Teenagers, Terrorism, and Technopanic: How British Newspapers Framed Female ISIS Recruits as Victims of Social Media

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In 2015, three teenage girls from London were recruited by ISIS via social media. British news discourse focused on the role of gender and technology in their recruitment. Through the lens of technological fetishism's intersection with gendered terrorism, a discourse analysis of British newspapers revealed two dominant themes: (1) gendered terrorism through the victimization of female ISIS recruits and (2) the technological fetishism of social media focused on individualized solutions including censorship and regulation.

Keywords: *social media, terrorism, technological fetishism, moral panic, teenagers, gender, agency*

In March 2019, a three-week-old British baby died from pneumonia in a Syrian refugee camp. His 19-year-old mother and former ISIS recruit, Shamima Begum, attempted to bring him to her homeland in the United Kingdom, a place he never visited, to save his life. However, the choices Begum made when she was 15 years old cost both her son's life and possibly her citizenship. Begum was found in a Syrian refugee camp and interviewed by *The Times* when she denounced ISIS, saying, "I was brainwashed. I came here believing everything I had been told, while knowing little about the truths of my religion" (Loyd, 2019, para. 4). Begum desired to return to the United Kingdom, where citizens debated the British home secretary's decision to cancel Begum's citizenship. Supporters said they were "enraged by the cruelties of Isis and their killings," and "others pointed out that Ms. Begum had been a minor and possibly the victim of online grooming" (Loyd, 2019, para. 10).

In June 2014, the extremist group ISIS launched a global social media recruitment campaign targeting men, women, and teenagers. An unprecedented number of young men and women from Western countries (i.e., United States, United Kingdom, Australia) responded to online campaigns and made attempts to travel to Syria and join ISIS militants, with many arriving successfully. News media highlighted the number of Western fighters joining the ranks of ISIS, with news outlets drawing attention specifically to young female recruits. But that was not the only story making headlines.

ISIS established a sophisticated media presence, particularly on Twitter, with an "estimated 46,000–90,000 active ISIS support accounts" in 2014 (Berger & Morgan, 2015, p. 9). Part of this campaign was explicitly aimed at young Westerners as jihadis by employed grooming techniques such as

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using trendy hashtags and comparing the jihadi experience with the popular video game *Call of Duty*. In addition, ISIS used a social justice framework in its propaganda messaging. These grooming strategies simultaneously addressed the need for identity and purpose that many young people desire (Lennings, Amon, Brummert, & Lennings, 2010; Perez, Brown, & Ellis, 2014). ISIS capitalized on that need and invited teenagers to join the pursuit of an Islamic utopia (Bjorgum, 2016). The ISIS campaign and its outcomes attracted the attention of the international press. Articles featured women from the United States, Britain, and other Western countries, and their attempts to travel to Syria to become jihadi brides. For example, in 2014, *The Daily Beast* reported several young women trying to travel to Syria to support Islamist rebels as jihadi brides. Among them were two Austrian girls, ages 15 and 16; British twin sisters, 16 years old; and a 19-year-old American convert to Islam (Dettmer, 2014). In that same year, the *International Business Times* reported the arrest of three Colorado girls in Germany en route to Syria, ages 15–17 years old (Vultaggio, 2014).

ISIS's practice of *Salafism* calls for women to advocate for jihadism through supporting roles (Bhui, 2013; however, some women's roles evolved into leadership positions (Peresin, 2019. In the group's recruitment efforts, the *Muhajirat* (feminine migrants) uploaded blog posts, tweets, and videos featuring romanticized narratives of "an Islamic utopia" (Bjorgum, 2016, p. 96) coupled with romantic testimonials of their own. In addition, the message sent to potential female recruits offered a sense of meaning, purpose, and identity (Peresin & Cervone, 2015) along with an ironic escape from the "liberation" of the West (Stan & Vladescu, 2010).

Although there is a history of women joining terrorist networks (including women from the West), the number of recruits joining ISIS militants was unparalleled, in large part due to the role of social media (Dettmer, 2014; Peresin & Cervone, 2015). Many news outlets and counterterrorism research centers recognized the unique and pioneering nature of the ISIS campaign (Carter, Maher, & Neumann, 2014), particularly among teenage girls. Some of the girls came from an Islamic background, but in general, the recruits came from diverse backgrounds. Bhui's (2013) study on extremists' use of new media and the persuasive techniques enabled by its platforms revealed jihadi fighters' strategic use of the Internet's ability to facilitate immediate social response, interpersonal connections, and global communication. These qualities were initially recognized as part of the Internet's innovation; however, those same qualities were later reported to have enabled terrorists to incite radical behavior on a global level (Bhui, 2013).

The current study examines a high-profile case from the United Kingdom, which received worldwide news coverage in 2015, shortly after the establishment of ISIS as a global threat. The case features three girls from London, Amira Abase (15), Kadiza Sultana (16), and Shamima Begum (15), who fled to Syria on February 17, 2015. The girls attended school together at Bethnal Green Academy and were recruited by a former schoolmate and friend who joined ISIS as a jihadi bride a few months before. The media made strong efforts to track the girls' every move through their journey to Syria and their lives after they joined ISIS as jihadi brides. Throughout this coverage, journalists focused on how well the girls did in school and how their families had no indication of their plans, and included several pleas from family members for the girls to return home (Saltman & Smith, 2015). The three teenagers did eventually make it to Syria, and two of them became widows within the first few months of arriving in the Islamic State (Dodd, 2016).

The case of the "London girls" focuses on gender and technology, primarily based on the link journalists consistently made between gendered terrorism and social media. Through a discourse analysis of online articles from four British news outlets, this article explores the narratives found in the coverage of the case, revealing two main themes: (1) the victimization of teenage girls recruited to ISIS and (2) the technological fetishism of social media as a moral panic aimed at teenage girls.

Literature Review

Teenage Girls, Social Media, and Moral Panic: A Technological Fetishism

Many adolescent girls who joined ISIS were recruited through social media, which produced a narrative of fear grounded in a moral panic over technology (Peresin, 2019; Peresin & Cervine, 2015). However, this is not the first time anxiety over technology and teenagers would make headlines. Historically, the introduction of a new technology simultaneously brought in waves of excitement and outbreaks of apprehension, resulting in a moral panic (Gitelman, 2006; Marvin, 1988; Springhall, 1998). A moral panic occurs when an event, person, or group of persons is considered a threat to society's overarching morals/values and powerful players within that society. Furthermore, influential media outlets perpetuate these narratives and validate the reality of the threat to society (Cohen, 1980). For example, after the telephone's debut, people praised how the device simplified life; however, its presence also generated concern for parents who feared its ability to facilitate contact between unwanted suitors and their daughters. This reaction is similar to parents' fear of social media as an outlet to allow sexual predators to groom their teenagers, particularly girls. Journalists built on these concerns regarding teenagers' activity online by highlighting the vulnerability of teenage girls to sexual predators and cyberbullies while instigating a "moral panic."

The moral panic associated with social media is rooted in its powerful influence on teenagers. Research shows that teenagers are particularly impressionable at their age as they seek to find their identities through the exploration of different community outlets, exposing their vulnerability to extremists online (Bhui, 2013; Lennings et al., 2010). These potential threats can generate a moral panic and lead to calls for regulation and surveillance. As Springhall (1998) notes, "Whenever the introduction of a new mass medium is defined as a threat to the young, we can expect a campaign by adults to regulate, ban or censor" (p. 7).

Eliciting a moral panic over social media's influence on youth reifies the power and autonomy of technology, suggesting an ideological framework of technological fetishism (Comor & Compton, 2015; Fuchs, 2012). Technological fetishism is rooted in Karl Marx's (1977) concept of *commodity fetishism*, or when physical commodities are treated as autonomous and equipped with the ability to exercise power. David Harvey (2003) argues that this fetishism manifests itself because "we endow technologies—mere things—with powers they do not have (e.g., the ability to solve social problems, to keep the economy vibrant, or to provide us with a superior life)" (p. 3). Furthermore, Comor and Compton (2015) use Marx's theory to argue that because technology "is used, thought of, and treated as if it is powerful—it *in effect* exercises power" (p. 76).

The perspective of technological fetishism also creates the danger of simplifying a larger and more complex societal issue as "societal problems are reduced to the level of technology" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 386). This attribution is problematic. Although humans can empower technologies with autonomous capabilities and intelligence, a social hierarchy remains in terms of who does the empowering. Consequently, if the technology steers away from societal norms, those in power blame not only the hardware, but also the inventor of the technology. These narratives of blame are cultivated and circulated by journalists.

The ideas and discourses news media present have an inevitable ability to shape the way an audience thinks about a societal issue, especially if the story involves foreign entities unfamiliar to the audience (Gitlin, 1980). Moreover, the unique aspects of these sorts of events ironically make them more vulnerable to stereotyping. As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) point out, "The more deviant people or events are, the more likely they are to be included in media content and the more likely they are to be stereotyped" (p. 270). Furthermore, by cultivating an emotional angle to a story, "news professionals intensify the interest of readers, viewers and listeners in 'developing' stories; in some stories, otherwise independent events are used to imply worrisome patterns" (Denham, 2008, p. 947).

Morals and values take center stage as journalists report on stories of threatening irregularities within technology, such as an extremist group's influential social media campaign that seduces teenage girls away from their homes. In addition, the narratives journalists choose to communicate an event set the tone for its cause and where responsibility will be attributed (Gitlin, 1980). These narratives are significant because they are part of the network of information that shapes the thoughts and opinions of the national audience who have little personal experience with an event of this nature. Their source of information on the issue is almost exclusively the product of the news media. The way journalists set the stage for the public's first encounter with this issue helps the audience make sense of these young women's actions as well as having the power to shape how the event itself is understood. In addition, news media portrayals organize the details of a story, identifying the good and the bad actors, the victim and the perpetrator, creating a discourse with different attributions of blame for the public to consider (Entman, 2007).

Although moral panic is a framework for victimizing teenage girls (Thiel-Stern, 2014), they are not always victimized. They can be granted agency, by both journalists and high-profile authorities, when their actions align with the sustainment of the Western status quo. For example, Malala Yousafza, "a young Pakistani activist pushing for girls' education," publicly opposed the Taliban's conduct and was eventually targeted by the group when she was 15 years old. Subsequently, "*Time Magazine* named her in its annual list of the world's 100 most influential people" (Pruitt, 2014, p. 490). Nevertheless, young women's political agency is not always well received, which can sometimes send an ambiguous message on the reality of "girl power" (Harris, 2004). Because of the lack of recognition for girls' political actions, their actions are often "passionate yet occur in locations that are marginal, virtual or underground, such as sharing political views online" (Pruitt, 2014, p. 487) and, in this case, in partnership with ISIS.

Gendered Terrorism and the News Media

Whereas the case of the London girls centers on the threat of terrorism, coverage of the case placed a large emphasis on gender and social media's looming effect on teenage girls. Both aspects carry a dose of

deviance, which, as Shoemaker and Reese (1996) claim, makes for prime-time media coverage. Focusing specifically on deviance and gender, Conway and McInerney (2012) argue that women are more culturally vulnerable, both socially and politically, because their actions do not align with societal gender expectations. Therefore, when women perform politically deviant acts, they are more likely to be portrayed differently from men, both in the amount of media coverage women receive and the curated narratives embedded within that coverage. The news coverage on the London girls emphasized their gender and portrayed their actions as deviant from appropriate performances of femininity. However, this framing tactic is not limited to this case alone but remains prevalent among news stories covering young women involved in "deviant" actions.

Third (2014) argues that narratives often found in news coverage of deviant women explain their actions as deviant from societal expectations of femininity using either a nonfeminine narrative, a hyperfeminine narrative, or both. The nonfeminine narrative centers on deviance from stereotypical femininity, and the hyperfeminine narrative describes the female terrorist "as fundamentally emotional, incapable of divesting herself of her feminine propensity for passion-inspired irrationality" (p. 160). Furthermore, Third explains that gender can also elicit more attention to a woman's sexuality rather than her ideology.

Nacos (2005) expands on these narratives by arguing that Western media frames consistently portray women, in both legitimate and illegitimate roles, within the realms of Western gender stereotypes. Within those realms, women are typically represented as victims of violence, not perpetrators of terrorism (Cunningham, 2003). Whereas more scholarship on female terrorism has revealed the growing number of female terrorists as "an undeniable reality" (Gardner, 2007, p. 910), news coverage continues to portray these women as outliers (Cunningham, 2003; Nacos, 2005). Nacos unpacks the consistency of gender stereotypes as a way to prevent the intelligence community from understanding the recruitment tactics of terrorist groups, creating a gap between "the stereotypical female terrorist and the reality of gender roles" (p. 436). In her content analysis on cases related to female politicians (legitimate role) and female terrorists (illegitimate role), Nacos reveals conventional news media frames among both female terrorists and female politicians "rooted in conventional stereotypes" (p. 438): the physical appearance frame, the family connection frame, the "terrorist for the sake of love" frame, the women's lib/equality frame, the "tough as males/tougher than men" frame, and the "bored, naive, out-of-touch-with-reality" frame.

Although journalists are moving toward more empowering narratives for women in politics, these narratives continue to permeate stories of female terrorists, painting them as "an exception to the rule" of femininity (Nacos, 2005, p. 446). These news narratives shy away from female profiles inconsistent with the cultural understanding of women and could potentially explain how women can take advantage of those gender stereotypes.

In terms of motivations, scholarship varies on how news media portray female recruits. "Journalists may attempt to frame a woman's participation in terror by providing contextual explanations for her involvement, attributing her actions to motives ranging from vengeance to victimization to empowerment" (Gardner, 2007, p. 910). In this way, journalists process the information and communicate their understanding of an event in a way that becomes familiar to the audience (Berkowitz, 2005; Gardner, 2007). Often this includes an in-depth investigation of the woman's personal life and portrayals of overly emotional women or as victims of strategic deception.

McManus (2013) explores the victimization frame and journalists' use of sympathetic language as a way of gendering terrorism, mainly when reporting on violent Middle Eastern women caught in societal circumstances outside of their control. These narratives promote sympathy using gendered imagery that links them to the protection/production of life, particularly motherhood. Furthermore, this perspective guides the reader in distinguishing between the individual as a victim of cruel circumstances and their chosen means of survival. Narratives such as these can support ISIS in its recruitment efforts by capitalizing on Western stereotypes of Muslim women as vulnerable. News coverage of female ISIS recruits limits the roles these young women play in feminist culture, which can enhance the recruitment efforts of radical organizations.

The Western world has long made assumptions that Muslim women are an oppressed and naive population that needs to be liberated by Western feminism (Abu-Lughod & El-Mahdi, 2011; Ayotte & Husain, 2005; Eltantawy, 2007; Fahmy, 2004; Mishra, 2007). However, feminism is not confined to the boundaries of Western ideals but can include nationalist, religious, and political ideologies that are inherently anti-Western (Bjorgum, 2016; Jacoby, 2015) as showcased with ISIS's "jihadi brides" (Jacoby, 2015). Most recently, the International Center for the Study of Radicalization reported that 850 British citizens recruited to ISIS, with an estimated 145 women among those recruits. The center stressed the estimation of these numbers, noting that much attention has been focused on male recruits, whereas women and minors have been understudied (Cook & Vale, 2018).

Initially, female recruits were understood to play the role of jihadi brides or wives and mothers who give birth to the next generation of the caliphate. However, more recent research shows that women's roles have gone far beyond the jihadi bride and included "recruiting other women, disseminating propaganda and fundraising for the caliphate" (Khomami, 2018, para. 12). In addition, a study from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue discovered that "women on the receiving end of that social media onslaught were captivated by the violence they saw" (Malik, 2015, para. 5). One woman described the beheading of the American aid worker Peter Kassig as "gut wrenchingly awesome," and another requested more beheadings. "There is no doubt, therefore, that the women who migrate to the territory controlled by ISIS revel in the gore and brutality of the organization" (Hoyle, Bradford, & Frenett, 2015, p. 29).

Digital media have enabled marketing strategists to reach target audiences in competitive ways and currently serve as the most powerful platform for radical organizations' recruitment (Bhui, 2013). ISIS used these platforms to lure young women into taking advantage of the opportunity to be a part of something bigger, the *Ummah* ("global community of believers"; Bhui, 2013, p. 218). Through professionalism, experience, and strategy, ISIS targeted young women with a curated message online that would eventually lead many of them to travel to Syria (Stan & Vladescu, 2010, p. 94).

This study examines the media discourse surrounding teenage girls recruited by ISIS through a case study of one of the most high-profile stories of Western female ISIS recruits. The case of the three London girls includes the journey the teenagers took from their homes in the United Kingdom to their new roles as jihadi brides in Syria by networking with a friend via social media. Specifically, this study pursued the following research questions:

RQ1:   *How did UK journalists define the role of the three London girls in their recruitment to ISIS?*

RQ2:   How did UK journalists define the role of social media in the recruitment of the three London girls to ISIS?

RQ3:   How did the role of the girls intersect with the role of social media in the news discourse?

Method

I conducted a critical discourse analysis to explore the themes found in journalistic coverage of the three London girls. Critical discourse analysis is appropriate for this study to examine the ideological structure of journalistic discourse. In addition, critical discourse analysis promotes a descriptive analysis of the data as well as the exploration of societal influences and news sources for each story and their potential role in maintaining the social structure (Fairclough, 2003; KhosraviNik, 2010; van Dijk, 1997).

Sample

The sample for this study focused on both circulation and a variety of online news outlets including two top newspapers, one top tabloid paper, and one broadsheet. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations ("ABCs," 2014), the top newspapers in January 2015 were *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. The top tabloid newspaper was *The Daily Mirror*, and *The Guardian* served as the broadsheet newspaper (Ponsford, 2017). In 2014, *The Guardian* became "the world's second most popular English-language newspaper website," and surpassed *The New York Times* that year (Sweney, 2014). In addition, because *The Guardian*'s reach surpasses the United Kingdom, including this newspaper was informative for how the news coverage impacted other Western audiences. The online articles for each newspaper were collected through a search on LexisNexis, followed by a search on each newspaper's website to ensure saturation. The search terms included the names of each of the London girls: Amira Abase, Kadiza Sultana, Shamima Begum. The search timeframe included one month, beginning on the date the girls were reported missing (February 17, 2015) to reach a saturation point of 368 articles analyzed.

Data Analysis

I used an open coding scheme (Strauss & Corbin, 1988) and read each article, at minimum, three times each, while searching for patterns regarding gender, moral panic, and social media. Regarding gender, I used Nacos's (2005) framework as a guide for stereotyping deviant women, Gardner's (2007) research on the motivations of deviant women, and McManus's (2013) work on gendered terrorism. I specifically coded descriptions of the girls' (mentally and physically) motivations for joining ISIS and notes on gender concerning terrorism. For moral panic, I relied on Cohen's (1980) and Springhall's (1998) research and looked for language referring to regulation and censorship of media to protect children. Finally, I coded for social media by noting all mentions of specific social media platforms, social media as a whole, and communication over the Internet.

Findings

The analysis of the four newspapers revealed two prominent themes: (1) the victimization of teenage girls recruited to ISIS via social media and (2) the technological fetishism of social media in online

ISIS recruitment. Consistent language used to gender terrorism revealed the victimization of the girls and focused more on the danger the girls put themselves in rather than the potential threat they posed to national security. Many of the articles placed emphasis on the girls' impressionable natures and shifted away from any violent motives they may have cultivated. These articles are important to note as recent research and news articles continue to unpack girls' motivations for joining ISIS including "militant desires" and a "tendency toward violence" (Peresin, 2019). Furthermore, journalist Azadeh Moaveni (2019) suggests social justice and teenage rebellion as the motivation for the girls in an article from *The Guardian* entitled "'It Could Have Been Me': On the Trail of the British Teenagers Who Became Brides of Isis." She writes, "When I began peering in the social media posts of the Bethnal Green girls . . . they seemed, as is the way with young people, awakened to justice and inequality for the first time . . . much of what they [ISIS] offered sounded empowering" (para. 7).

In addition, technological fetishism manifested within the discourse through the scapegoating of social media by labeling such platforms as Twitter and YouTube accomplices to ISIS recruiters. The significance journalists granted social media platforms emphasized the dangers of social media and called for its regulation. Furthermore, there was little to no mention of the girls' rejection of the Western ideological system in favor of a radical one.

Gendering Terrorism: The Sexual Victimization of Teenage Girls

The primary narrative of fear found throughout the coverage focused on the victimization of the three London girls, specifically victims of sexual abuse. The articles included authority figures claiming the likelihood of the girls' sexual exploitation and featured ways that parents could safeguard their teenage girls from recruitment efforts via social media. For example, *The Guardian* promoted a specific campaign appealing for Asian mothers to talk to their daughters about becoming jihadi brides: "The new campaign focuses on the bond between mothers and daughters, encouraging them to have open discussions with their daughters about issues such as travelling to Syria and what they are viewing online" (Weaver, 2015, para. 3). The language used to deter girls from a terrorist lifestyle is reminiscent of the way parents are encouraged to talk to their teenagers about drugs or safe sex, similar to a controversial program recently released by the United Kingdom called Prevent, an antiradicalization program circulating through UK schools (Grierson, 2019). The article goes on to quote Deputy Assistant Commissioner Helen Ball, senior national coordinator for counterterrorism policing:

> We care deeply about the wellbeing of women and girls throughout the world. We reject the degrading treatment of women by terrorist organizations and seek to prevent the tragedies caused by it. We are increasingly concerned about the numbers of young women who have travelled or are intending to travel to Syria. It is an extremely dangerous place and the reality of the lifestyle they are greeted with when they arrive is far from that promoted online by terrorist groups. (Weaver, 2015, para. 11)

Although not to assume that terrorist organizations do not abuse their female comrades, it is essential to acknowledge the subcontext of this narrative that teenage girls' pursuit of jihadi life is far from the message advertised online. Journalists interviewed expert sources who consistently claimed that these girls did not

understand the consequences of their actions, supported by calls for the United Kingdom to make an increased effort to keep these girls from an inevitable fate as sex slaves.

The *Daily Mail* habitually quoted Metropolitan Police Chief and Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, referencing the consequences young girls faced by pursuing lives as jihadi brides: "Sir Bernard yesterday warned that girls lured to Syria by IS faced sexual abuse at the hands of 'deeply misogynistic' militants" (Steere, 2015, para. 13). The article did not provide evidence for this claim. This form of victimization essentializes the violent actions of ISIS militants and women's roles within the group. Furthermore, the narrative casts women as sex slaves without consideration for their potential to commit violent acts or the ability to recruit. On the contrary, ISIS recruiters were promoting a message to "empower" women through their inclusion in the implementation of an Islamic utopia and recognizing gender roles that deviate from Western norms. Nacos (2005) addresses this tension between expected gender roles and the misunderstanding of young women's motivation for deviant behavior primarily based on Western gender stereotypes. *The Daily Mirror* also circulated the narrative of victimization:

> Police officers are locked in a race against time to trace Shamima Begum, 15, Kadiza Sultana, 16, and Amira Abase, 15, who are believed to have gone to Turkey in a bid to cross-over into Syria to ISIS-held areas. They could face beatings, sex slavery and even being killed if, as feared, they become "jihadi brides." (Webb, 2015, para. 2)

There is no mention of the decision-making process or motivation for the girls' pilgrimage to Syria. Instead, Webb (2015) uses a dramatic synopsis to stress the dangers of the girls' trip and perpetuate a savior trope by emphasizing the need to save the girls from themselves. Furthermore, rather than considering the girls as a threat to national security, Webb focuses on the threats facing the girls themselves, detracting from the girls' deviant behavior. This rhetoric emphasizes a narrative of fear that if teenage girls choose to deviate from their expected gender roles in the West, they will be giving themselves over to danger. In addition, this narrative assumes that the adolescent girls were unaware of what their participation would indeed entail, although there is no evidence to support this claim. Alternatively, the girls' deviance from Western culture in London to pursue life as jihadi brides is interpreted as a misunderstanding and subsequently victimizes them.

However, some journalists from *The Guardian* detoured from the victimization narrative and acknowledged likely motivations for the successful recruitment of the girls. Specifically, an article from *The Guardian* featured Muhammad Abdul Bari, the trustee of the East London mosque in Whitechapel. Bari said he recognized the girls' incentive to be no different from that of the male recruits and "objected to the use of the term 'jihadi brides.'" He said, "It's a misogynistic word. These girls, like young boys, have probably gone for idealistic reasons" (Topping & Gani, 2015, para. 16). Bari's theory is compatible with ISIS messaging for young women to join the cause aimed at an Islamic utopia and does not gender their participation (Pearson, 2015). In another article from *The Guardian*, Nosheen Iqbal (2015) also rejects the notion that the girls' inspiration for joining ISIS is different from that of boys. She argues that girls and boys often have similar reasons for pursuing ISIS that do not fit within societal understandings of gender: "Plenty of teenagers love violence—this isn't new. The shock seems to be that girls, as well as boys, appear to have an appetite for it" (para. 4). Iqbal criticizes societal gender norms as ill-informed based on society's lack of

knowledge or acceptance of girls' deviant behavior. Both of these articles from *The Guardian* suggest that the hesitation in implicating girls as violent terrorists is rooted in their gender. A writer for the *Daily Mail* made similar claims, however, with one gender-related caveat:

> If the girls have flown off to join jihadis, they'll have done so in the belief that it's an exciting romantic adventure. The same applies for teenage boys who do the same. It might be easier to talk boys out of this kind of escapade than girls. Boys can be mulish and difficult, but in the end will often see sense. Girls in the same position will, I'm sure, nod, smile, utter non-committal words of assurance and then do exactly what they intended to do in the first place. (McKay, 2015, para. 3)

McKay (2015) makes a sexist implication that although there is no difference in motivation for why boys and girls join ISIS, a contrast exists in the way boys and girls respond to "reason" and endanger themselves. In addition, an opinion article from *The Sun* frankly dismisses the victimization of the teenagers: "The Jihadi Janes—Shamima Begum, 15, Kadiza Sultana, 16, and Amira Abase, 15—are old enough to understand exactly what they were buying a ticket for . . . blame the Jihadi Janes themselves" (Parks, 2015, para. 4).

Regarding Research Question 1, UK journalists defined the role of the three teenage girls through the frame of victimization, specifically as sex slaves. Except for two articles from *The Guardian* and one from *The Sun*, the news narrative surrounding the girls was built on language that paints them as naive and confined to a life of sexual exploitation, without any mention of the girls' agency in the decision-making process. These assumed gender roles for jihadi brides negate any violent or ideological motivations behind the girls' decision to travel to Syria. Instead of "blaming the Jihadi Janes themselves," questions of agency and blame weaved in and out of the discourse, and the consensus led to the scapegoating of social media.

Technological Fetishism: A Shift in Agency

A moral panic typically emerges when a new technology poses a threat toward young people, particularly teenagers and children. In the case of the London girls, not only did their recruitment make headlines, but so did their social media use. *The Daily Mirror* illustrated aspects of moral panic when reporting on young British girls and ISIS: "Quietly and away from enquiring eyes of their worried parents, youngsters are being radicalized by terror groups in their bedrooms over the Internet" (Scheerhout, 2015, para. 12). This excerpt is representative of most articles included in the sample, embedded with narratives of fear and cause for parental concern regarding who and what teenagers are engaging with online.

Journalists from all four newspapers published articles advising parents to monitor their child's Internet use, to look for changes in their behavior, and, should there be any suspicion, former UK Foreign Secretary William Hague says, "confiscate their passports" (Taher, Cahalan, Chorley, Duell, & Rahaman, 2015), according to the *Daily Mail*. *The Sun* published an opinion article featuring similar notions: "Some serious potential monitoring of the radical rubbish they were sucking up on the Internet would have nipped their jihadi dreams in the bud" (Parks, 2015, para. 3). However, the call for parental monitoring also led to the demand for social media companies to do more to stop the ISIS recruitment campaign, particularly

Twitter. These calls for regulation are reminiscent of Springhall's (1998) mention of moral panics, resulting in a "campaign by adults to regulate, ban or censor" (p. 7). Twitter was frequently featured in news articles as the girls were initially recruited to ISIS by a former schoolmate through the platform. The *Daily Mail* often used Twitter to label the bridge between ISIS and two of the three London girls:

> Shamima and Kadiza were both prolific Twitter users who used privacy settings to mask their activities. But messages recovered by the *Daily Mail* reveal Kadiza was recently linked with hate preacher Anjem Choudary. The schoolgirl amassed almost 11,000 followers with her prolific messages, many praising life in territory controlled by IS. Meanwhile Shamima followed 77 accounts, of which almost every single one belongs to a terrorist fighter or IS sympathizer. (Greenwood et al., 2015, paras. 83–85)

Here, the journalist appears to not only incriminate Islamic extremists but also the medium through which they disseminate their message, labeling Twitter an accomplice. Also, the reporters seem to attribute minor agency to the "schoolgirls," writing that Kadiza "amassed almost 11,000 followers with her prolific messages" and that Shamima "followed 77 accounts." Another *Daily Mail* article expanded on Shamima's social media use to network "with three of the British leaders of the al-Khansa brigade, an all-women militia set up by the group a year ago" (Verkaik & Wyke, 2015, para. 3). The previous sentence is one of the few instances in which reporters acknowledge the girls' pursuit and support for ISIS, although there is no outright condemnation of the girls, only victimization. Of the four papers, the *Daily Mail* published the most critical perspective on social media's negative aspects and their role in ISIS recruitment, and *The Sun* featured the least critical articles

The *Daily Mail*'s Robert Verkaik (2015) mentioned the popular website Jihad Matchmaker used to radicalize young girls by offering arranged marriages between young Muslim women and jihadists, as well as Surespot, an encrypted chat messenger ISIS used after young girls "are brainwashed on Twitter" (Bentley, 2015, para. 2). A group of the newspaper's writers also reported that "Islamists have even tricked users into viewing awful images by mislabeling them and often accuse the authorities of Islamophobia when they are blocked" (Greenwood et al., 2015, para. 91). This narrative suggests that even if young women are not looking for extremist content, it manages to infiltrate their homes and find them. Although these examples are more extreme than interracial courtship via telephone (Marvin, 1988), the basic concept is the same: Technology enables teenager girls to communicate with the "other." Furthermore, the journalists suggest that parents have lost touch with who their teenagers are communicating with online and should feel threatened. However, rather than holding ISIS recruiters exclusively responsible, social media companies become a more tangible scapegoat for parents to blame.

Along with the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Mirror* justified parents' fears by seeking out professional resources, quoting counterextremist experts who described the recruitment of these young girls as "child abuse" and "grooming." Sara Khan, cofounder and director of Inspire, a nongovernmental organization aiming to counter extremism and gender inequality, told *The Guardian*,

the tactics used by those luring young girls to Syria and Iraq to marry them off to jihadis or force them into domestic servitude, were the grooming methods of paedophiles. "We need to stop using the phrase 'jihadi brides,'" she said. "This is grooming, a child safety issue, and we need to make that distinction. These are normal teenage girls who should be in school, with their families, and have sacrificed everything to run off and join this crazed group." (McVeigh & Reidy, 2015, para. 4)

In addition, *The Daily Mirror* quoted Detective Chief Superintendent Tony Mole appealing to concerned parents:

It's not just linked to radicalization over the Internet. You can get groomed over the Internet. It's about safeguarding your child. There are a lot people that can try to corrupt you on the Internet. It's about your relationship with your child. If you are concerned, at the end of the day you are a parent or guardian. Take their passports to safeguard them. (Scheerhout, 2015, paras. 8–9)

Mole makes somewhat of a shift away from ISIS recruitment online and discusses grooming practices online and isolated the issue to the relationship between children and the Internet. The pattern in the arguments from different journalists is the isolation of the issue as a technological problem, and thus an illustration of technological fetishism. The discourse implies a cause and effect relationship in which the absence of Internet regulation led to the recruitment of the teenage girls in London.

However, the discourse is lacking the ideological messaging communicated through social media: the decision-making process to make physical contact with a recruiter, and the final choice to join a terrorist group committed to the eradication of Western imperialism in the Middle East. Social media and Internet use alone cannot account for the success of ISIS's recruitment efforts. Yet, the present discourse is reminiscent of technological fetishism that strategically shifts attention away from the political and structural aspects of the issue. Fuchs (2012) explains that these social media panics "are an ideology that abstracts from the societal causes of problems and inscribes these problems into technology" (p. 387). This notion is present in the discourse around control and surveillance of social media, given the assumed danger technology poses to British teenager girls. Journalists gathered a network of expert resources to support claims that the manipulation of the Internet is a relevant and credible threat to young girls all over Britain. Cohen (1980) references this kind of expert support to rationalize trepidation as "expert confirmation of dangers." The combination of expert resources and strategic language portrays teenage girls recruited to ISIS as vulnerable children, targeted and manipulated through social media. Furthermore, comparisons with child abuse limit the girls' agency and reduce them to victims of a savvy social media campaign.

Journalists reported the issue of online radicalization as a losing battle against ISIS. Britain's former foreign secretary William Hague spoke to this struggle in the *Daily Mail*: "We will need to update the powers of the security services as technology is changing all the time, and that makes it harder to intercept organized crime or potential terrorist activity" ("UK 'Losing Radicalization War,'" 2015, para. 16). Hague implied that technology is not only a hindrance to counterterrorism, but also a collaborator as the changing nature of technology works to the advantage of terrorist organizations.

In conjunction with discussing the dangers of ISIS via social media, journalists continued to publish frequent calls for government surveillance of social media websites, another example of technological fetishism. Furthermore, one such plea came from the father of another British female recruit, Aqsa Mahmood, the young woman who the London girls communicated with via Twitter and eventually followed to Syria. The father attributes the Internet to the destruction of recruits' lives: "I think the police should monitor the Internet more because it's destroying lives. It's not fair. Not only my daughter's, but her three friends, and I don't know how many more it has destroyed" (Sinmaz, Reid, & Marsden, 2015, para. 10). Notice that the father attributes blame to the Internet, not members of ISIS. Calls like this point to Cohen's (1980) condition for moral panic in the introduction of new regulations and a rigid enforcement. The *Daily Mail* exemplified this step, saying that Prime Minister David Cameron called for encrypted communication services such as WhatsApp and Snapchat to be opened up for security services (Doyle & Newton, 2015).

In addition, the *Daily Mail* published an article from Reuters entitled "Cameron: Internet Firms Must Do More After UK Girls Head to Syria," which reported that the actions of the London girls "led to calls from lawmakers for social media companies to do more after it was revealed they had been in contact via Twitter with other women involved with the Islamic State" (Holden, 2015, para. 3). These calls for increased security measures to protect teenagers from Internet predators oversimplifies the issue by assuming that surveillance or censorship can control recruitment efforts. Furthermore, this discourse suggests that society is technologically determined and that societal issues that involve technological elements can be solved at the technological level (Fuchs, 2012).

Regarding Research Question 2, many of the news articles focused on the role of social media and attributed more agency to Twitter than the young woman who recruited the three teenagers. The discourse suggests that social media are not the mere vessel used by ISIS to broadcast its propaganda, but rather a responsible agent in the recruitment of young girls. Here, the role of social media is overestimated and "ignores the fact that technology is embedded into society, and that it is humans living under and rebelling against power relations, not technology" (Fuchs, 2012, p. 387). Regarding Research Question 3, the roles of both the girls and social media are made complete by identifying the intersection of social media's dangerous autonomy and the victimization of the girls as a cause and effect relationship. Here, technological fetishism is an ideological strategy that shifts agency away from the human actors and attempts to obscure the maintenance of gender roles both at home and abroad.

Conclusion

Bhui's (2013) research highlights a teenager's vulnerability to outside sources that shape their identity, mainly through the Internet, giving radical organizations access to a young recruitment pool. Journalists who reported on the three London girls showcased this vulnerability by separating the girls' agency from their decision to take the "jihadi bride trail" to Syria. Journalists undermined the agency of the young teenage girls' role in their recruitment by habitually using the language of gendered terrorism and fear.

The focus on gender supplements the implication that the enemy is coming for our young women and plundering the West by brandishing their social media accounts. Spivak (1988) refers to this narrative as a case of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (p. 296). In a direct contradiction of gender norms,

these three teenage girls chose to leave their lives in London to join the fight against the same country where they were born. Furthermore, admitting that young women are just as susceptible as young men to recruitment by ISIS for political purposes is a threat to the societal understandings of gender in the West.

However, the narratives featured in the sample not only portray the London girls as victims of ISIS, but also of social media's deviant role in their recruitment. Theories surrounding gendered terrorism, coupled with Cohen's (1980) theory of moral panics, map out the technological determinist narrative that uses social media as a scapegoat for the successful recruitment of teenage girls. Furthermore, these narratives of fear encourage parental support for the surveillance and censorship of social media, while dismissing the ideological threat that the girls represent. If these narratives of fear can perpetuate the victimization of young women, the hegemonic understanding of gender roles can be maintained, and the likelihood of censorship in social media becomes more realistic.

As this study illustrates, the extensive news coverage of the three London girls helped to circulate a fear of both gendered terrorism and technology. Although journalists' coverage varied, the consistent discourse victimized the teenage girls while simultaneously denying them agency and instead lending it to social media platforms. Perhaps how British tabloids focused on the effects of social media's potential to radicalize teenage girls is reflective of the tabloid's sensationalist nature. However, the same argument does not explain similar representations found in broadsheets such as *The Guardian*, which made similar arguments to the effect of ISIS's social media campaign on British teens.

Ultimately, the underlying narrative of fear is the threat against the maintenance of the status quo at home and, consequently, Western imperialism abroad. The technological fetishism in this case study shifts power away from both the recruit and the recruiter by making social media the determinist and casting the teenage girls as casualties of the Internet's dark side. Revealing the frameworks built on technological fetishism and gender is vital for moving forward in counterterrorism as relying on a fear of technology through extensive censorship and regulation serves as a temporary fix for a more significant problem (Fuchs, 2012). Also, enabling governments with the power to censor and regulate social media reinforces power structures and the hierarchy of ideology preventing society's members from exploring other ideologies.

Finally, concerning Shamima Begum's desire to return to the United Kingdom from her life with ISIS, a thorough understanding of the "why" rather than the "how" of teenage girls' ISIS recruitment might reveal more valuable insight into anti-Western sentiment as well as aid in counterterrorism efforts. The audience's knowledge of Begum is limited exclusively to the content media choose to showcase. Considering the extensive influence of media on public opinion, understanding the narratives through which journalists tell the stories of ISIS recruits is imperative to future decisions regarding recruits' desires to return home.

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