Twitter, Tweeting, and Terrorism: How Terrorist Organizations Utilize Social Media to Create a Brand

**Abstract**

The rise of social media has created a plethora of new opportunities for individuals to connect and share with each other from all corners of the world. These new developments in communication through the digital world does not come without risk. In recent years, social media outlets have seen an increase in activity in support of various terrorist organizations. With access to these platforms, terrorist organizations have the potential to spread their reach to a whole new audience from their fingertips. This study aims to understand how terrorist organizations have utilized social media for their own benefit. Specifically looking at ISIS, I examine their utilization of social media as it relates to their recruitment efforts, spread of propaganda, and use in facilitating public terror to identify any potential patterns. By analyzing data obtained from the Global Terrorism Database and several related studies, I argue that ISIS has used social media to turn the organization into a brand by capitalizing on the theory of brand culture. By creating a brand image for ISIS, the group effectively keeps the threat of terror alive via its virtual caliphate while the physical caliphate diminishes. Understanding the way terrorist organizations utilize social media is crucial to figuring out the next steps in combating the issue. The findings from this study can be used as a backbone for further discussions regarding the protection of free speech and how this transcends to the digital world regarding the spread violent messaging and the responsibility of social media companies.

**Method**

This study employs descriptive quantitative analysis and comparative case studies of ISIS’s use of social media in the post 9/11 era. Focusing especially on how the organization’s utilization of social media relates to the theory of brand culture, the study explores how this has affected recruitment efforts, the spread of propaganda, and the facilitation of public terror while examining several recent attacks as examples.

**Conclusion**

ISIS has capitalized on the theory of brand culture, using social media as a platform to transform the organization into a global Brand and to create a virtual community where members social identities are molded to align with the group’s ideals. The rise of social media has allowed the group to remain relevant through a growing virtual caliphate due to their newfound global reach to recruit and spread propaganda. By adopting the ISIS Brand, the group is able to spread terror across a global platform, enforcing the idea that ‘ISIS is everywhere.’ Additionally, ISIS branded attacks employee social media in ways that are not only difficult to control, but also are extremely effective in creating a fear, such as using Facebook Live to stream their deadly attacks in real time.

**Impact**

Not only does this study redefine the traditional definition of a brand by applying the term to the social sciences, but it also helps further the limited understanding of the relationship between terrorism and social media. By better understanding this relationship, we can begin to determine how to best go about shrinking ISIS’s virtual caliphate and attempt stop the spread of violent messaging.