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ISIS rhetoric: A war of online videos

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ISIS Rhetoric: A War of Online Videos

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Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Acknowledgements..... | ii |
| Table of Contents | iii |
| Abstract | iv |
| Chapter 1: Introduction..... | 1 |
| Contexts | |
| Shared Values Initiative | |
| Research | |
| Framework and Methods | |
| Chapter 2: “No Respite”..... | 17 |
| Video Summary | |
| Analysis | |
| Chapter 3: “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh”..... | 28 |
| Video Summary | |
| Analysis | |
| Chapter 4: Conclusions..... | 36 |
| Implications | |
| References..... | 42 |

Abstract

In an attempt to combat ISIS recruitment videos, the United States Department of State (USDS) developed the *Think Again, Turn Away* social media campaign featuring videos attempting to persuade viewers to resist the message of ISIS. In the article “U.S. government: A war of online video propaganda,” authors William Allendorfer and Susan Herring (2015) analyze the textual rhetoric of the ISIS video series *Flames of War* in comparison to eight *Think Again, Turn Away* videos. To add to Allendorfer and Herring’s (2015) textual analysis, this study uses the framework of scholar David Blakesley’s (2004) four elements of film rhetoric (*language, ideology, interpretation, and identification*) to complete a visual analysis of the ISIS video “No Respite” and the *Think Again, Turn Away* video, “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh.” From this visual analysis, I argue that ISIS attempts to make their organization seem larger than it is, the USDS lacks a dichotomy in message, and ISIS seems to utilize images relatable to the target audience. Ultimately, this study found that ISIS propaganda tends to have a stronger impact than the USDS. This study is limited because the audience impact and reception cannot be fully measured.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The United States of America (US) and other Western societies are facing a new threat: the harnessed power of online social media. In recent years, the infamous militant group known as the Islamic State of Iraq in Syria (ISIS) has utilized the tools that online social media has to offer. ISIS uses platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to attract Millennials¹ to join, support, or sympathize with the group (Singer & Brooking, 2016). The varied forms of online social media that ISIS uses allow them to network with young adults all over the industrialized world in order to create and sustain a terrorist movement to promote the ISIS agenda and ideology. The particular medium ISIS uses to attract followers is short, well-produced, high-quality videos. The most recent videos are visually and emotionally captivating and feel incredibly enticing due to their movie-trailer-like production and style.

In the US, with fear of ISIS growing throughout the country, the government is unremittingly attempting to create counter-videos that respond to the solicitations of ISIS (Singer & Brooking, 2016). In 2011, President Barack Obama instituted Executive order 13584, which instated the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (2011). This organization, a subsidiary of the United States Department of State (USDS), is working to create and release videos with messages that contradict the information and logic of the ISIS recruitment videos. One of the current campaigns created by the USDS is the *Think Again, Turn Away* project that seeks to convince individuals to resist the message of ISIS by releasing counter information about them. The portion of the *Think*

¹ According to Pew Research, “Millennials” are the 2014 age group of 18 to 33 years old or those born between the years 1981 and 1996 (Mitchell, Gottfried, and Matsa, 2015).

Again, Turn Away campaign that takes place on their YouTube channel features more than 30 short videos with reasons viewers should choose not to join or support ISIS. In addition to the YouTube channel, this campaign has a Facebook and Twitter account with regular postings of information along the same themes. The webpages are hosted by the USDS and display the seal of the department throughout their content.

In addition to the US government's attempts to study the presence of ISIS on social media, many scholars have turned their attention to the complex issues surrounding online ISIS propaganda. William Allendorfer and Susan Herring (2015) explore these topics in the article "ISIS vs. the U.S. government: A war of online video propaganda." In this article, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) use multiple theoretical frameworks and lenses to complete a multimodal content analysis of the ISIS video series titled *Flames of War* in comparison to eight *Think Again, Turn Away* videos. The authors use analyses ranging from World War II film propaganda characteristics to the grounded theory approach to analyze demography-related content. While this content analysis is thorough, it lacks a key element of multimodal analyses: visual analysis. From a rhetorical viewpoint, I attempt to add to the discussion and fill in the gaps in Allendorfer and Herring's (2015) research. By implementing a framework from the field of film analysis, this research uncovers the rhetorics used through visual messages in ISIS propaganda videos and the USDS *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign.. The two videos I have chosen to analyze for this research are "No Respite," an ISIS recruitment video that was released in October 2015, and "#WhyTheyLeftDaesh," a USDS *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign video that attempts to counter the argument of the ISIS rhetoric. By using a film framework of visual rhetoric to analyze these two videos, I dig deeper into the

criticism and meaning behind the ISIS propaganda and the counter-messages.

Completing the visual analysis capitalizes on an under-researched area in the study of ISIS rhetoric. The findings and conclusions reinforce many of Allendorfer and Herring's (2015) theories as well as bring about new questions and topics that can inform ways of countering online terrorist propaganda videos.

After exploring the contexts of ISIS recruitment video research, I set up visually oriented frameworks and methods that were used previously in the analysis of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* by David Blakesley (2004). Blakesley (2004) uses these frameworks to critically analyze *Vertigo* and uncover the ways that the audience interacts with the visual elements of the film. Blakesley (2004) particularly looks at visual elements not in an artistic way, but as a way to determine when and how the audience begins to identify with the characters. In Blakesley's (2004) conclusions, he makes assumptions and connections from the visual elements of the piece to its creator (Hitchcock) and the audience. By using this framework, Blakesley (2004) links visual rhetoric to the identity of the audience. This framework is incorporated in Chapters 2 and 3, the analyses of "No Respite" and "#WhyTheyLeftDaesh" respectively. This analysis unveils new rhetorical tools incorporated into these videos and reinforces other researchers' theories to add to the discussion of ISIS, social media, and online propaganda videos. The analysis not only makes conclusions about the ideology of ISIS and their media strategies, but also makes suggestions on how to enhance the rhetoric of counter-strategies through the analysis of the *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign.

Because ISIS propaganda is a topic of international and safety interest, and in order to create a more accurate and thorough base of research, I will draw on a broad

range of literature from multiple academic disciplines and fields of knowledge to complete the analysis of the two videos. My sources range from the areas of sociology, news media, social media blogging, military journals, communications, and many more. These sources are compiled into the following contexts that represent a variety of voices discussing ISIS videos.

Contexts

Shared Values Initiative

In the past, the US government has attempted to create a similar type of counter-movement called the *Shared Values Initiative*, following the events of the September 11th, 2001 terror attacks (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009). The Bush administration wanted to internationally portray Muslim-Americans as happy and productive individuals who are integrated and accepted into mainstream American culture in order to dispel the idea that, after the September 11th attacks, Muslims were facing (or deserving of) persecution in America (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009). The campaign seemed to have two main messages for two separate target audiences. The first message was for the Muslims worldwide, which said that Muslim-Americans were not being persecuted. The second message targeted American non-Muslims in order to show them that Muslim-Americans did not deserve persecution because they were productive individuals.

In order to relay these messages to the target audiences, the campaign featured a series of commercials depicting Muslim individuals as teachers, bakers, and other casual

members of American society.² The commercials showed personal narratives of Muslim-American individuals claiming that they did not feel persecuted in America. There were various shots of Muslim-Americans shaking hands with other business owners, hugging, working, and seemingly fitting in with the American culture.

However, this campaign abruptly halted prior to the US invasion of Afghanistan and the declaration of the “War on Terror.” This campaign might have been more successful had the US not chosen to invade a Muslim-majority country. The invasion of Afghanistan was a move that caused many Muslims to believe that the US was fighting a “War on Islam” rather than a “War on Terror” because the “terrorists” wore the veil of Islam. The subsequent equating of the words “Muslim” and “terrorist” in the US created tensions that might have led to the destruction of the *Shared Values Initiative* campaign and prevented other positive-rhetoric campaigns from starting.

Research

Due to the intense nature of warfare and the immediacy of the online “attacks” of ISIS propaganda and USDS counter-attacks, the topics surrounding this issue are heavily debated and researched in the US government and in multiple academic fields. In addition to Allendorfer and Herring’s (2015) research, other scholars and professionals are taking part in the conversation about these topics. Each of the following scholars has an intentional and intimate connection with the study of ISIS recruitment videos or a closely related field.

First and foremost, in their article titled “Winning the Battle but Losing the War?”

² The *Shared Values Initiative* videos are now published to YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Iu3dR7F0Cz8?list=PL1792FDD6F86AF947> shows a YouTube playlist of six of these commercials.

Narrative and Counter-Narrative Strategy,” authors Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko, and Clark McCauley quote Dr. David Betz from the Department of War Studies at King’s College London defining the “Jihadist Narrative” characteristics that he coined (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009). His list of elements in the jihadist narrative are as follows: “(1) Islam is under general unjust by Western crusaders led by the United States; (2) Jihadists, whom the West refers to as ‘terrorists,’ are defending against this attack; (3) the actions they take in defense of Islam are proportionally just and religiously sanctified; and therefore (4) it is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions” (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009). Through defining the elements of the jihadist narrative, the authors made four conclusions about how to counter the jihadist narrative: (1) the US must counter the idea that they are waging a “War on Islam” rather than a one on terror, (2) the US must counter the idea that the Muslim terrorists are defending Islam, the US must show that the jihadist attacks are “acts of war” rather than “collateral damage.” and, (4) the US must counter the idea that “good Muslims” support Muslim extremists (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009).

Overall, these authors, even though none have backgrounds in narrative theory, try to communicate the basics of narrative and counter-narrative in order to provide audiences with the means to create media to counter the jihadist narrative.

In addition, a *Think Progress* article called “Meet the State Department Team Trying to Troll ISIS into Oblivion” featured an interview with Will McCants, a former USDS member who was working to counter the ISIS social media influence (Brown, 2014). He adds to the characteristics of the jihadist narrative outlining three main areas of

ISIS persuasion: “[1] tapping into a deep-seated sense of grievance and persecution among Muslims, particularly as the civil war in Syria continues; [2] an assurance that ISIS actually has the ability to right the wrongs others have imposed on the community, recruiting young men and women to join the movement and dirty their hands; and [3] harnessing the religious aspect of their cause, promoting the rise of the caliphate³ and a sense of inevitability” (Brown, 2014).

In summary, this blog article gives examples of how different entities in addition to the US government are attempting to battle the social media presence of ISIS. The article uses Will McCants’ testimony to reveal that, as other scholars have stated, the US is losing the online battle of ISIS social media (Brown, 2014; Singer and Brooking, 2016; Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009). However, there are few ways to determine if the large presence of ISIS on social media is actually leading to success for their organization. Still, understanding the elements of jihadist narrative is important to this research because it informs the way the “No Respite” and #WhyTheyLeftDaesh” videos manifest in narrative contexts.

Understanding jihadist narrative partially informs the contexts of these videos, but understanding other contexts of terrorist propaganda and counter-narrative further inform how these videos can be read. William Casebeer and James Russell’s “Storytelling and Terrorism: Towards a Comprehensive ‘Counter-Narrative Strategy’” (2005) outlines the characteristics of a strong counter-narrative in a terrorism situation by giving six elements of effective counter-narrative. Their framework is in the context of “jihadist terrorism” or

³ Caliphate is the term used in Islam to describe the area or state where the caliph (the leader of Islam who is believed to be a descendant of Mohammed) is located (Merriam-Webster).

Islamic-motivated terrorism (Casebeer and Russell, 2005). The elements of the counter-narrative defined by this article are as follows: “(1) a competing myth creation; (2) foundational myth deconstruction; (3) creation of alternative exemplars; (4) metaphor shifts; (5) identity gerrymandering; and (6) structural disruption” (Casebeer and Russell, 2005). By using this set of elements, counter-narratives can both be analyzed and created. Casebeer and Russell (2005) explain creation and analysis of a terrorist counter-movement to a government or military discourse through the usage of the previous framework. Although this article does not focus on social media or visuals that are specific to this research, a military discourse representation of the jihadist narrative helps expand the topic at hand.

The most extensive analysis of terrorist video narratives that I found in my research comes from Allendorfer and Herring (2015). In this research, the authors use multiple frameworks to examine various videos from the ISIS *Flames of War* video series. In addition, they use separate frameworks to analyze comparatively eight of the many *Think Again, Turn Away* videos (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015).

The first framework they use is taken from a content analysis created by Thomas Christie and Andrew Clark, who looked at the World War II government definitions of enemy characteristics describing the Germans and Japanese in comparison to the war propaganda films of the time (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). Christie and Clark determined their own list of enemy characteristics as portrayed in the films: “(1) having no legitimate government order or alliance; (2) cruel; (3) cynical; (4) deceitful, not trustworthy; (5) disregarding basic human rights; (6) dividing the US [or home country] (causing fear and distrust among Americans or allies); (7) dominating by force, or power;

(8) lying, spreading rumors, false optimism and defeatism; (9) not invincible; and (10) sabotaging” (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015).

When using this framework, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) determined that the *Flames of War* and the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos both incorporated these characteristics in different degrees through the content. The analysis with this framework uncovered that both video sets were using language that overwhelmingly portrayed the other as an enemy (i.e., in *Flames of War*, US is the enemy and in *Think Again, Turn Away*, ISIS is the enemy). By using the World War II propaganda film characteristics framework in their analysis, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) were able to take a historic representation of enemies and apply those characteristics to the current threat to the US: ISIS. Each characteristic in the framework transitioned from a World War II-era film medium to the updated online video medium to uncover how the enemies are portrayed in each video set.

Another framework Allendorfer and Herring (2015) used to analyze the ISIS and USDS videos was the grounded theory approach from authors Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, which was used in order “to identify other emergent content characteristics, such as participant status and demographics” of the individuals portrayed in the videos. In this analysis, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) take the scenes of the videos and quantify them with different demographical information in order to determine the target audience and individuals portrayed in the opposing sets of videos. Although this requires some visual analysis, Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) article comes from a sociological background and the grounded theory approach does not strictly define the visual elements that are required to analyze the visual images. Because the grounded theory approach did not

originally apply to visual elements, it does not necessarily assess the visual rhetoric of the videos.

By combining the previously mentioned frameworks and synthesizing the quantitative data, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) came to some conclusions about the rhetoric used in both videos. They also make suggestions about the way the USDS should alter the rhetoric used to counter the ISIS narrative. Among these conclusions and claims is that, as opposed to *Flames of War*, the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos have a much more “one-dimensional” type of narrative. A one-dimensional narrative suggests that the audience abstain from joining ISIS, without offering an alternative action or other dimension (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). This makes the USDS seem as if it is on the defensive end of this rhetorical online “battle” and are using reactionary tactics like simply stating why the viewer should not join ISIS, a sign of inherently weaker rhetoric (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). As well, the authors suggest that the voice of the USDS videos is inauthentic because the videos do not mention the USDS or the identity of the community behind the videos, while the ISIS videos claim to be ISIS and claim the identity of ISIS (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). Due to this inconsistency of voice between the two videos, it seems that ISIS has a more authentic voice that is coming straight from the source, whereas the USDS is mimicking the same voice, yet not representing that voice. As a response, the authors suggest that the USDS attempt to develop a more authentic voice. Finally, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) conclude that the USDS videos lack a cultural sensitivity to the Muslim-American discourse community because they do not reference Islamic terms correctly. The authors suggest that the USDS uses references to Islamic culture more appropriately and become more

sensitive to their target audience.

These frameworks are suitable because they represent a breadth of research, and the claims and conclusions are founded and sensible due to the comprehensive suggestions for improvement or consideration. The contexts represent the goals of various terrorist propaganda and how to analyze the messages of these organizations. This information helps inform the way I analyze the visual messages of the ISIS recruitment videos. However, there is a slight deficit in the analysis of the videos in *Flames of War* and the *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign because the analysis features no visual analysis. Allendorfer and Herring, as well as the other authors mentioned, focus their analysis almost solely on language- and content-based data.

The previously discussed analyses do not completely take into account the relationship of the images and visual information used in ISIS videos. Because videos are a medium experienced partially through visual consumption, a textual analysis is simply insufficient. As Blakesley (2004) would argue, visual elements can “make us believe that *framed* experience is *all* experience,” or that what we see in an image is an independent experience or message. This independent message deserves exploration outside of the textual information. When placing so much weight in the scripted and spoken content of the videos, much of the rhetorical value is lost or not fully defended. Therefore, I argue that, in order to more completely understand and defend conclusions about ISIS recruitment videos and their contexts, a visual analysis must be used in addition to the script and oral content analysis. The analysis will not expose the successes or failures of one campaign over the other because that measurement is nearly impossible to make. Rather, this analysis will help uncover how the campaigns manifest themselves and will

add to the conversation surrounding the debates on how best to counter ISIS recruitment videos and other terrorist media propaganda.

Framework and Methods

ISIS and USDS videos are situated in the field of visual rhetoric through the complex usage of video in online spaces. In basic terms, visual rhetoric, as an academic discipline is studied “[t]hrough the analysis of photographs and drawings, graphs and tables, and motion pictures” and how these “visual elements are used to influence people’s attitudes, opinions, and beliefs” (Helmets & Hill, 2004). Additionally, visual rhetoric is an inherently cross-disciplinary subject that crosses the academic fields of English, Rhetoric, Art, and Psychology (among others) and must be approached from a variety of different perspectives (Helmets & Hill, 2004). The analysis of the following videos is situated from the perspective of video as a visual language or text that is interpreted by the audience.

The videos “No Respite” and “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” were strategically chosen to be analyzed for multiple reasons. First, “No Respite” is one of the most recent ISIS recruitment videos to be released in multiple languages, one of which being English. The video also focuses its arguments on the US making this media especially valuable subject matter for Americans and Westerners. As well, the video has a high production quality. It looks as if it were a trailer for a movie or action scenes from a video game. These characteristics make it visually dynamic and especially interesting for visual analysis. Additionally, these videos represent the organizations in which they were created because they are broadly focusing on the topic of ISIS rather than specific situations or facets of their group. This video contains information that summarizes the ideology of ISIS and,

unlike some ISIS videos, does not focus on one small element of the ideology (e.g., Islam, marriage, beheadings, or prayer). On a similar note, “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” is comparable in production quality and focuses on multiple encompassing elements of ISIS (e.g., female defectors, slain journalists, violence, and child soldiers). The video was also released during the same time as “No Respite.” The videos, only being a few months apart in their release, have spent relatively the same amount of time online. Furthermore, these videos represent a broad spectrum of rhetorical devices used by both of these groups in order to communicate each social movement.

ISIS is using social media websites like Twitter and YouTube in order to reach a wide audience and spread the organization’s ideology and identity to the audience (Sanchez, 2015). Although, there is no statement of a clearly expressed target audience of the ISIS recruitment videos, there is evidence suggesting that the group is targeting mostly young adult males. First, upon initial viewing of recently released videos like “No Respite,” the actors are mostly powerful-looking young adult males (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). The males are almost exclusively portrayed in a military or commanding position that evokes a sense of power. In addition, the genre in which the videos are released and spread through militainment attracts a mostly male demographic between the ages of 18 to 34 years of age (Payne, 2014; Blattberg, 2015). Thus, “No Respite” could be attracting a more male-dominated audience due to its videogame-like style. Another dimension of the target audience is the religious element. Because ISIS claims to be motivated by Islam, the message involves linguistic references that would be easily understood by Muslim individuals (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). For instance, the videos reference words like “jihad,” “Allah,” and scriptures from the Qur’an. Considering

the relevant demographic evidence, the target audience seems to be Muslim men between the ages of 18 and 34 years.

Many of the previously defined frameworks will not accomplish the level of visual analysis required to determine the broad and parallel contexts of visual rhetoric for the chosen videos because they do not apply to visual rhetoric specifically. The frameworks used by each of the scholars are very content- and language-oriented or else are specific to one of the videos. For a parallel analysis of the two videos, I am utilizing a basic framework that specifies visual and film rhetoric into a coherent system.

The book *Defining Visual Rhetoric* is an anthology of various papers addressing the complex components of visual rhetoric and the ways this field discusses a language of images (Hill and Helmers, 2004). Chapter 5, written by the author David Blakesley (2004), is called “Defining Film Rhetoric: The Case of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*” and describes film and video rhetoric. As a well-published rhetorical studies writer, English professor, and Director of Professional Writing, Blakesley has a background that lends well to the field of rhetoric studies (Hill and Helmers, 2004).

In Blakesley’s (2004) chapter on the renowned filmmaker, Alfred Hitchcock and the use of rhetoric in the film *Vertigo*, the author defines elements of “Film Rhetoric.” Blakesley breaks film rhetoric or video rhetoric, a subset of visual rhetoric, into four distinguishing elements. The elements are not separate areas of analysis, but a series of areas that progress from one to the next. The four elements of film rhetoric are the 1) *language*, 2) *ideology*, 3) *interpretation*, and 4) *identification*⁴ (Blakesley, 2004). Through these four elements, Blakesley (2004) analyzes the complex web of visual

⁴ Each of the four elements of film rhetoric will be designated in the analysis by italics.

elements in the film *Vertigo* to determine how the audience, the director, Alfred Hitchcock, and the movie's characters relate and identify with one another in various ways.

According to Blakesley (2004), the *language* of a video in this context is not the literal words of the scripted content, but rather, the visual elements of color, frame, composition, special effects, and other individual visual elements. In the analysis, the researcher first examines visual elements that are deemed as meaningful or representative and then evaluated through the other three elements of video rhetoric. For the purposes of this study, the meaningful and representativeness of the visual elements is determined by the frequency of theme occurrence and the significance of the visual event. In this type of analysis, the film *language* is always first to be examined.

Further, according to Blakesley (2004), the *ideology* of the visual elements is the notion of the cultural, value, or belief expression taken from the visual information. From this, the researcher is to ask, "What does the film reveal or repress" about the culture or values of the film's creators. For example, in the era of *Vertigo*, women were always considered to be damsels in distress. However, the visual *ideology* was reversed when the lead female character outwitted the male character to show a reversal of cultural norms.

The *ideology* leads to the film *interpretation* element of film rhetoric. *Interpretation* involves a deeper analysis of the film *language* and film *ideology* to determine more about the audience *interpretation*, director *interpretation*, and actor or video participant *interpretation* (Blakesley, 2004). The film *interpretation* considers the viewers and participants to determine how and why the meaning of the visual argument is made. In this analysis, *interpretation* and *ideology* are very closely related due to the way

the two overlap. Because an audience tends to *interpret* everything through a lens of their personal *ideology*, these two elements overlap often.

The final element of film rhetoric is film *identification*, in which the interaction of the film *language*, *ideology*, and *interpretation* form together to show how the participants *identify* with the visual elements or their meanings (Blakesley, 2004). The *identification* cannot be analyzed without the interaction of the preceding three elements of visual rhetoric; therefore, Blakesley (2004) considers this element to be the conclusion of the rhetorical analysis of a video element. This final step of the analysis takes into account the audience's tendency to identify with a character, element, or message conveyed in a visual medium.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I use Blakesley's (2004) framework of film 1) *language*, 2) *ideology*, 3) *interpretation*, and 4) *identification*, roughly in that order, to analyze visual images from the ISIS "No Respite" video and the "#WhyTheyLeftDaesh" video respectively in an attempt to add to the discussion surrounding propaganda in the field of visual rhetoric. The two videos are analyzed parallel to each other in order to compare and contrast the visual rhetoric incorporated in the videos. Through this analysis, I attempt to synthesize the data in the images in order to make conclusions about the way the USDS can combat ISIS online. The final chapter draws inferences and implications about the way visual rhetoric is affecting the field of video propaganda, terrorist rhetoric, and wartime media. Following the conclusions and suggestions, questions for further research are posed in an attempt to continue conversations about visual and video rhetoric in this field.

Chapter 2: No Respite

ISIS can be a difficult group to discuss in many cases due to their public violence and the scars the organization has left internationally. However, another reason why the group is challenging to discuss is the structure of their organization (or lack thereof). ISIS is not a nation or area of the world that can be defined by traditional terms. They are simply a network of people and things that are spread into unknown and undefined places. When ISIS created such a massive online media presence and more specifically, online videos, they began to seem more tangible and cohesive to outsiders. Although the group still lacks the infrastructure, numbers, and solid landmass of an actual nation, their media presence suggests otherwise. After a summary of the “No Respite” ISIS video, the visual elements and themes of the video are uncovered in order to discuss how and why ISIS has an image of being a fortified nation.

Video Summary

“No Respite⁵” was originally published on YouTube but versions are repeatedly taken down due to the YouTube policies on terrorist speech. However, the video still exists on videopress.com. Because of the efforts to delete the video from the web, it is difficult to determine how many total views this video has accumulated. However, one version of the video has over 700,000 YouTube views, 3,800 shares, and over 2,300 comments as of April 2016. On this YouTube video, the video has caused 96

⁵ In this video the term “respite” is used synonymously with “mercy” or a term of similar meaning. As the title “No Respite” suggests, the creators tell their opponents to show them no mercy.

subscriptions to the channel where it is posted⁶. The video was published sometime around November 24, 2015, although for the same reasons, it is difficult to determine exactly when it was released to the public.

The ISIS video, “No Respite” gives a brief introduction to ISIS and very logically argues why the viewer should support the group. In the four-minute video, the enemy is clear: the US, US-supporting countries, and anti-ISIS groups. “No Respite” is an animated video that uses still images and realistic computer-generated imagery (CGI) to create moving graphics. Creating videos of this quality takes plenty of skill, but with the recent advances in animation applications, learning and creating animation is no longer limited to professionals in Hollywood. For example, the animation software created by Adobe called AfterEffects is affordable for non-professionals and can be self-taught through the plethora of online resources and tutorials.

As well, the creators use a style of animation that is categorized under a visual subset called “militainment,” which is a portmanteau of “military entertainment” media (Payne, 2014). This type of media manifests mostly in military-themed video games like Call of Duty, Halo, and Fallout. These games depict a first-person perspective on killing and war. The graphic violence tends to desensitize the player to images of war and the realities of military hardships (Payne, 2014). Further, as previously discussed, the male-dominated demographic on YouTube is attributed to videos about video games, linking the target audience to the idea of “militainment” (Blattberg, 2015). In “No Respite”, the quality of the animation feels like the viewer is being taken through the frames of a

⁶ The channel responsible for posting this version of “No Respite” is named “中華電視公司”

militainment video game. In this way, the viewer might be excited by the thought of violence, while being desensitized to the actual violence of ISIS.

In “No Respite,” one deep male voice with a hint of an Arabic accent narrates the video, pronouncing each Islamic term and Arabic name clearly. The voice is rational and serious in tone as it describes the leader of the khalifah (the caliphate) as Shaykh Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and the size of the area in which he rules. In contrast to the khalifah, ISIS mocks Western politicians by calling them names such as, “liars” and “fornicators” when referring to George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. The video tells of military successes such as destroying the Sykes-Picot borders, as well as moral successes like racial acceptance by saying that there is no difference between a black or white Muslim. In the video, ISIS offers a haven for individuals within the religion, even going as far to say that they have plenty of schools to educate children on the expansion of the caliphate. The group’s mocking of US political leaders and boasting of violence is then justified by Islam and by the god, Allah.

Further, the video targets America and the US military. Although the US military might have incredible numbers, according to ISIS, the members lack the motivation that Islam could offer. The video shows statistics of American soldier suicide and depression rates due to what ISIS refers to as a lack of “will and resolve.” Additionally, the expensive long-range missiles that the US military uses in the airstrikes on Iraq are compared to the cheap bullets ISIS uses to send their enemies “to hell.” ISIS also criticizes Russia, Iran, and Turkey for joining the effort against the group. To its enemies, ISIS mocks, “bring it on, all of you,” while describing the apocalyptic signs leading to the final battle or rapture event. Signs include banners or flags of Muslim enemies adding up

to eighty or more and a battle waging on the hills of Dabiq. The narrator's voice begins to echo toward the conclusion of the video as he tells the enemies to gather allies and "show no respite" because their "ally is the greatest...he is Allah and all glory belongs to him." The video ends with a verse from the Qur'an and an Arabic song playing softly in the background.

Analysis

When initially researching "No Respite," I wanted to gauge some kind of response from the audience, so I read the comments posted about the video on both YouTube and the website in which the video was posted (videopress.com). Many individuals were in disbelief that a video of this caliber could be made by a militant terrorist organization. Comments suggested that ISIS is not capable of such multimedia skill by arguing that the CIA must have edited these videos because "someone smart enough to edit like [this] is not dumb enough to join ISIS" (Xedrius, 2016). The comment seemed to ask how an organization could have such impeccable logic and technical media skills while still being so violent and brutal as if the two entities could not coexist.

For example, the *language* elements of one particular frame of the video are very complex in meaning and skill. The frame shows multiple logos of companies all surrounding the logo of the US Federal Reserve. Of the thirteen logos, four are US oil companies, two are US electric companies, three are US banks, and four are US defense and weapons engineering companies. In the background of the logos, there is a graphic of three televisions with images of politicians shrugging as if they are feeling defeated. On the surface, this single frame of the video is commenting on the corporate control over US government. However, looking into the *ideology* of the video involves looking deeper

into the history and relations of each company. Each company has ties with Iraq, one of the base locations of ISIS. Every oil company is mining and drilling in the country even in areas that are very close to ISIS-ruled areas and danger zones (Zhdannikov, Coles, and Parker, 2014). For Example, ISIS attacked one of the Iraqi towns where Exxon and Chevron operate and the US sent aid to the area. This aid could seem like a corporate interest, rather than a humanitarian effort due to the amount of money invested in the town (Coll, 2014). If the viewer *interprets* this humanitarian effort as a US corporate interest, the individual would be likely to *identify* with ISIS because the audience would believe in the corporate corruption ISIS is fighting against (Blakesley, 2004). In another example, the Citibank took a corporate interest in the Iraqi economy by expanding to the country; a move that would disrupt the economic system ISIS uses (Bukhari, 2013). If an American company disrupts a monetary system, ISIS can use that event, as they did in this situation, to exploit issues caused by Citibank in order to have Iraqis interpret American companies as a disruptor of their *ideology*. In all, by having these corporate logos in the video, ISIS is stating a distrust and anger toward the relationship these companies have with Iraq and the surrounding area that could cause the audience to be more likely to *identify* with ISIS rather than an American culture.

In addition, the frame features logos of electric, weapons, and combat companies. Following the war in Iraq, multiple companies were contracted by the US government to rebuild destroyed areas and train new local police forces while the military left the area. General Electric (GE) and Washington Group International (WGI) were given large sums of government funds to help rebuild the electric infrastructure of cities in Iraq after the war, leaving major US corporations to make essential decisions about vital systems

within Iraq and other areas of the Middle East (Rasheed, 2016). GE and WGI were highlighted in the video to address the resentment that Iraqis might *interpret* toward the companies as they take control over the infrastructures of their country. In addition, the US contracted four defense systems corporations to contribute to weapons engineering in Iraq and security training following the war. Of the four corporations in the video, all benefitted financially from the war in Iraq and were accused of crimes in the Middle East. Aegis and DynCorp (Iraqi Police Trainers) had major court hearings about the abuse of power and specifically the murder of multiple innocent Iraqi civilians (Fainaru and al-Izzi, 2007; Glanz, 2007). All of these situations cause serious friction between Iraqis and the US and this friction is used to remind the viewer of the control these companies have in areas in which they do not relate *ideologically*. If the relationship between the US and Muslim Arabs is agitated by the *interpretation* of these situations, ISIS can use that to press their *ideology* and message that the US is fighting a war against the Muslims by simply showing logos of American corporations operating in Iraq.

Further, this frame is only visible for about one second. It would be nearly impossible to make out each of the corporate logos without pausing the video and taking note. So, why would this particular scene matter if the viewer does not have a chance to fully read the image? Each of the corporate logos picked for this one-second frame seems very intentional, particularly when placed against the relations the corporations have with the Middle East. They seem to state a background and history of the group's motivation and, perhaps, what motivates the target audience to *identify* with the movement. The visual messages coming from this video are much more complex than what the YouTube comments suspect. The ISIS media team is not only technically sound, but also careful

and organized in the way they present visuals. It seems very puzzling that the ISIS video creators would take so much time to create a complex and meaningful scene that cannot be read fully. Although I can speculate reasons why they might have made this rhetorical decision, the overall effort and skill implies that ISIS is a diverse team of skilled artists working on their video projects. While this particular scene could be read as less impactful since it is so brief, there seems to be evidence of complexity of logic, research, and skill in the design of this frame.

On the other hand, there are elements and themes that are much more impactful throughout the “No Respite” video. Many reoccurring elements within the video are the ISIS flag, images of men, rays of light, clouds, fire, guns, transitions, and color themes. Both videos have many more significant visual elements that could be analyzed, yet in order to complete a breadth of analysis, the multiple elements must be organized into common themes. The individual elements can be broken into four larger themes for analysis: color and brightness, flags and symbols, violence, and gender. These four themes are not only analyzed in “No Respite,” but are repeated in the analysis of “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” in order to ensure parallel evaluation.

One prominent reoccurring theme is the two color schemes of gold contrasting with a dark blue-gray. The gold color occurs often in text and image filters when the video depicts ISIS. Gold also appears first when the video shows the leader of the organization and the image of Al-Baghdadi with a heavy outline in the gold color around the frame. As well, the color continues in other frames depicting entities of ISIS such as the image of children studying the Qur’an in a circle wearing camouflage. However, in this image, the color is used as a filter to give the image a light golden hue, rather than a

saturated color or outline. On the other hand, when the US is depicted, the video *language* shifts to display a contrast by use of a darker blue-gray hue in most cases. For example, US troops are shown with a dark blue filter with the capitol building in the background as dark blue-gray clouds stretch behind the building. The difference between these two color schemes creates a dichotomy between the two entities representing ISIS in gold and the US in dark blue-gray. Basic color theories suggest how the audience can *interpret* these colors. One study, by Patricia Valdez and Albert Mehrabian (1994) examines colors' effects on human emotion on a large and quantitative scale. This study is one of the largest, most comprehensive, and all-encompassing color theory analyses available. The authors found that audiences associate warm, saturated, gold colors with positive and active emotions while darker, less vibrant, cool colors tend to evoke darker emotions (Valdez and Mehrabian, 1994). To add to this dichotomy, images of brightness like beams of sunlight, clear blue skies, and fluffy white clouds reoccur with the positive portrayals of ISIS. In contrast, the US is portrayed with dark clouds and black vignettes, which darken the scenes. The audience is being told to associate ISIS positively and the US negatively through this type of *interpretation*. Consistent repetition of this color scheme shows how ISIS brands the *identity* of ISIS in a positive light and the US in a negative light through the use of color. In doing this, the message is reiterated that the audience should *identify* with the happier or brighter group of ISIS rather than the US.

Next, the video language depicts many flags. As a symbol of an *identity*, flags tend to force the audience to make a choice to support or deny the flag. As Blakesley (2004) would add, “[i]dentification is inherently an acting-together of subject-object, with identity a constructed middle ground in the symbolic.” When observing the ISIS flag, an

audience must interact with the symbol, whether they agree with its meaning or not. “No Respite” shows this symbol many times and in many different ways, forcing this interaction. In addition to the eight scenes that include the ISIS flag, there are three scenes that feature the US flag and other nations. The unequal distribution of certain flags indicates many things. The large number of ISIS flags gives the audience a sense of scale, making ISIS seem bigger than they are. A Muslim-American who did not know the size or scale of ISIS might *interpret* the group as being of a large presence. As well, having the ISIS flag waving scene-by-scene with national flags makes ISIS seem as if they are a proper nation supported by the infrastructure and organization of a large country in addition to having national pride. This, again, gives ISIS an *interpretation* of a larger size to the audience and *ideologically* a sense of nationalism. The image of size, pride, and group stability can help gather support for the organization. In addition, the ISIS flag is always depicted in motion. Each image shows flight and movement of the flag. One purpose for this is practical because without wind behind a flag the audience cannot see its design. However, a still graphic of the ISIS flag could have been represented in the video, and yet, it is always shown flying. The movement of the flag implies a metaphorical movement or advancement of the organization. If the ISIS flag is always flying and always in motion, it means that the power that it represents is stable and progressing in some way. Without progress, ISIS would not seem like it needed more support or poses a threat to the US.

Throughout the video, violence is illustrated in various forms. Violence is depicted in three ways: fire, guns, and blood. Fire is shown in thirteen different scenes through the images and animations of burning, explosions, and melting word graphics.

Guns are displayed twenty-six times throughout the video, recurring almost non-stop. Blood is depicted on either the wounded bodies of US soldiers or else as animated graphics over eleven times in the video. The emphasis on violence shows the clear *interpretation* the creators have for the audience: violence and killing. Of all the other images within the analysis, violent images occurred the most frequently. Overall, the visual language is clear that ISIS is representing their organization as a militant group that is promoting violence and using violence to shock audiences. Subsequently, the message also suggests that the viewers join the violence.

Not to be ignored in the *language* of this video is the absence of female images. Images of men are displayed exclusively in this video. The only image that could possibly be interpreted as being female or feminine in nature is an image of a well-manicured hand holding an iPhone that displays an article about ISIS persecuting homosexuals. The assumption is that the hand belongs to a female in this situation. The absent of other female images is a gendered representation of the target, male audience of this video. Men who are depicted as ISIS members are all bearded while Americans do not have beards. The beard comes from the Islamic belief that Adam, the first man, was given a beard by Allah to become beautiful and pass the characteristic to his male offspring (Qur'an). However, culturally the beard is a symbol of becoming an adult man and assuming a power that children cannot have. In both cases, the beard distinguishes these men as a certain identity: powerful and devout Muslim. The male dominated *ideology* of the group and the area in which they rule is evident by the representation of powerful men exclusively. This would cause more men to *identify* with ISIS in this case

if the men were to *interpret* the power as desirable—something that is obviously intended.

In conclusion, the “No Respite” video shows a variety of symbols, elements, and themes that encourage the audience to *identify* positively with ISIS. Although the frame with the corporate logos might not be very impactful due to the short duration of the scene, the complexity shows the time and skill placed in the elements of this video. This skill shows when analyzing the color dichotomy, flags, gender, and images of violence. The repetition of these images and themes shows ISIS as a united, stable, and positive force. As well, the dichotomies in color and images show the US and other allies as enemies or negative forces. Clearly, ISIS is having the audience believe that identifying with their organization is, not only a possible decision, but the best decision they can make.

In order to understand how the USDS is attempting to combat the message of ISIS through these same themes and visual elements, it is crucial to begin to uncover how “No Respite” and “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” parallel.

Chapter 3: #WhyTheyLeftDaesh

The origin of the “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” video is very different from that of the ISIS “No Respite” video. The USDS is a centralized government organization with incredibly detailed structure. As well, the USDS represents the US, a large country with a set landmass, massive military, solid infrastructure, and powerful allies around the world. However, the USDS videos do not seem to capitalize on this power. In fact, when looking at the ISIS and USDS videos side-by-side, one might argue that the creators of “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” show no evidence of infrastructure or power that is seen in the US. On the other hand, the ISIS videos tend to display power and structure that is a façade. In order to understand why the USDS does not show a realistic depiction of the nation’s stability and background, this chapter discusses the summary of the video “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” leading into a parallel analysis of the same themes and visual elements discussed in the previous chapter: colors, flags, gender, and violence.

Summary

“#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” is published on the *Think Again, Turn Away* YouTube channel. It has just over 1,000 views, six shares, and only four comments as of April 2016, and it was published to the site on September 29, 2015. In the YouTube statistics, this video has been the initial link to zero subscriptions to the *Think Again, Turn Away* channel.

The USDS created the “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” video for the *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign in September 2015. The video is nearly two minutes of testimonials from anonymous former ISIS members. They each give reasons why the organization is something that they felt they needed to escape. As opposed to “No Respite,” this video

has no central narrator or voice representing the USDS or its creators, but instead, uses primarily animated text in addition to testimonials. The overall quality of the video is similar to “No Respite” in image resolution, but the graphics are slightly less compelling, videogame-like, and simpler to produce. Instead of using CGI to create moving flags, explosions, and other complex animations, this video uses clips from news outlets and ISIS amateur footage as well as still images to illustrate the testimonials.

In the beginning of “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” the text explains that “Daesh⁷ is recruiting all over the world” and the individuals who have joined are not finding the “justice, freedom,” and “fulfillment” they were promised. One man conveys the disappointment of ISIS in real life as opposed to their online presence. The next narrator confesses that they did not want to use violence to spread Islam. One of the many veiled female narrators spoke of having a bad feeling about ISIS while others went deeper, detailing the incredible violence of the group. What seems to be a child or young teen spoke of being forced by ISIS to knock out his brother’s tooth. The shadowed young male is very distraught as he tries to tell the story of his brother as the camera focuses on his fists. These testimonies are followed by text saying things like “murder,” “corruption,” “rape,” and “cruelty,” each accompanied by an image that seems to illustrate or parallel the word. The video ends with the words “#whytheyleftdaesh” stretching across the screen as the eerie music slowly fades. In this video, as opposed to

⁷ Daesh is generally accepted as a derogatory term for ISIS and is used throughout the “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” video in reference to the organization. The term is the Arabic acronym coming from “al Dawlah al-Islameyah fi Iraq wal-Sham” (ISIS). Daesh sounds like the Arabic word “daas” that means to “trample or crush something underfoot.” By using the term “Daesh” instead of ISIS, the term demeans the organization (Buchanan, 2015).

many of the other *Think Again, Turn Away* videos, the USDS crest is not shown at the conclusion of the video.

Analysis

The *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign has been heavily criticized and is widely considered to be a major failure by many (Katz, 2014). In a Time Magazine article by Rita Katz (2014), she claims that the USDS is losing the online battle against ISIS by embarrassingly engaging with the organization on sites like Twitter. The article measures failure of the USDS to properly defend the US against the online logic of ISIS by taking into account the vast numbers of usage that ISIS receives over the USDS and by the quality of the messages. Overall, Katz (2014) determined that the ISIS messages online were more clever than the USDS. However, it is difficult or even impossible to determine the success of the movements taking place online because there are few ways to analyze a controlled group of audience members. If a message is truly successful, it must change or influence the perception of the audience and that cannot be measured by these means. Therefore, judging the success of either movement in an online context is not the goal of the analyses in this research, but rather to compare the judgments of authors like Katz and use their reasoning toward the analysis of the video.

Therefore, in order to understand how the ISIS videos might be considered more successful than the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos, it is useful to compare similar visual elements from the “No Respite” video. Therefore, the “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” video will also be analyzed by looking at the occurrence of similar themes, images, and symbols that are present in the “No Respite” video. The themes, images, and symbols recurring from the analysis of “No Respite” are color and brightness, ISIS flags, gender and

sexuality, and symbols of violence. In order to complete a parallel analysis of both videos, “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” is observed through the same characteristics.

The color *language* in this video is very different than “No Respite” because the color scheme does not show a dichotomy of parties. “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” uses only muted warm tones, white, and one saturated red. The red color is the most vibrant color throughout the video and makes up the majority of the text. This vibrant red tends to symbolize terms associated with anger and violence because the vibrant red can be *interpreted* as blood and pain. Compared with the content, the video is explicitly associating ISIS with the violence or negative connotations assumed by the vibrant red color. However, the focus on ISIS shows an absence of the dualism that is seen in the ISIS video. ISIS used color and symbols to brand two distinctly separate forces: ISIS versus the US and its sympathizers. In “No Respite,” the audience could *identify* with one of the two forces. However, in this particular video, the audience is only given an opposing group with no *identifying* group. The *identifying* group could be some form of USDS voice or representative “American” voice, and yet there does not seem to be much representation. The lack of a “good guy” or *identifying* protagonist could be a reason why the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos feel less effective than the ISIS videos.

The next symbol observed in the previous video is the ISIS and various national flags. In “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh,” the only flag that is shown is the ISIS flag and it is never shown in motion or hanging on a flagpole. In the twelve separate depictions of the ISIS flag, a member of ISIS is holding the symbol of their group. Because only the ISIS flag is seen in the video, the singularity in parties is reinforced. ISIS is the only party represented in this *language*. Because the video shows such a vast number of ISIS flags

in a short amount of time, the organization, as in the “No Respite” video, seems larger and more powerful. However, this is the opposite impact that “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” is attempting to evoke. One of the testimonials claims that ISIS is not as grand as the organization seems in their online presence, and yet the number of flags seen in the video compared to those in “No Respite” suggests that ISIS has a larger presence. This competition in rhetorical symbolic *language* creates friction in the ability of the audience to *identify* with the message. One way the message is reinforced is by showing the flags as stagnant and low to the ground. While flags in motion can symbolize progress, the stagnant flag that must be held up by an individual can be *interpreted* as lack of motion within an organization and an inability to hoist the flag high and prominently. The image of lacking progress could be advantageous in combating the *interpretation* that ISIS has a large presence. However, the image of lacking progress contradicts the large presence of ISIS flags in the video, which could cloud the message and cause audiences to have trouble *identifying* with the information.

Gender is depicted very differently in “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” than in “No Respite.” In the testimonials, four men and three women are narrators (one of the men being a younger male). Overall, as opposed to “No Respite,” the portrayal of gender seemed to be more feminine in visual *language* by showing many images of women, children, and Muslim men who do not have beards or wear military attire. In addition to showing multiple women, the images of women and children had meaningful words associated with the images. One image of a woman in a traditional Arab hijab had the word “rape” associated with the image. This type of image and text association speaks to women because the female audience *interprets* the image of the woman, the stereotypical

target of rape, as a victim. Giving women a “victim status” allows them to be considered innocent or not harmful even if they were a part of ISIS. On the other hand, “No Respite” distinctly showed men in power, but very much accountable for their actions. Due to this difference in accountability, “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” might attract a larger female audience than “No Respite” because women are not only more represented, but they are not held accountable for the violence and injustice of ISIS. However, this creates a conflict in the target audiences between the videos. If the target audiences are meant to be the same audience, this video should be countering the ISIS video with a video that targets Muslim-American men. Because “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” seems more likely to *identify* with women rather than the male target audience, the campaign is more likely to be considered weaker than the ISIS propaganda.

The last visual *languages* seen throughout both videos are elements of violence. In the “No Respite” video, guns, fire, and blood are the reoccurring signifiers of violence, but in “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” guns, destruction, and death reoccur. Guns are shown in the video in eleven scenes, always in the possession of an ISIS member. This symbol is shown the most in both videos as the greatest symbol of violence. In both cases, the large amount of firepower makes ISIS seem as if they have a large artillery and strong military. For “No Respite,” this will help their militant message, but in “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh,” the message is to keep the audiences from *identifying* with the ISIS militant force. If the viewers *interpret* the abundance of ISIS firearms as a reflection of the ISIS military power without an opposing representation of the US power, then the message could be convoluted. As opposed to “No Respite,” “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” does not show any blood, graphic wounds, or killing. This video shows one still image of a building that is

engulfed in smoke as if a bomb went off within it. Another still image shows approximately 50 wrapped bodies before they are buried in unmarked graves on a distant hill. These images of destruction and death seem as if they should incite the emotions of most individuals to *identify* with the fear and sadness of loss, but the visuals are surprisingly distant. Within the confines of the frame, the image takes up less than a third of the screen space, neglecting to utilize the full screen area. As well, both images are taken a long distance from the raw emotion that could be happening at the scene of these events. This physical distance from the graves and explosions can greatly disconnect the viewer from the event that is taking place when there is no context. With context, for example when looking at an image of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center from a distance, the viewer can still feel more connected to that event because of the known context. However, in this video, the destruction and death images have no context and story to give them an emotional connection. This can cause a disconnect with the destruction and death that ISIS is causing throughout areas in the Middle East. The disconnect with the emotions that these images attempt to *interpret* causes another disconnect to *identifying* with the overall message of the video.

Between the “No Respite” and “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” videos, the visual elements seem to be showing a stronger rhetorical usage in the first video, as many scholars and journalists like Katz (2014) have claimed, even though successes of the messages cannot be confirmed. After examining the massive amount of ISIS flags present in the USDS video, the video can be seen as having a large ISIS representation rather than a different dominant force. This representation, without a strong color dichotomy, is showing the audience one message: the ISIS message. Although the USDS is attempting

to combat the message, they tend to reinforce many aspects of the ISIS message. For example, ISIS attempts to look larger and more organized than it is, and yet the usage of many flags and many weapons in the USDS video strengthens that argument. Because of this image of structure and lack of dichotomy in message, the US has no voice and, in turn, seems smaller than ISIS. As mentioned previously, the origin of the “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” video seems murky and unstable, rather than structured and powerful like the USDS. These conclusions bring about more questions and further areas of future detailed analyses of the themes and elements collected from each of the two videos.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

To understand the elements and visuals from the analysis and how they interact and impact the message to the audience, this research draws upon the conclusions made by Allendorfer and Herring (2015). By understanding and utilizing some of their conclusions, the visual analysis of this study and the content analysis of Allendorfer and Herring (2015) can be combined and contrasted to add to the discussion of ISIS videos in the field of rhetoric. The conclusions from each video are merged in order to assess how the videos manifest in the same genre. As well, these conclusions lead to questions concerning the field of study, areas for further research, and implications about the field of rhetoric.

The USDS initially defended their social media losses to ISIS by saying that the “sheer volume” of the online presence of ISIS is simply too large to combat with the US government (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). While this is true, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) conclude that the quality of content that is output by the USDS is very important as well. The information gathered from the visual analysis of “No Respite” and “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” confirms this argument and adds to Allendorfer and Herring’s (2015) conclusions about how the USDS can improve their rhetorical strategies.

First, Allendorfer and Herring (2015) conclude that the USDS is using only negative rhetoric in the *Think Again, Turn Away* videos by only stating what is wrong with ISIS without stating any positive alternative. This is also the one-dimensional narrative that suggests a viewer abstain from committing an act without suggesting an alternative for an act, a major difference between the USDS and ISIS rhetoric (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015). Allendorfer and Herring (2015) suggest that the USDS

should focus on creating positive rhetoric in the videos. However, the visual information gathered from “No Respite” and “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” does give insight to this issue in ways, but does not necessarily confirm that the USDS should use positive rhetoric.

On the other hand, the visual analysis suggests that the USDS combine positive and negative rhetoric in order to create a more dynamic two-dimensional narrative. For example, the USDS can mimic the narrative style of the ISIS videos by creating a “good guy” and “bad guy” figure through the usage of color schemes. The USDS can use positively associated color schemes and brightness to depict pride in the American culture while simultaneously showing ISIS as secular beings with dark and dingy color schemes. The dichotomy created through this color usage brands a hero-like character and a villain in order to develop a more concise voice that is lacking from the USDS media (Allendorfer and Herring, 2015).

Since the *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign inconsistently brands itself with the USDS crest and has no narrator, the voice can seem mysterious. Yet, if the videos created an identifying community, the voice would seem more authentic. This can also be done with the use of symbols and flags. As seen in the visual analysis, “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” and “No Respite” show many images of flags. However, “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” shows exclusively ISIS flags and a larger quantity of flags than the ISIS video. In order to create an American-themed voice, the images of American flags or red, white, and blue color schemes would enhance the authenticity of the voice in the USDS videos. On the same note, the USDS videos would not need to eliminate the usage of the ISIS flag because that could weaken the dichotomy between the two forces, but instead limit the usage of ISIS flags to few and stationary ones. The concentration on reorienting the usage of flags

to create a strong-looking American symbol and a weaker ISIS symbol, can enhance a sense of nationalism in the viewer and combat the images of a corporate-obsessed America as seen in “No Respite.”

However, creating an American-centered nationalist movement in the USDS propaganda might cause conflict in the Muslim-American discourse community. As Allendorfer and Herring (2015) suggested, the USDS videos are not very sensitive to Muslim culture because they do not use many Islamic words and references important to the discourse community. Although the visual evidence from the analysis of “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” does not seem to support this notion, it does not show the latter. Assuming from contextual clues that the USDS is less culturally sensitive to the Muslim discourse community, their messages need to involve more accurate and sensitive references to Muslim-American culture. One way of creating this visually with the element of color dichotomies in mind is to show holiness and religious peace through the colors gold and white. The action of using the same color scheme as the ISIS videos to depict Allah’s essence reverses the meaning of Islam from violent, militant groups to peaceful, religious ones. For example, while ISIS depicts children in military uniforms studying the Qur’an with a gold hue, the USDS could depict children studying the Qur’an in an American mosque wearing white clothing with the same gold hue to filter the image. This type of image is sensitive to the Islamic faith because it represents a realistic version of the religion while using the same color scheme.

In addition, the example of the children in the mosque shows no militaristic elements of guns and camouflage outfits like in “No Respite.” From the analysis of “No Respite” and “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh,” the information shows that there were significantly

more firearms and images of violence in the USDS video. The USDS would likely want to make ISIS seem less powerful and have less of a military presence, so their videos should tone down the amount of guns and violence seen throughout the video. However, in order to create the dichotomy of forces, the USDS must show that joining ISIS would require violence and unnecessary sacrifice. According to conclusions made in the article “Winning the Battle but Losing the War: Narrative and Counter-Narratives Strategy,” the jihadist counter-narrative should show that the Muslim attacks on the US and others are “acts of war” rather than simply the “collateral damage” of ISIS (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009). In order for the USDS to create a counter-message that shows the weight of supporting ISIS, they could attempt to show a weakened ISIS due to the war waged on the group.

Additionally, in the evidence from the “#WhyTheyLeftDaesh” video, the USDS seems to miss the target audience that ISIS aims to capture: younger Muslim-American males. The USDS is focusing on male and female audiences in its visual representations by showing women’s testimonials and representing less accountability for women. In order to create a counter to the ISIS message, the USDS must focus more on the target audience of men. However, this brings about the question of how. According to the article by Matthew Thomas Payne on “militainment,” the videogames and entertainment media that make the viewer feel like a war hero or have a sense of nationalism are desensitizing individuals to violence (2014). “No Respite” is a video that captures many of the militainment qualities of graphic blood and glory of defeating an enemy. One area of contest is whether or not the USDS should incorporate the same militainment techniques to counter the ISIS videos in order to capture the target audience. While

showing peaceful mosques and children might convey the message of peace and holiness to the viewer, the target audience, one that relates to militainment, might not identify to the peaceful message (Payne, 2014). This contradiction deserves further study of militainment in the contexts of counter-terrorist propaganda.

One other area in which to investigate further would be to more fully analyze how the *Shared Values Initiative* failed and how these commercials could inform a more positive rhetoric for the USDS videos. The *Shared Values Initiative* commercials used visual devices in order to show that Muslim-Americans were happy adhering to the American culture, a message that I suggest the USDS should also convey to their target audience. However, the *Shared Values Initiative* was initially criticized for attracting a female audience (Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, and McCauley, 2009). Therefore, taking an approach to these videos that incorporates too much positive rhetoric and not enough negative rhetoric might again miss the target audience. Further visual and contextual analysis would be required to understand how incorporating the rhetorical techniques of the *Shared Values Initiative* campaign would affect the message of the USDS *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign.

Overall, the motivation of the message behind the *Think Again, Turn Away* campaign needs to be clearer and more concise. Currently, the one-dimensional message of the campaign simply refutes the logic of ISIS rather than giving a motivation for the target audience to do so. In order to capture and persuade their audience, the USDS must tighten the information being released online, and brand their motivation in a more obvious way. To counter a very skilled and powerful social media presence like ISIS, the

USDS and any other organization should use powerful visual elements along with valuable texts to combat the call of ISIS.

Overall, this study reveals complexities of this subject by which the field of rhetoric must continue to expand into the areas of digital and video rhetoric. While the study of ISIS videos is multidisciplinary, the way the message impacts the audience and shapes the ideologies of individuals is crucial to understanding how ISIS can influence countless people behind the veil of a computer screen. In this way, the field of rhetoric must be a dominant voice in the analysis of these materials in order to define and evaluate the process of these elaborate visual messages. However, engaging in the field of online video study can be a difficult task because it can be difficult to assess the reception of the audience. Often, as with the research from this study, measuring the audience impact is nearly impossible because there is no connection with the actual audience watching a video. One can speculate on the way an audience would react based on online forums, comments, and demographics gathered from online viewer profiles. To expand on this visual analysis, a textual analysis of audience comments from online videos can be combined with the research of Allendorfer and Herring (2015). From this, research could have a better understanding and gauge more accurately how an audience reacts to online videos.

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