synopsis of the Elaboration Likelihood Model and the history of the Islamic State. The researcher explained why the success of the study depended on the participants either knowing or not knowing the true intent of the magazine.

Procedure

Participants were informed that they are volunteering for a study regarding international propaganda while recruited through network and convenience sampling. Students were contacted either in person or via e-mail and were told that the research study would take approximately thirty to sixty minutes. No other information besides logistics of the time and place were given to the participants. Any student was eligible, but the network sampling yielded participants involved in the political science and international studies departments. The focus groups took place in rooms set up to encourage interactive dialogue between the participants and the researcher. Each participant was assured confidentiality before the study began and were signed an informed consent sheet. Thus, all participant

names have been changed and all identifying characteristics of the participants removed. All of the aforementioned information was made available to the participants on the informed consent sheet.

Three of the five focus groups were observed while using the central route of persuasion, while the other two were observed using the peripheral route of persuasion, following the Elaboration Likelihood Model of communication. At the commencement of each focus group, the researcher had a participant draw a route of persuasion from the researcher's hand, thus determining whether the group would be observed under the central or the peripheral route. The participants had no knowledge of the route used, or why they were choosing the piece of paper. There were equal opportunities for the participant choosing to select either the central route or the peripheral route of persuasion.

The participants within each focus group were given a copy of *the Dabiq* magazine (randomly chosen, issue 4, published in 2014, "The Final Crusade) and asked to page through it to become familiar with it. The researcher preemptively removed all pages, which they deemed too graphic for the participants to reduce the likelihood of a traumatic experience within the focus group. After five to seven minutes of the participants familiarizing themselves with the magazine, the researcher commenced the focus groups with the questioning as listed in Appendix A.

Each focus group lasted approximately thirty to sixty minutes, dependent on the size of the group and the involvement activity of the members. Participants were questioned both according to the questioning protocol listed in Appendix A and were also asked follow up and probing questions in order to get an all-encompassing description of each participant's perception of the magazine.

Analysis

After the transcription of the data gathered from the focus groups, the complete data set was analyzed using a thematic analysis. The analysis searched for common themes within the discussion as well as obvious minority opinions and outliers to determine the general perception of *the Dabiq* to students at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The researcher first utilized Keyton's (2011) use of analytical memos to record any reactions and overall impressions to the focus group interaction as a whole immediately after each focus group concludes. This required the researcher to take detailed notes during the focus group and to maintain after. This study applied Esterberg's (2002) method of first developing an analysis and then beginning with looking for patterns in the text through the open coding process in which the researcher will not develop any coding scheme in advance but instead seek out specific themes that are present within the data. Esterberg (2002) claimed that the researcher should avoid developing any codes in advance while partaking in open coding to avoid imposing a sense of what the researcher believes should be present in the data results. The researcher developed several potential themes through this process.

Using a thematic analysis, developed by Owen (1984), the researcher looked specifically within the data for recurrence, repetition and forcefulness. The data was analyzed for official themes and subthemes within the data. The researcher began with reviewing the transcriptions with Research Question 1 in mind and highlighted any information that was pertinent to answering Research Question 1. The researcher then conducted the same process for Research Questions 2 and 3. Once the data was properly coded the researcher analyzed the data according to recurrence and repetition and placed them into the proper thematic categories. Once all main themes were uncovered, the codes were further broken down into sub-themes that allowed an in-depth look at the information.

Results

The focus groups generated five different themes with thirteen different subthemes that answered the three research questions presented in this study. Relevant themes arose from each participant's individual perceptions of the magazine and the ways in which they were persuaded or thought that the magazine could be persuasive. The themes yielded from Research Question 1 included the perceived quality of the magazine and the perceived ideology of the magazine. Themes yielded then from Research Question two included persuasion of the magazine, knowledge of the magazine and greater organization at hand, Islamophobia concerns and partisan ties.

RQ1: What is the general perception of university students to the terrorist recruiting magazine, *the Dabiq*?

The purpose of Research Question 1 was to gather general perceptions of university students to the Islamic State recruiting and propaganda magazine, *the Dabiq* and to study for repetitive and prevalent opinions throughout the groups. Two themes and seven subthemes occurred as a result of the study. Refer to Table 1 for thematic results of Research Question 1.

Table 1

University Student Perceptions of the Dabiq *Magazine*

Perceived Quality of the Magazine

Subtheme #1: It looks like a journal

Subtheme #2: They look like real people

Perceived Ideology of the Magazine

Subtheme #1: According to the Quran

Subtheme #2: Welcome to the club

Subtheme #3: Is that a gun?

Subtheme #4: Public Enemy No. 1: the United States

Quality of the Magazine

The quality of the magazine was reported most frequently within the focus groups in each circumstance, without being prompted by the researcher. Overall, the participants were surprised by the quality of the magazine as a whole, regardless of their knowledge of the true intent of the magazine, but were aware of the biases within the magazine. There were many comments made by participants that related to the overall quality of the magazine as a whole.

Professional. All participants believed that the magazine was done extraordinarily well in terms of professional quality of the material. None of the researcher questions dealt with perceptions on the professionalism of the magazine, all comments containing comments on the professionalism were from the participants. One participant, Mark, offered this comment that "if you're just flipping through it and not really reading the headlines or anything, you'd think it was a Time magazine."

The term "Time magazine" as a comparison to *the Dabiq* was made multiple times in three different focus groups. The subjects overall through verbal and nonverbal cues appeared very impressed with the magazine in terms of professionalism. The adjectives, "smooth," "intelligent," "journal," "scientific publication," and "professional media" were all used throughout the focus groups.

Some participants, however, were aware of the dutiful and effective media arm of the Islamic State, which contributed to their understanding of the professional quality. While participants questioned whether or not a terrorist organization could create such a document, another participant, Riley, pointed out: "It's also entirely possible, given what I've heard of ISIS' media arm, that there are people that could actually make these things [referring to *the Dabiq* magazine]."

Most participants, however, did acknowledge that this perception of such a professional magazine took place while they were just flipping through the pages, and if they were solely looking at the headlines and the layout of the magazine. They clarified that the same perception would not necessarily take place when looking at the articles and photos in detail.

Humanizing. The participants noted that the magazine made the Islamic State look incredibly humanizing. Each group independently pointed out pages 26 and 29, which contained photos of members of the Islamic State helping out in their respective communities. Participants overall reported seeing the magazine as a kinder and gentler representation of the Islamic State. One participant offered this perspective after confirming that the magazine was published by the Islamic State: "It was incredibly humanizing. The things that they do I mean it's just totally a different vantage point of them than what we usually get."

One participant pointed out that, "they don't come out guns blazing," and another that "it really romanticizes a lot of the stuff that's really going on." The participants were generally surprised that the magazine was so moderate once they learned that it was put out by a terrorist organization.

Each perspective of the magazine being humanizing to the Islamic State was stated after the magazines intent and publishing had been either confirmed or if the group had built a strong consensus that the magazine was Islamic State material. Individuals that did not conclude the magazine was affiliated with the Islamic State did not make this observation.

Perceived Ideology of the Magazine

The groups also pointed out major ideological components of the magazine. They reported a lot of ideological components that often differed that their own, or that differed from their expectations of the magazine.

According to the Quran. The participants' findings of religion within the magazine was primarily driven by the magazine's use of the Quran. The topic of the Quran came up frequently within the discussion and was relatively well known by participants in each focus group. The participants were able to identify right away that the magazine was religiously focused, often times even before that they had established that the magazine was published by the Islamic State.

Participants commented many times on the frequent use of the Quran and the prevalent use of the word "Allah" in the text, with comment such as: "You can see they're quoting the Quran." Another participant, Kathryn additionally discussed the prevalent and frequent use of religion in the magazine: "There's a lot of talk of Allah. And their religion is on like every single page. They're very focused on that."

Many participants contrasted the religion that was apparent in the magazine to their own religion. This tended to prompt a feeling of misunderstanding and an inability to comprehend the Islam religion. Jackson, who sought to discover these differences, stated: "It shouldn't be your God promising that you enslave people, break crosses and ruin other religions. I don't know it just seems so skewed and they believe it so truthfully that it's just amazing to me. I can't wrap my head around it."

And he later asked, "if you're a religion of peace, why would you post stuff like that?" His fellow focus group member Ethan however brought up before learning the true intent and publisher of the magazine that: "I tried to go into it with sort of like trying to hear what they had to say and if that's like their religion; in Christianity you'd say "our Father who art in heaven." That's just theirs. Who am I to judge them on that?"

Some, but not many participants recognized the use of the Muslim religion and attributed the religious component to the Islamic State having published the magazine. Lucas, a participant in the fourth focus group concluded the use of the Muslim religion and Allah as a rationale that the magazine was a form of ISIS publishing: "So they're basically saying that by saying his sake the Islamic State is fighting for Allah. So it's saying that they're representing Allah so automatically that tells me that this is pro-ISIS publishing and that this is their version of Islam. Which is, I think we'd all say is pretty perverted. To me so yeah I guess it does seem to be pro-ISIS."

The participants that built consensus that the magazine was published by the Islamic State commented that the use of their religion, the Quran and Allah was a strategic, persuasive strategy by the Islamic State. One participant stated that "they're really pro-jihad and they just try to reinforce it through the use of the Quran," and "to them that's the truth and they're just funneling that through the whole thing," and "I feel like they try to justify and support their arguments and opinions with the quote from the Quran." One participant had even stated: "I just think it's really fascinating that they start with praise be to Allah. Like I think that shows their whole drive behind everything. That's all about all of those words."

Most comments about the religious component of the magazine occurred before the participants confirmed the true intent of the magazine. Yet, the religious qualities were prevalently noted throughout the focus groups.

Welcome to the club. Participants in each focus group mentioned pages 28 and 29 of the magazine, discussed earlier in this paper. While the participants often found this section of the magazine showed the Islamic State in a more positive light, and often humanized the members of the Islamic State, they also found that it made the Islamic State seem much more welcoming and open to future recruits. The word "positive" was found numerous times throughout the focus groups. Lucas offered:

> This is how they get their word out and they do it through propaganda. So specifically on page twenty-nine I think they do a good job of putting out that propaganda by showing kind of the compassion to the folks that would read it. They are talking about cancer treatment for children, street cleaning services, a care home for the elderly. So basically they're making it look as if the Islamic State is doing good things. They're helping local communities and making people's lives better when in reality they're using it to recruit people into their military operation.

Thomas noted that the openness and welcoming characteristic of this particular section of the magazine could potentially be attractive to potential recruits outside in America: "Just trying to glorify not the Islamic State, like the terror and ISIS and those kind of groups. Make it sound like it's all - everything's good and rosey over there - so it's appealing to Americans."

Many participants reported being somewhat surprised that these types of photos were included in the magazine. There was an additional kindness element to this section of the magazine, according to participants.

Participants pointed out that often these pictures showed a strong juxtaposition to their typical perception of the Islamic State. One participant mentioned that "this is like one half of the coin, but it's the positive half." Another participant, Jason talked about this fact in that: "I think it eases you into seeing ISIS as more than just a bloodthirsty religious fanatic. You have quite touching pictures that seem to be legit, not staged. Those are nice things so in that sense you're going to look at it in a positive light with at least positive connotations."

Kathryn talked about this juxtaposition in the sense that this part of the magazine showed a much happier Islamic State than perceptions would normally provide:

> I found it interesting that like all of the pictures were like happier. Like the men are hugging and even when they're driving their cars with the guns in there it's very relaxed and you don't see them doing any violence it's like "we're just riding down the road with a gun, that's completely normal.

The comments made by the participants led to somewhat of a glorification of the members of the Islamic State to potential recruits. Jason also discussed the attractiveness of the current members:

"It's like you see them working, everything's structure and building. It looks like these guys got it going on they're great, they're moving they're forward they've got momentum they're sincere. That would be appealing I think."

Though there were a lot of surprising positive and happy moments portrayed in the magazine, as reported by the participants, there was additionally a few instances of violence that caught their attention.

Is that a gun? This subtheme elicited minimal comments compared to the other subthemes, but was still a significant perception of the magazine. The violence perception was also only acknowledged by groups that had confirmed or built consensus among them that the magazine was published by the Islamic State. Sarah stated that she thought "[the magazine] shows the anger that comes with passion."

Thomas additionally pointed out that there were many guns and grenades present in the magazine. Jackson compared what he saw in the magazine with what his typical day to day experiences are like:

You see the guys with the cloths over their face and they're all with their guns and their camo and whatever and you don't see any of that here. You see just like an intimidating figure with a gun.

Public Enemy Number 1: the United States. The participants noticed very quickly that the United States was illustrated as a great enemy within the magazine. Some, like Lucas theorized that by the Islamic State making the United States the enemy, it would be easier to rally potential recruits to their side:

> I'm thinking that's the immediate reason for it so they're trying to put it across to your regular average everyday civilians in those countries to just show how much the West is corrupting Islam, their way of life in these countries, trying to blame the West, specifically America, for every problem possible. Which, I think it resonates with a lot of individuals at this point within these countries because all they've known, a lot of them are young now and a lot of them have grown up just seeing Iraq in a state of disrepair and the Middle East in a state of disrepair largely caused by the war and all they see are American soldiers in there and you know there have been plenty of acts of corruption within Iraq by the US military that's unfortunately happened and so I think that, you know, it's an easy target for ISIS to pin it on Americans at this point and the West so I think that that resonates with civilians.

Participants also pointed out how the magazine is set to perceive American leaders. Jackson stated that:

> I also noticed too like in all of these pictures anyone American, they don't look very happy like they're in a good moment. Like in both of these you see [President Obama] is almost like distraught and said so I don't know if the pictures are like an emotional point of his presentation. . . . I don't know it seems like they're definitely like almost subliminally trying to just make you not see any happiness or good in us.

Ethan, in the same focus group as Jackson also agreed that the magazine attempts to draw United States leadership in a negative light and stated:

> Well, like we were saying about the pictures and stuff how it tries to make the US either look weak or overbearing like there's a pic of George W and Obama back here and they both sort of have like this confused look on their face. Whereas when you see pictures of Obama or George Bush in our media they're confident and arguing a speech or something and they just look like they're in control and know what they're doing.

One participant, Elise, in particular held strong to the claim that this was not a terrorist magazine, even taking into account the negative perceptions of the West in the magazine. She points out that just because a group negatively perceives Western culture does not necessarily directly correlate with being a terrorist organization:

> I look at this and I see that they're trying to point out the negatives of Western influence in the Middle East. I mean there's two sides to every story so I can't say that this is, like they're just trying to paint them in a

> bad picture because it is a bad picture like it's a bad thing that happened. . . I still don't think this is like a terrorist magazine.

Some participants did however point out that some of the mentions of the West and the leadership in the United States in particular was more objective than they would have anticipated it to be. Mark realized that: "I was confused that they just put like his words in there like they didn't really spin it and I was kind of confused as to why you know just throwing that out there like, what does that contribute other than more text?"

Participants reported a variety of perceptions about the magazine in general, both before and after confirming and/or building a consensus on the real intent and publisher of the magazine. Their perceptions revolved around two dominant themes: acknowledging the quality and recognizing the ideology. Participants thought the quality of the magazine was professional, provided an element of humanization to the group, yet appeared biased. They also determined their perception of the ideology of the magazine being very religious based, kind and welcoming but violent and recognizing the United States as the enemy. Contrastingly, Research Question 2 looked to determine if participants were overall persuaded by the magazine and if they could determine the true intent and publisher of the magazine.

RQ2: To what extent are university students using the central route of persuasion persuaded by the images and/or texts present in *the Dabiq*?
RQ3: To what extent are university students using the peripheral route of persuasion persuaded by the images and/or texts present in *the Dabiq?*

Research Question 2, in contrast to the first research question, aimed to gather if and how participants were persuaded by the Dabiq magazine. The second research question elicited three themes and six sub themes. Refer to Table 2 for the relevant themes for Research Question 2.

Table 2

University Student Perceptions of Persuasiveness to the Dabiq *Magazine*

Overall Persuasiveness of the Magazine

- Subtheme #1: Elaboration Likelihood Model
- Subtheme #2: Hey, I recognize that thing
- Subtheme #3: It's not me, but it definitely could be you

Knowledge of the Issue at Hand

- Subtheme #1: Who wrote this?
- Subtheme #2: Who is the target audience?
- Subtheme #3: What is the purpose of this?

The Role of Islamophobia

The extent to which participants were persuaded by the Dabiq magazine is at the crux of this study. This magazine can only be successful in terms of recruitment if it can be effectively persuasive to its target audience.

Overall Perception Persuasiveness of the Magazine

Overall, most students involved in the focus groups were not persuaded by the messages presented in *the Dabiq* magazine and were, in most cases, able to identify the magazine as either terrorist propaganda or some sort of terrorist recruitment method before it was confirmed by the researcher. This was not true of all participants, however.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model. This study had intended to look at the differences in the central and peripheral routes of persuasion according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model of Communication. However, results demonstrated very few differences in the way that the participants studied under the central and peripheral routes

perceived the magazine. When focus groups came out right away and guessed or eventually came to a consensus that the magazine was a form of terrorist recruiting material, the rest of the discussion operated under that assumption until the purpose and publisher of the magazine was confirmed by the researcher, regardless of their model of persuasion. Likewise, if a focus group made it to the very end without coming to a common consensus, they also operated their entire discussion under that assumption.

The average percentage of participants who had mentioned that the magazine was recruitment material by the end of the study was 75% of participants in whole. All three central route focus groups contained 100% of members mentioning that the magazine was somehow related to recruitment by a terrorist organization, and the two peripheral route focus groups contained the 25% and 50% participant knowledge of the true purpose of the magazine. However, all participants were asked for a "final answer" as to what they think the magazine was used for *before* they were told the true intent of the magazine, which is when they could report what they thought the magazine was used for. Therefore, the persuasion route under which they were studied did not have an impact on whether or not they thought the material was related to recruitment of a terrorist organization, as all participants were asked the "final answer" question under the confirmed knowledge of the magazine.

Hey, I recognize that. The magazine was recognizable to most participants overall. There were many factors within the magazine that made it more recognizable to participants, such as the ISIS flag, the language used or the headlines. In fact, all but one of the focus groups mentioned the word "flag" as one way that they had identified the magazine as being somehow related to the Islamic State.

Three out of the five focus groups had mentioned the term "ISIS" in the first fifteen seconds of the discussion. The two others followed and had mentioned it within the first five minutes, albeit not immediately. The three that mentioned it right away did explicitly state that the magazine was somehow related to the Islamic State, though didn't mention the perceived purpose. And though their group members may have disagreed later down the line, the very first lines of three out of five groups consisted of declaring that this magazine was somehow linked with the Islamic State.

One participant came into the discussion with knowledge of the magazine, Lucas said:

My assumption that this was ISIS is because I saw *Dabiq* and I was like "aha!" because I read a Wikipedia article on the national publishing of ISIS which I know that they have and so I went "*Dabiq*, that's it"! If I can remember correctly. So I went off of that assumption so every time I saw the Islamic State, it reinforced it.

Yet, even with his prior knowledge talk of potential Islamophobia (that will be discussed later) was enough to make Lucas second guess himself. Shortly after the aforementioned quote, Lucas continued:

> Now there *is* a rebellious force within Syria that's fighting against the Syrian rebels that are fighting against the government and now ISIS that I mean technically this could be them because I do not know 100% that, you know, as much of a hunch that I have, that that is actually the ISIS flag. I'm not 100% sure on that and I'm second guessing myself about the title. And so that would also explain why you're seeing so much pictures of war, so many guns and what not because if this is the Syrian rebels than that's really all they're doing they're trying to defend themselves they're trying to defend their people against the Syrian government. So that makes me you know question myself a little bit.

There were a couple of people within the focus groups that seemed to have changed their minds at some point during the discussion. Similarly, Jenna came to the same conclusion:

> Initially I would have said it's related to terrorism but now I don't know. Just like with this letter, I don't know. I feel like there is this preconceived notion though that anything revolving around the Middle East is always terrorist because they don't like Western expansion don't like Americans and there's always that fear.

Elise typically held the dissenting opinion of her entire group, maintaining until the end that the magazine could potentially still be just an informative magazine from a different country:

> I see ISIS is mentioned a couple of times but I don't think necessarily it's in favor of I think it's just a magazine from a different country. I think it's interesting to read articles from their point of view especially the ones that concern like our political figures and things like that. And their thoughts on what the west is doing to try and promote themselves in the Middle East.

Though participants tended to conclude very quickly that the magazine somehow involved the Islamic State, they all determined this at different times during their own individual reading of the magazine. For example, Thomas testifies that:

> The first cover I was kind of like halfway there. I was like maybe it's just a foreign magazine maybe it's - I had kind of that ISIS feeling but the more I read… I thought it was a little too much to just be like a Middle Eastern magazine or something.

Nathan similarly says that:

> I wouldn't go off the assumption right away, like I honestly started reading it and I couldn't figure out I didn't think that this was, I thought this was honestly like an informative magazine about the state of Islam. I just thought it was kind of like you know just informing what they believe in and what type of message they want to spread.

Overall, by the end of the discussion there was at least one participant in each group that recognized the material as Islamic State rhetoric or propaganda, or at the very related to the Islamic State in some way. There were a few who maintained their stance that the magazine wasn't related to terrorism until the very end, but the vast majority recognized some component of the Islamic State or what they perceived to be terrorist organization material.

It's not me, but it definitely could be you. The participants who were studied under the peripheral route that believed the magazine to be a terrorist recruiting magazine, and all participants studied under the central route after they were informed of the true intent then switched to describing how persuasive the magazine is as a whole and who would be most persuaded by the magazine.

There were many participants that right off the bat deemed it non-persuasive to them, such as Thomas who said "I didn't really buy into it when we were reading it." Yet some participants were still surprised when they learned that it was Islamic State recruiting material.

The participants discussed that "to the right mind it can be persuasive," and that they believe a person has to be in a proper mindset to be able to actively receive and process this information. Ethan stated:

> I think for someone who is swayed easily and is somewhat compulsive I can see them reading this and being able to jump ship. But I don't think anyone who's educated and knows both sides would just hop ship by reading this.

Sarah, likewise agreed that there was a mindset that a person would have to be persuaded by *the Dabiq*:

> I think that maybe this would be most effective if a party has kind of made up their mind. And this could just be their final push to really join their army or really join in and make a difference in those situations than just being in agreement.

Kathryn contributed that she thought there was a specific population of people that were likely not going to be persuaded by the material: "I don't know if it would be persuasive for like people who are well educated because I feel like if you're well educated you'd be more well-rounded and look at the different perspectives."

Hunter, contrastingly, offered another perspective that even if you typically would buy into some of the ideas in this magazine, that some of the ideas illustrated in the Dabiq may still turn a person off to their cause:

> It doesn't seem that if I'm like a radical person who's very angry it doesn't seem like I'm going to care about building bridges or curing cancer. That seems pretty low on my priority list

Some participants stated and explained why they weren't personally persuaded by the magazine. They explained a myriad of reasons, such as Logan saying:

> [The violence] would have thrown me out. Because I look at some of the awful things that our military has done as much as we don't like to think about it we did stuff in Vietnam that we shouldn't have done.

The discussion in one of the focus groups then stemmed to Muslim people in America possibly being persuaded by the ideas in the magazine. Lucas showed great concern to this sentiment by saying:

> My worry is that for somebody that's not me and somebody who looks at this and does not know that this is an ISIS publication they might actually look at this and come to the same conclusion as we're coming to but out of a position of ignorance and the fact that they think that this is just it's a random publication they don't know it's the ISIS publication and they look at it and they actually see the good things and they see cancer treatment for children and street cleaning services and they make the conclusion that these are probably terrorists not out of the knowledge that it's actually an ISIS publication but simply out of the fact that they're seeing Arab individuals that are Muslim. I would assume that they also conclude off of that that this is automatically terrorists.

Lucas also later concluded that:

> I guess I would disagree what Muslims in America would find this attractive. I think Muslims in America would find this, I think they're the demographic that would find this the least attractive. I think that they would be very scared by this publishing and I think you know with the unfortunate amount of battering that the Muslim population has gotten in the United States.

Participants were able to reasonably infer and support their assumptions with general arguments as to who and what type of person could potentially find this material persuasive. No academic arguments were made by any participant.

Knowledge of the Issue at Hand

Whether or not a participant was persuaded essentially came down to the amount of knowledge they seemed to have on international relations in terrorist organizations. Those who claimed to be more oblivious to the issue or claim to "not know what they're talking about" were usually not those who had perceived the material right away as a terrorist organization recruiting material. There were multiple attempts to guess or suggest who the publisher and author, the target audience and the purpose of the magazine were.

Who wrote this? The ideas that participants had about the potential author or publisher of the magazine could all be categorized into three different ideas: it was definitely published by ISIS, it's dangerous to assume that it is published by ISIS, or there is a need for more information. Before revealing the true intent of the magazine the researcher consistently asked who the participants thought was the publisher and the target audience of the magazine; this data is derived from the responses to that particular question.

The most common response was that the magazine was published by the Islamic State. Most of the statements were made as single sentence, point blank statements, such as: "ISIS because they want to recruit." and "This is ISIS publishing." Others, like that of Caden, were less certain: "It could be trying to find people or like a recruiting tool, possibly. I don't know that for certain or at all really. It's just kind of an idea but I do think it's put out by the Islamic State."

The second most common response was that it is either not Islamic State material, or that we should not assume that the magazine is Islamic State material. Elise concluded:

> I can't say one way or another but I just think it's really dangerous of us to think here especially where we are in our culture, I think it really speaks to islamophobia when we see this and it might just be a foreign country who's scared and confused and people are dying there and it's terrifying. I think it's very dangerous to be able to look at this and immediately think terrorist. But I could be very wrong and it could be a terrorist thing, I don't know.

Jenna similarly agreed: "We generalize a whole place and say that they don't like us or that this is terrorism."

Lastly, the least common response from participants was a desire for more information before coming to a conclusion. Only two people in the focus groups wanted more information, and even that particular participant eventually concluded that it was Islamic State material. Lucas' statement is as follows:

> I think honestly if I didn't have the assumption that the title was like "oh that's the publishing," I would still want to look at another page to make sure that this is actually ISIS publishing because, you know who knows, maybe you're looking at two pages where this anti-ISIS publishing is, you know, giving an example of the kind of propaganda that ISIS is actually putting out. And so the specific page that you're reading is the page that is ISIS but is just thrown in there an example from the publication of the bad things that ISIS and propaganda that ISIS is putting out. But I think I'd still want to look at another page I feel.

Elise agreed, after the true intent of the magazine was confirmed by the researcher to her:

> I think we should always try to check our privilege with that and like not make an opinion either way right away and like wait and read through it for real. Read through it for real and not make uneducated decisions and assumptions on things even - it is a terrorist magazine, now that we know - but I still think it's important to be wary about both sides if that makes sense. Be wary about your privilege and be wary about what's happening in the world. Just not jumping into things too quick I guess.

In summary, the majority of participants were able to come to a conclusion without asking questions or reporting the need or desire for additional information.

Who is the target audience? Likewise, the perceptions of a potential target audience for this magazine can be split into two distinct categories as well: vulnerable or mentally weak people, or those with affiliations to the Muslim religion.

The most discussed category of potential recruits was vulnerable or mentally weak people, who the participants believed could be more susceptible to the beliefs expressed in the magazine. Aiden was a strong proponent of this, saying:

> It might just be that you're young and vulnerable and you just think that this world sucks - the world that you're living in sucks - and you're looking for some change and then all of a sudden you turn to, or you pledge your support to the Islamic state on page twenty-one and then in a couple pages you're curing cancer and then somethings getting better. I think they're going after the same person just these people are few and far between that you have to be I guess so unattached from what's going on in the world and around you.

Mark concurred and expanded on who the potential target audience was:

> I guess you kind of see that like maybe people who think violence is the answer this would appeal to them. People who, I don't know, I don't want to say people who have a rough background but people who have that tendency to anger issues or things like that. I guess maybe that plays into it like yes they'd be attractive to the violence aspect but then they could also rationalize it with the compassion aspect. So maybe it's like yes this is good and you know we're doing all these other good things too so it's like okay to do these things that require murdering.

The other common topic discussed was whether or not this magazine could be targeting those with religious affiliations to the Muslim faith, which was only talked about briefly. Riley claimed that:

> [People like us wouldn't be a target audience] because odds are we're *not* Muslim and odds are we're *not* in a place that has a large Muslim population that would ever have the opportunity to get this material. Whether we're in other places in larger groups of Muslim.. They would be the target market. I don't see us being the target market. Even in reality with the list the CIA has put out of people who have joined ISIS, it's not Americans. It's not even Canadians.

The next comment from the same focus group as Riley was another participant, Sean that said:

> "It's got to be people who believe in what the Quran says." There were others, such as Lucas, as discussed earlier, that thought people of the Muslim faith would be a group of people that would be offended and absolutely not persuaded by the ideas in the magazine. Yet, Lucas' was the only dissenting opinion that this magazine was not possibly targeted towards people of the Muslim faith in the least.

What is the purpose of this? Lastly, participants were asked to reflect on what they thought the purpose of this magazine was, before the true intent was revealed. The three main categories of comments were that it was terrorist propaganda, recruiting material or that the purpose is unknown or not affiliated with the Islamic State at all.

The most common belief was that the magazine was meant for propaganda purposes. This also included publishing the magazine in efforts to persuade people to take them seriously as a terrorist organization, and to gain support or followers for the organization, such as what Caden said:

> I think it's the same purpose that we publish Time, because Time is an American-skewed magazine. They're probably just trying to get their message out to what they want their people to know.

Other comments just consisted of believing that the magazine was "ISIS or Islamic State propaganda." This is also where it was mentioned a lot that participants thought the magazine resembled Time magazine, or another professional journal or publication that we would find in the United States. Another thought by Jason was: "I feel like it's a low key liberal satire, not satire, but just to prove the point of how easy it is to make something, propagandize it."

Aside from the feelings of the magazine being propaganda and satire, there were also statements about it truly being for recruiting purposes. Similar to before, there were those who put it very succinctly and simply said that the magazine was intended for recruiting purposes, yet Thomas expanded on it: "Probably recruitment, propaganda would be my guess. Just trying to glorify not the Islamic State, like the terror and ISIS and those kind of groups."

The last dominant perception in the conversation was either that the purpose of the magazine was unknown, or by any means it was not connected to the Islamic State. Elise, the biggest proponent of this argument said: "It might just be a foreign country who's scared and confused and people are dying there and it's terrifying. I think it's very dangerous to be able to look at this and immediately think terrorist."

While the vast majority of participants suspected the true intent of the magazine before it was confirmed, there were a varying array of responses from around the table at each focus group. Participants who spoke key buzzwords about the Islamic State, such as "the Caliphate" or were knowledgeable about some of the scenery in the magazine such as "the Vatican" were typically more accurate in their prediction about the true intent and purpose of the magazine. Similarly, participants who knew various prominent, but not obvious United States figureheads either explicitly mentioned or implied to reference in the magazine such as Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel were additionally more accurate in their prediction about the true intent and purpose of the magazine.

Islamophobia. Many examples throughout the results mentioned so far have focused around the role and hopeful dispelling of potential Islamophobia within the reactions to the magazine. Participants were split on this issue in how much sensitivity should be portrayed towards the document. Some participants, such as Lucas took great thought to decide if he was really sure that the magazine was Islamic State material:

> Like how do you know that this is for sure the official publishing of ISIS, you know. And so I think I don't know I think people would have a lot of second guesses if you ask that question in a lot of situations. So it is making me think like "wow am I actually concluding this 100% or making a mistake?"

Others like Thomas thought that a delicate balance was instead the right course of action:

> I feel like we should be sensitive to an extent because not all people follow Islam or do intend to be terrorists but in the same point you have to take in national security at some point and then like you can go in with a clean slate and analyze it for yourself but if you analyze it and read it and you start thinking that it's okay to think that because it is an extremist publication it's okay to realize that and say it. You can't just ignore it.

The discussion regarding Islamophobia has been prevalent in the results thus far and will commonly be a center of discussion in future conversations regarding terrorist recruitment.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to determine if a prime population of terrorist recruit targets was susceptible to the new era of terrorist recruiting material, which in this particular study consisted of a digitally available recruitment and propaganda magazine. Each participant was unique in terms of knowledge of terrorist organizations, experience, political affiliation and gender, but clear thematic elements of the study still emerged.

RQ1: What is the general perception of university students to the terrorist recruiting magazine, *the Dabiq*?

Two subthemes emerged as a result of the discussion revolving around general perceptions of the magazine: perceptions of quality, and perceptions of ideology. Each perception of the magazine was able to fall under one of the two categories.

The Dabiq is a very new method of terrorist recruiting of which there is very little academic research. While research on terrorist recruitment and propaganda may prove to be effective in looking at overarching trends of believability and susceptibility to ideas, FBI Director Comey (2015) and many other scholars in the field of international terrorism remind us that the Islamic State and its propaganda extension *the Dabiq* are unlike any terrorist recruitment propaganda that this nation has seen before. The fact that a digital publican such as this is a new sort of recruitment assists in concluding what Ozren et al (2014) did in that there is really one overarching or particular way to which prospective terrorists are recruited.

The magazine overall appeared very attractive to focus group participants. There were multiple reports by participants that if they not read the actual text in the magazine, it appears just like a *Time* magazine or some sort of other journal or publication. On the superficial level, the magazine was quite attractive.

Once the initial perception of the magazine being attractive wore off, participants realized what sorts of tactics and strategies were being employed in the magazine. Participants noted that the magazine was incredibly humanizing towards the Islamic State, if they were to come to the consensus that the magazine was published by the Islamic State. They were even often surprised to find that there were photos of the Islamic State doing activities aside from murdering people. However, the participants also caught on quickly to the pro-Islamic State presence within the magazine and were quick to acknowledge the bias before they got too quickly into the magazine.

This was not the case for every participant, however. Depending on the knowledge level of the individual participant, a few reported that they did not believe that this was the publishing of the Islamic State and that instead if could have been the publication of various other groups and potentially nations.

The participants in the study easily differentiated qualities of this magazine that appeared to be different than what they believe and experience every day in their lives. Some of the first things that were spoken in the focus groups in this study were the emphasis on religion that this magazine portrays, and participants were quick to identify the differences between the religion expressed on the paper and the religion that they experience each day.

In this way, the ideology of the magazine was quickly recognized. They overall found the religious components of the magazine to dominate, and even sought to question why there would be so many mentions of "Allah" and religion in a publication like this. They found that the ideology of the magazine was a mix of welcoming and kind gestures while also paired with a few violent escapades. The study participants also recognized quickly that the United States was clearly identified as an enemy of the Islamic State, or whoever they believed was publishing the magazine at the time.

Overall, the participants were able to for the most part, easily identify key characteristics of the magazine and what the magazine essentially represented. They were able to recognize that the magazine was purposefully professional, humanizing of Islamic State members and biased as a persuasive, propaganda magazine.

RQ2: To what extent are university students using the central route of persuasion persuaded by the images and/or texts present in *the Dabiq*?
RQ3: To what extent are university students using the peripheral route of persuasion persuaded by the images and/or texts present in *the Dabiq?*

The second research aimed to understand if and how university students were persuaded by the ideas, images or texts in *the Dabiq* magazine. Three major themes occurred as a result of the line of questioning under this research question.

Generally, these university students did not seem to be persuaded by the ideas, images or texts prevalent in *the Dabiq*. There were again occasional dissenting opinions that were hesitant to believe that the magazine was a publication of the Islamic State, but even those opinions still did not go far enough to prove to be persuaded by the images, texts or messages in the magazine. Instead, there was a slight notion of having to defend the Middle Eastern culture from being consistently stereotyped as a culture of extreme terrorism.

A few participants made sure to draw the line between Arabic and Islamic culture and extremist terrorism, reminding the rest of the group in their cases that a connection to the Arab and Muslim world does not mean a direct correlation to the terrorist world.

There was little differentiation between the central and peripheral routes of persuasion within the focus groups. The focus groups had similar comments on the quality of the magazine, the ideology of the magazine and the overall persuasiveness of the magazine regardless of whether they were being studied under the central or the peripheral route of persuasion.

Instead of being persuaded themselves, the participants identified factors that could be successful in persuading others.. Overall, they concluded that vulnerable people would probably be more likely to be persuaded by this material and some participants mentioned that less educated people would also be more willing to be persuaded by this sort of magazine. Current research tells us that a population of people that are likely to be recruited by terrorists are young, educated, middle class people (Bakker, 2006; Ghosh, 2013; Krueger, 2007; Mastors & Deffenbaugh, 2007). Yet, a superficial analysis of some of buzzwords and names mentioned by participants that would make them seem slightly more or less uneducated than the rest compared to how accurate their perception of the magazine was may lend to conclude that the more educated and aware a person is, the less likely they may be to believe some of the ideas in the magazine. Current research only spoke to the likelihood of a terrorist organization recruiting a prospective recruit, not the perception of the potential recruit to that material or method, so the data from this particular study would not be used to contradict that of any previous study.

Aside from the persuasion of the magazine, the participants had a difficult time determining who the potential target of this magazine could be. Gambhir (2014) claimed that one of the intended audiences of *the Dabiq* is potential fighters, taken together with the data from the aforementioned scholars that claim likely terrorist recruits are young, educated and middle class could draw a very strong reason to believe that at least one target of this propaganda magazine are characteristically similar to the very young participants in this study.
This could potentially speak to a dangerous lack of self-awareness in university students when it comes to terrorist recruiting. Should young, educated and middle class people be completely unaware that their population of people with similar demographic characteristics is a prime target for terrorist recruitment they may never be able to counteract it in the unfortunate event that it were to be attempted. While most participants could guess at least close to the publisher and the purpose of the magazine, the same logic and argument could be applied to some participants being completely unaware of what the magazine is used for and who it is published by.
The role of potential Islamophobia in the case of this magazine in particular could also raise future concerns for the community.

A very viable concern is that a magazine like this could easily be classified as terrorist materials right off of the bat, but equally concerning is that a magazine like this could fail to be classified as terrorist materials quick enough to counteract it. The question then begs to be asked as to which scenario is the more dangerous of the two: classifying the magazine as terrorist recruiting material when it isn't, therefore alienating an entire population people residing in the United States that had no reason to be alienated, or ignoring the evidence of it truly being a terrorist magazine and allowing it to be seen by many pairs of eyes, therefore placing potential recruits in the path of danger to being susceptible to the ideas in the magazine. This is a question to which there is no clear answer.

Limitations

There are a myriad of factors that serve as limitations to this study, the greatest of which being a small population that was sampled and that the results cannot be generalized for all young, educated and middle class students beyond the population sampled in this study. Additionally, the sample studied clear severely lacked in great

diversity of age and knowledge level of international affairs, a vast majority of the participants here appeared very knowledge on international terrorism. Time factors and resources also serve as potential limitations to this study, as participants were not given enough time to fully read and comprehend the magazine as a whole.

Future Research

Future research would include interviewing a greater population of people inside the same age group, education level and socioeconomic status, but that came from different knowledge levels of foreign relations and international terrorism. It would also be worthwhile to study the role of partisan, politically motivated ties to responses in the data regarding perceptions of the magazine. On a superficial level, there may have appeared to be some partisan ties within this study, however far too few to draw any substantial conclusions.

As terrorist recruitment advances and becomes more sophisticated, it is important to not only understand the ways in which they are recruiting their members and what populations of people they are continuing to recruit, but additionally how those people they are likely to recruit are perceiving that recruiting method or material. Without understanding the thought processes of those receiving the material, any action taken is just hopeful, lucky guessing, whereas any counterterrorism actions would be much more effective if they were more targeted towards the exact problem. Cutting off a terrorist organization source of recruitment is the first step, and though outwardly miniscule, it could change the whole nature of the game.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Question & Debriefing Protocol

Central Route Focus Groups:

Each participant within each focus group will be given a copy of *the Dabiq* magazine without the cover page attached and asked to page through it to become familiar with it. The cover page will not be included in the initial assessment of the magazine because the cover of the magazine will be crucial to deciphering the differences between the central route and the peripheral route of persuasion in this instance.

1. What are your general first impressions of the magazine?
a. *Probe*: what do you think of the layout?
b. *Probe:* what do you think of the size of the magazine?
c. *Probe:* what do you think of the pictures?
2. What are your general impressions regarding this photo (the researcher will choose the same photo within the magazine to show to both groups)?
3. What are your general impressions regarding this article(the researcher will choose the same article within the magazine to show to both groups)?
4. Do you have any idea what this magazine could be used for?
a. Probe: do you have any ideas as to who would have written this magazine?

After this question and discussion, participants will be informed of the true purpose behind the intent of the magazine; including who the magazine was created by and where it is typically dispersed. They will be given a new copy that now includes the cover page. There will be a short debrief on the purpose of the research and why they were not informed of the magazine's true intent in the first place.

5. Would you want to read more into any of these articles?
a. *Probe*: do any of the titles stand out to you?
6. What photos in the magazine are interesting to you?
a. *Probe*: why?
b. *Probe*: are some more interesting than others?
7. Are you persuaded by any of the ideas in this magazine?
8. What is the most attractive thing about this magazine?
a. *Probe*: what would make you want to read deeper into this magazine?
9. Do you have any idea what this magazine could be used for?
a. *Probe*: do you have any ideas as to who would have written this magazine?

At the conclusion of the focus group questioning, participants will receive the full debriefing that is included in this proposal. The debriefing will provide follow up contact information and places for discussion, if desired by the participants.

Peripheral Route Focus Groups

Each participant within each focus group will be given a copy of *the Dabiq* magazine without the cover page attached and asked to page through it to become familiar with it. The cover page will not be included in the initial assessment of the magazine because the cover of the magazine will be crucial to deciphering the differences between the central route and the peripheral route of persuasion in this instance.

1. What are your general first impressions of the magazine?
a. *Probe*: what do you think of the layout?
b. *Probe:* what do you think of the size of the magazine?
c. *Probe:* what do you think of the pictures?
2. What are your general impressions regarding this photo (the researcher will choose the same photo within the magazine to show to both groups)?
3. What are your general impressions regarding this article (the researcher will choose the same article within the magazine to show to both groups)?
1. Would you want to read more into any of these articles?
a. *Probe*: do any of the titles stand out to you?
2. What photos in the magazine are interesting to you?
a. *Probe*: why?
b. *Probe*: are some more interesting than others?
3. Are you persuaded by any of the ideas in this magazine?
4. What is the most attractive thing about this magazine?
a. *Probe*: what would make you want to read deeper into this magazine?
5. Do you have any idea what this magazine could be used for?
a. *Probe*: do you have any ideas as to who would have written this magazine?

Participants now will be informed of the true purpose behind the intent of the magazine and who the magazine was created by. At the conclusion of the focus group questioning, participants will receive the full debriefing that is included in this proposal. The debriefing will provide follow up contact information and places for discussion, if desired by the participants.