European Female Supporters of the Islamic State: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of their Facebook Profiles

Abstract

This article presents multimodal discourse analyses of Facebook profiles set up by European women who support the Islamic State (ISIS). The research question guiding the analyses is: What types of discourses, modes and semiotic resources are these women drawn to, and how do they exploit them in setting up a Facebook profile consistent with the ISIS ideology*? The analyses are based on ethnographic data obtained from Facebook. The findings show that discourses related to the following Islamic concepts are prominent in their self-presentation on Facebook:* hijra *(migration),* jihad *(holy war),* jannah *(paradise) and* ghurba *(estrangement). The use of the concept of* ghurba *represents a new finding in research on jihadi culture and radicalisation. I argue that the discursive use of* ghurba *may serve as a pull factor and contribute to the processes of radicalisation.*

Keywords: Visual culture, multimodality, discourse analysis, jihadism, radicalisation

Introduction

The self-proclaimed caliphate in Syria and Iraq, known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), seems to have ended; however, that does not mean the end of ISIS activity and ideology (Conway 2019), and European supporters of the ISIS ideology still worry governments throughout Europe. Consequently, there is a demand for knowledge about these Islamist extremists and their networking activities, particularly those of women (Saltman and Smith 2015; Conway 2017; Pearson 2018). This article expands current knowledge about who the European women supporting ISIS are by presenting analyses of how they construct their Facebook profiles to be consistent with the ideas of ISIS. The research question guiding this study is: What types of discourses and semiotic resources are these women drawn to, and how do they exploit these resources in setting up a Facebook profile consistent with the ISIS ideology?

Based on linguistic and discourse-oriented ethnography (Creese 2008) structured around online observation and multimodal analyses (Kress 2010), the study pays attention to how the Facebook profiles appear as a combination of modes and semiotic resources. In this manner, the article contributes to existing knowledge related to jihadi culture

(Hegghammer 2017), and in particular to visual extremism, a field in which there is a specific need for more research (Conway and MacDonald 2018).

Facebook is the chosen site for analyses due to its public nature, easy access to data and the fact it functions as a platform on which people can present themselves as they would like to be perceived by others.

The findings show that the profiles in the data sample are highly anonymised, and that online these women follow the norm of strict segregation. Their values and worldviews are expressed in discourses related to the following concepts: *hijra* (migration), *ghurba* (estrangement), *jihad* (holy war), *mujahida* (female holy warrior), *al-akhira* (the hereafter) and *jannah* (paradise). The use of the concept of *ghurba* appears to be a new finding in research related to jihadi culture, and in the discussion and the end of the article I shall argue that the discursive use of *ghurba* may serve as a pull factor (Vergani et al. 2018, 3) in radicalisation. In this manner, the article also contributes to knowledge about radicalisation online.

Data

The collection of data from the Facebook profiles of European females expressing support for ISIS was conducted over a three-year period between October 2014 and November 2017. During this time, Facebook deleted a large number of such accounts due to their extremist content. However, the owners often had backup accounts that they began using once the original accounts were deleted. The use of backup accounts has also been observed amongst extremists on Twitter (Pearson 2018, 867).

For example, one woman posts on Facebook: "*Salaam alaykom* [peace be with you], I have a new account since my last Facebook page was deleted by the *kuffar* [infidels] *subhan* Allah [glory be to God]. I kept my name so that you may easily recognise me, just chose a different *shahada* [the creed of Islam] flag" (italics added).

Kuffar is a highly derogatory Arabic term used to refer to infidels and is common in images of the enemy amongst Islamist extremists (e.g. Nilsen 2019). The *shahada* flag refers to the black-and-white flag (*al-raya*) often associated with ISIS, the creed of which

is written in white on the black flag. It is one of the most prominent symbols of jihadi identification (Holtmann 2013, 43).

Knowledge about the Arabic language was essential in finding Facebook accounts for this study. The accounts were initially found by conducting a search of Facebook, and by correctly assuming that some female Islamist extremists would choose an Arabic name that stated their nationality, ethnicity or place of origin, since that is a common practice amongst Islamist extremists offline, and also found by Klausen (2015) online. For example, al-Qaida's former leader in Iraq called himself Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, referring to the city in Jordan – al-Zarqa – that he came from. Therefore, searches were conducted using, for example, the terms *al-belgikiya* (Arabic for *the Belgian*, female) and *al-almaniyyah* (Arabic for *the German*, female), as well as using different ways of spelling these terms (e.g. *al-belgikiyya*, *al-belgikiyah*, and *albelgikiya*); this led me to several accounts, and I examined lists of friends to find more. The accounts, in turn, led me to Facebook pages set up with the purpose of spreading propaganda about Islamist extremism. These pages were the ones visited most often for the purposes of this research in order to identify accounts that had liked the different postings on these pages and to follow the discussions. Special attention was paid to a Facebook page created to support one of the imprisoned European leaders of an Islamist extremism organisation, and to a page created for European families of Islamist extremist martyrs.

I also anticipated that some of the female ISIS supporters would present themselves using pseudonyms in the form of *kunyas*, as is common amongst Islamist extremist men, including al-Qaida supporters. A *kunya* is an Arabic nickname consisting of the word *umm* or *abu* (Arabic for mother and father, respectively) followed by the name of offspring or an identity marker. By extension, the *kunya* may also have hypothetical or metaphorical allusions such as, for example, Abu Sayfullah (father of Allah's sword). Numerous accounts were found by searching Facebook for *kunyas*, such as *umm mujahid* (mother of holy warrior), *oum mujahid* and *oem mujahid*, which are other ways of transcribing the word mother from Arabic.

It is important to note that many Facebook profiles with *kunyas* and family names that state their owners' places of origin as profile names do not represent support for ISIS.

Consequently, I also looked at the profile pictures, banners and postings of the accounts found during the searches to find explicit support for ISIS.

The fieldwork resulted in a large collection of profile pictures, banners and examples of *kunyas* and other names, in addition to field notes of conversations. The exact number of accounts represented in the data cannot be ascertained because several of them have since been deleted, with some later reappearing. In addition to the deletion/reappearance issue, the focus when collecting the data was not on the individuals to whom the accounts belonged, but rather on the discourses, modes and semiotic resources represented on their profiles. Hence, I approximate to have obtained examples from 250 Facebook accounts. Observations were recorded through field notes and through copies of the participants' updated profile pictures and banners. Conversations were not initiated with any of the participants, allowing me to act in the role of an observer.

An obvious methodological weakness in using data based on anonymised profiles is that it is impossible to confirm with certainty that these Facebook profiles are those of women who support ISIS, given that online identities can be deceptive (Parekh et al. 2018). Although there is no concrete reason to suspect or believe that these account owners were not women or extremists who support ISIS, there was clear anxiety in some of the women's conversations about men, who were on their lists of friends, presenting themselves as women, because many Islamist women do not interact with men outside of their immediate families. Additionally, there were posts about journalists who had infiltrated their interactions. However, this study is not about the people these accounts represent, but instead is about extremist profiles on Facebook. Consequently, the possible existence of Facebook profiles operated by persons pretending to represent women or extremists is not considered a major weakness in this study because, even if they are pretending, they must nevertheless seek to adapt to the expected codes of conduct when interacting. The fact that they are accepted as "friends" by others is an indication that their profiles are in line with the norms associated with extremist women.

Due to ethical restrictions, the data were collected only from the public domain and open Facebook accounts. Collecting data from the public domain is nonetheless problematic (Landert and Jucker 2011, 1423; Mahlouly 2019, 19). Facebook accounts are public in

terms of access, but private in terms of content. As a result, the data have been anonymised in such a way that it is not possible to trace any of the associated Facebook accounts. Although not all profiles contained information on age, a large number of them did, leading to the conclusion that the accounts were most likely to belong to women between 14 and 33 years of age. The youthfulness of some of those behind these profiles was another reason for the careful anonymisation.

Methodological perspectives

Underpinning the study is a social constructionist perception of language inspired by Fairclough (1992).[1] It postulates that language and other modes of communication do not only reflect the world as it is, but also that communication shapes norms, values and worldviews. Accordingly, profile pictures, banners and profile names also serve to construct norms, values and worldviews on Facebook, rather than merely reflecting or mirroring these. Through the continuous repetition and citation of specific semiotic resources, certain norms, values and worldviews become fixed and normal. One of the most common semiotic resources on the Facebook profiles of female European ISIS supporters is the black-and-white flag. This symbol is reproduced in various ways, and thus contributes to becoming a fixed and normal symbol of these Facebook profiles. The data reveal an awareness of the meaning potential in this symbol when one woman (woman 1) comments when another woman (woman 2) changes her profile picture to an image of the flag (Figures 1 and 2):

Figure 1. Inverted black-and-white flag.

Figure 2. The black-and-white flag.

> Woman 1: Exactly the opposite from this one. (Figure 1)
> Woman 2: You have a white background with black letters and I have a black background with white letters. The meaning is of course the same. (Figure 2)

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[1] The study is not using CDA as presented by Fairclough but other approaches to discourse analysis, as described below.

This study is based on the framework of discourse and linguistic-oriented ethnography (Creese 2008) structured around online observation and multimodal analyses (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Kress 2010) of modes, semiotic resources and discourses found in Facebook profiles. Discourses, in this study, refer to meaning-resources to make sense of the world (Kress 2010, 110) from the position of ISIS. The detailed multimodal text analyses are conducted using analytical tools from social semiotics. The multimodal perspectives employed imply that worldviews, norms and values are not created exclusively through the words people choose to use, but also through a number of other modes and semiotic resources, and through a combination of these in multimodal ensembles (Kress 2010). In this article, modes refer to photos, posters and texts. Examples of semiotic resources include vocabulary, symbols, clothing and colours.

It is in discourse regarding the relationship between the visual and linguistic resources, and the relationship between the names, profile pictures and banners, that ideological adherence is revealed. These relationships are illustrated in a typical example of a profile picture of a lioness with the ISIS flag on her forehead. The flag connotes support for ISIS (e.g. Ostovar 2017, 88), while the lion is a common visual semiotic resource used by Islamist extremists due to its connotations of power, strength and bravery (e.g. Ostovar 2017, 98-99). Moreover, *osama* means lion, as in Osama bin Laden, the former leader of al-Qaida; thus, through him, the lion also connotes al-Qaida, from which ISIS evolved. In this typical profile, the banner may be black and, in this context, it connotes ISIS by using one of the colours from the ISIS flag, representing a way of underlining the content of the profile picture.

The focus of this article is on how women construct their Facebook profiles to be consistent with the ideas of ISIS. The research question guiding this study is: What types of discourses and semiotic resources are these women drawn to, and how do they exploit these resources in setting up a Facebook profile consistent with the ISIS ideology? An assumption underlying the study is that observed behaviour is indicative of a deeper set of rules and codes enabling communication: norms, values and worldviews.

Analysis of the Facebook profiles

In this section, I will first present some general characteristics of the Facebook profiles. Secondly, I will present typical modes and semiotic resources that are used in setting up these profiles. Thirdly, I will present the discourses represented in the Facebook profiles.

The most striking characteristic of the Facebook accounts set up by European women in support of ISIS is that they are highly anonymised, and thus reveal little or no information about the identities of the profile owners. Very few use their own names, and they do not use profile pictures with photos of their faces. If the profile picture features a woman's face, it is always covered by a *niqab*, a veil covering the face, so that only the eyes are visible. Typically, these Facebook accounts only provide personal information regarding age and gender. Furthermore, the account owners mostly have friends on Facebook who share their support for ISIS. Many of the profiles therefore seem to have been created for the sole purpose of interacting with people who secretly express this support. Since the accounts are mostly anonymous they seem to be used to hide their owners' social networking activities amongst Islamist extremists. Another reason for keeping the accounts anonymous may be that the owners are worried about attracting the attention of the authorities, as one women points out in this post: "*Subhan* Allah [glory be to God], some of our sisters give their blood to the *kuffar* [infidels]. Sisters, don't be surprised when the police appears at your door! Keep your Facebook pages clean, we do not want to see another sister locked up" (italics added).

Modes and semiotic resources in the Facebook profiles

In what follows, I will present typical modes and semiotic resources found on the Facebook profiles.

In these Facebook profiles, gender is expressed through both linguistic and visual resources. A typical name expressing gender could be *Umm Khadija al-Muhajira* (no brothers). The female name Khadija alludes to the Prophet Muhammad's first wife; *al-muhajira* (migrant) refers to a migration to ISIS and has a feminine grammatical form. By adding the imperative ("only sisters") or ("no brothers") to their names, they indicate that they are women and adhere to the strict segregation between men and women, thus

only accepting women as friends. Gender is also often expressed in profile pictures or banners, for example by posting photos of women in *niqab*. Such a design is suitable for highlighting both gender and politico-religious ideology, as also noted by Pearson (2018).

Many accounts seem to be abandoned, which probably means that their owners have either lost interest in the network or are no longer able to participate. For example, two young women, one 16 and the other 18 years old, have not posted anything on their Facebook accounts since the day before they left for Syria in the autumn of 2013.

The most common modes found in the profile pictures and banners are photos and posters. Typical photos are those of unidentifiable women whose faces are covered by a *niqab*, or those alluding to Middle Eastern scenery – for example, a desert – or romance and romantic scenery with flowers, woods and rivers depicting the paradise through non-realistic images in pastel colours. As noted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 165), colour is a source of pleasure and affective meanings used in a context where the pleasure is allowed to be dominant. These non-realistic images, in which pleasure is indeed dominant, may be interpreted as a romanticisation of the hereafter and of martyrdom. Although these sorts of images are the most salient, linguistic resources also play a prominent communicative role in the setting up of these Facebook profiles, in particular with respect to their names but also through the multimodal posters used as profile pictures and banners. Common linguistic resources include certain lexical choices, such as female Islamic names, *kunyas*, Arabic family names, Islamic historical female figures, Islamic concepts and Arabic vocabulary.

The posters used are typically in colour, with texts in Arabic, the women's first language, or English and with quotes from extremist leader figures such as Anwar al-Awlaki and Osama bin Laden. There are also posters with text and images in which often the function of the images is to highlight the texts. An example of this is a poster with an image of a man and a woman taken from behind them; they sit close together on a light-red background with the caption "living for *al-akhira*, not for *dunya*" (living for the hereafter, not for this world). In the context of these social networks, this poster alludes to the importance of martyrdom. The woman, whose body is covered by a *niqab*, depicts modesty and the segregation between men and women.

Discourses in the Facebook profiles

In the following, I will present the discourses found on the Facebook profiles.

In general, the discourses represented by these profiles are based on explicit semiotic resources associated with ISIS and other forms of Islamist extremism – the black-and-white flag, or quotes from extremist leaders such as Anwar al-Awlaki – represented in the banners or profile pictures. These references to ISIS make it easy for the women to find one another. Thus, social activity amongst supporters is probably the purpose of these Facebook profiles. The number of references the women use when setting up their profiles, however, varies, and it seems that the women who are well known in these Facebook networks, rely less on highly explicit references to ISIS in the construction of their profiles, and instead exploit references to personality more often. A European woman who migrated to ISIS and who was well known in the European network of ISIS supporters on Facebook, for example, had a profile picture that showed her cat.

Politico-religious ideology features prominently in the Facebook profiles and is expressed through discourses relating to the following Islamic concepts: *al-ghurba* (the feeling of being a stranger), *al-hijra* (migration to the Islamic state, in this context), *jihad* (holy war), *mujahid* (holy warrior) and *al-jannah* (paradise). The typical discourses relating to these Islamic concepts are presented below.

The term for migration in Arabic is *hijra*, and it is a significant Islamic concept, referring as it does to the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina (e.g. Raven 2019). *Hijra* marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar in 622 CE. The active participle of *hijra* is *muhajir*, meaning migrant, its feminine form is *muhajira*. *Muhajirah* has previously been identified as a prominent concept in females' personal accounts on social media. Peresin and Cervone (2015, 495) note that "Western women who have joined ISIS have extensively used the term *muhajirah* to identify themselves on social media. In this way they indicate a discontent with their previous living environment (the West), an impellent drive to move to a place of ideal perfection (the caliphate) and the religious motivation for seeking the change".

Both *hijra* and *muhajira* are commonly used in profile names. One example is Ukht hijra (sister of migration), connoting a person who is longing for migration or somebody who

is planning to migrate to the Islamic state. Another example of this is Aisha al-muhajirah (Aisha the migrant).

Hijra also occurs on the posters used as profile pictures. One example is that of a profile picture of a passport with the black-and-white flag on the front page, connoting ISIS and migration to the Islamic state as well as obtaining formal citizenship and a passport. In another example of a profile picture, the black-and-white flag is used, on which it states: "I am European and this is my only flag".

Jihad is an Islamic concept that, for most Muslims, refers to an inner struggle to do good, or a struggle or a fight against the enemies of Islam. However, for supporters of ISIS, *jihad* refers to a holy war and plays an important role in their ideology (Uddin 2017, 7). Several studies demonstrate the importance of *jihad* and *mujahidin* in magazines like *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, which are produced by ISIS (e.g. Welch 2018; Wignell, Tan and O'Halloran 2017b, 437). In the Facebook accounts analysed, *jihad* is found on posters used as profile pictures and banners, as well as in the profile names. One example of such a profile name is Umm Jihad al-Almaniyya (The German mother of jihad), which, in this context, connotes support for a holy war. One example of a poster shows a photograph of a young man and a woman in a *niqab* with a gun on her shoulder; above them is written "Love for *jihad*" and "Till martyrdom do us apart".

Mujahida relates semantically to *jihad* in meaning the one who is doing *jihad*, and has a female form (the masculine form is *mujahid*). In a previous study of the visual culture in jihadi organisations (Ostovar 2017, 93), the *mujahid*, the *martyr* and *paradise* are identified as the central building blocks of the jihadi identity. Another study at the organisational level (Wignell, Tan and O'Halloran 2017a, 10–11) highlights the following fundamental ISIS values: *tawhid* (the indivisible oneness of God), *manhaj* (following the pious predecessors' way in belief, worship and interacting with others), *hijrah, jama'ah* (the Muslim community) and *jihad*.

Mujahida is also a concept used in user names and in profile pictures and banners. An example of such a name is al-Mujahida ad-Danmarkiyya (the Danish holy warrior). The concept is also found on posters used in profile pictures and banners. One example is that of a young woman who changed her profile picture to a poster with the following text the

day before she left for Syria in 2015: "*MUJAHIDA*: a caring wife for a *mujahid* today, and loving mother of the *mujahid* tomorrow." Another example is a photograph of two women with guns dressed in *niqab* who seem to be lying in a trench. At the bottom of the photograph, the text states that the love for *jihad* will never change. In these two examples, *mujahida* refers to very different roles: to the role of mother and wife, and to that of a female warrior. These findings support those of Peresin and Cervone (2015) and Jacobsen (2016), according to which some of the women who support ISIS are not content taking only a domestic role.

Jannah means paradise and *al-akhira* means the hereafter. An example of the use of *al-akhira* in a profile picture is a poster with a citation from Anwar al-Awlaki: "What can you do with me? Because I'm not limited to this *dunya* [world]. I'm living for *al-akhira.*" In the background, we see a *mujahid* with a gun. In another example, a poster of a little green bird displays the text: "Be patient" written in Arabic. Green birds reference the souls of the martyrs that live in the birds' bodies close to God in paradise, and in that way they connote *jannah*, *al-akhira* and martyrdom. The text "Be patient" refers to this life as something temporary, and the notion that if you are patient there is a better life waiting for you in *jannah*. Another example of the exploitation of the potential meaning of the green birds comes from a woman who changed her profile picture to that of a little green bird immediately after receiving the news of her husband's death in combat in Syria. The changing of the profile picture was followed by condolences and expressions of hope from her Facebook friends that God would accept her husband as a martyr. Her friends, in other words, immediately interpreted the changing of the profile picture as a way of conveying information about the death of her husband.

The Arabic word *ghurba* means estrangement or separation, and it refers to being a stranger in a place. Typically, *ghurba* is used to refer to someone being a foreigner who is away from his or her home country and experiences feelings of alienation and loneliness. Thus, *ghurba* is often associated with the migration of Arabs to the West (e.g. Haddad 1999).

An example of the use of the concept of *ghurba* in my data is the profile name Umm Ghareeb, as *ghareeb* is derived from the same root as *ghurba*. *Ghareeb* means stranger,

thus Umm Ghareeb can be translated literally as the mother of a stranger, and it might be interpreted to indicate a person who feels like a stranger in her society. In an article in the ISIS magazine *Dabiq* (1435 AH, 6), strangers are described as those who break off from their tribes, the *muhajirin* (migrants) who have abandoned their homelands and migrated to Allah. In another article in *Dabiq*, ISIS is described as a place where one no longer feels the strangeness. *Ghurba* is described as "a condition that the Muslim living in the West cannot escape as long as he remains amongst the crusaders. He is a stranger amongst Christians and liberals. He is a stranger amongst fornicators and sodomites. He is a stranger amongst drunkards and druggies. He is a stranger in his faith and deeds […]" (*Dabiq* 1437 AH, 29–30).

Several of the posters used in banners and profile pictures refer to a sense of loneliness and estrangement. One poster states: "Do not be sad with the destiny of losing friends when practising Islam. You should be happy with the destiny of having Allah and his angels as close friends." In another posting, a woman says: "Do you feel as a stranger? If you do, you are amongst *ahl assunnah* [people following the tradition of the prophet Muhammad]." One of her friends replies by saying "*Ghurba*", followed by a red heart.

Discussion of findings

The feelings of not belonging and estrangement that are expressed through the concept of ghurba, being a *ghareeba* (stranger) or in the state of *ghurba* (strangeness), are reflected in some of the Facebook profiles studied and in the conversations. The use of the concept *al-ghurba* represents a new finding in research related to the values of Islamist extremists online, and the concept is of course connected to *hijra*, as the migration may be a solution to the feeling of alienation. Other studies refer to islamophobia, religious discrimination, identity and belonging as motivating factors for joining and supporting ISIS (e.g. Saltman and Smith 2015; Pooley 2015; Franc and Pavlović 2019; Poli and Arun 2019), which may be factors that increase the feelings of *ghurba*. Van San (2016) highlights the alienation that affected families and their youngsters when the latter were going through a process of radicalisation.

There is no agreed definition of "radicalisation" (Neumann, 2013, 874), but it is widely understood to refer to the process by which individuals or groups come to embrace attitudes, or engage in actions, that support violence. Shapiro and Maras (2018) find that the majority of radical women use Facebook and Twitter in their radicalisation processes, and group dynamics can intensify these processes online and offline (e.g. Conway 2012). Saltman and Smith (2015) claim that *hijra* and the notions of belonging and sisterhood are key factors in women's radicalisation. Pearson (2018, 854) finds that members of online communities of ISIS supporters are constructed as a family of sorts. I thus argue that the use and the experience of *ghurba* as described in this article may influence the process of radicalisation because the online ISIS communities may provide comfort and counteract the women's feeling of estrangement by offering a space where they can experience a sense of belonging. Concurrently, the discursive use of the concept of *ghurba*, and the continuous repetition and citation of specific semiotic resources related to this concept, may reinforce and normalise their emotional state of estrangement and position as outsiders, and in that manner contribute to radicalisation.

The factors associated with radicalisation are categorised as either push, pull or personal. Push factors overlap with the structural root causes of terrorism that drive people toward resorting to violence, and pull factors capture the aspects that make extremist groups and lifestyles appealing, including ideology, group belonging, group mechanisms and other incentives (Vergani et al. 2018, 3). The feeling of estrangement may be understood as a push factor, whereas the online communities and their discursive use of *ghurba* may serve as pull factors.

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented findings from multimodal discourse analyses of Facebook profiles set up by women in support of ISIS that expand the current knowledge about jihadi culture and about Islamist radicalisation. The findings show that the women follow a strict norm of segregation online, and express their values through discourses related to Islamic concepts such as *hijra* (migration), *jihad* (holy war), *jannah* (paradise) and

ghurba (estrangement). *Ghurba* appears to be a new finding in research related to jihadi culture and radicalisation.

I have argued that online communities may serve as a source of comfort and for countering feelings of estrangement, and thus can be a pull factor in radicalisation. I have further argued that the discursive use of *ghurba* seems to reinforce and normalise the emotional state of estrangement and the women's position as outsiders, and in that manner serves as a push factor in radicalisation.

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