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# The Allure of Isis: Examining the Underlying Mechanisms that Helped the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

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THE ALLURE OF ISIS: EXAMINING THE UNDERLYING MECHANISMS THAT HELPED THE
ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

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DEDICATION

For Ashley, my wife, biggest supporter, cheerleader and confidant. Thank you for putting up with my perpetual neuroses. And for Luke, my son, you couldn't have come at a better time. I'm so thankful to have spent so much time with you during the first few months of your life. And for my parents, Rich and Amanda, for your patience, love and perseverance, I know I wasn't the easiest son at times. I hope that you're proud of me.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the effects of exposure to media content related to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its effect on support for the group.  Using a survey of Muslim adults living in the United States (N = 396), this study sought to understand the influence of media exposure on identification, empathy and attitudes toward ISIS, and how they relate to behavioral intention to support the group.  Using social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework, these relationships were assessed using mediation analyses to measure the relationships between variables.  Findings indicate that identification, empathy, and attitudes are all significant predictors of behavioral intention.  However, most are respondents are opposed to Islamic State in Iraq and Syria's terrorism.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

IS ................................................................................................................Islamic State

ISIS ...................................................................................Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

ISIL ............................................................................ Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant

SCT ............................................................................................ Social cognitive theory

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of June 12, 2016, a lone gunman armed with a pistol, assault rifle, and a stockpile of ammunition, stormed a crowded nightclub in Orlando, Florida, opening fire and killing 49 people and wounding 53 others.  It was the worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history (Nelson, 2016), stoking fear and horror in the hearts and minds of people around the world.  Just before laying siege to the nightclub, the gunman, Omar Mateen, called 911 pledging his allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (aka the Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL, IS and Daesh).  The three-hour onslaught ended in a hail of gunfire, with law enforcement killing Mateen, leaving many questioning what would cause someone to carry out such a reprehensible act of violence (Alvarez, Perez-Pena & Hauser, 2016).  Authorities say that Mateen had prior contact with Islamic extremists, a phenomenon that is becoming more prevalent in many countries around the world, particularly the West, and a problem that is a growing increasingly challenging for the U.S. government to combat (Mazzetti, Lichtblau & Blinder, 2016).

In recent years, an increasing number of terrorist attacks have been successfully carried out around the world, and even more thwarted because of increased security in many of the world's most targeted cities and countries.  The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has claimed responsibility for many of the large-scale attacks that have killed and maimed hundreds of innocent civilians since its rise in 2014.

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One of the worst terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere was in Paris, France on November 15, 2015.  In a well-planned, highly coordinated attack, gunmen and suicide bombers stormed a concert hall, a crowded stadium, and bars and restaurants in some of Paris' most popular neighborhoods, detonating explosives and shooting and killing 130 people and wounding hundreds more (BBC, 2015).  World leaders were quick to condemn the attacks, and French president, Francois Hollande, called them, "An act of War."

Just three months later, a series of coordinated explosions ripped through Belgium's capital, Brussels, killing 30 people and wounding 200 others.  The Islamic State claimed responsibility for those attacks through the group's website (CBS News, 2016).  Between 2015 and the first half of 2016, ISIS inspired or carried out dozens of attacks outside of Iraq and Syria.  One of the first ISIS-inspired attacks in the West occurred in early 2015.  Gunmen barged into the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo's offices in Paris, shooting and killing 12 people, including a police officer on the sidewalk in broad daylight.  All three gunmen were connected to either ISIS or an al Qaeda affiliate (CBS News, 2016).  The brazen attack rocked an area of Paris known for its close proximity to some of the city's most trafficked tourist attractions.  A few months later, a heavily armed man proclaiming his allegiance to ISIS, opened fire on a Paris bound train from Amsterdam before being subdued by three Americans (Nossiter, 2015).  And, in late 2015, the Islamic State praised a California man and his wife after they walked into a holiday party and opened fire on a group of the man's co-workers with semi-automatic assault rifles, killing 14 and wounding many others.  The couple then led San Bernardino, California police on a car chase that ended in a standoff on a busy

thoroughfare. Both Syed Farook and his wife Tashfeen Malik were killed in a gun battle with police and were subsequently found to have ties to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (CNN, 2015).

The thread that all of these attacks have in common is communication with the Islamic State. Many of the attackers, who resided thousands of miles from Syria and Iraq, were inspired by the Islamic State's propaganda disseminated through digital media, including social media posts and flashy and highly produced media content showcased on Twitter, YouTube and scores of mainstream and clandestine web platforms (Warrick, 2015). Additionally, news coverage provides a platform for terrorist attacks, which in itself can influence people to become involved.

The Islamic State's goal is to establish a global caliphate, a political religious state similar to the era of the Prophet Muhammad, founder of the of Islam, where a "caliph" rules (Wood, 2014). The group's goal is to persuade Muslims that it is their religious duty to create a global caliphate and that they should feel a religious compulsion to support this cause in the name of Islam (Farwell, 2015). The group has taken full advantage of different technologies to spread its message throughout the world. ISIS and its supporters are actively engaged on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as well as a multitude of other mainstream communication outlets as well as the lesser-known "Dark Web" sites hidden from well-trafficked Internet sites (Farwell, 2015; Weimann, 2015).

In fact, ISIS is heavily reliant on its ardent support from its social media followers. Research shows that ISIS supporters create and share as many as 90,000 tweets and social media posts every day (Schmitt, 2015), and the group has been known to communicate with prospective recruits over Facebook to field questions about what

life is like as an ISIS fighter is like and explain how to join the group (NPR, 2014). This voluminous amount of digital media content and level of media sophistication have enabled ISIS to successfully reach and recruit members from all over the world, with many joining from the United States, Europe, former Soviet states, and Africa (Berger & Morgan, 2015).

Because of the broad reach of communication platforms on the Internet and more traditional media outlets, and the sophisticated production capabilities of ISIS' media arm (Al-Furqan), understanding the nuances of the content and how it influences ISIS support is crucial to combat the spread of ISIS' ideology throughout the world and prevent future terrorist attacks (Winkler, 2016). This could provide insight for counter-messaging programs and anti-terror campaigns in the U.S. and around the world. Mitigating or merely getting a grasp on the proliferation of ISIS media content, however, has been challenging for counter-terrorism professionals. The ever-changing, borderless nature of the Internet, and the sheer volume of messages makes tracking communication virtually impossible. The U.S. government is actively engaged in tracking ISIS messages and whereabouts online through what it has dubbed as "counter-messaging," whereby the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), under the Department of State and Homeland Security, were tapped to create anti-ISIS media campaigns in an effort to disrupt online recruitment (Kruglanski, 2015). So far, programs like these have been largely ineffective (Miller & DeYoung, 2016), which is why media scholars and practitioners are needed.

**Purpose**

There is a crucial need for academics and practitioners alike to understand the dynamics of terrorism, especially in a rapidly changing 21st century world. In the wake of the ongoing global terrorism crises perpetrated by the Islamic State, and the sophisticated nature of its outreach through digital media platforms, this dissertation seeks to explore the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and the intention to support the group. This includes an individual's intention to share information, provide monetary support, and intention to join the Islamic State. For the purposes of this study, this research will focus on Muslims living in the United States and explore the relationship between exposure to Islamic State media content and intention to support the group. Mediation analyses (Hayes, 2013) will be utilized to explore this relationship.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study will examine this relationship through concepts borrowed from Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1986), a social psychology theory that aims at predicting behavioral outcomes, and will explore several latent constructs, including identification, empathy, and attitudes, in order to test for mediation effects on behavioral intention. Specifically, Bandura (2001) suggests that a large amount of human behavior is acquired by observing a model in the mass media environment (Bandura, 2001). Through a survey of Muslims residing in the United States, this research will examine the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content (i.e., social media, mainstream media coverage, dark web sites, or any sort of ISIS media, regardless of medium) and the downstream effects on identification, empathy, attitudes and behavioral intention to support ISIS. To the best of the

researcher's knowledge, SCT, specifically SCT as it relates to mass communication, has yet to be applied in the context of terrorism research.

**Theoretical and Practical Implications**

This study is among the first to examine terrorism through the lens of mass communication and social science theory. As such, this dissertation has both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, this study seeks to expand the dual-pathways of influence model posited by Bandura (2001), by employing a multivariate approach to examine the phenomenon of joining or supporting terrorist organizations like ISIS. This would support Bandura's notion that acquisition of behavior can be achieved through media by identifying with a model (Bandura, 1986; 2001), and could also provide a new and innovative stream of research to the study of terrorism communication. Since many scholars suggest that the study of terrorism is an interdisciplinary endeavor (Beck, 2008; Gunning, 2009; Touraine, 1985), examining terrorism from a mass communication perspective could yield new results regarding an individual's motiviation to join or support terrorist organizations.

This study also builds upon several decades of social learning theory research, such as social learning theory (Miller & Dollard, 1942) and SCT (Bandura, 1986). To date, the majority of SCT studies in the mass communication discipline have focused on health communication (Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Noar et al., 2015; Yang, 2015), education (Cheng & Chu, 2014), business (Conklin, Dahling & Garcia, 2013), and psychology (Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott & Berry, 2005). Two recent studies (Velasquez and LaRose, 2014; 2015), however, have applied SCT in studying social movements and

collective action and demonstrate promising new ways to examine the role of modeling

and its effect on efficacy leading to participation.  This dissertation is an innovative

attempt to use SCT to study an individual's intention to join activist-type groups, and the

use of SCT in this dissertation will expand upon previous research to include terrorist

organizations.

From a practical standpoint, this research will contribute to understanding the

underlying motivations that cause people to support terrorist groups.  As Stern and Berger

(2015) suggest, there is no consensus on what makes someone a terrorist. Government

organizations, counterterrorism groups, and global and national security groups could

benefit from a deeper understanding of peoples' motivations, which could help narrow

down key traits and facilitate counterterrorism operations.  This exploration into the

underlying mechanisms as they relate to ISIS media exposure and behavioral intention

could help counterterrorism practitioners develop new approaches for combatting

terrorism.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

**Chapter 2 Summary**

This chapter discusses the Islamic State's rise to power, followed by its media strategy. An overview of terrorism and studies on the topic of terrorism is given, followed by a summary of the social cognitive theory literature and the variables under examination (i.e. media exposure, identification, empathy, attitudes and behavioral intention). Research questions and hypotheses are also developed as these SCT variables are outlined. The chapter ends with a review of all research questions and hypotheses, and a conceptual model of the predicted pathways of the hypotheses.

*2.1 The Islamic State's Rise to Power*

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (al-Sham), or simply ISIS, is often referred to by several names in popular press (i.e., ISIL, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; ISIS, as mentioned above; IS, the Islamic State; or Daesh, a name the group considers offensive because it does not contain the word 'Islam' in its title). For purposes of consistency, the group will be referred to by either ISIS, or the Islamic State, throughout the remainder of this manuscript.

In 2006, as the U.S.-led coalition forces turned their attention back to the war in Afghanistan, a contingent of insurgents – remnants from the war in Iraq – called al-Qaeda in Iraq (IQI), began recruiting and amassing thousands of fighters in an effort to

capitalize on the vacuum left in Iraq after Saddam Hussein was captured and killed (Warrick, 2015). What began as al-Qaeda in Iraq quickly morphed into what is today ISIS, as did the ideology and extremist punitive measures that are deeply reviled around the world.

From Iraq, the Islamic State moved into war-ravaged Syria in 2010, which was in the throes of a messy civil war, and set up what is now its de facto capital in the city of Raqqa (Warrick, 2015). With sizeable territory under its control in Iraq and Syria, ISIS seized oil refineries and imposed taxes on residents to fund its crusade to establish a caliphate – Islamic religious and political rule – in the region and beyond. What was once considered a ragtag group of bandits ballooned into a well-organized militia consisting of thousands of seasoned fighters, taking much of the world by surprise – including the United States.

In addition to its large, well-organized militia, ISIS also possesses the skill and knowhow to disseminate well-produced propaganda, successful at luring foreigners from around the world to join or support their cause (Stern & Berger, 2015). Nissen (2014) suggests that the Islamic State has a sophisticated, targeted communication plan for disseminating content in an effort to solicit support for its cause, which includes six strategic audiences it solicits for support:

1. Sympathizers and supporters (gain and maintain support).
2. Potential recruits (especially disenfranchised youth in the West in order to mobilize and recruit "foreign fighters" to come to Iraq and Syria).
3. Donors.
4. International media (gain attention).

5. Local audiences in Iraq and Syria (to include Iraqi soldiers and civilians and other rival jihadist factions).

6. Wider international community (to include the 'Umma,' or whole community of Muslims bound together by religion) (Nissen, 2014).

In summary, garnering support from sympathizers is a way for the group to gain and build momentum, much like scores of grassroots and guerilla movements have done for decades. For example, Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, and the 26the of July Movement garnered support from the proletariat class on up the socioeconomic ladder to successfully overthrow then-president Fulgencio Batista in Cuba in the early 1960s (Anderson, 1997). Potential recruits are typically those looking for a greater sense of purpose, thus making them more susceptible to ISIS messages which promise them a sense of purpose and a rewarding life (Kruglanski, Gelfand, Belanger, Sheveland, Hetiarachchi & Gunaratna, 2014). Donors are those providing funding, often classified as material support. International media provides a platform for terrorism groups by dedicating news coverage to their attacks and using material produced by them on-air, online and in print. Local audiences are either coerced or threatened to join groups like ISIS. And finally, Muslims around the world, using religion as the vehicle that connects all Muslims, regardless of sect, to one another.

So far this communication strategy is working - the Islamic State currently has some degree of control in 6 countries and has active supporters in 37 others (Kessler, 2016). Perhaps one of the most poignant illustrations of the influence of ISIS media content was in a televised interview with Scott Pelley of CBS News, and Abdirizak Warsame, a Somali-American teenager from Minneapolis who became the leader of an

ISIS cell in the United States responsible for sending recruits to join the group overseas.

Below is an excerpt from the 60 Minutes interview:

> **Warsame:** "The reason I wanted to go to Syria was because I felt it was my duty. I felt like it was something that I had to do, and if I didn't do it I would be basically a disgrace to God. I would be a disgrace to the world. I'd be a disgrace to my family."
>
> **Pelley:** "Did you see the videos of the ISIS atrocities?"
>
> **Warsame:** "Yes, I have seen them."
>
> **Pelley:** "Of them shooting people and throwing them into the river, one after another? Of the Jordanian pilot that they burned to death? Did you think you were going to be doing that kind of thing?"
>
> **Warsame:** "Yeah, I was going to be participating in those kind of activities."
>
> **Pelley:** "Because those people weren't true Muslims, and therefore they deserved to die?"
>
> **Warsame:** "Correct." (CBS News, 60 Minutes, October 30, 2016).

Later in the interview, Mr. Warsame spoke about how a particular video of Anwar al-Awlaki, a deceased Muslim-American cleric and al Qaeda spokesman, made him feel like Awlaki was speaking directly to him. This example of identification with the 'model' is one of the key tenets of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and was applied in this study. Mr. Warsame was eventually arrested and now faces a 15-year prison sentence for his involvement with the Islamic State. He is just one of the approximately 260 Americans who have joined, or tried to join, terrorist groups overseas in recent years (CBS News, 2016). Examples like this underscore the importance and urgency of the research conducted for this dissertation as a way to better understand the underlying mechanisms that influence people to support or join ISIS.

The Islamic State relies heavily on its online reach to attract new recruits from outside of the Middle East (Kirk, 2016), as well as its how-to videos to inspire homegrown terrorism, as evidenced in the dozens of attacks around the world (i.e., France, Belgium, United States et al.).  Therefore, applying SCT – a social psychological theory that states that people acquire behavior by observing a model – is a logical, and novel, approach to the study of terrorism in the field of mass communication.  A model is simply an individual who exhibits behaviors that are observed by an individual or group (Bandura, 1977; 1986).  A model in the context of this study is a member, or members, of ISIS that someone observes via different media.

*2.2 The Islamic State's Media Strategy*

Since its beginning in 2006, the Islamic State has made major inroads in the global media distribution industry, constantly testing and iterating its process along the way.  The group's media presence began with the Al-Furqan Institute of Media Production, where it produced films, audio, and videos (Leone, 2015).  In 2013, The Islamic State formed I'tisaam Media Foundation, piggybacking onto the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) to distribute content to Western audiences.  At the time, GIMF was already an established distribution center for much of Al-Qaeda's propaganda intended for Western audiences that succeeded in recruiting members and inspiring terrorist attacks like the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 (Eligon & Cooper, 2013).

In 2014, the Islamic State launched a full-scale media center, Al Hayat, with the primary goal of targeting Western audiences with its propaganda (Leone, 2015).  Al Hayat's content is distributed in English, French, German and Russian (Gertz, 2014).  The Islamic State also publishes *Dabiq*, a digital magazine, in many different languages.

The magazine is easily accessible online, and details its political, religious and military strategies, and its strategy to implement a caliphate. The publication is peppered with sanitized images, showing men, women and children living normal lives, intertwined with photographs depicting heroic fighters (Figure 2.1) and graphic images of gruesome killings (Gambhir, 2014).



**Figure 2.1** *Dabiq* Magazine, Issue 1, p. 24.

Like much of the connected world, the Islamic State seized on the proliferation and widespread use of social media, incorporating different platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook to reach people around the world. The Islamic State is both adept and agile in its use of social media, consistently out-maneuvering and finding workarounds when platforms ban various accounts (Berger, 2014). The group is thought to have 46,000 different Twitter accounts sending as many as 90,000 tweet per day, prompting Twitter to designate a "Tweet threat" team to shut down accounts (Bean, 2015; Berger & Morgan, 2014). Most of these accounts were created in 2014 when the

Islamic State began disseminating its execution videos – ranging from beheadings, immolation and drownings – and various forms of flashy, well-produced propaganda (Berger & Morgan, 2014). Much like a business, ISIS uses hashtags – a word or a groups of words beginning with a number/pound sign (#) to curate, categorize and create searchable terms online. This, in turn, drives traffic to its social media accounts, increases engagement, and grows its digital footprint in what Berger (2014) says, "would put American social-media-marketing gurus to shame," (p. 1).

This style of operating like a business is similar to startup businesses in the technology sector that apply what has been dubbed the "lean startup" method by businessman and entrepreneur Eric Ries (2011) to their business practices. The core tenets behind this approach to launching a new entrepreneurial venture are what Ries (2011) refers to as *Build, Measure, Learn* – where founders create a stripped down version of a product or technology as quickly as they can, test it in the market, and make changes based on reception in the marketplace. This is precisely what the Islamic State has done in many of its media ventures. This method uses a "fail-fast" approach, where companies make rapid changes in an effort to beat competitors by adapting and utilizing market feedback. The Islamic State has demonstrated this by outperforming the al-Nusra Front, a competitor terrorist group in Syria, in its online engagement and social media shares, as well as its brute force and intimidation (Berger, 2014). The group does this by quickly getting media products to market, including video and social media, gauging the success of the content based on shares and engagement, and, finally, either staying the course or what is known in business as "pivoting" – iterating based on customer feedback to rapidly retest the new product or message again in the marketplace (Ries, 2011).

To continue its media momentum, the Islamic State created *The Dawn of Glad Tidings*, a mobile application allowing users to sign up and received the latest news about the group. The app also integrated the group's Twitter account, which, at its pinnacle, sent out thousands of tweets per day, resulting in tens of thousands of shares, or retweets, online (Berger, 2014; Schmitt, 2015). This use of social media provides both a top-down and bottom-up approach to spreading its message, further complicating the ways in which law enforcement agencies and governments around the world attempt to combat the spread of Islamic State ideology (Nissen, 2014).

*2.3 What is Terrorism?*

Although terrorism and the rationale to commit terrorism are discussed in both the academic and public policy literature (for example, see Beck, 2008; Berger & Morgan, 2015; Crenshaw, 1981; Fair, Malhotra & Shapiro, 2012; Gunning, 2009), there are still differences in the manner in which government organizations and academics define terrorism. For example, the U.S. Department of State (2016) defines terrorism as, "Premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated again noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents," while the FBI (2016) defines terrorism as, "The unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."

According to Crenshaw (1981), the term *terrorism* was first used to describe the "systematic inducement of fear and anxiety to control and direct a civilian population," (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 380), and that the phenomenon of *terrorism* grew out of inspiration to recreate the uprisings of the French Revolution. Despite the nuances in the definitions

of terrorism, the use of violence to achieve a political goal is the crux of the word *terrorism* within the academic literature. In essence, terrorism is the indiscriminant killing of soft targets, or civilians. And, in the case of ISIS, the group's overarching goal is to establish political and religious Islamic rule around the world, and its tactics to achieve that goal have been through the use of extreme violence and intimidation (Warrick, 2015).

*2.4 Studies of Terrorism*

Terrorism studies abound, particularly in the political science literature, but also in the psychological, religion, and mass communication literature. These studies examine topics ranging from news content and framing, to religiosity and marginalization as they relate to support for terrorism. There are few studies, if any, however, that discuss terrorism in the context of SCT, therefore, this section summarizes studies involving support for terrorism borrowed from other theoretical perspectives and social science fields.

Research on terrorism and religion have mixed findings when examining religion's role as a predictor to support for terrorism (Fair & Shephard, 2006; Pearce, 2014). Using secondary data from a Pew Research study, Fair and Shephard (2006) found that women, younger people, and those who perceived Islam to be under threat were more likely to support terrorism in their investigation of 14 Muslim countries. In a later study, however, Fair, Malhotra and Shapiro (2012) found that neither religious practice nor support for political Islam had any significant bearing on support for militant groups in Pakistan. Other studies arrived at similar conclusions, suggesting that political views or religiosity have little to no impact on attitudes towards terrorism (Acevedo &

Chaudhary, 2015; Muluk, Sumaktoyo & Ruth, 2013), while Tessler and Robbins (2007) found that negative attitudes toward people responsible for political and economic stagnation resulted in support for terrorism. Conversely, neuroscientist Sam Harris, one of the most outspoken and polarizing authors on the role of religion in terrorism, claims that Islam in itself is a violent religion that encourages and rewards acts of violence (Ferriss, 2015; Harris & Nawaz, 2015).

Some studies have examined the effects of in-group, out-group discrimination as it relates to support for terrorism. Victoroff, Adelman and Matthews (2012) found that perceived discrimination increased support for the justification of suicide bombing among European Muslims, as well favorable responses toward suicide bombing for those who claimed to have experienced discrimination among a sample of American Muslims. Likewise, in their study of how news reports increase prejudice against outgroups, Das and colleagues (2009) found that exposure to terror-related news content increased prejudiced attitudes in Non-Muslims (in-group) toward Muslims (out-group). Similarly, Kaltenhaler and colleagues (2010) concluded that Pakistanis mostly oppose terrorism, but better tolerated it if the targets are Indian (out-group) and not Pakistani (in-group). These findings are consistent with previous in-group, out-group studies that have induced empathy arousal which, in turn, impacted attitudes involving prejudice (Batson et al., 1996; Dovidio et al., 2010).

Finally, and perhaps most pertinent to this study because of the sample (Muslim immigrants in the U.S.), Lyons-Padilla and colleagues (2015) found that Muslim immigrants who experienced discrimination, coupled with feelings of marginalization and insignificance, were more likely to support radicalization. The authors suggest that

helping integrate Muslims into society is one way to help combat the issue of

radicalization, and that future research should attempt to replicate these results using a

randomized sample (Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq & van Egmond, 2015).

In their essay on terrorism and the media, Montiel and Anuar (2002) highlighted the

dangers of media misrepresentations of Muslims suggesting the media can, **"Radicalize**

moderate Muslim individuals and groups to the degree that they eventually resort to

violence, as they perceive themselves as victims of injustice and oppression," (Montiel &

Anuar, 2002, p. 204). In fact, this is one of the major pain points that the Islamic State

emphasizes in its media output (Stern & Berger, 2015).

Building upon previous terrorism research, the current study seeks to explore the

relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and the intention to support the

group. More specifically, this research will expand upon previous studies that focused on

support for terrorism (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof & Vermeulen, 2009; Fair,

Malhotra & Shapiro, 2012; Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015) by utilizing SCT to examine the

relationship between exposure to ISIS-related media content and its effect on

identification, empathy, and attitudes on behavioral intention (Bandura, 1986).

*2.5 Social Cognitive Theory*

Social cognitive theory posits that people observe and remember behavior

exhibited by a model, or actor, and that these observations influence subsequent behavior

(Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986) suggests that people are neither driven by internal

forces or controlled by external stimuli. Instead, human functioning is "explained in

terms of triadic reciprocality in which behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and

environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other," (Bandura,

1986, p. 18). Through observational learning, or learning from a model, one is either be encouraged or discouraged from emulating an observed behavior. Modeling influences promote both personal and social change, and models serve as instructors diffusing knowledge, skills, behaviors and values to their intended recipients, or "observers" (Bandura, 1986; 1997). For example, an instructional video on how to perform a task would be in the realm of social cognition, and movies depicting certain behaviors (e.g., drug use or violence) are an example of behavior that may be acquired through observational learning. In the context of the Islamic State, a video depicting Muslims suffering, for example, could prompt affective responses such as identification or empathy in an observer. According to Bandura, behavioral acquisition is further strengthened if the observer feels similar to the model (i.e., identification), and most human behavior is learned through modeling; otherwise, social and cognitive development would be stagnant (Bandura, 1986).

In his *Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication*, Bandura (2001) suggests that humans also acquire behavior by observing a model in the mass media environment (Bandura, 2001). Thus, because of the widespread dissemination capabilities of mass media, a single model can communicate new ways of thinking and behaving to large audiences. This is particularly true in today's media environment given the proliferation of communication platforms and widespread adoption of social media. Most people will never encounter terrorism in their lives, therefore the vast majority of peoples' knowledge of terrorism comes from the mass media (Kampf, 2015; Montiel & Anuar, 2002; Wilkinson, 1997). Most, if not all, news of the terrorist attacks committed by the Islamic State in the West have been disseminated by news media and other forms of mass

communication, or by the terror groups themselves.  Without media, knowledge of
terrorist attacks would not reach mass audiences.  For example, news of the ISIS Paris
attacks spread quickly over traditional (i.e., television, newspapers, radio) and social
media, almost instantly, with people posting videos, images, and text from the different
locations where the attacks took place, in turn prompting other social media users to
share posts across various platforms (Rutledge, 2015).  The widespread dissemination of
these media happen through two pathways as posited by Albert Bandura in his
description of social cognitive theory of mass communication.

There are four sub-functions that govern human learning proposed in SCT of
mass communication: *Attention* (observation), *retention* (storing knowledge), *production*
(acting out), and *motivation* (rewards or punishments) – all in response to media exposure
(Bandura, 1986; 2001) (see Figure 2.2).  This notion was first evidenced in Bandura's
Bobo Doll experiment, where children observed aggressive behavior toward an inflatable
doll first-hand, and later on a television screen, with some participants subsequently
imitating the aggressive behavior they observed (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961; 1963).
Attention refers to the processes that people observe and what information they glean
from the observation.  Retention is what people learn and retain once exposed to a
behavior.  Production is what people do in the form of behaviors, or actions.  And
motivation is whether or not people use what they learn in practice (Bandura, 2001).

Additionally, Bandura (2001) suggests that people operate in narrow social and
physical environments (i.e. travel routes, social circles, etc.), therefore, what they read,
watch or listen to has a profound impact on shaping their idea of social reality despite
never experiencing some of what they perceive to be true in real life (aka, indirect

experiences).  This is referred to as vicarious experience, where people can learn a

behavior indirectly through someone in their immediate environment or through media,

and people are more likely to perform these behaviors if they believe they will result in a

desirable outcome (Bandura, 2001). For example, if a member of ISIS conveys that

people will be martyred and live a promising afterlife, the more likely they will be to

perform a behavior.  This is not to be confused with vicarious learning, another principle

in social cognitive theory, which involves full immersion into another's perspective or

'being in someone else's shoes' – which is effectively how empathy has been defined by

some scholars (Bandura, 2002; Batson et al., 1981).

Modeling by way of mass communication can create large-scale changes through

two different pathways, direct pathways and socially mediated pathways.  Figure 2.2

illustrates Bandura's (2001) dual paths of communication influence.  Specifically, direct

pathways enable the media to create changes by, "informing, enabling, motivating, and

guiding participants" (Bandura, 2001, p. 285).  The socially mediated pathway allows

media influences to connect participants to communities and social networks.  In other

words, media influence can directly promote behavioral change, and connections to

social systems can also mediate the relationship between media influence and behavioral
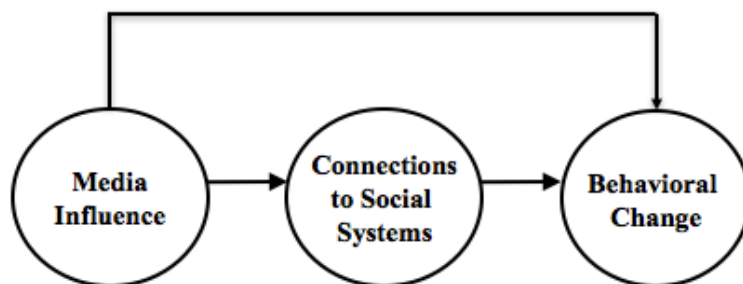
change.



**Figure 2.2** Dual path of communication influences.

Currently, with the multiplicity of online social networks, what used to be a rather

narrow social network has grown into something virtually impossible to measure.

Thousands of how-to videos, pictures and text posts are disseminated on a daily basis on

the Internet (Berger & Morgan, 2015; Schmitt, 2015). Video-based modeling is a process

whereby actors can take complex tasks and distill them into simple steps that can be

mastered by an observer (i.e. bomb-making, etc.) (Bandura, 1986). Web-based

interaction and opportunities to observe models is greater than ever before. This

powerful mass communication capability is used for both good and evil. Bandura (1977)

suggests that much of behavioral acquisition is typically incentive-based, and that

observers are often motivated by some sort of reward for their behavior. Therefore, when

a person believes he or she will receive something as a result of performing a behavior,

the more likely they are to perform the behavior, provided the outcome is perceived to be

beneficial.

Furthermore, modeling alone is not a catalyst for behavioral acquisition. In order

to create social change, "one must create optimal conditions for learning new ways,

provide incentives for adopting them, and build supports into the social system to sustain

them," (Bandura, 1986, p. 161). That is, learning news ways via online media (i.e.,

instructions on how to join or support ISIS, as well as how to commit terrorism from

afar) must include incentives (i.e. better lives, religious prosperity, etc.) and builds

support into the social system (this could be the promise of wealth and equality, marriage

or martyrdom). In the case of the Islamic State, the group promises its supporters and

members a litany of ways (i.e., quality of life, purpose, martyrdom, wealth) in which their

lives will be changed for the better if they join or support the group. The group preys on the desperate, depraved, and the directionless.

The majority of social cognitive theory studies in the mass communication discipline have been in the area health communication (Fox & Bailenson, 2009; Noar et al., 2015; Yang, 2015). Other predominant research areas that have applied social cognitive theory include: education (Cheng & Chu, 2014), business (Conklin, Dahling & Garcia, 2013), and psychology (Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott & Berry, 2005).

There are some studies, however, that have applied SCT in studying social movements and collective action. Velasquez and LaRose (2014) found a relationship between efficacy perceptions and the level of agency that exists when participating in online political activities. In a similar study, Velasquez and LaRose (2015) found that social media political efficacy was positively related to the experience of using social media for activism. Studies like these demonstrate promising new ways to examine the role of modeling and its effect on efficacy leading to participation. Still, there are not many studies employing social cognitive theory beyond the scope of health communication in the current mass communication environment. Therefore, the researcher argues that SCT is a promising foundation to study the effects of exposure to media and behavioral intention, and that this treatment of SCT is an innovative extension of the theory.

For purposes of this study, three mediating variables – identification, empathy, and attitudes, which are defined below – will be tested and analyzed to examine the intervening role these variables exert on behavioral intention (DV) through media exposure. In this study, identification is defined as "affinity, friendship, similarity, and

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liking of a media character by audience members," (Cohen, 2001, p. 249). Empathy is defined as an other-oriented response, or the ability to see something through another person's lens (Batson et al., 1981). And attitudes, in the context of this study, are the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable opinion or evaluation of whether a behavior is good or bad (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

SCT posits that people learn through media characters – in this case ISIS – which can influence attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. To accomplish this research aim, the current study expands on a previous cross-national study of Muslim participants living in India and the U.S. (Luchsinger & McKeever, 2016), which found that identification was a key intervening mechanism between exposure to ISIS propaganda and intention to support the group. The current study includes additional intervening variables (empathy and attitudes) in an effort to better understand the underlying affective properties that may contribute to intention to support ISIS (Figure 2.3).
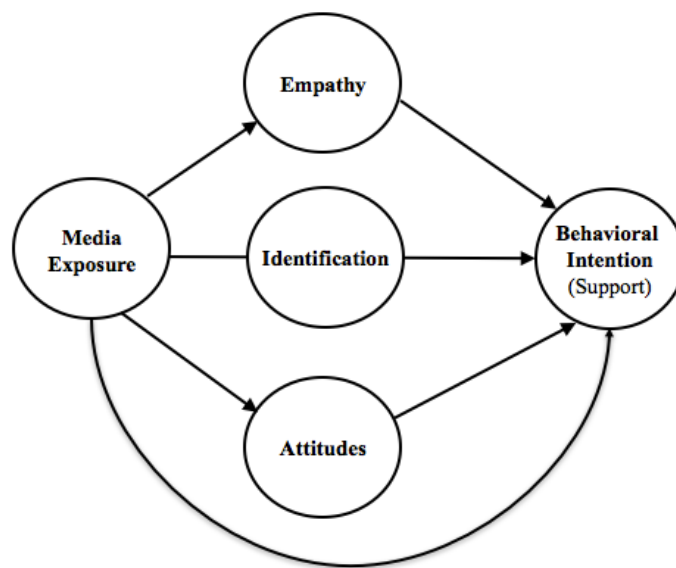


**Figure 2.3** Conceptual model of research questions and hypotheses.

Therefore, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ1:** For Muslims living in the United States, what is the relationship between exposure to Islamic State media content and intention to support the group?

It is important to note that there are a variety of different sects, or branches, of Islam, many of which have a long and history of turmoil and violence. The majority of Muslims belong to one of two sects, Sunni or Shi'a, and, in Iraq, where the Islamic State began, 55-65% of Muslims are Shi'a, while 30-40% are Sunni (Brancati, 2004). However, Iraq is anomalous in its sectarian composition when compared to most of the world. Sunni Muslims make up approximately 87-90% of the world's Muslim population, while Shi'a Muslims account for only 10-13% (Pew, 2013). Globally, there are approximately 1.6 billion Muslims, or nearly one-quarter of the world's population, positioning Islam the second largest religion after Christianity (Pew, 2013).

The Islamic State, a Sunni group, used the Sunni-minority plight to appeal to disenfranchised Sunnis in Iraq to garner support for its causes (Warrick, 2015). The group's Sunni designation also gives them far greater global reach, since Sunnis make up most of the global Muslim population. In Iraq, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims have a long history of strife, most recently evidenced when Saddam Hussein's government slaughtered thousands of Shi'a Muslims when they revolted against the then-Sunni controlled government (Brancati, 2004), and currently, the repeated indiscriminate killing of Shi'a Muslims by members of the Islamic State (Arango, 2016; Warrick, 2015). Given the contentious history between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, and the much larger global Sunni population, the following research question was proposed:

**RQ2:** Will there be any differences between sects (i.e., Sunni or Shia'a) of Islam as it relates to support for the Islamic State?"

**Variables Under Study**

Early studies across disciplines suggest there is no concrete terrorist psychology (Crenshaw, 1981; 1985), nor a psychological pattern of a terrorist (Rasch, 1979). Stern and Berger (2015) concur with these earlier studies and posit that there are not any distinctive traits, characteristics or profiles for the modern day terrorist. Therefore, examining the relationships between latent constructs (i.e., identification, empathy, and attitudes) and their influence on behavioral intention through exposure to ISIS media content is critical in understanding why people support the Islamic State. The following variables under examination are discussed in terms of their conceptual definitions.

*2.6 Media Exposure*

Exposure to media content is a highly contested variable within the mass communication literature, both in its conceptualization and operationalization. In fact, media scholars have not reached a true consensus on what it means to be "exposed to media," (Prior, 2009; Slater, 2004; Vreese & Neijens, 2016). The proliferation of media channels (i.e., apps, web-based media, etc.) further conflates this issue, and there are wide-ranging and nuanced exposure measures spanning from passive exposure (Foehr, 2006; Napoli, 2011; Webster & Ksiazek, 2012) to a more involved level of attention to exposure to media content (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). For example, radio listenership continues to grow because of the rise of satellite radio such as *Sirius XM* and the various audio streaming services available for smartphones and tablets (Pew, 2016).

In their meta-analysis of 204 articles addressing this issue in two of the communication field's most prominent journals – *Journal of Communication* and *Communication Research* – Vreese and Neijens (2016) concluded that there still is no agreement on a proper conceptual and operational definition for exposure to media content. Since this dissertation applies the self-reported media exposure approach, Slater's (2004) conceptual definition of media exposure, "the extent to which audience members have encountered specific messages or classes of messages/media content," (p. 168) was adopted as the conceptual definition of media exposure in the context of this study. However, it is important to note that Slater suggests that studies need to be conducted using cross-sectional designs over longer periods of time to better understand causality as it relates to peoples' exposure to media. Slater (2004) mentions potential confounds such as recall and recognition of exposure to various media, and the issue of people over-reporting or under-reporting their use of media. Still, Slater (2004) does contend that the easiest way to gauge one's media exposure is to simply ask them, however, this method has pitfalls because people are exposed to thousands of mediated messages every day, whether cognizant of this or not, thus skewing true recall of media exposure. The magnitude of exposure is even greater today because of the multiplicity of media available to people on mobile devices and the like. On average, people are spending two to three hours on social media every day, and teenagers are thought to spend up to nine hours online every day (Cohen, 2017). Leading the pack is YouTube, followed by Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram – respectively. All of the different forms of communication create difficulties when asking people to recall their media exposure.

Still, some scholars continue to rely on self-reported media exposure methods in their research. Niederdeppe (2014) suggests that self-reported exposure measures rely on one's ability to remember some level of detail of viewed media to assess exposure. For example, recognition and recall of a certain message, program or event. This is precisely the approach taken in this research. This research is asking people to recall different ISIS media they have been exposed to, and which medium they saw, heard or read it on using these media: television, newspapers/magazines, radio, video websites, social media, websites/blogs, and mobile apps.

Finally, in their meta-analysis of mediated health campaign studies, Snyder and colleagues (2004) found that media exposure alone produced minimal effects, which Smith, Downs and Witte (2007) suggest is because these media exposure effects hinge on the inclusion of mediators, which is why identification, empathy, and attitudes are included as mediators in this study. Many studies have used various mediators to determine whether or not media exposure exerts any effects by including mediators. For example, when interviewing boys and girls about their favorite TV characters, Hoffner (1996) found that character traits predicted identification and parasocial interaction with media characters, thus influencing social behaviors. Many studies have demonstrated that peoples' attitudes, beliefs, and cognition (all mediators) are influenced by the presence of media exposure, or media exposure by itself exerts effects (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963; Gentile, Lynch,Linder & Walsh, 2004; Lin, 2013).

A study examining media exposure and terrorism will add to the media exposure literature by demonstrating that media plays a crucial role in the Islamic State's terrorism repertoire in garnering support for the group. Additionally, if the proposed hypotheses

are correct, this study could help practitioners with counter-terrorism efforts, and provide a useful and fruitful path for future scholarship. Understanding the different media where people are being exposed to ISIS content will also aid in directions for future research related to security efforts. In keeping with previous studies, this study will employ multiple mediators as discussed in the following sections.

*2.7 Identification*

The concept of identification has been previously examined in mass communication research (Cohen, 2001; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Hoffner, 1996; Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podoloski & Eron, 2003). Cramer (2001) defined identification as, "…the process in which one individual takes on the behaviors, values or goals of another," (Cramer, 2001, p. 667). Cohen (2001) further explicated identification with media characters to denote the "affinity, friendship, similarity, and liking of a media character by audience members," (Cohen, 2001, p. 249). Bandura (1986) refers to this a "modeling". For example, identification with a model (i.e., an ISIS spokesman) has been shown to increase the likelihood of behavioral acquisition (Bandura, 1986; 2001). Tajfel (1982) studied identification with a social group in social identity theory, categorizing groups as identifying in either an in-group or out-group in context. Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) coined the term "wishful identification" which suggests that viewers' possess a desire to be like a media character that they observe. Hilmert, Kulik and Christenfeld (2006) found that identification is strengthened if a model exhibits similar opinions as a viewer. Similarly, McKeever (2015) found that shared similarity (identification) with a character influenced participants' willingness to help a person in need. Not only has identification been found to increase the likelihood of behavioral

acquisition (Bandura, 2001), but in some cases, it has been shown to moderate aggressive behavior when violence in video games is present, which also makes identification an antecedent to aggressive behavior (Bandura, 2007; Konijn, Bijvank & Bushman, 2007; Lin, 2013).

Previous research has demonstrated the power of identification in carrying out successful social movements (Touraine, 1985), particularly when attempting to persuade young people to join or support terrorist groups (Cheong & Halverson, 2010). Identification, or "collective identity" in the context of the Islamic State, refers to a sort of "shared status" by each member (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Terrorism studies have examined identification and its influence on support for terrorism, often in the form of group membership (Hogg & Abrams, 2006). Levin and colleagues (2003) found strong support for Arab identification as an antecedent to support for terrorism organizations and feelings that the September 11th terrorist attacks were justified. Additionally, and similar to this study, identification mediated the effect of Arab group membership on support for terrorist organizations (Levin, Henry, Pratto & Sidanius, 2003).

From an affective standpoint as identification relates to media content, a viewer shares the feelings of a media character or model when exposed, thus creating a shared sense of perspective and motivation of the character (Cohen, 2001). For example, Lyons-Padilla and colleagues (2015) found a connection between identification and support for cultural identity and support for terrorism, and a concrete example of identification with terrorists was evidenced in the aforementioned *60 Minutes* interview with Abdirizak Warsame, the Somali-American man who claimed he identified with terrorist leaders by watching YouTube videos. Furthermore, Cohen (2001) suggested that the notion of

identification is where a person acquires the goals and identity of a media character, which is the conceptual and operational definition applied in this study. In order to connect the concept of identification to ISIS media content, the following hypotheses were developed that expand on a previous study examining identification with the Islamic State (Luchsinger & McKeever, 2016):

> **H1a:** Higher levels of exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with greater levels of identification with ISIS.

> **H1b:** Higher levels of identification with ISIS members will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS.

> **H1c:** Identification with ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

*2.8 Empathy*

Empathy is a strong predictor of helping behavior and has been included in myriad media studies (Batson, 1981; Batson et al., 1991; Davis, 1983; Dovidio et al., 1996; McKeever, 2015). Put simply, empathy is seeing the world through another person's lens. Media scholars often refer to empathy as an other-oriented emotion that induces helping behavior (Batson, 1981), and is a concept that is explored often in media research. As previously noted, empathy is commonly referred to as an other-oriented response (Batson et al., 1981), which is further strengthened based on perceived similarity (identification) to someone in need (Batson et al., 1981; 2002; Bandura, 1992; McKeever, 2015). Empathy is often treated as a mediating, or intervening, variable because it is an emotion that contributes to downstream cognitive and affective properties like attitudes, as well as behavioral intention and helping behaviors.

For example, Batson and colleagues (1981) conducted an experiment to determine whether empathy led to altruistic or egoistic motivation to help undergraduate students receiving electric shocks in front of their peers. In their study, they found that participants feeling a high degree of empathy were willing to help shock victims escape from the situation, regardless of whether or not escape, or the ability to leave the treatment, was easy or not, thereby confirming their hypothesis that empathy is indeed an altruistic motivation. These researchers also found that students in the low empathy group were more likely to help if escape (i.e., being able to leave and not witness their peers being shocked) was easy, but not if escape was difficult, thus confirming the egoistic empathy hypothesis posited by Batson and colleagues (1981).

Davis (1983) took this a step further, suggesting that empathy was a multidimensional construct consisting of four dimensions, all which influence a person's helping behavior, and how dispositional empathy – an emotion a person already possesses – plays a role in one's proclivity to help. Davis (1983) found that a dispositional measure of emotional empathy did indeed influence a person's helping behavior when prior situational experience was a factor. Batson and colleagues (1996) went on to argue that prior experience, or similarity, with a person in need would cause more empathic feeling than those with no prior experience. Findings showed that prior experience does lead to increased feelings of empathy. Likewise, McKeever (2015) found that similarity played a role in inducing empathy, which led to willingness to help and ultimately helping behavior.

A study by Batson and colleagues (2002) found that inducing empathy improved attitudes towards a stigmatized group – in this case drug addicts. Students listened to

audio or read a story about a drug addict, then asked if they would allocate student senate

funds to social programs geared toward helping drug addicts.  They found that higher

levels of empathy did lead to increased willingness to help stigmatized groups, which is

closely related to this research.  Similarly, empathy studies have been shown to improve

attitudes towards AIDS patients, homeless people, and racial and ethnic minorities

(Batson et al., 2002).

Empathy studies have also looked at intergroup relations, and how reprehensible

behavior can affect the treatment of group members (Dovidio et al., 2010).  Dovidio and

colleagues (2010) found that empathy can also induce punitive treatment toward others

who cause unjust harm to individuals.  However, Dovidio and colleagues (2010) also

discovered that the outgroup is usually treated with punitiveness, whereas the in-group's

use of punitive measures is seen as justified.  This notion of empathy is closely related to

this study of the Islamic State, since the group is seen as causing both justified and

unjustified harm by Muslims and non-Muslims alike.  Dovidio and colleagues (2010)

suggested that this angle of looking at empathy as promoting punitive behavioral

outcomes is a promising new direction for empathy research.  Empathy and identification

share many of the same properties and nuances; however, in the context of this study,

empathy and identification are treated as mutually exclusive.

Cohen (2001) suggested that empathy is a dimension of identification, while

Bandura (1986) suggested empathy is a vicarious experience, and is also a strong

predictor of helping behaviors.  For example, McKeever (2015) found that greater

empathic responses led to a greater likelihood to support or join an organization if

participants perceived themselves as similar to someone in need.  This also gives

credence to Batson's (1991) empathy-altruism hypothesis, which posits that greater

empathic concern yields greater motivation for increasing someone else's well-being.

Based on findings examining previous research on empathy, the author theorizes that

greater levels of empathy for ISIS should lead to, or influence, willingness to support the

Islamic State. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H2a:** Higher levels of exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with

greater levels of empathy for ISIS.

**H2b:** Higher levels of empathy for ISIS will be associated with greater intention

to support ISIS.

**H2c:** Empathy for ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure

to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

*2.9 Attitudes*

Attitudes are commonly explored variables in social science research. Attitudes

are an antecedent to behavioral intention, thus a logical precursor to support for ISIS in

this study. According to Fishbein and Ajzen's theory of reasoned action (1975), an

attitude is a person's opinion about whether a behavior is positive or negative. This study

will apply Ajzen's (1991) conceptual definition of attitude, "the degree to which a person

has a favorable or unfavorable evaluation or appraisal of the behavior in question,"

(Azjen, 1991, p. 188) in relation to terrorism. Specifically, whether Muslims surveyed in

this study have a positive or negative view of ISIS and show support for the organization.

Numerous studies (Alexander & Link, 2003; Batson, Chang, Orr & Rowland,

2002; Granello, Pauley & Carmichael, 1999; McKeever, 2015; Sundar & Kim, 2005)

have examined media exposure as an antecedent to attitudes in media research,

particularly in regard to improving attitudes toward stigmatized groups.  For example, exposure to media (i.e. audio recordings, video, etc.) has been shown to be a precursor to a shift in improvement in attitudes toward drug addicts (Batson, Chang, Orr & Rowland, 2002), AIDS patients and homeless people (Batson et. al, 1997), as well as reducing prejudice (Dovidio et al., 1999; Pan & Kosicki, 1996; Ramasubramanian, 2013) and the stigma of mental illness (Alexander & Link, 2003; Granello, Pauley & Carmichael, 1999; McKeever, 2015).  Similarly, Calzo and Ward (2009) found that greater media use in college students lead to greater acceptance of homosexuals.

While media exposure research often explores the positive influences media can have on attitudes, myriad attitudinal research studies have examined media exposure as an antecedent to attitudes that can lead to negative behavior like aggression (Eyal, Metzger, Lingsweiler, Mahood & Yao, 2006; Hoffman, 2005; Huesmann, 2007; Konijn, Nije Bijvank & Bushman, 2007; Lin, 2013; Martins & Wilson, 2012; Slater, 2003). Specifically, Eyal and colleagues (2006) found that exposure to violent television increased young viewers' aggressive political opinions in the U.S.  Kremerman, Cohen and Tsfati (2012) arrived at similar results in their study of violent media in the more militaristic society of Israel.

Finally, studies of terrorism examining attitudes have demonstrated that attitudes can influence behavior to join or support terrorist groups.  In a large-scale survey measuring attitudes towards terrorism in Pakistan, Fair and Malhotra (2012) found that Pakistanis who believed that jihad, or an armed struggle against enemies of Islam, was a personalized individual struggle were more likely to support militant groups.  In a study of news about terrorism in Holland, non-Muslim and Muslim participants reported

increased prejudiced attitudes toward out-group members when participants were

exposed to news about terrorism (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof & Vermeulen,

2009).  Several studies have analyzed secondary data from Pew Research to measure

attitudes towards terrorism, but few have examined the relationship between media

exposure and attitudes and their influence on behavioral intention.  Based on the literature

exploring attitudes and how they influence behavior, the following hypotheses were

developed:

>**H3a:** Attitudes toward ISIS will be positively associated with behavioral intention
>
>to support ISIS.
>
>**H3b:** More positive attitudes towards terrorism will be associated with greater
>
>intention to support ISIS.
>
>**H3c:** Attitudes toward ISIS members will mediate the relationship between
>
>exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

*2.10 Chapter 2 Summary – Research Questions and Hypotheses*

Because of the complexity of terrorism and its appeal to those interested in

supporting or joining, studying this subject through the lens of mass communication is

another way to gain a deeper understanding of this multi-pronged phenomenon.  Through

a survey of Muslims living in the United States, this study seeks to explore what

influences exposure to ISIS media content have on intention to support the Islamic State.

Together, the following research questions and hypotheses will allow the researcher to

examine the relationships between exposure to ISIS media content and its influence on

identification, empathy and attitudes, and how these relate to support for the Islamic State

(behavioral intention).

**RQ1:** For Sunni Muslims living in the United States, what is the relationship between exposure to Islamic State media content and intention to support the group?

**RQ2:** Will there be a difference between different sects of Islam (i.e., Sunni, Shia, Salafi, etc.) as it relates to support for the Islamic State?

**H1a:** Higher levels of exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with greater levels of identification with ISIS.

**H1b:** Higher levels of identification with ISIS members will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS.

**H1c:** Identification with ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

**H2a:** Higher levels of exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with greater levels of empathy for ISIS.

**H2b:** Higher levels of empathy for ISIS will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS.

**H2c:** Empathy for ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

**H3a:** Attitudes toward ISIS will be positively associated with behavioral intention to support ISIS.

**H3b:** More positive attitudes towards terrorism will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS.

**H3c:** Attitudes toward ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

As illustrated in Figure 2.4, this study hypothesizes that exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with greater levels of identification and empathy with members of ISIS. Additionally, exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with attitudes towards terrorism, whether favorable or unfavorable. Finally, it is hypothesized that all three variables –identification, empathy, and attitudes – will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and support for the group (behavioral intention). That is, these variables will influence the size of the effects once each variable is introduced in the model and computed as seen in the proposed model in Figure 2.4.
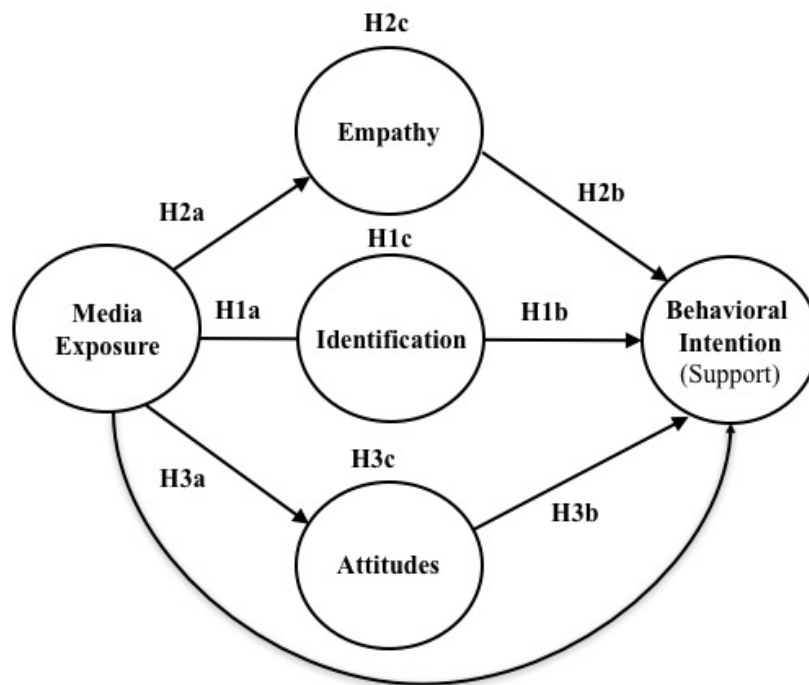


**Figure 2.4** Hypothesized conceptual model.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

**Chapter 3 Summary**

This chapter provides a brief history of survey research, followed by an overview of the survey methodology used in this dissertation. Sample participants and sampling strategy are discussed, as well as survey design, development of the survey, and operationalization and measurement of the variables under investigation (i.e., media exposure, identification, empathy, attitudes and behavioral intention). The chapter closes with a detailed description of the statistical analyses used to examine the relationships between the study variables, including descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, ordinary least squares regression (OLS), and mediation analyses in the hypothesized mediation model (Figure 3.1).

*3.1 Survey Methodology Overview*

Surveys are one of the oldest, time-tested quantitative data gathering methods for capturing large-scale data (Chaffee, 2000). According to Babbie (2013), a survey is a useful method for, "collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe directly," (p. 253). Additionally, conducting a survey is useful when collecting data about peoples' feelings, beliefs, attitudes and socioeconomic background that are otherwise unobservable (Fink, 2015).

The data in this dissertation were collected using a survey instrument designed and distributed via Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com), an online data collection company that specializes in assembling both easy and hard-to-reach populations in exchange for monetary incentives. Online surveys are an expedient and cost-effective way of collecting data from the masses (Couper, 2000). The sample was constructed by Qualtrics, which uses a proprietary method of data collection by assembling a panel of the target sample. In the context of this study, the target sample was Muslims living in the United States. Then, using the survey instrument designed by the researcher, the survey was sent to participants using a uniformed resource locator (URL), or web link, where they could take the survey.

Despite the many advantages of online surveys, they are not without potential problems and pitfalls. For example, issues like coverage error can arise because some people do not have Internet access (Couper, 2000). According to a Pew Research Center study (2016), 13-percent of U.S. adults still do not use the Internet, thereby most likely excluding them from taking a survey such as this one. Additionally, lack of motivation and comprehension can impact self-administered online surveys since these are conducted in the absence of supervision (Couper, 2000), which is the way this survey was administered. Design issues can also influence survey responses. For example, Tourangeau, Cooper and Conrad (2004) found that choosing between using a single screen per question versus having multiple questions on the same screen using an online survey impacted how respondents answered the questions. Therefore, it is crucial to pretest the survey in order to work through any design issues before launching the final survey (Babbie, 2013; Nardi, 2015).

Due to the sensitive nature of this topic, careful consideration was given to the order of the questions to mitigate any priming effects (Babbie, 2013; Couper, 2000). This was also pertinent in the decision to use an online survey questionnaire. Previous research has shown that utilizing self-administered computer-assisted surveys reduces the number of unfavorable responses to questions or statements pertaining to socially undesirable behavior – including potential legal consequences. With the importance of anonymity and the stigma associated with this research in mind (ISIS and terrorism), the researcher concluded that selecting to use an online survey was the best method of data collection for this study. In addition to these points, another advantage of using online surveys is that the number of questions that are inadvertently skipped is greatly reduced (Schaeffer & Presser, 2003; Tourangeau & Smith, 1996), as is the amount of time to take the survey (Fowler, 2013). For these reasons, using an online survey was the most logical choice for this research.

*3.2 Study Participants and Sampling*

There are two types of sampling approaches in survey research: probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling means that each person within a population has an equal chance of being selected in sample. Conversely, non-probability sampling means that not every participant has an equal chance of being selected for the sample (Babbie, 2013; Nardi, 2015). This study seeks to survey Muslims living in the United States using non-probability sampling (discussed in greater detail in the section 3.4), because Muslims living in the U.S. are a difficult to reach demographic. Additionally, the topic under examination here is sensitive, therefore, attempting to

gather a large sample without a third-party survey research company like Qualtrics posed significant challenges for the researcher.

There are approximately 3 million Muslims currently residing in the United States (Pew, 2016), therefore, a sample size of 384 (N = 384) is the minimum number of participants necessary for a population of 3 million to have a generalizable sample within the desired 5% margin of error, as stated in the z-score calculation formula for computing sample size: ME (margin of error) = $z$ ($\hat{p}(1 - \hat{p})$ / $n$ (where $z$ = 1.96 for a 95% confidence interval) (Agresti & Finlay, 2009). This study sought a sample of adult Muslims (N = 396) living in the United States, regardless of sect (i.e., Sunni, Shia, or other), sex, race or socioeconomic status, using a purposive sampling method to collect the data. Obtaining this sample (N = 396) was the product of Qualtrics' proprietary sampling procedure, which included sorting out non-completed surveys and those who did not qualify for the study (i.e., non-Muslims). For this study, Qualtrics guaranteed a 100% completion rate.

Since this was a hard-to-reach population, the method of assembling a panel of Muslims living in the United States using non-probability purposive sampling may preclude generalizability. However, non-probability samples can still yield important information and pave the way for future research (Fowler, 2009). Both the benefits and potential shortcomings of using a non-probability purposive sample are discussed in the limitations section of this manuscript in greater detail. Since Muslims make up less than 1% of the U.S. population (Pew, 2016), and because the Islamic State and terrorism are sensitive topics, a purposive sample was an appropriate method of data collection for the current research.

*3.3 Survey Design*

Using formative research that has examined terrorism and what potentially causes people to support terrorism as a guide, (Acevedo & Chaudhary, 2015; Crenshaw, 1981; Fair, Malhotra & Shapiro, 2012; Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq & van Egmond, 2015; Montiel & Anuar, 2002; Muluk, Sumaktoyo & Ruth, 2013), the survey instrument was developed to measure variables from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; 2001) and the concepts of identification (Bandura, 1986; Cohen, 2001), empathy (Batson et al., 1981; Davis, 1983), and attitudes (Azjen & Fishbein, 1975; Batson et al., 1997) as they relate to exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support the group. All questions and statements were adapted from different scales used in previous research (Batson et al., 1981; Batson, 2002; Cohen, 2001; Davis, 1983) to reflect the variables under examination as they related to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

3.4 *Survey Distribution*

The survey (see appendix) was distributed using Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com), a web-based research company that specializes in constructing panels for professional and academic survey research in exchange for monetary and other incentive-based compensation. Participants were contacted via email and provided a link that directed them to a page on www.qualtrics.com where the survey was hosted. Qualtrics partners with other survey panel companies and randomly selects respondents based on survey-specific criteria to ensure a representative and robust sample from its various sample pools (Qualtrics Panel Book, 2016).

In order to minimize self-selection bias, the company does not provide specific details about the survey prior to recruitment. The rationale for using an online survey

instrument was: 1. The potential to reach a large group of individuals that would otherwise be difficult to contact; 2. To minimize the potential for social desirability bias, and; 3. To reduce and potential for perceived fear of legal sanctions given the topic of this research.  This survey promised respondents anonymity, which, according to McTavish and Loether (2002), "…means that it is impossible (or that no attempt will be made) to determine the identity of a case (i.e., a person or organization)," (p. 176).  The researcher made sure to highlight that this was an anonymous survey in the instruction portion of the survey because of the sensitive nature of the topic to encourage participants to answer openly and honestly.

Once the respondents agreed to take the survey, they were directed to a homepage which showed a welcome page that described the purpose of the research, the researcher's university and college affiliation (University of South Carolina, School of Journalism and Mass Communications), and the researcher's email address should they have any questions regarding the survey.  Participants were notified that the survey was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.  This page also discussed anonymity and the approval from the University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Board (IRB; see appendix).

If the participants agreed to participate, they were asked to click the (>>) button at the bottom right of the screen, which moved them to the next page, the beginning of the actual survey.  Prompts then guided participants from one screen to the next within the survey, and a completion status bar was imbedded on all pages of the survey at the bottom of the page so participants could track their completion progress while taking the survey.  Couper (2001) suggests including a completion indicator to increases the

chances of survey completion.  Lastly, since Qualtrics guarantees a certain number of

responses for compensation, there was no need to calculate a response rate for this

research. The survey was submitted through the University of South Carolina

Institutional Review Board and required two revisions.  The researcher made the

corrections, sent the instrument back, and was subsequently approved to administer the

survey to the study participants.

The foundation for the variables in this research came from a variety of previous

studies examining identification (Cohen, 2001), empathy (Batson et al., 1981; Davis,

1983), and attitudes (Azjen & Fishbein, 1975; Batson et al., 1981) and were adapted to fit

the specific topic of this study (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).

*3.5 Operationalization of Variables*

*Dispositional Empathy.* Dispositional empathy was assessed by adopting one of

the four subscales as posited in the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1983).  Each of

the subscales consists of 7 items.  This research applied empathic concern (EC), which

assesses "other-oriented" feelings of concern and sympathy for those perceived to be in

need.  Dispositional empathy was measured using a Likert-type scale where 1 = *Strongly*

*disagree*, and 7 = *Strongly agree*.  Statements included, "I often have tender, concerned

feelings for people less fortunate than me," and "When I see someone being treated

unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them."  All items were scaled and

checked for reliability using the reliability analysis function in SPSS version 24.0, which

provides a reliability score, or Chronbach's alpha.  The items demonstrated a high degree

of internal consistency (Chronbach's $\alpha$ = .79).

*Media Exposure.* Self-reported exposure to Islamic State content was measure by asking participants to rate the frequency of exposure to ISIS media content on a 7-point Likert scale. Participants were asked, "On which of the following media have you seen/heard content about the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, aka ISIS? (select all that apply), then asked to rate how often they have been exposed to ISIS media content on the different media (*television, newspapers/magazines, radio, video websites, social media, websites/blogs, mobile applications*, a textual response within the survey) ranging from 1 = *Not at all* to 7 = *Very often*. This measure was designed to gather data to ensure that participants have been exposed to ISIS media content on a variety of different media. The items demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency (Chronbach's $\alpha$ = .86).

*Identification.* Participants' identification with ISIS was assessed using ten items adapted from Cohen (2001), which asked participants to rate their agreement with the following statements using a 7-point Likert-type response format (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*). Statements included: "I think I have a good understanding of ISIS members"; "While viewing ISIS media content, I feel like I'm a part of the action"; "While viewing ISIS media content, I forget myself and become fully absorbed"; "I tend to understand the reasons why ISIS members do what he or she does."
The items were scaled and checked for reliability and multicollinearity with empathy in SPSS. The items demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency when subjected to a reliability analysis in SPSS (Chronbach's $\alpha$ = .96).

*Empathy.* In addition to the dispositional empathy measure, an endogenous empathy measure was used to tap emotional empathy after being exposed to Islamic State media content. This measure was adopted from Batson and colleagues (1981), which

asked participants to rate their emotional responses to viewing members of ISIS on a Likert-type scale where 1 = *Not at all* and 7 = *Extremely*. The scale is composed of six adjectives: *sympathetic*, *moved*, *compassionate*, *tender*, *warm*, *softhearted*. The items were scaled and checked for reliability using the reliability analysis function in SPSS statistical software. The items demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency (Chronbach's $\alpha$ = .97).

*Attitudes*. Attitudes towards the Islamic State were measured using a seven item Likert-type scale where, 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*, to assess participants' attitudes toward support for the Islamic State. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements: "I support what ISIS is trying to accomplish"; "I agree with the goal ISIS is trying to accomplish (create a global caliphate)"; "I am favorable toward the main point of ISIS' message." The attitude measures were scaled and run for reliability using SPSS. The items demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency (Chronbach's $\alpha$ = .74).

3.6 *Survey Pretest*

The survey was pilot tested by sending a pretest link using Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com) to five Iraqi nationals who were current graduate students at the University of South Carolina. These graduate students completed the survey and then provided feedback and suggestions about question wording and content. The ability to receive feedback from Iraqis was particularly helpful, as the Islamic State started in Iraq and currently controls large territories in the country (Warrick, 2015). The participants reported that the survey instrument was worded clearly, included pertinent content, flowed well, and was an appropriate length. Additionally, participants reported that none

of the wording of the questions and statements in the survey were culturally or religiously

offensive towards Muslims.  Minor revisions were made to improve transitions between

different sections of the survey before it was sent out to the study participants.  For

example, the statement, "*Great, thanks for participating.  We would like to begin by*

*asking you to answer some statements about your feelings towards others*," was included

to provide a smooth transition from the survey 'Welcome page' to the dispositional

empathy question block, as were several other transition statements.

In addition to the pretest, Qualtrics, by design, sent out a pretest that captured

responses from ~10% ($n = 38$) of the entire sample under examination in this study (N =

396) in order to identify any problems or issues with the survey before the final launch

into the field.  No problems were found in the soft launch of the survey, therefore, the

complete instrument was subsequently distributed for final data collection.

*3.7 Analysis*

Data collection and analysis took place from February 10-19, 2017.  Once the

data were gathered, they were exported from Qualtrics into a SPSS statistical software

file (.sav) and imported into the program.  The spreadsheet was then cleaned and

analyzed using the PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) macro in the statistical software program

SPSS version 24.0.  Once the data were cleaned and inspected for missing responses,

descriptive statistics were computed.  All variables were summated in order to calculate

reliabilities denoted by Chronbach's alpha, then analyzed as stated in the hypothesized
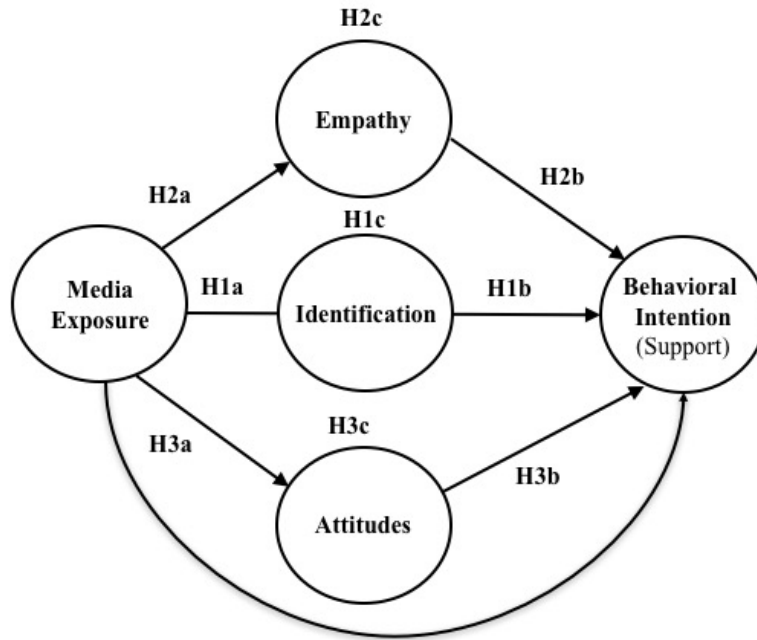
model depicted in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1** Hypothesized model.

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions were calculated to assess the associations between variables. Following the OLS regression analyses, mediation analyses were conducted to examine the direct and indirect relationships between variables, and how each variable influenced (i.e., mediated) the relationship between the independent (media exposure), mediating variables (identification, empathy and attitudes) and dependent variable (support for ISIS), as seen in Figure 3.1. The model depicted in Figure 3.1 is what Hayes (2013) refers to as a parallel multiple mediator model, whereby, "antecedent variable X is modeled as influencing consequent Y directly as well as indirectly through two or more mediators, with the condition that no mediator causally influences another," (p. 125). Therefore, $X$ represents the independent variable, $M_1...M_2... M_3$ the mediators, and $Y$ the dependent, or outcome variable. Furthermore, one of the principle distinguishing features of the parallel multiple mediator model that sets it

apart from other multiple mediator models is that the no mediators influence each other in the model (Hayes, 2013).

Hayes and Preacher's (2014) bootstrapping procedures were used to assess direct and indirect effects and their confidence intervals (CI). In a mediation model, one pathway, $X \rightarrow Y$, is used to denote $X$'s direct effect on $Y$, while the remainder of the pathways in the model are indirect effects, that is, passing through each single mediator (Hayes, 2013). For each individual analysis, bias-corrected confidence intervals were generated using 10,000 bootstrapped samples of the data. In order for these findings to be statistically significant, the corresponding bias corrected confidence interval must not include zero (Hayes, 2009; Hayes & Preacher, 2014; Rucker & Hayes, 2007). Details of the results are discussed in the findings section of this manuscript (Chapter 4).

3.8 *Detailed Variable Items*

To summarize in full detail, the survey was designed in six question blocks: A dispositional empathy control measure (1 question block consisting of 7 items), using Davis' (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), which asked people to rate their agreeance with the following statements on a 1 to 7 scale, where 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*: 1. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me; 2. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems; 3. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them; 4. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal; 5. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them; 6. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen; and, 7. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.

In the exposure to ISIS media content section (1 question block consisting of 7 items), the statements asked respondents to rate their self-reported media exposure frequency where 1 = *Not at all* and 7 = *Very often*, following the question: "On which of the following media have you seen/heard content about the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, aka ISIS?" The choices available for participants to select were: television; newspapers/magazines; radio; video websites (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo); social media; websites/blogs; mobile applications; and, Other, which included an open-ended response that prompted participants to write in their response.

For empathy (1 question block consisting of 6 items), participants were asked to rate their agreement with six adjectives (sympathetic, moved, compassionate, tender, warm, softhearted) that described their feelings towards members of ISIS, where 1 = *Not at all* and 7 = *Extremely*. The prompt for this section was: "Please rate how well the adjectives below describe your emotional responses to seeing a member of ISIS."

Identification (1 question block consisting of 10 items) consisted of 10 statements and questions. Participants were asked to rate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*. The following items were included in the survey instrument: 1. While viewing media content about ISIS, I feel as if I was part of the action; 2. While viewing media content about ISIS, I forget myself and am fully absorbed; 3. I am able to understand the events in the media content in a manner that is similar in which the ISIS member(s) understand them. 4. I think I have a good understanding of members of ISIS; 5. I tend to understand the reasons why members of ISIS do what they do; 6. While viewing ISIS media content, I can feel the emotions the member(s) portray; 7. When viewing ISIS media content, I feel like I can really get inside

the member's head; 8. At key moments, I feel I know exactly what the member is going through; 9. While viewing the content, I want the member to succeed in achieving his or her goals; and, 10. When the members succeed I feel joy, but when he or she fails, I am sad.

Attitudes (1 question block consisting of 5 items and 3 additional separate questions). For the first block of five statements, a 7-point Likert scale was used where 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*. The following five items were included in this section: 1. Members of ISIS have no one to blame but themselves for their troubles; 2. Anyone who commits an act of terrorism must be inhuman; 3. Anyone who commits terrorism should be punished to the full limit the law allows for their crime; 4. No one would commit terrorism unless he or she had a moral or mental deficiency; 5. Our society should do more to rehabilitate and educate convicted terrorists. For the next question, a 1 to 7-point Likert scale was used where 1 = *Not at all* and 7 = *Very much*, and asked, "How much do you personally care about the plight of convicted terrorists serving life without parole? The next question also used a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *Not at all important* and 7 = *Extremely important*, and asked, "Compared with other social problems we face today (e.g., homelessness, education, drugs, diseases, environmental protection, energy conservation), how would you rate the importance of improving conditions for convicted terrorists? Finally, the last attitude question used a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *Very negative* and 7 = *Very positive*, asking, "In general, what are your feelings towards convicted terrorists?

Behavioral intention (1 question block consisting of 5 items) used a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *Not at all likely* and 7 = *Very likely*, which asked: 1. How likely is it that

you will support ISIS in the near future?; 2. How likely are you to share information about ISIS with others?; 3. If you see or hear information about ISIS, how likely are you to pay attention to it? 4. How likely are you to communicate about ISIS on the Internet?; 5. How likely are you to seek information about ISIS?

Demographic information followed the variable questions (5 question blocks). Then, three additional question blocks with two open-ended responses, and a dichotomous question where skip-logic was used in Qualtrics to filter respondents who answered "yes" to a question to an open-ended response prompt. The complete survey instrument consisted of 53 statements and questions total, including demographic questions. Keeping the sensitive topic of terrorism in mind, the questionnaire was carefully designed to mitigate any priming effects (i.e., questions/statements that would influence responses to subsequent questions/statements) (Couper, 2007; Babbie, 2013).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter first outlines the demographic and descriptive characteristics of the participants in this study (N = 396).  Next, the findings of the study's two research questions and nine hypotheses are discussed.  The research questions are discussed first, followed by each mediating variable (identification, empathy, attitudes) and their relationship with the independent variable (exposure to Islamic State media content) and dependent variable (support for ISIS) utilizing subheadings throughout the chapter.  Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression and mediation results are displayed in tabular format.

Post-hoc qualitative results are also discussed, which were open-ended text responses designed to capture sentiment toward ISIS; as well as responses about the newly-elected President of the United States, Donald Trump, who instituted a travel ban on seven predominantly Muslim countries barring non-U.S. citizens from entering the United States just before the data collection for this dissertation began (McNeil, Jr., 2017).  Finally, qualitative responses and selected examples are reported from two open-ended textual response questions in the survey.  Figures and tables are imbedded throughout this section to consolidate and illustrate different findings from research questions and hypotheses.  The chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

4.1 *Demographic and Descriptive Statistics*

This study's sample size (N = 396) was comprised of 69.3% male participants (n = 253) and 36.1% female participants (n = 143). As shown in Table 4.1, most participants in the study were White (41.2%), followed by Middle Eastern (16.9%). Ages ranged from 18 to 76 years old, with a mean age of 32.26 (SD = 11.64). This was a highly-educated sample. Over half (56.8%) of participants reported having completed either some college education, an associate's degree, or an earned bachelor's degree.

As also seen in Table 4.1 on the following page, there was a wide range of annual household incomes. Nearly one-quarter (24.7%) of participants reported an annual household income of below $20,000, while on the upper end, 12.9% of respondents reported earning over $100,000 per year.

For sect of Islam, over three-quarters of participants (76.5%) identified as Sunni Muslim, while 13.6% identified as Shi'a Muslim, and 9.85% identified as Other. The percentages for Sunni and Shi'a are similar to the global Muslim populations, which are 80-90% Sunni and 10-15% Shi'a, and similar to the United States Sunni and Shi'a populations depicted in Table 4.2 on the following page (Pew, 2016). Using skip logic in Qualtrics, participants were prompted to provide an open-ended text response if they selected "other" for sect of Islam. Some of the text responses included: "Nation of Islam"; "Muslim"; "Al Islam"; "Alawi"; "5 Percenter"; "Neither, just Muslim"; and "Both."

**Table 4.1** Characteristics of Sample Participants.

| Demographic Variables | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 253 | 63.9% |
| Female | 143 | 36.1% |
| Education level | | |
| High school or below | 71 | 17.9% |
| Some college | 70 | 17.7% |
| Associate degree | 27 | 6.8% |
| Bachelor's degree | 128 | 32.3% |
| Master's degree | 74 | 18.7% |
| Doctorate | 15 | 3.8% |
| Professional (JD, MD) | 11 | 2.8% |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Hispanic or Latino | 21 | 5.3% |
| White | 163 | 41.2% |
| Black or African American | 66 | 16.7% |
| American Indian or Alaska Native | 20 | 5.1% |
| Native Hawaiian or Pacific | 5 | 1.3% |
| Islander | | |
| Middle Eastern | 67 | 16.9% |
| North African | 7 | 1.8% |
| Other | 47 | 11.9% |
| Sect of Islam | | |
| Sunni | 303 | 76.5% |
| Shi'a | 54 | 13.6% |
| Other | 39 | 9.8% |
| Annual household income | | |
| Below $20,000 | 98 | 24.7% |
| $20,000-$39,999 | 69 | 17.4% |
| $40,000-$59,999 | 71 | 17.9% |
| $60,000-$79,999 | 60 | 15.2% |
| $80,000-$99,999 | 47 | 11.9% |
| $100,000 or above | 51 | 12.9% |

*Note.* N = 396

**Table 4.2** Percentages of Muslims by Sect in Sample and United States.

| Sects | Sample % | United States % | World % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sunni | 76.5% | ~65% | 80-90% |
| Shi'a | 13.6% | ~11% | 10-15% |
| Other | 9.9% | ~24% | N/A |

*Note.* Secondary data were used for U.S. and world Muslim populations from Pew Research Center (Pew, 2016). Per the Pew Research, the percentages are approximations of the U.S. and world Muslim populations.

4.2 *Descriptive Statistics for Variables*

  *Exposure to ISIS Media Content*.  Self-reported media exposure questions asked respondents to rate the frequency of exposure to ISIS media content across seven different media measured using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *Not at all* and 7 = *Very often*.  Figure 4.2 displays the media exposure scores from greatest to least.  Television was the primary source of exposure to ISIS media content (M = 5.34, SD = 1.94), followed by social media (M = 5.05, SD = 2.05), and video websites (M = 4.71, SD = 2.11).
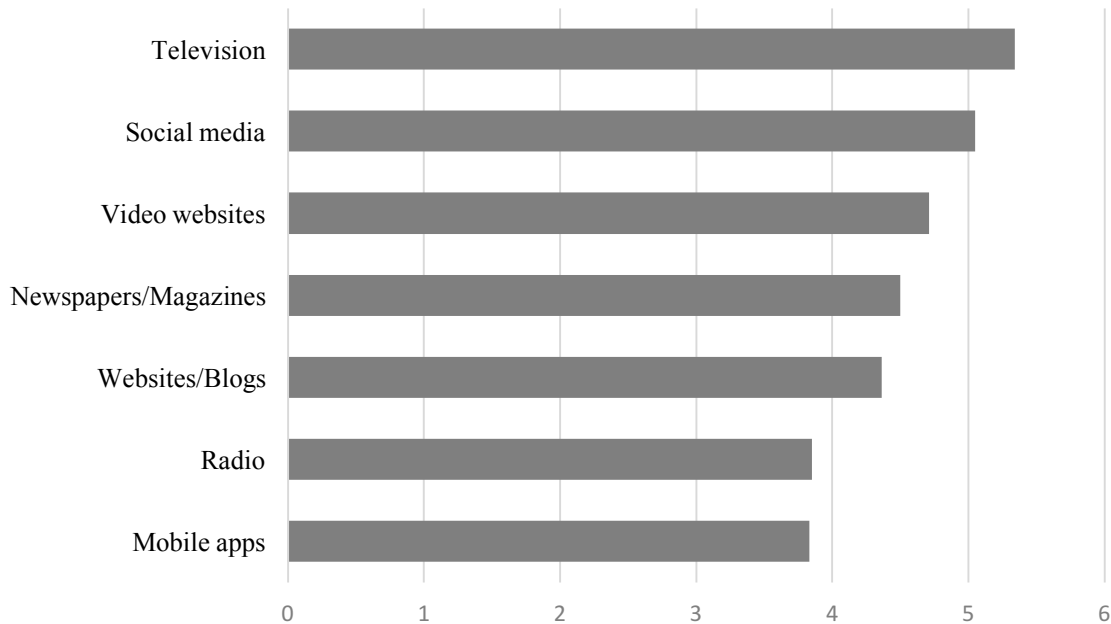


**Figure 4.1** Bar Graph Depicting Mean Scores of Exposure to ISIS Media Content.

  *Identification*.  An identification scale consisting of 10 items asked participants if they identified with members of ISIS after observing them through media using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *Not at all* and 7 = *Very often*.  Those items were summated and averaged in SPSS v.24.0, then computed to examine descriptive statistics (M = 4.22, SD

= 2.72).  Results show that overall identification with members of ISIS were above the

mean.

*Empathy*.  The empathy scale consisted of six items asking participants to rate

their feeling towards members of ISIS using six adjectives (sympathetic, moved,

compassionate, tender, warm, softhearted) using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = *Not at*

*all* and 7 = *Extremely*.  These items were summated using SPSS and computed for

descriptive statistics (M = 2.37, SD = 1.79).  Thus, results of overall empathy were below

the mean.

*Attitudes*.  Attitudes towards members of ISIS and terrorism were measured using

eight items on 7-point Likert scales.  Five of those items were measured using a 7-point

Likert scale where 1 = *Strongly agree* and 7 = *Strongly disagree*; the sixth item 1 = *Not at*

*all* and 7 = *Very much*; the seventh item 1 = *Not at all important* and 7 = *Extremely*

*important*; and the eighth and final item, 1 = *Very negative* and 7 = *Very positive*.

Attitudes towards members of ISIS and terrorism were generally unfavorable (M = 3.35,

SD = 1.42), as they were just below the mean.

*Behavioral intention*.  Behavioral intention was measured using four items on a 7-

point Likert scale where 1 = *Not at all likely* and 7 = *Very likely*.  Descriptive statistics

revealed that, overall, participants did not want to support ISIS (M = 1.94, SD = 1.10).

However, it is worth noting that, when each item was examined individually and not in a

scaled format, 57.8% of respondents reported that they will continue to pay attention to

ISIS media content.  Additionally, nearly 50-percent (47.8%) of respondents reported that

they intend on sharing ISIS media content; 40.9% reported that they would seek

information about ISIS, and 36.2% claimed they would communicate about ISIS on the

Internet.  Mediation analyses and OLS regression results for all of the variables are

discussed later in this chapter.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

4.3 *Variable Reliability*

Reliability of the summated scales was calculated for the variables under

investigation: media exposure, identification, empathy, attitudes, and behavioral

intention. Both alpha scores and number of items used to compute these scales are

displayed below in Table 4.3.  All of the variables had either a high degree ($\alpha \geq .90$) or

above an acceptable level ($.80 > \alpha \geq .70$) of internal consistency when summated in SPSS

v. 24.0 per the standard measures using Chronbach's alpha (Chronbach, 1951).

**Table 4.3** Summated Variable Scales Reporting Chronbach's Alpha.

| Name of Scale | Items | Alpha |
|---|---|---|
| Media exposure | 7 | .86 |
| Identification | 10 | .96 |
| Empathy (aroused) | 6 | .97 |
| Dispositional empathy | 4 | .79 |
| Attitudes | 8 | .74 |
| Behavioral intention | 4 | .89 |

*Note.* Reliability analyses were conducted using summated mean scores calculated in
SPSS v.24.0.

4.4 *Results of Research Questions*

For all research questions and hypotheses, individual mediation analyses were

conducted to avoid suppression effects between aroused empathy and identification.  In

some of the literature, scholars claim that empathy is a dimension of identification

(Cohen, 2001; 2006; Shen, 2011), however, the author of this dissertation treated them as

distinct variables using Cohen's (2001) identification scale and Batson and colleagues'

(1981) empathy scale. As noted in section 4.3 above, this produced a high degree of

internal consistency across both variables (identification $\alpha = .97$) (empathy $\alpha = .96$).

Each mediation analysis has a dedicated table to summarize statistical results, which are

reported in the subsequent variable subheadings.

Research question 1 (RQ1) asked, "For Muslims living in the United States, what

is the relationship between exposure to Islamic State media content and intention to

support the group?" To answer this question, a mediation analysis was conducted to

measure the direct effect of X (exposure) on Y (behavioral intention). As Figure 4.2

illustrates, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression results of the analysis show that

exposure to ISIS media content had a positive, statistically significant direct effect on

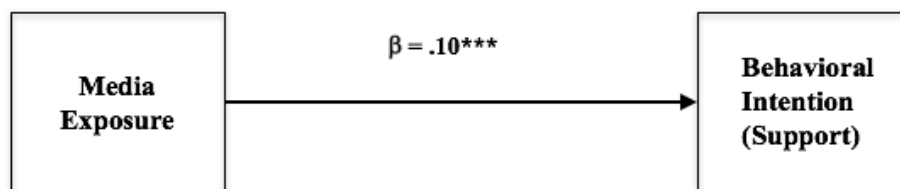intention to support ISIS ($\beta = .10$, $p < .001$).



**Figure 4.2** Direct effect of media exposure on behavioral intention.
***p<.005

Research question 2 asked, "Will there be any differences between sects (i.e.,

Sunni or Shia'a) of Islam as it relates to support for the Islamic State?" To answer this

question, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using a Welch F-statistic was used

because of the unequal sample sizes: Sunni ($n = 303$) and Shia'a ($n = 54$). Results

revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance was not met (p <.012 $\alpha$ <.05 ),

thereby ruling out any significant differences between sect of Islam and intention to support ISIS [$F(2, 394) = 4.45$, $p = 0.12$].

As no statistical significance was found between sect of Islam and intention to support ISIS when utilizing the Welch F-statistic, a post-hoc Games-Howell test of unequal cell sizes was also conducted. The Games-Howell test also violated ANOVA assumptions of homogeneity of variances, showing no significant mean differences between Sunni or Shia'a participants ($p = .274$). Therefore, there were no significant differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims and intention to support the Islamic State in this sample ($N = 396$).

4.5 *Results of Hypotheses*

***Identification***

Three hypotheses were proposed to examine the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content, identification, and behavioral intention. The following hypotheses were:

**H1a:** Higher levels of exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with greater levels of identification with ISIS.

**H1b:** Higher levels of identification with ISIS members will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS.

**H1c:** Identification with ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

As shown in Table 4.4, mediation analyses and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions were conducted using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro in SPSS v. 24.0 in order to determine if these hypotheses were supported. For H1a, in step 1 of the

mediation model, regression results showed that there was a statistically significant direct effect of exposure to ISIS media content on identification with its members ($\beta = .41$, $p$ <.001), and that exposure to ISIS media content accounted for 16.5% of the overall variance in identification: $R^2 = .165$, F (1, 394) = 71.84, $p$ <.001. Therefore, H1a was supported.

The second hypothesis (H1b) posited that higher levels of identification with ISIS members will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS. As predicted, the path coefficient associated with this hypothesis was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .24$, $p$ <.001), thereby offering support for H1b.

H1c predicted that identification would mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS. The mediation analysis demonstrated that identification indeed mediated the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS, as there was a statistically positive indirect effect of exposure to ISIS media content through identification (point estimate = .024, SE = .004, 95% CI [.016, .028]), and that the effect of exposure to ISIS media content (path $c$) was diminished, but still statistically significant, when identification was included as the mediator. As posited by Hayes (2013), the indirect effect of exposure to ISIS media content on intention to support ISIS is significant if the confidence interval is does not straddle the number zero. Therefore, H1c was supported.

**Table 4.4** OLS Regression Results for Exposure, Identification, Behavioral Intentions.

| | Outcome Variable | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Predictors** | **Identification (M)** | **Intentions (Y)** |
| **Conceptual Variables** | | |
| Exposure | .101 (.011)*** | .021 (.004) |
| Identification | -- | .236 (.016)*** |
| | $R^2 = .17***$ | $R^2 = .48***$ |
| | $F(1, 394) = 77.84***$ | $F(1, 394) = 183.56***$ |

*Note.* The first column depicts the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support the group.  Standard errors are in parentheses.
*p <.05. **p < .01. ***p <.005.

### *Empathy*

Three hypotheses were posited to examine the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content, empathy and intention to support ISIS.  Mediation analyses and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression were used to measure the following three proposed hypotheses:

**H2a:** Higher levels of exposure to ISIS media content will be associated with greater levels of empathy for ISIS.

**H2b:** Higher levels of empathy for ISIS will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS.

**H2c:** Empathy for ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

Again, mediation analyses were conducted using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro in SPSS v. 24.0 (see Table 4.5).  For H2a, in step 1 of the mediation model, regression results show that there was a statistically significant direct effect of exposure to ISIS media content on empathy ($\beta = .32$, $p <.001$), and that exposure to ISIS media content

accounted for 10.3% of the overall variance in this model: $R^2 = .103$, F (1, 394) = 45.48, $p$ <.001. Therefore, H2a was supported.

For H2b, higher levels of empathy for members of ISIS will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS. As predicted, the path coefficient associated with H2b resulted in a positive, statistically significant relationship between empathy and intention to support ISIS ($\beta = .29$, $p$ <.001). Therefore, H2b was supported.

H2c predicted that empathy would mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS. The mediation analysis demonstrated that empathy did indeed mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS, as there was a statistically positive indirect effect of exposure to ISIS media content through identification (point estimate = .015, SE = .003, 95% CI [.010, .021], and that the effect of exposure to ISIS media content (path $c$) was diminished, but still statistically significant, when empathy was included as the mediator. As posited by Hayes (2013), if the confidence interval does not contain zero, then the indirect effect, or mediation, is significant ($p$ <.05). Therefore, H2c was supported.

**Table 4.5** OLS Regression Results for Exposure, Empathy, Behavioral Intentions.

|  | Outcome Variable | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Predictors** | **Empathy (M)** | **Intentions (Y)** |
| **Conceptual Variables** | | |
| Exposure | .053 (.008)*** | .030 (.004)*** |
| Empathy | -- | .287 (.026)*** |
|  | $R^2 = .10$*** | $R^2 = .40$*** |
|  | $F(1, 394) = 45.48$*** | $F(1, 394) = 128.20$*** |

*Note.* The first column depicts the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support the group. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*p <.05. **p < .01. ***p <.005.

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*Attitudes*

Three hypotheses examined the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content, attitudes toward terrorism and intention to support ISIS. Mediation analyses and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression were used to measure the following three proposed hypotheses:

**H3a:** Attitudes toward ISIS will be positively associated with behavioral intention to support ISIS.

**H3b:** More positive attitudes towards terrorism will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS.

**H3c:** Attitudes toward ISIS members will mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS.

As shown in Table 4.6 mediation analyses were conducted using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro in SPSS v. 24.0. For H3a, in step 1 of the mediation model, regression results show that there was a statistically significant direct effect of exposure to ISIS media content on attitudes ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$), and that exposure to ISIS media content accounted for 10.3% of the overall variance in identification: $R^2 = .103$, F (1, 394) = 45.48, $p < .001$. Therefore, H3a was supported.

For H3b, higher levels of attitudes towards members of ISIS will be associated with greater intention to support ISIS, the path coefficient associated with H3b in Table 4.6 shows a positive, statistically significant relationship between empathy and intention to support ISIS ($\beta = .29$, $p < .001$), thereby offering support for H2b.

H3c predicted that attitudes would mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support ISIS. The mediation analysis demonstrated

that attitudes did mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and

intention to support ISIS, as there was a statistically positive indirect effect of exposure to

ISIS media content through identification (point estimate = .015, SE = .003, 95% CI

[.010, .021], and that the effect of exposure to ISIS media content (path *c*) was

diminished, but still statistically significant, when empathy was included as the mediator.

Because the confidence did not straddle zero, the indirect effect is significant (p <.05).

Therefore, H2c was supported.

**Table 4.6** OLS Regression Results for Exposure, Attitudes, Behavioral Intentions.

|  | Outcome Variable | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Predictors** | **Attitudes (M)** | **Intentions (Y)** |
| **Conceptual Variables** | | |
| Exposure | .043 (.006)*** | .036 (.005)*** |
| Attitudes | -- | .209 (.036)*** |
|  | $R^2 = .11$*** | $R^2 = .26$*** |
|  | $F(1, 394) = 47.92$*** | $F(2, 393) = 70.54$*** |

*Note.* The first column depicts the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support the group. Standard errors are in parentheses. *p <.05. **p < .01. ***p <.005.

In summary, all three mediation models (identification, empathy, attitudes)

exerted both positive and statistically significant effects on the outcome variable,

behavioral intention (intention to support ISIS). Recall that if the confidence intervals

(CI) do not overlap or contain zero in the lower level and upper level ranges, then

mediation has occurred (Hayes, 2013). Detailed results are reported in Table 4.7, which

include all three mediation models and their corresponding statistical findings.

**Table 4.7** Summary of Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Confidence Intervals of Indirect Effects of Predictor Variable through Mediating Variables on Intention to Support ISIS.

| Predictor Variables | *b* | *SE* | LLCI | ULCI | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Model 1** | | | | | |
| Identification | .236 | .016 | .204 | .267 | <.001 |
| Exposure to ISIS media | .101 | .011 | .079 | .124 | <.001 |
| Intention to support ISIS | .021 | .004 | .013 | .029 | <.001 |
| **Model 2** | | | | | |
| Empathy | .287 | .004 | .237 | .338 | <.001 |
| Exposure to ISIS media | .053 | .008 | .037 | .068 | <.001 |
| Intention to support ISIS | .030 | .004 | .022 | .038 | <.001 |
| **Model 3** | | | | | |
| Attitudes | .209 | .036 | .139 | .280 | <.001 |
| Exposure to ISIS media | .043 | .006 | .031 | .055 | <.001 |
| Intention to support ISIS | .036 | .005 | .027 | .045 | <.001 |

*Note*. 10,000 bootstrap samples with 95% CI. Bootstrapping reveals that each of the variables (identification, empathy, attitudes) mediates the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content (IV) and intention to support ISIS (DV) if the 95% CI does not overlap or include zero. These models were generated using Model 4 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013).

4.6 *Qualitative Results*

Two open-ended responses were included with the online survey, one which focused more generally on ISIS media content and one on President Donald Trump, as data for this study were collected shortly after his inauguration in January 2017. Specifically, one qualitative response was mandatory for all survey participants, the other was included if a respondent answered "yes" to a question about the election of U.S. President Donald Trump. Both questions are discussed in this section.

A statement was posed prompting a textual open-ended response asking respondents, "In a sentence or two, please describe what about ISIS media content appeals, or does not appeal to you." The following (Table 4.8 and Table 4.9) is a selection of some of the open-ended responses from the aforementioned statement broken

down by those who answered why ISIS media appeals to them, and those who answered

why ISIS media does not appeal to them.  Selected responses are denoted by quotes in

Table 4.8:

**Table 4.8** Selected Participant Qualitative Responses for What Appeals to them about ISIS Media Content.

| Selected responses | Appeals |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | "I have traveled in the Middle East and watching ISIS media concerns me greatly for the lives of the people there. It only appeals to me for education. Otherwise, I detest it." |
| 2. | "ISIS conceptions is totally wrong. They are terrorists because George Bush destroyed their home, killed their family & all their dreams.  I am not supporting ISIS for what they have done, but this is the real truth behind everything, try to understand the fact. |
| 3. | "Nothing to say, bush killed their hopes, dreams with their family. Now they became terrorists.  I am not supporting them at any cost, but you also need to know story behind the scene." |
| 4. | "It runs a powerful propaganda machine on social media." |
| 5. | "Amazing." |
| 6. | "The killing of innocent people and the bombings." |

*Note*. Responses were selected excerpts from sample (N = 396).

Table 4.9 contains selected responses from participants who indicated that ISIS

media did not appeal to them.  Responses range from tepid, to political, to outrage, thus

illustrating some of the fervent emotional arousal that ISIS media evokes in people.

Below are selected responses:

**Table 4.9** Selected Participant Qualitative Responses for What Does Not Appeal to them about ISIS Media Content.

| Selected responses | Does not Appeal |
|---|---|
| 1. | "ISIS does not appeal to me. But I do believe ISIS is a multi-government conspiracy to promote fear and garner support for war & more US involvement in Middle Eastern countries." |
| 2. | "I hate seeing media content about ISIS or any terrorist organizations in that matter. I believe terrorists who kill people should be punished with a death sentence or life in jail in isolation. I feel discussed even to hear the word ISIS. I tend to get very sick when I hear news about people being victims of terrorism and my body reacts to it by getting very sick due to an auto immune disease I have. Therefore, now I change the channel or Internet page immediately if I see any content that is related to terrorism and innocent people dying because of animals with no heart. It would be an insult to animals to call terrorists animals. So I will call them pure evil... I hope the world gets rid of this problem soon and heal its wounds..." |
| 3. | "It absolutely revolts me. They have killed so many Shia Ismailis in Asia and it is so disgusting that they kill all these people." |
| 4. | "ISIS media is war propaganda. It's fueled by western government giving them the attention they desire." |
| 5. | "Most of the time the content shows one-sidedness of ISIS and doesn't show other aspects or the plight of the land and people that ISIS affects." |
| 6. | "ISIS is composed of disaffected people throughout the world, similar to the Nazi regime. ISIS is a result of unemployment, poverty, war, and the global economic system that leaves so many disenfranchised. Anyone is susceptible to this sort of behavior, however horrible it is." |

*Note*. Responses were selected excerpts from sample (N = 396).

As depicted in Table 4.10, the majority of respondents reported that ISIS media does not appeal to them.  The "Undecided" category in Table 4.10 represents those who were either unsure or wrote "undecided", and the "N/A" category represents answers that were either blank, did nor pertain to the question, or whose answers were illegible.

**Table 4.10** Self-Reported Frequency Scores to the question, "What about ISIS media content appeals, or does not appeal to you."

| Answer | *n* | % |
|---|---|---|
| Appeals | 67 | 16.9 |
| Does not appeal | 253 | 63.9 |
| Undecided | 32 | 8.1 |
| N/A | 44 | 11.1 |
| Total | 396 | 100.0 |

*Note.* Frequencies represent textual responses provided by respondents.

Given the nature of the political climate in the United States, coupled with the geopolitical climate at the launch of the survey instrument, an open-ended question was added to examine whether the election of United States President Donald Trump had any influence on respondents' answers.

The question: "Finally, has the election of Donald Trump to the President of the United States influenced your responses in any way?" was structured as a dichotomous, "yes or no" response format.  Respondents who answered "yes" to this question were prompted to answer a textual response that read, "How so?", and asked to provide an open-ended response by typing their answers into a text box.  Respondents who answered "no" were directed to the end of the survey and thanked for their participation.

Just over 30% (n=119) of respondents answered "yes," the election of Donald Trump influenced their responses in the survey.  The majority (69.9%, n=277), answered that President Trump's election had no influence on their responses. Those who answered

"yes" were directed to a prompt where they were asked to expound on this by typing a textual response. Below are some of the open-ended responses – which yielded both positive and negative answers – that respondents typed into the answer box:

> "Trump is mixing up the terrorists (ISIS) with the innocent immigrants regardless of whether they're legal or illegal."

> "Donald Trump is a weakness for all Americans."

> "He is finally gonna put an end to ISIS."

> "Trump is a good leader."

> "He is not the right person to be the president of United states. He hates Muslims more than he loves his country."

> "He thinks Islam is a race and constantly bashes it but what he doesn't realize is that he's banning people from a country just because they believe in 1 god and 1 book."

> "His election has brought to me more awareness of the negative impacts it has on the Muslim community as a whole."

> "With his stupid executive orders he is actually uniting all people in the world which is a positive thing."

> "President Trump's unconstitutional executive order banning legal permanent residents with valid visas for only 6 primarily Muslim countries is despicable. I've had to go to airports to provide legal advice. I've had to protest. I've had to research and educate. What is my country becoming? Does he not realize I'm more likely to be killed by a white domestic terrorist than any foreigner??!"

4.7 *Post-hoc Analysis*

There were also gender differences for intentions to support the Islamic State. The mean scores for males ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.15$) and intention to support ISIS were greater than females' intention to support ($M = 1.61$, $SD = .92$), as depicted in Figure 4.1. Despite differences between genders, there were tepid intentions to support the Islamic State regardless of gender. Nonetheless, there

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was support for the group, which is explained in evidenced in the quantitative

results for the variables in this dissertation.

**Chapter 4 Summary**

In light of the complexity of this section and myriad research questions

and hypotheses, this paragraph briefly summarizes the findings. As seen in

Figure 4.3, there was support for Research question 1, Hypotheses 1a-c,

Hypotheses 2a-c, and Hypotheses 3a-c. Tests from Research question 2 revealed

no statistically significant findings for whether sect of Islam had any bearing on

intention to support the Islamic State. Qualitative findings were included for

context, not for inferential statistical measures. All findings are discussed in

detail in the next and final chapter of this dissertation.
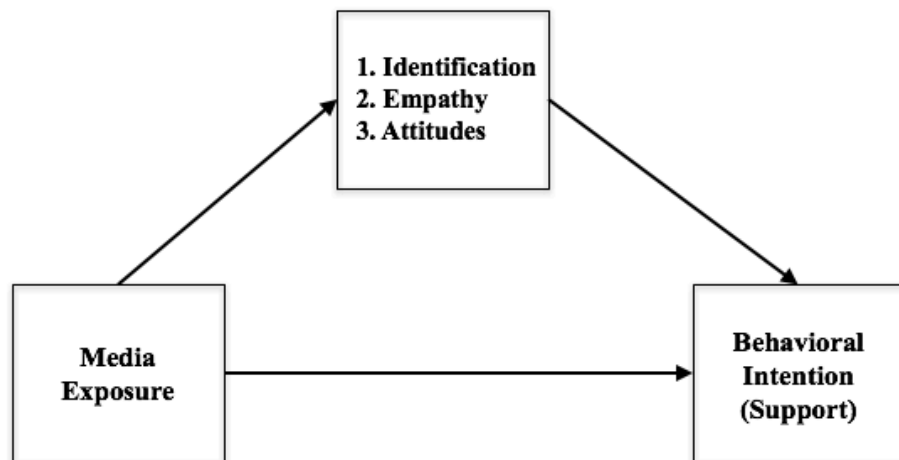


**Figure 4.3** Observed model.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

**Chapter 5 Summary**

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, the results and analysis of the research questions are discussed, followed by a discussion of the variables (media exposure, identification, empathy, attitudes, and behavioral intention). Conclusions are drawn and discussed based on the findings in the study. Next, the limitations of the study are acknowledged and discussed. Finally, suggestions for future research and recommendations for both scholars and practitioners are provided.

Currently, ISIS remains a global threat and dangerous enemy to nearly everyone, regardless of religious affiliation, around the world. The group continues to out-maneuver government agencies, counter-terrorism officials, and the military community, distributing a torrent of media content around the world. Surveillance programs suggest that tens of thousands of messages are disseminated daily – mostly unabated – through a variety of web-based distribution channels (Berger & Morgan, 2015; Schmidt, 2015). Momentum like this, however small the impact, has led to both the successful recruiting of new members and legions of followers responsible for carrying out homegrown terrorist attacks and various forms of direct and indirect support for the group. This has been evidenced repeatedly in terrorist attacks around the world since the rise of ISIS in 2014.

In fact, the most recent attack credited to the Islamic State came during the course of writing this chapter of the dissertation, underscoring the perpetual nature of terrorism. On March 22, 2017 a Muslim man, inspired by the Islamic State, used his car to ram pedestrians on London's Westminster Bridge, killing five and wounding 50 others. The attacker, 52 year-old Khalid Masood, was subsequently shot and killed by police after exiting his vehicle and attempting to slash his way towards parliament with a knife (BBC, 2017). This case differs slightly from other terrorist attacks inspired by ISIS. Masood was much older than many of the Islamic State's media targets or potential recruits, and he was a Muslim convert; two facts that concur with key findings of this dissertation.

**Discussion**

There is a crucial need for academics and practitioners alike to understand the dynamics of terrorism, especially in a quickly evolving, technology-centered world where there are no borders. In the wake of the ongoing global terrorism crises perpetrated by ISIS, coupled with the sophisticated nature of its outreach through digital media platforms, this dissertation sought to explore the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and the intention to support the group, and how these variables were mediated by identification, empathy, and attitudes towards ISIS, and their influence on behavioral intention.

This was the first quantitative study to examine support for ISIS in the United States using social cognitive theory as it relates to exposure to ISIS media content utilizing the combination of variables in this dissertation. The purpose of this study was to measure exposure to ISIS media content, identification, empathy, and attitudes toward

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the group, and intention to support ISIS. The underlying mechanisms (media exposure, identification, empathy, attitudes, and behavioral intention) were then examined to explore exactly what leads someone to support ISIS.

5.1 *Descriptive Statistics Discussion*

Although mediation did occur between media exposure, identification, empathy, and attitudes, overall results demonstrated that the participants in this study are not inclined to support the Islamic State. Descriptive findings also revealed that television, social media, and video websites were the primary sources of Islamic State media exposure. Interestingly, although respondents said they "often" identified with ISIS after viewing ISIS-related media content, they rarely empathized with the group or had favorable attitudes toward ISIS after viewing ISIS-related media. This could be attributed to strong identification with Muslims in general, as shown in previous research (Luchsinger & McKeever, 2016; Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq & van Egmond, 2015). The dependent variable, support for ISIS (behavioral intention), possessed the lowest mean score, suggesting that exposure to ISIS media did not elicit strong intentions to support the group. While this research is merely a small slice of the complexities involved in 21st century terrorism, these findings provide insights into the affective properties associated with the Islamic State's media content, and provide a fertile area of research for scholars and practitioners in the field of mass communication and other behavioral science disciplines. These results may also help identify potential deterrents to supporting ISIS that could be implemented in counter-terrorism tactics in the future.

Nearly 400 Muslims living in the United States responded to the online survey that was used to gather data for this study. Consistent with U.S. and global Muslim populations (Pew, 2016), the sample in this study was predominantly Sunni Muslim (76.5%), with the minority of the sample population reporting to be Shi'a Muslim (13.6%). The average age of participants was also consistent with the younger target age group that the Islamic State targets to join the group (Warrick, 2015). The racial demographic makeup was predominantly White (41.2%). It is important to understand that many people from North Africa and the Middle East identify as White in the United States per the definition from the U.S. Census and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission which defines White as, "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa (U.S. Census, 2017). The next largest racial demographic was the Middle East (16.9%). These two racial groups made up nearly 60% of the entire sample population.

5.2 *Key Findings*

Regarding media exposure, results revealed that television, social media, and video websites were the primary sources of Islamic State media exposure. Television was the number one source among participants in this study. This is likely due to abundance of television news coverage of dozens of terrorist attacks carried out by ISIS since 2014, most notably in Western countries (United States, United Kingdom, France, Belgium and Germany) where television news is still a major source of news consumption. Television also offers a visually compelling medium that transcends geographical and linguistic barriers (Thussu, 2003), that is, it is essentially a universal medium. This finding implies that most people are being exposed to ISIS content through television news sources and

begs the question as to whether or not televising ISIS content is potentially contributing

to the problem by giving terrorist groups like ISIS by providing a platform to spread its

ideology.  This notion is consistent with previous studies that suggest that the "media"

and terrorists have a symbiotic relationship because televising terrorist attacks suggests

that terrorism is a newsworthy topic (Blain, 2009; Hoffman, 2006; Iqbal, 2015).  For

example, every year, there is abundant coverage of the September 11th attacks.

Consistent coverage such as this could be seen as a promotional spot for ISIS and other

terror groups.

Consistent with the Islamic State's primary method of dissemination, respondents

reported that social media was a close second to television when pertaining to ISIS media

content exposure.  According to *The ISIS Twitter Census*, over 90,000 ISIS-related

messages are disseminated on Twitter every day (Berger & Morgan, 2015).  This

problem plaguing law enforcement and counter-terrorism officials was the primary topic

at the NYPD Shield Conference addressing the threat of terrorism following the terrorist

attacks in Paris in 2015.  In a speech to New York City law enforcement and officials,

FBI Director, James Comey, underscored the effectiveness and ease of communicating

with ISIS:

> "If you want to talk to a terrorist, you don't need to send an e-mail to
> anybody. You just need to follow that terrorist on Twitter, and then
> maybe engage in Twitter direct messaging with that terrorist,"
> (FBI.gov, 2015).

What's more, a simple Google search of the word "ISIS" returns over 225 million

results, including videos of beheadings and executions on the very first page of the

Google search.  It is clear that access to all kinds of ISIS material is easy to find so long

as one has an Internet connection.  More research is needed to understand the

pervasiveness and accessibility of this content.

Video websites were the third medium where respondents reported exposure to

ISIS media.  Again, a simple search on YouTube produces millions of hits when "ISIS"

is typed into the search bar.  This finding is particularly interesting because it suggests

that people are actively searching out information about ISIS.  Video websites are an

interactive medium, versus television news, for example, which packages the content and

delivers it in a passive manner (Foehr, 2006; Napoli, 2011; Slater, 2004; Webster &

Ksiazek, 2012).  Therefore, either people are deliberately searching for this content or

they are being directed here via horizontal entry – through links or other platforms that

drive traffic to sites like YouTube.

Additionally, there was a qualitative question asking, "In a sentence or two,

please describe what about ISIS media content appeals, or does not appeal to you."

While most respondents reported that ISIS media content did not appeal to them, some

did (16.9%), and nearly 20% reported they were undecided.  For example, some had a

political bent:

> "ISIS conceptions is [sic] totally wrong. They are terrorists because George Bush
> destroyed their home, killed their family & all their dreams.  I am not supporting
> ISIS for what they have done, but this is the real truth behind everything, try to
> understand the fact."

Answers such as this are likely due to two full-scale wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well

as ongoing military operations around the Middle East, the Arabian Peninsula, and

Central Asia (Schmitt, 2015).  What's more, the United States has another conservative

president who has publicly admonished terrorism, Muslims, and various immigrant

groups, and is currently flirting with the idea of war on several fronts.  In stark contrast to

some of the politically-oriented responses, some respondents' answers were blatantly in favor of ISIS' mission. One respondent wrote, "It runs a powerful propaganda machine on social media."

Responses like these underscore the necessity of forging quick solutions to combat this problem. Additionally, if people are willing to provide responses in a survey through a company like Qualtrics, which has the ability to track Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, there is reason to believe that they are serious. Of note, nearly 20% of respondents reported being undecided about what appeals or does not appeal to them about ISIS media content. It is possible that some of the undecided responses could be linked to fear of prosecution or retaliation.

When examining the relationship between exposure to Islamic State media content and intention to support the group (RQ1), results revealed a strong, statistically significant relationship was found. Specifically, study findings suggest that, for Muslims living in the U.S., the more often they are exposed to ISIS media content, the more their intention to support ISIS increases. This is consistent with a previous study, the genesis of this research, that examined a smaller population of Muslims living in the United States using social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework (Luchsinger & McKeever, 2016). Therefore, the findings in this study support the limited, previous research to date, suggesting that there is a strong relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support the group.

These findings are also consistent with myriad studies in the mass communication that have previously examined the direct relationship of media exposure and behavioral intentions (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963; Batson et al. 1981; 1996; 2002; Gentile, Lynch,

Linder & Walsh, 2004; Hoffner, 1996; Lin, 2013; McKeever, 2015). Additionally, this finding offers support for Bandura's (2001) dual-pathways of influence within social cognitive theory, which posits that exposure to media content can has the potential to directly lead to behavioral change through the presence of a single mediator, or multiple mediating variables.

Differences in intention to support the Islamic State based on identification with either the Sunni and Shi'a Muslim sects were also examined (RQ2). Sunni and Shi'a Muslims have a long and turbulent history dating back to the beginning of time (Brancati, 2004; Warrick, 2015). For centuries, the sects have been fighting or jockeying for territory and power in Iraq and around the Middle East, which is precisely why the Islamic State – a Sunni-dominant group – has been so successful at luring recruits to join its ranks or support its mission of establishing a global caliphate. Many of the group's messages target Sunni Muslims – the minority sect in Iraq – through religious and ideological compulsion to serve and protect fellow Muslims, and ultimately prevail to reinstate a caliphate in Iraq and throughout the world. Outside of Iraq, Sunnis are the majority sect (~85% worldwide), giving ISIS a large pool of potential followers to target (~1 billion+) (Pew, 2016).

Contrary to the historical feuding between the two sects, there were no statistically significant differences between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims when it came to support for the Islamic State. It is important to note that the sample population for Sunnis (n = 303) was much greater than Shi'a (n =54), so making comparisons between the groups posed statistical challenges. Since this was a U.S.-only sample, there is the potential that some of the participants considered themselves as simply, 'Muslim',

regardless of sect, and in fact, some participants who answered "other" in the demographics portion of the survey responded to the open-ended Muslim sect text response as, "Just Muslim."

Although ISIS is a Sunni Muslim group, their media messages aim at attracting all Muslims around the world to join and create a caliphate, using an "us versus them" narrative (i.e., Muslims versus non-Muslims), to create division and discontent towards non-Muslims. For example, much of their magazine-centric material is steeped in religious ideology and the camaraderie that revolves around being Muslim. Nonetheless, the majority of the world's Muslim population (~1.6 billion) are Sunni, therefore ISIS does not necessarily need to make a case to non-Sunni Muslims simply because of the sheer amount of Sunni Muslims throughout the world. As previously mentioned, the group's first choice target is Sunni Muslims. More research is needed to examine differences between sects and what it is about the media content that transcends centuries of problems between Sunnis and Shi'as.

5.3 *Identification*

In keeping with Bandura's theory that identification plays an integral role in behavioral acquisition, this study's strongest predictor of behavioral intention was identification, thereby offering support for one of the key variables in social cognitive theory. Specifically, results revealed that higher levels of exposure to ISIS media content leads to greater identification with ISIS (H1a), and higher levels of identification with members of ISIS leads to greater intentions to support the group (H1b). This finding is consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated that identification is an antecedent to behavioral intention (Bandura, 1986; 2001; Christenfeld, 2006; Lin, 2015;

Lin, 2013; McKeever, 2015), and is an important component the process of social

movements – good or bad – to build momentum and catalyze social change (Touraine,

1985).

Identification is one of the key tenets of social cognitive theory. According to

Bandura (1986), the greater the level of identification with the model, in this case

members of ISIS, the more likely a person is to acquire a behavior. Additionally, the

more a person perceives themselves to be similar to a model, whether it is looks, gender,

hair color, religion, etc., the greater the level of identification with the model. This

notion was echoed by Cramer (2001) who suggested that identification is a process where

an individual takes on the behaviors, goals and values of the person or persons whom

they identify with, or what is sometimes referred to as perceived similarity. Findings in

this study also offer support for Cohen's (2001) conceptualization of identification with

media characters whereby one develops an, "…affinity, friendship, similarity, and liking

of a media character…" (Cohen, 2001, p. 249).

Nowhere is this rationalization truer than in today's Internet-driven world and its

widespread reach. Minimal effort is required to be fully engaged with someone halfway

around the world whom one would likely otherwise never cross paths with. This is why

ISIS and other terrorist groups have been able to grow their ranks – and their brands –

quickly and successfully. Recall the *60 Minutes* interview with Adirizak Warsame, the

Somali-American teenager from Minnesota, who said that he identified with members of

terrorist groups on YouTube, and explicitly stated that he felt that the now-deceased

Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki was "speaking to him" in videos that inspired him to

pursue a life of terror (CBS News, 2016). This is just one instance of radicalization

among thousands since the rise of the Islamic State where an individual became ensnared by the group's media content and ideology.  Videos like these appear to be the Islamic State's secret weapon.  In this study, the top three sources of media are, or have the potential to be, video-driven delivery platforms: Television, social media, and video websites.  The one caveat being social media because there are many different social media platforms offering a variety of communication methods.  However, many social media platforms offer video capabilities (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).  Thus, the role of identification through video appears to be strong.

It is possible that a lot of the respondents in this study feel marginalized living as Muslims in the United States.  Only 3% of the U.S. population is Muslim, making this group one of the smallest minority groups in the country (Pew, 2016).  The possibility of perceived marginalization has also been evidenced in previous research, where group membership was found to be a strong predictor for support for terrorism (Hogg & Abrams, 2006; Lyons-Padilla, Gelfand, Mirahmadi, Farooq & Egmond, 2015).  The in-group, out-group subject matter has been studied extensively across many disciplines and topics, and perhaps this study's population, like other studies (Levin, Henry, Pratto & Sindarius, 2003), felt as though they are members of the out-group as Muslims living in the United States.

Despite the negative sentiment about ISIS and its ideology, identification was still strong.  Future research could explore the relationship between identification, marginalization, and how these concepts relate to support for terrorism using various methodologies.  Specifically, conducting in-depth qualitative interviews could yield a deeper understanding of these concepts and pave the way for large-scale quantitative

research projects.  Additionally, conducting experiments using different stimuli (e.g., photographs) related to ISIS, one depicting Muslims in a peaceful manner – as much of ISIS' media content does – and one showcasing violence – which ISIS does in various contexts (e.g., video recorded beheadings).  An experiment like this could help separate those who are torn about supporting or joining the group, and those who are hell-bent on becoming a member.

5.4 *Empathy*

There was also a strong connection between exposure to ISIS media content and aroused empathy (H2a-c).  Empathy is one of the personal factors, an affective component, in the social cognitive theory model.  As social cognitive theory posits, empathy can occur vicariously, where a person experiences empathy arousal by observing another person in need (Bandura, 1986).  Bandura first demonstrated this in his seminal *Bobo Doll* study, where children adopted both aggressive and empathetic viewpoints upon witnessing the mistreatment of an inflatable doll both in-person (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961) and through film-mediated aggressive modeling (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1963). Similar studies have concluded that exposure to media is a strong antecedent to empathy arousal, particularly when some form of media depicts a person in need (Batson et al., 1981; 1996; Davis, 1983; Dovidio, 2006; McKeever, 2015).  Similar to these studies, this research looked at the downstream effects following self-reported exposure to ISIS media content, as well as how empathy influenced the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and intention to support the group.

Despite the overarching anti-ISIS sentiment reported by the participants in this research, the battery of items focused on empathy yielded statistically significant results.

This suggests that, no matter the topic, people are likely to feel some degree of empathy for other people in general. Batson and colleagues (1996) described this as an "other-oriented" response to the perceived welfare of another person. This notion has been demonstrated on topics involving other stigmatized groups such as drug addicts (Batson, Chang, Orr, Rowland, 2002) to empathy for those in pain or being tortured (Batson et al., 1981). Now, as reported in the results of this study, these findings appear to be a promising area of research in the study of terrorism and other stigmatized groups. Perhaps some people in this study felt like members of ISIS as victims versus villains. However, it is important to note that there was a high degree of dispositional empathy in this sample, which could mean that this particular sample possessed what is known as trait empathy. Thus, the participants could have been at maximum capacity for exhibiting greater levels of empathic concern (e.g., compassion fatigue). Still, the empathy items probing for aroused empathy yielded statistically significant results. Future research should employ experimental studies using stimuli in a controlled environment to measure empathy arousal, then deconstruct dispositional and aroused empathy in post-experimental analyses. Studies employing virtual reality are also a promising area for future research. For example, the New York Times now has a mobile application where people can wear virtual reality glasses and experience an immersive, 3-D environment.

Empathy can also have the inverse effect on peoples' behavior. That is, as Pearson and Dovidio (2008) discovered, cause people to favor punishment versus understanding and compassion – particularly in the in-group, out-group context. Pearson and Dovidio (2008) found that there were favorable outcomes for members of the in-

group members and punitive outcomes for out-group members who purportedly committed the same bad deed. The researchers referred to this phenomenon as "empathic punitiveness" which effectively serves as a buffer to the sensitivity of right and wrong. This is perhaps key to understanding some of the psychological processes or motives that members of ISIS and potential recruits experience when making decisions to carry out acts of terror. This position on empathy could also help explain why there was more aroused empathy in some respondents than others, and provides a path to further understanding the nuances involved in terrorism research.

Future studies should experimentally test this notion by changing the in-group (ISIS or other terrorist organization) to another terrorist-like group, and, for example, say that they are from the United States, therefore making them part of the out-group. Future studies should use experiments and survey research to test the in-group, out-group differences by manipulating the race, origin, religion and proximity of a real – or fake – group with similar objectives as ISIS.

Additionally, experiments could tap into another dimension of empathy known as "associative" empathy (Davis, 1994), which has also been said to parallel the concept of identification (Chory-Assad & Ciccihirillo, 2005). Cohen (2006) suggested that this conceptualization is as if audience members create messages internally, then respond to them as if they were going through specific events. Two ways to test experiential scenarios are through experiments and virtual reality.

5.5 *Attitudes*

Attitudes are one of the cognitive components in the social cognitive theory model and are a main driver of behavioral intention and actual behavior (Bandura, 1986).

In this study, attitudes toward terrorism yielded statistically significant results when using regression analyses, as well as mediating the effects of media exposure on behavioral intention. Specifically, results revealed that, while sentiment towards terrorism overall was generally negative, there were several findings related to attitudes toward terrorism that revealed intriguing results worth noting. For example, when asked if our society should do more to rehabilitate and educate convicted terrorists, participants were generally in favor of this. Additionally, there was support for the importance of improving conditions for convicted terrorists when compared to other social problems in the country (i.e., homelessness, drugs, education, etc.). This could potentially be attributed to the salience of the Guantanamo Bay prison where suspected terrorists have been detained since the start of the war in Afghanistan (The Guantanamo Docket, 2017 February 22, *The New York Times*). Past research has shown that attitudes are a strong predictor of behavioral intentions and actual helping behaviors (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961;1963; Batson et al., 1981; 1996; 2002; Dovidio, Gaertner & Johnson, 2010; McKeever, 2015).

Nonetheless, these findings provide support for the attitudinal component of social cognitive theory. Future research should examine non-US populations to see if attitudes are a stronger predictor of behavioral intention. Specifically, asking about attitudes towards terrorism in Western countries. Using a variety of countries could also yield varying degrees of attitudes towards terrorism. For example, samples from Iraq and Afghanistan may produce different results than countries that have not been involved in large-scale wars for many years.

*5.6 Behavioral Intention*

Generally, when asked a series of questions about the act of committing terrorism, respondents were opposed, but there were mixed results from the behavioral intention questions. For example, when asked about who's to blame for the troubles ISIS members have, the majority of people agreed that these troubles were self-inflicted, thereby not supporting what ISIS is doing. This could possibly be attributed to the large amount of media coverage of ISIS and terrorism in the United States and other Western countries. Or, as previously mentioned, the participants in this study could very well have assimilated to American society and values and have no interest in supporting any terrorist groups.

Still, respondents did report intentions to pay attention to ISIS media content going forward, as well as intentions to actively seek out information about ISIS through various media. This suggests that there is a keen interest in the media that ISIS disseminates and the news coverage of the group. For example, one respondent wrote, "I like to stay informed about what's going on with the group." This could be construed as curiosity or, on the extreme end, malicious intent. Additionally, and perhaps most intriguing about behavioral intention, was that a large percentage of respondents reported intention to share information about ISIS on the Internet. Regardless of the meaning behind this finding, people sharing information about the group are being, or have the potential to become, scrutinized by law enforcement in the U.S. and abroad. Currently, claiming that you are or intend on sharing information about ISIS could lead to serious legal trouble (e.g., Adirizak Warsame, *60* Minutes interview). More research is needed to examine what that means and why these intentions exist.

Finally, the proposed model posited in this research was supported. All hypotheses resulted in statistically significant results. Identification, empathy, and attitudes all mediated the effect of exposure to ISIS media content on behavioral intention. Additionally, when these variables were regressed on exposure to ISIS media content, results were statistically significant, though overall support for ISIS was unfavorable.

Building upon prior research involving identification, empathy, and attitudes, I had reason to believe that all hypotheses in this study would be supported. For example, prior studies examining identification have demonstrated that the identification is an antecedent to behavioral intention and, more specifically, operates as a mediator between media exposure and behavioral intention (Bandura, Ross & Ross, 1961; 1963; Lin, 2015; McKeever, 2015). Additionally, the study that informed this research found a strong link between identification and behavioral intention (Luchsinger & McKeever, 2016).

Similarly, studies using empathy as a mediator between media exposure and behavioral intention found that empathy is strongly associated with behavioral intention (Batson et al., 1981; Dovidio, 2010; McKeever, 2015), and that exposure to media involving stigmatized groups, as was the case in this study, evokes aroused empathy (Batson et al., 1996; McKeever, 2015). Attitudes have also been shown to be a precursor to behavioral intention (Batson et al., 2002; Fishbein & Azjen), and to operate mediationally between media exposure and behavioral intention (Lin, 2015; McKeever, 2015). As such, I had reason to believe that attitudes, a cognitive component in social cognitive theory, would be a significant predictor of behavioral intention and mediate the relationship between exposure to ISIS media content and behavioral intention.

*5.7 Post-hoc Results of Donald Trump Question*

During the course of data collection, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. He ran and won on a campaign promising a violent and swift defeat of "radical Islamic terrorism" with ISIS as his primary target. This, coupled with anti-Muslim rhetoric and other statements perceived to be xenophobic, created an uproar in Muslim circles. Trump instituted an executive order banning certain countries from traveling to the United States and, after a federal judge struck down the order for being unconstitutional, reinstituted another variation of the order. Needless to say, the political climate, both in the U.S. and abroad, has been divisive since President Trump took office.

This is worth noting because a question posed in this research asked, "Has the election of Donald Trump to the President of the United States influenced your responses in any way?" Roughly a third of respondents answered "yes" to this question and provided open-ended text responses. Respondents were mainly concerned by the hostile political climate created by instituting the previously mentioned travel ban involving several Muslim-majority countries. One participant wrote, "Trump is mixing up the terrorists (ISIS) with the innocent immigrants regardless of whether they're legal or illegal." Another wrote, "President Trump's unconstitutional executive order banning legal permanent residents with valid visas for only 6 primarily Muslim countries is despicable. I've had to go to airports to provide legal advice. I've had to protest. I've had to research and educate. What is my country becoming? Does he not realize I'm more likely to be killed by a white domestic terrorist than any foreigner??!"

Continued research should explore the political sentiment within a terrorism context. After all, terrorism is a politically motivated act intended to create fear in order

to achieve the aggressor's goal, whatever that may be (Crenshaw, 1981).  Additionally, some people who support ISIS could be fed up with bureaucracy, thus supporting groups like ISIS from a political standpoint.  Historically, many coup d'etats and political uprisings started by political disagreements, and waging terrorism has been a popular means to an end.  This is likely to continue as long as long as divisive politicians choose war over diplomacy.

## Study Limitations

This study has several limitations, some of which relate to the timing of collecting data for the study.  The presidential campaigns and the subsequent election of Donald J. Trump, one of the most divisive figures in modern politics, is likely the biggest limitation of this study.  Throughout the entire U.S. presidential campaign, two of then-Republican candidate Donald Trump's campaign touchstones were ending "radical Islamic terrorism" and deporting illegal immigrants.  His rhetoric was interpreted as anti-Muslim in some circles, stoking fear in those communities in the U.S. and abroad.  During the course of his campaign, Trump was vocal about his opposition to Syrian refugees and other political refugees entering the United States because of the risk of terrorism and, just weeks into his presidency, instituted an indefinite ban on Syria refugees.  He argued that allowing Muslim refugees into the country would result in greater risk of terrorist attacks. Some experts have called the ban a boon for Islamic State propaganda (Revkin and Mhidi, 2016).

Once Trump was elected president, fear among the Muslim community in the United States became a reality when he instituted a travel ban on seven predominantly

Muslim countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen).  Days later, a Federal judge blocked the ban, which was subsequently reinstated and excluded Iraq from the list of countries.  The president's order had an immediate impact on Muslims in the United States, from airport detentions to barring visa-carrying students from returning to the U.S. after visiting family abroad.  The ban is currently being debated in U.S. courts and bars new immigrants and all refugees from entering the United States.

All of this happened just as this study was set to go into the field, resulting in a two-week delay in an effort to buffer the potential feelings of resentment, hostility and fear as a result of the ban.  Trump's travel ban was a salient global issue, and there is no doubt in my mind that the results of this study were impacted by it.  Though this research did not specifically ask about the travel ban, there were many negative responses when participants were asked if the election of President Trump influenced their responses.  Over 30% of participants reported that the election of President Trump did influence their responses, and, as previously noted, some were flat out incensed by the travel ban.  However, despite the ban and the political climate, most (69.9%) participants reported that Trump's election did not influence their responses.  Some participants even offered support for Trump and his promise to end radical Islamic terrorism.  One respondent wrote, "He's made me hate ISIS even more than I do now."

There were other limitations to this study as well.  Using an online-based survey panel introduces a number of potential problems in quantitative research.  For starters, because of the method used to conduct this study, this is considered a non-probability sample.  Therefore, the generalizability of this study is partially inhibited by the use of an online panel.  Additionally, while Qualtrics guarantees a representative sample, and

because the company offers financial incentives for participation, there is still the chance of people slipping past the company's screening process.  Despite these shortcomings, the results in from the online survey offer useful information and directions for future research.

Another limitation is the use of a US-only sample.  The study that informed this dissertation (Luchsinger & McKeever, 2016) found much larger effect sizes and marked differences between two different countries (U.S. and India).  Additionally, Muslims living in the U.S. may have assimilated to life in the U.S. and adopted "American values" like freedom and democracy, perhaps resulting in tempered responses or just a general aversion to ISIS.  What's more, there was no way of knowing if participants in the study were Muslim immigrants or second or third generation American-Muslims.  For example, a person who was born in the United States as a second-generation Muslim may have a vastly different viewpoint of groups like the Islamic State versus someone who immigrated within the last few years (i.e., refugees and asylum seekers).

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study examined some of the many underlying mechanisms (identification, empathy, and attitudes) that the researcher believed underpin some of the appeal of ISIS and their relationship to media exposure and intention to support the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.  These constructs were explored using social cognitive theory as a theoretical framework.  Though there were many interesting and useful findings in this study, much more research is needed to understand why people join and support terrorist groups, the

underlying mechanisms that influence these decisions, and how these data can aid in combatting terrorism in the United States and the rest of the world.

Since this study surveyed people using an online instrument, more research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of both the potential targets (people) and the influence of the media content itself. The research should include studies using multiple methods and theories, as well as multidisciplinary collaboration, and technologies available to collect and analyze data. Content analyses will yield important information that would inform more research, for instance, and large amounts of data can be gathered using data scraping software and other web-based algorithms designed to fetch large amounts of data. For example, conducting a critical examination of the Islamic State's content: Online videos, apps, and digital magazine (*Dabiq*) using technology is a fruitful area to pursue. This could be done both qualitatively and quantitatively with the aid of content scraping tools. Content scraping tools can also be used to capture immense amounts of data from Twitter, Facebook, other social media, and mobile applications to rapidly examine data points and make inferences.

Another method worth exploring is an ethnography. Embedding with a group of at-risk people who are susceptible to ISIS' draw would provide a wealth of information into the lives of these targets. Qualitative data gathering transcends quantitative analyses, in some cases, in that this method gives researchers the ability to explore the nuances in the data and identify themes and typographies. This is particularly important in a sample such as this. While challenging, some journalists have been able to infiltrate these groups and spend significant time with potential recruits, as well as members of ISIS. One place in particular that researchers should explore is the Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota area

because of its large Somali population.  As evidenced by the *60 Minutes* interview

mentioned throughout this study, ISIS has succeeded in recruiting Somalis from this area

many times over, and law enforcement in this area have even created a special task force

to combat this growing problem.

Additionally, experimental research involving manipulations of video, photos and

text is needed to better understand the appeal of these media.  Experiments give

researchers the opportunity to control different groups under study, and the ability to

make comparisons between groups.  Additionally, researchers can determine the temporal

order of the different variables in a study through experimentation.  Knowing which

variable is exerting more influence and in what order could yield useful information.

Lastly, studying ISIS through a business lens could also be advantageous.  Using the

concepts of *Build*, *Measure*, *Learn*, as posited by Ries (2011), could lead to interesting

comparisons between the iterative processes of startup businesses and groups like ISIS.

### Conclusion

This study contributes to a nascent body of research involving terrorism in the

mass communication discipline by applying social cognitive theory as the theoretical

framework.  As far as the researcher knows, this study was the first to examine the effects

of exposure to ISIS media content and its influence on Muslims living in the United

States in the mass communication discipline.  This study extends social cognitive theory

by examining terrorism using the concepts of identification, empathy, and attitudes, and

how they relate to support for the Islamic State.  The contributions are twofold: First,

using SCT to study the phenomenon of ISIS and its media content effects; and second,

gathering data from the main source that the Islamic State is targeting in the West

(Muslims), a difficult to reach population that is key in understanding the appeals and

effects of ISIS' media.  The study of ISIS' target population was crucial to this study and

provides useful information to practitioners and scholars.  Exposure to ISIS media

content alone provides a roadmap for terrorism researchers to pursue in future studies

about the Islamic State.  Additionally, the fact that this particular sample did not support

ISIS or terrorism, but did demonstrate a keen interest in some of the behavioral measures,

indicates that there is significant interest in the Islamic State.  Results of this study

demonstrate that something about the ISIS media content is intriguing to people.  More

research is needed to explore the 'why' to this particular area.

The data gathered in this study support social cognitive theory.  The results

revealed a high degree of identification with members of ISIS, and moderate degrees of

empathy arousal and attitudes towards terrorism.  By and large, the data revealed that

respondents were against terrorism and viewed ISIS in a negative light.  However, results

revealed that respondents were in favor of paying attention to ISIS media and were nearly

split down the middle on intention to share information about ISIS.  Though the

hypotheses in this study were supported, the individual intention items are perhaps the

most useful and interesting findings.

This study also revealed useful information for practitioners and law enforcement

agencies involved in counter-terrorism operations.  Since identification yielded the

strongest results, these entities may want to examine how they can disrupt the "us versus

them" sentiment that Muslims living in the United States may harbor as members of the

perceived out-group.  Additionally, fostering a more inclusive community where

Muslims are better integrated into American society and culture may help mitigate some of the in-group, out-group sentiments. Muslim leaders in various communities could also benefit from these results. For example, speaking about these issues to parishioners on a regular basis would be a good starting point. Some of this is already going on in some of the more vulnerable areas in the United States. For example, a local Muslim leader in Minneapolis is using cartoons on a website called *The Average Mohamed* to disseminate anti-ISIS messages to the masses. The site also promotes messages to dispel stigma about Muslims and create an open dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Along with identification, empathy is another useful component that practitioners can focus on. For example, messages containing some of the atrocities committed by the Islamic State crafted in different ways could prove a successful tool in combatting recruitment and material support for the group. Similarly, educating Muslims in the United States at a young age about the repercussions of becoming involved with ISIS, or merely searching or sharing information about the group, could lead to death or a prison sentence.

Like empathy, implementing some of the same techniques and strategies as identification and empathy could sway peoples' attitudes about ISIS and prevent them from becoming ensnared in the group's ideology. However, since attitudes are a cognitive dimension, cognitive behavioral therapy is a logical choice to rehabilitate and educate those who have either fallen victim to ISIS' messages (e.g., Abirizak Warsame, *60 Minutes* interview), or for those that are more vulnerable to ISIS recruitment (e.g. Muslims in Minneapolis). Additionally, educating all students – Muslim or not – in schools is tactic that could aid in attitudinal responses to ISIS and terrorism more

broadly, as ISIS does not just target Muslims. The group also goes after the "disenfranchised" or those without a purpose. Since terrorism is so pervasive in modern society, educating students at a young age is of utmost importance. Terrorism is here to stay, so educating young people about the dangers and consequences of involvement in terrorism is paramount.

While the combination of the variables in this study (exposure to ISIS media content, identification, empathy, attitudes, and behavioral intention) yielded interesting and useful insights on the study of terrorism, they are far from providing a comprehensive understanding of why people support and join terrorist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Additionally, although mediation did occur between the variables in this study, sentiments toward ISIS were generally negative. The approach to a more comprehensive understanding of terrorism is multifaceted and deeply complex, and additional research is needed to aid in understanding this continuously evolving phenomenon.

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# APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter



**UNIVERSITY OF**
**SOUTH CAROLINA**

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH**
**APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW**

This is to certify that the research proposal: **Pro00062328**

Title: *What Makes ISIS so Alluring? An Examination of the Underlying Mechanisms that Influence Support for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria*

Submitted by:
Principal Investigator:     Alexander Luchsinger
                            Information and Communications
                            Journalism & Mass Communications
                            800 Sumter Street
                            Columbia, SC 29208

was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(**2**), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **1/9/2017.** No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
IRB Manager

University of South Carolina ● 1600 Hampton Street, Suite 414 ● Columbia, South Carolina 29208 ● 803-777-7095
An Equal Opportunity Institution

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## APPENDIX B: Survey Instrument

Hello, thank you for being interested in this research. Before you decide to participate in this study, please read the following instructions carefully. This survey will ask your opinions about the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and will take about 15 minutes to complete. Don't worry! Any personal information will not be asked in the research. This survey is completely anonymous, so please answer as honestly as possible. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you have any question about this research, please contact me, Alex, Graduate Student, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of South Carolina at: luchsing@email.sc.edu. This research has been approved by the University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Agreement I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the survey and I have received a copy of this description. By Clicking the button in the bottom right corner (>>), you agree to participate in the survey.

Q41 What religion or faith do you practice?
- ○ Protestant
- ○ Catholic
- ○ Mormon
- ○ Other Christian
- ○ Judaism
- ○ Islam
- ○ Buddhism
- ○ Hinduism
- ○ Unaffiliated
- ○ Other

Q42 We care about the quality of our survey data and hope to receive the most accurate measures of your opinions, so it is important to us that you thoughtfully provide your best answer to each question in the survey. Do you commit to providing your thoughtful and honest answers to the questions in this survey?
- ○ I will provide my best answers
- ○ I will not provide my best answers
- ○ I can't promise either way

Q7 Great, thank you for participating. We would like to begin by asking you to answer some statements about your feelings towards others. Please answer the following statements.

| | Strongly disagree | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me. | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems. | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them. | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal. | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them. | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I am often quite touched by things that I see happen. | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person. | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |

Q9 Now we'd like to ask you a little bit about Islamic State (ISIS) media content you've seen or heard.  On which of the following media have you seen/heard information about the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, aka ISIS, or ISIL? Please rate how often you've seen or heard information about ISIS/ISIL.  Please rate each of the following media.

| | Not at all | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very often |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Television | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Newspapers/magazines | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Radio | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Video websites (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo) | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat) | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Websites/blogs | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Mobile applications | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |

Q11 The next group of statements asks you to rate your opinions of ISIS.Please answer the following statements.

| | Strongly disagree | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| While viewing media content about ISIS, I feel as if I am part of the action. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| While viewing media content about ISIS, I forget myself and am fully absorbed. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I am able to understand the events in the media content in a manner similar to that in which the ISIS member understands them. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I think I have a good understanding of members of ISIS. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| I tend to understand the reasons why members of ISIS do what they do. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| While viewing ISIS media content, I can feel the emotions the | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| member(s) portray. | ○ | | | | | |
| When viewing ISIS media content, I feel like I can really get inside the member's head. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| At key moments, I feel I know exactly what the ISIS member is going through. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| While viewing the content, I want the ISIS member to succeed in achieving his or her goals. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| When the ISIS members succeed I feel joy, but when he or she fails, I am sad. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Q12 For this section, please rate how well the adjectives listed below describe your emotional responses to seeing members of ISIS.  For this set of items, please select your response using the following answer scale.

|  | Not at all | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Extremely |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sympathetic | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Moved | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Compassionate | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Tender | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Warm | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |
| Softhearted | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ | ❍ |

Q13 Great, you're moving right along.  The next statements and questions ask your opinions about terrorism. Please answer the following statements and questions.

| | Strongly disagree | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Members of ISIS have no one to blame but themselves for their troubles. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Anyone who commits an act of terrorism must be inhuman. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Anyone who commits terrorism should be punished to the full limit the law allows for their crime. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| No one would commit terrorism unless he or she had a moral or mental deficiency. | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Our society should do more to rehabilitate and educate convicted | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

| | terrorists? | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Q14 Please answer the following questions.

| | Not at all | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very much |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How much do you personally care about the plight of convicted terrorists serving life without parole? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Q15 Please answer the following question.

| | Not at all important | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Extremely important |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Compared with other social problems we face today (e.g., homelessness, education, drugs, diseases, environmental protection, energy conservation), how would you rate the importance of improving conditions for convicted terrorists? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Q16 Please answer the following question.

| | Very negative | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very positive |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In general, what are your feelings toward convicted terrorists? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Q17 Please answer the following statements and questions.

| | Not at all likely | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Very likely |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| How likely are you to share information about ISIS with others? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| If you see or hear information about ISIS, how likely are you to pay attention to it? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How likely are you to communicate about ISIS on the Internet? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| How likely are you to seek information about ISIS? | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Q22 What is your age?

Q23 What is your gender?
○ Male
○ Female

Q24 What is your race?

○ Hispanic or Latino
○ White
○ Black or African American
○ American Indian and Alaska Native
○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
○ Middle Eastern
○ North African
○ Some Other Race

Q25 What sect of Islam are you?
○ Sunni
○ Shia
○ Other (please specify) _____

Q26 What is your annual household income (U.S. Dollars)?
○ Below $20,000
○ $20,000-$39,999
○ $40,000-$59,999
○ $60,000-$79,999
○ $80,000-$99,999
○ $100,000 or above

Q27 What is the highest level of education you have completed?
○ High school or below
○ Some college
○ Associate degree
○ Bachelor's degree
○ Master's degree
○ Doctoral degree
○ Professional degree (JD, MD)

Q29 In a sentence or two, please describe what about ISIS media content appeals, or does not appeal to you.

Q31 Finally, has the election of Donald Trump to President of the United States influenced your responses to this survey in any way?
○ Yes
○ No

Q32 How so? (Please provide a short typed response)

Q35 That's it! Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Remember, your responses are anonymous. The researcher does not have any identifying information.