#Jihad

A Qualitative Study of Radical Jihadists’
Online Performance on Social Media

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Master thesis
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Europe has witnessed several terrorist attacks over the past years. Several attacks in other parts of the world as well prove that radical Islamic groups no longer impose just a local threat in the Middle East, but rather a global danger. A number of adolescents from Western countries have joined the jihadist movement, and much of the recruitment seems to happen within small groups, and through social interaction based on face-to-face contact. However, many of those who have travelled to the conflicted areas in the Middle East also seem to have been active online. Previous research suggests that online contact gives an opportunity to establish radicalized identities, and that social media provides tools to create online communities. Previous research also point to ideological and political motivational factors, as well as marginalization-, group- and social network theories, when seeking to explain recruitment and involvement within war conflicted areas.

In this thesis I use social media forums to study the online performance of radical jihadists. Data from three types of media are used: Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs. My material sums up based on citations and texts from 15 different Twitter accounts, 10 profiles on Ask.fm and 5 Tumblr blogs.

Twitter is a social media forum, or a so-called “micro-blogging service” where the online users can write short and personal messages on their profiles, and share their messages or information to other users. Ask.fm is also a social media forum, but the technological features are quite different. The forum is based on online users asking each other questions, and having their questions answered. The Tumblr forum, is based on “blogging” which means that the users create their own personal website, where they can share information and write texts, and post pictures. All of these forums provide the user with an ability to be anonymous, or choosing a nickname and portray a certain online identity.

My main finding is that the forums are used quite differently. Twitter provides followers with ideological Islamic propaganda. Rhetoric based on violence and threatening messages is used, sparkled with youthful language, irony and sarcasm. Ask.fm is used in a different manner. The forum enables an opportunity to ask questions and chat with a jihadist. It is typically used to attain practical information before waging for jihad in Syria. The jihadists reply in an
“understanding” way. Finally, the Tumblr blogs can be described as something “in between” Twitter and Ask.fm. These blogs provide both a scene for texts and pictures. Here as well, questions may be asked. Tumblr blogs seem to be visually more violent than the two other forums. There seems to be moderators and some censorship on Twitter and Ask.fm. However, this seems to be lacking on the Tumblr blogs.

Combined, these forums may create a larger ‘cyber community’. Here, identities, fellowship and trust might develop. Most users are young men, and these forums also provide opportunities for performing masculinities, and they give support for violence. Moreover, actors within this cyber community skilfully promise young men a unique brotherhood and membership in a tight Islamic community.

I conclude that the jihadists, or radical Islamic sympathizers, by means of these three forums provide their online followers a whole “package for jihad.” As well radical Islamic identities, practical guidance when waging jihad, and membership of a “true brotherhood” as foreign fighters might result from the complex cyber community analyzed in this thesis.
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# Table of Content

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1
   1.1 Historical Context .......................................................................................................................... 3
   1.2 Radicalization and Violent Extremism ......................................................................................... 5
   1.3 Definition of terms ....................................................................................................................... 6
   1.4 Previous Research ....................................................................................................................... 8
   1.5 Radicalization – The Role of Social Media .............................................................................. 11
      1.5.1 Online Propaganda and Inclusion ..................................................................................... 13
   1.6 Research Problem ....................................................................................................................... 15

2. Theoretical Backdrop .......................................................................................................................... 16
   2.1 Jihadism Online: Identity and Community .............................................................................. 16
      2.1.1 What is ‘social media’? ....................................................................................................... 19
   2.2 Online Activity and Performance ............................................................................................. 21
   2.3 The Use of Rhetorical Appeals .................................................................................................... 24
      2.3.1 Ethos, Pathos and Logos ..................................................................................................... 25
      2.3.2 Performing Masculinity ....................................................................................................... 26
      2.3.3 Portraying Violence and Polarization ............................................................................... 27
      2.3.4 Neutralization Techniques ............................................................................................... 29

3. Methodological Choices ...................................................................................................................... 32
   3.1 My Empirical Data and the Collection Process ........................................................................ 32
      3.1.1 Twitter ................................................................................................................................. 33
      3.1.2 Ask.fm ................................................................................................................................ 35
      3.1.3 Tumblr Blogs ....................................................................................................................... 35
      3.1.4 Who are my “Informants”? ............................................................................................... 36
      3.1.5 Pros and Cons of the Empirical Data ............................................................................... 38
   3.2 “Internet Communication and Qualitative Research” ............................................................... 39
      3.2.1 Content Analysis – Text in Context .................................................................................. 41
   3.3 Analytical Tools ............................................................................................................................. 42
      3.3.1 Coding based on Grounded Theory .................................................................................. 43
   3.4 Ethical Issues and Considerations .............................................................................................. 44
4. What Happens on Social Media? ........................................................................................................48
   4.1 “Welcome to Twitter!” .....................................................................................................................48
      4.1.1 The Use of Western Language, Slang and Poetry ...................................................................51
      4.1.2 Heroic Status and Martyrdom: “(…) There is no reason to fear death” ..................................54
   4.2 Ask.fm – Chatting with a Jihadist ..................................................................................................57
      4.2.1 In Search for Practical Information: “Is it Internet there?” .....................................................58
      4.2.2 Jihadi Answers .........................................................................................................................62
   4.3 Jihadi Bloggers on Tumblr ............................................................................................................65
      4.3.1 Anti-Democracy and Violence: “Jihad and the rifle alone” ..........................................................66

5. To Persuade With Online Rhetoric’s ....................................................................................................72
   5.1 Online Radical Islamic Propaganda ...............................................................................................73
      5.1.1 Neutralization of Violent Messages ............................................................................................78
   5.2 Performing Accepted Masculinity Within the “Cyber Brotherhood” .............................................81
      5.2.1 Online Community .....................................................................................................................85
   5.3 Violence and Polarization: A Matter of “Duty” .............................................................................89
   5.4 Martyrdom – A Heroic Perception to Dying ..................................................................................96

6. Main Findings .......................................................................................................................................101
   6.1 Indoctrination of Radical Islam Through Social Media ................................................................102
   6.2 Final Conclusions ...........................................................................................................................105

References ..............................................................................................................................................107
1. Introduction

The discussion revolving around radical Islamic milieus, jihadists and foreign fighters is perhaps more heated than ever. The possible threats and concerns related to a further sympathy and recruitment to these milieus are rapidly being reported on by academic researchers worldwide, and not to mention; the media. People are actively engaging in the debate related to the fear of future terrorism, and national newspapers are constantly printing news and chronicles related to these inflammatory topics. Explanations and discussions feeding on both fear and polarization, and even the fear for religion itself, have formed and heated the public debates. The different questions when discussing variables of Islamic extremism are many, and a specific focus within Europe have been placed on so-called “lone wolves” (Nesser 2016) and foreign fighters. Often discussing the aspects of how, where and why they’ve internalized their motivation and ideological persuasion, and further being convinced that violence will help them attain specific political- and ideological goals.

Research underlines how individuals work alone or in small jihadi groups to plan and perform violent and deadly terrorist attacks. Pointing to a close connection between the “who”, the “why” and the “how” of jihadi terrorism in Europe, referring to both violence, money, trends, weapons and modus operandi within terrorist cells (Nesser 2016:53).

Throughout the year of research and writing for this thesis, the world has witnessed several brutal terrorist attacks. Leaving both law enforcement and politicians worldwide with several challenges, perhaps also leaving citizens with an extended fear within everyday life. What the attacks on European soil seem to have in common, is that the terrorists have attacked social and cultural arenas, and performed attacks on open and democratic sceneries. Behind the public discussion and reporting on Islamic radicalization, there are a waste of different variables and reasons discussed by researchers, elaborating on reasons for recruitment to these violent and extreme milieus (Nesser 2013; 2016, Hegghammer 2014, Bjørgo 2011, Stenersen 2012). The goal of this thesis is to discuss this recruitment and internalization of radical ideologies by diving into - and highlighting - the virtual world we are all co-living in. Aiming to illustrate and discuss how the Internet is used as a tool for further radicalization, by focusing specifically on a selected number of social media forums.
**Jihadism online**

The Norwegian press have, during the last year, reported rapidly on Norwegian foreign fighters who have waged for jihad, and travelled to Syria (VG 2014; 2015, Dagbladet 2015). The risk of a broader audience of Norwegian youths’ waging for these radical Islamic groups, and some even waging for jihad in Syria, alongside a specific focus on the Internet’s role in the radicalization- and recruitment processes were highlighted in a report presented by The Norwegian Police Security Service (PST 2015). The need for further research and elaboration on possible factors for this kind of recruitment, and recruitment to violent subcultures in general, is important in order to slow down such tendencies. The tendencies of an increase in recruited foreign fighters are not specifically correlated to Norway or Norwegian citizens, and other countries in Europe have reportedly a much higher number of waged foreign fighters (Bergen, Schuster, & Sterman 2015:3). The same researches report (2015:10) a registered number of 80 foreign fighters travelling from Norway, whilst the number for France is 1,450 waged foreign fighters. The number from Germany and the Netherlands are also high; reportedly being 720 and 180 waged foreign fighters (2015). The number of increasing foreign fighters, especially during 2013-2014 (PST 2014) is interesting, when discussing the possibility of further radicalization through the Internet and social media. Seeing that these numbers can indicate a recruitment and internalization of a violent ideology that happens across cultural and political borders (Nesser 2013), making it important to discuss the abilities to expand across borders due to technological tools, and further investigate how social media forums might inflict on individuals and enable a formation of communities online.

In the report provided by New America (Bergen et.al. 2015:3), the jihadists are seemingly described as being very active online, and the authors state that almost a third of the registered foreign fighters had been or were active within online jihadist circles, or had been radicalized via online interaction. Drawing upon these evaluations and assumptions about online interaction, I find it inevitable; in order to further understand and elaborate on the complexity of global recruitment for violent radical Islamic milieus, not to place a specific focus on the role of social media and the Internet in general in today’s society. In order to understand how social bonds can be formed, and enhanced via interactive contact, I’ve found it especially fruitful to dive into the rhetorical aspects and the traditional power that lies in some individuals’ charismatic and behavioral characteristics on social media forums. Aiming to illustrate and discuss the behavioral patterns of jihadists online one might enable an important
highlighting of specific features within the recruitment process. Discussing the ability to internalize radical and violent ideologies through online and virtual interaction.

This thesis focuses on how three social media forums are used differently, and how the Internet might provide an opportunity to create a self-selected cyber identity. In addition, the analysis of this thesis aims to shed a light on how the different social media platforms can create an illusion of social bonds, and affiliation across borders, religion, and culture – and discuss how these milieus takes use of traditional rhetorical and convincing measures when proclaiming their identity and sharing ideological propaganda online (Nilsen 2014, Eide 2006). Researching how jihadists perform and portray their identity online have been of specific interest for this thesis, and further aiming to discuss whether the online sphere can be viewed as a social arena that can possibly enable internalization of violent propaganda and push the process of Islamic radicalization and recruitment.

1.1 Historical Context

The term and concept of “foreign fighters” (Hegghammer 2014) have been rapidly mentioned and discussed publically during the last couple of years, initially expanding when the reporting on ethnic Norwegians who had waged for jihad in Syria first started in 2013-2014 (VG 2014). The media have reported rapidly about “The Islamic State,” which have claimed responsibility for several of the brutal terrorist attacks during the last years. In order to know, and understand parts of the ideology that lie behind the further expansion and recruitment to these extreme milieus, it’s key to elaborate on some of the social context and the prior history of the conflict within the Middle East. These historically ongoing conflicting sceneries have undoubtedly colored the expansion of radical Islamic milieus, much based on the inflamed situation going on within the Syrian border.

When the conflict in Syria escalated in the late 2013 and during the beginning of 2014, the violence expanded both in width and intensity. The Norwegian Police Security Service (2014) reported that the original disagreement between the Assad regime and the opposition, have
evolved and escalated in a way that has forced violent contrary actions to happen within this opposition. The creation of the two conflicted violent organizations within the opposition: The Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusrah have forged an extensive increase in measured violence within the conflicted areas of Syria. Both of these radical Islamic groups feed on the global jihadists ideology of al-Qaida, and the group Jabhat al-Nusrah is known for being the representation for Syria (PST 2014). Even though The Islamic State might have received most attention within the Western media during the last months and years it’s important to keep in mind the existence of the various amount of radical Islamic groups, and perhaps especially the mentioned two, who seemingly supports and fight different political battles.

The historical and contextual background of this thesis paints a dark picture, both within the Syrian border and through performed worldwide terrorism. In Europe we have witnessed several terrorist attacks over the last years, and months. The attacks that have been claimed responsibility for by the violent extremist group The Islamic State, proves that the members of these terrorist organizations are both an international and global threat.

One of the first attacks that struck Europe and got massive media attention worldwide, was the attack on the French satire magazine Charlie Hebdo on January 7th in 2015. This was the first big attack, performed by the jihadists representing IS’ beliefs, on Western soil. About a month later, on February 14-15th 2015, the attackers struck in Denmark. The attack happened in the main capital of Denmark, where a man opened fire against an art exhibit, which killed one person and injured three police officers. Later that night, one man was killed outside a synagogue in Copenhagen. Further, we have witnessed attacks in Garland, Texas (also, on an art exhibit, due to presentation of images of the prophet Muhammad), on a Shia Muslim mosque in Saudi-Arabia, and another mosque in Dammam. On June 26th of 2015, the world also had to witness three attacks on the same day. The IS struck in Lyon, Kuwait, and Tunisia. The attackers killed one person in Lyon, and injured 11 people. In Kuwait 27 people was killed, and several hundred people injured. The attack in Tunisia killed 38 people, most of them Western tourists.

One of the biggest terrorist attacks, at this date, happened in Paris on November 13th 2015. The attacks happened on six different areas within the French capital: Stade de France, Bataclan, Rue Bichat, Place de la republique, Rue de Charonne and Boulevard Voltaire. A
total of 130 people was killed, and 368 were injured.

1.2 Radicalization and Violent Extremism

In order to understand the concept of radicalization and extremism better, it might be worth mentioning other parts of the ideological extremist scale. Even though the main focus of this thesis revolves around the ideology of radical Islamic extremists, it’s relevant to mention and shortly elaborate on the ideological and political points and mindset that generally forms the extreme right wing milieus, which in many ways might be understood and perceived as a contrast to the radical Islamic worldviews. The Extreme right wing is a collective term, which embraces several political views outside the traditional rightwing on the political left-right axis. The meaning behind the term of being a right wing extremist have varied over time, but for this thesis, I´m referring to people or groups, which have an understanding that certain (their) groups, human races, or certain religions have a higher (more meaningful) place in society. A key word when discussing right wing extremism relates to nationalism, and the extreme willingness to use violence or terrorism to achieve political goals (Bjørgo 2012). The rightwing extremists are pro segregation, and are traditionally utterly conservative, and positive to a monocultural society. When discussing this extremist group, the connotations often relates to racism, xenophobia, or a hostile attitude towards people or groups who viewed as different based on religion, ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation (Bjørgo 2012). Both the extreme right wing and the radical Islamic extremists are seemingly feeding on each other’s different worldviews, proclaiming xenophobia from different sides. They are political opposites, and their differences are taking great part in reinforcing and proclaiming the importance of their political grounds. The ways, in which, these groups feed on each other’s opposite worldviews, has turned out to be quite important for the further analysis of this thesis.

Here, the focus will be placed on the Islamic extremist milieu. In the next underlined chapter definitions and elaborations of other relevant terms used throughout this thesis, specifically focusing on important terms of radicalization and within radical Islamic ideology will follow.
1.3 Definition of terms

The term ‘radicalization’ can be defined as a process, which can happen within any kind of ideology or political view. A common definition of the term provided by the Norwegian Government (2014), states that radicalization is a process where a person, over time, becomes more tolerant and accepting to the view of using violence to achieve political goals. The radicalization process can eventually cause someone to become an extremist, but; that is not to say that everyone will become a violent extremist. It’s important to underline that there are big differences related to having radical opinions and understandings, and being radical – and it’s important to underline that the propensity to use violence is a central aspect of the radical extremist ideologies (Regjeringen.no 2014). It’s quite difficult to present a complete elaboration of the features that seemingly shape someone who’s undergoing a radicalization process. However, the social factors are very important, central elements of group dynamics, withdrawal from the general society, and charismatic leading figures are mentioned as profound and inflicting variables (Regjeringen.no 2014).

When talking about extremism, the definition relates to the individual or groups’ ability and propensity to use violence in order to achieve their ultimate important goals, and further what separates the violent radicals from other political groups (Regjeringen.no, 2014). For this thesis, the main focus is placed on the violent radical Islamic groups, also known as “jihadists.”

Jihadists and “Jihadism” – Radical Islam

The radical Islamic extremists can generally be described and explained as groups or ideological sympathizers who are fighting against the moderate rulers within Muslim countries, and their out spring might also be comprehended as a response to the modern secularism in Western countries. “Consequently, the term ‘jihadi’ covers every follower of the ‘global jihadism movement’, from its leaders to its grassroots supporters” (Rogan 2006). Stating further that the jihadi movement and acting irrespective of natural and territorial boundaries escalated in the mid-1990s, under leadership of Osama bin Laden (Rogan 2006). The general goal of the radical Islamic sympathizers and extremists is a society build on Sharia law, and further a reinforcement of the caliphate (Nesser 2011). For this thesis the use
of the term “jihadist” and “jihadism” will be in use, underlining the same ideological perspectives as radical Islamists: “Just like other militant ideologies, jihadism deals with three main questions: why do we fight, who are the legitimate and most important enemies to be defeated, and how can they be defeated?” (2011:174).

“Foreign Fighters”
The concept of fighting for the radical Islamic ideology is penetrating when reading and studying the culture within jihadist milieus. As mentioned by Nesser (2011; 2016) the radical Islamic ideology are formed and shaped by their goals towards defeating their enemies, in order to establish their ideology worldwide. The romantic view to battling as a jihadist have, as mentioned, led its way to Europe and other parts of the world being that many men and women have waged for jihad in war-conflicted areas, and especially Syria. The term of a “foreign fighter” has been publically known through the last couple of years, and the concept has also made its impact on the analytical approach to the empirical data for this thesis. The term “foreign fighter” is known as someone who, on the basis of personal motivations, travels to a foreign country in order to fight in an armed conflict, without payment (Hegghammer 2014:278, Lia & Nesser 2014:400). Originally, the term isn’t related to radical Islamic milieus in particular; however for Norway, the term and concept received a new form of relevance when a large amount of Norwegians left Norway to fight within the war conflicted areas of Syria, especially during the years of 2013-2014 (Hegghammer 2014).

The concept of foreign fighting and radical ideological mindsets is not new, and neither is it specifically related to Muslims, or Islam. In all historical conflicts during the last decades, and across all parts of the world, there have been reported voluntaries in armed conflicts and wars (Hegghammer 2014). Hegghammer (2014) discusses the concept of foreign fighters by referring to the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s. Where over 30 000 foreigners fought for, and under The International Brigades, and thousands for the Franquists. The same tendencies also occurred in relations to the war in Palestine in 1948, and the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, where there were thousands of battling foreign fighters (2014:278).

The extreme mindsets are neither specific for radical Islam, and we have witnessed many tragic outcomes provided by violent extremism in general, from both the extreme right- and leftwing, as radical Islamists. What seems to color the generality of extreme milieus is their
specific aim for polarization, the need to underline thoughts about an “us” versus “them.” The World War 2 and the solo terrorist attacks in Norway on July 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2011 are both examples of how extremists wanted to diminish what they viewed as threats to their ideological ideals and standards.

1.4 Previous Research

There have been done a great amount of research on radicalization, possible factors behind the recruitment to these marginalized groups, and forces that might lie behind such ideological beliefs have been discussed (Hegghammer 2011; 2013; 2014, Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008, Nesser 2011, Sageman 2004). The Danish researcher Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen have aimed to shed a light on the recruitment process based on theories about social movement, where she points to Mertons theory of “strain”, and theories of labeling (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008). Some of the sociological explanations are based on relative deprivation theory (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010), and some researchers base their explanations on group- and social network theories (Nesser 2011, Sageman 2004).

Academic researchers (Lia & Nesser 2014) elaborate on how the motivations for becoming a foreign fighter are complex and various. For some, it might relate to idealism and solidarity, whilst for others, it’s about ideology and a moral and/or religious duty. Further, they elaborate on how some might be drawn towards the area of conflict in the search for excitement, companionship, or recognition. The powers within group processes, whether it’s about peer pressure or loyalty, are also assumed to inflict on the further recruitment (Lia & Nesser 2014:400). Further arguments relates to having an understanding of how the Islamic foreign fighters feel some sort of duty to help “their Muslim brothers” militarily within the conflicted areas (Hegghammer 2014). Although waging for jihad in foreign countries was quite rare before the 1980s (Hegghammer 2010) the phenomenon has risen tremendously since the war in Afghanistan in the 80s (Hegghammer 2014) perhaps correlated to the more rapid reporting through television, radio and the Internet. Enabling opportunities to see reports from the war
conflicted areas, and easily being able to witness the torture and injustice.

As mentioned, the sympathizers of the radical Islamic milieus, or more specifically the foreign fighters that have waged for jihad in Syria during the last couple of years, have increased rapidly (PST 2014). And two main reasons (Hegghammer 2014) have been presented when discussing the high number of foreign fighters being recruited to fight in (or with) different collations in Syria. The first reason mentioned revolves around the high publicity, from the conflict in Syria. The damages and the suffering amongst the Syrian population reported rapidly through digital cameras and social media, which have made the humanitarian consequences extra noticeable for everyone to see (Hegghammer 2014:280). The second main reason relates to accessibility. Mentioning two reasons for the easy access to the war conflicted Syria; the first mentioned reason, relates to political aspects. Many relevant states and countries are encouraging the rebellion, making it politically difficult to pin down the business of foreign fighters. Secondly, the rebellions are controlling Northern territories, (e.g. the borders towards Turkey) which make the border less guarded from the Syrian side, not preventing the foreign fighters to enter the country (Hegghammer 2014:281).

Both factors of high publicity and accessibility, pointed out by Hegghammer (2014), are suitable to the characteristics related to the modern society (Giddens 1990) and they are both relevant when further discussing online jihadism. When a crisis or tragedy happens today, the news is out and global in no time. The information spreads within seconds, and the global world have become quite small, in that sense. The news spreading, and the reporting from war conflicted areas, might create a stronger personal relation – between the ones who suffers, and the one´s receiving the information through television or social medias. These factors are also of great impact, when it comes down to enhancement in the process of actively recruiting more jihadists and foreign fighters, globally.

When seeking to explain tactics and online activity to enhance recruitment within radical milieus, the term of “ideological activists” is especially relevant, drawing upon the elaboration of Tore Bjørgo (2011), referring to ideological activists, and their power within the recruitment process to violent extremists’ milieus:
One particular type of radicalization process characterizes ideological activists who play leading roles in terrorist cells. They are often charismatic persons motivated by idealism and a strong sense of justice, responding to the suffering of others—be it fellow Muslims or other objects of identification, globally or locally. Jihadism or other varieties of political violence are embraced through an intellectual process where the need to take action gradually becomes a political or religious duty. These altruistic persons are often resourceful, educated, well integrated and in some cases even considered as role models within their communities (Bjørgo 2011:280).

These aspects have turned out to be especially relevant when analyzing the empirical data for this thesis, the terms of charismatic figures, and an ideological agenda are seemingly noticed as being of quite an importance. Another theoretical aspect that’s of relevance for the discussion of my empirical data is the terms of “drifters and followers” (Bjørgo 2011). Seeing how “for some youths, the experience of belonging to a group or being accepted by peers or leaders is a primary value, sometimes overruling most other considerations” (Bjørgo 2011:281). Further addressing how being part of a militant group might enable a feeling of powerful identity, and seeing how a search and need for friends, camaraderie and brotherhood might be fulfilled when joining radical Islamic milieus. Bjørgo (2011:282) further elaborates on how these “drifters and followers” are seemingly willing to perform and carry out acts of violence, “in order to prove themselves in the eyes of others in the group” he especially underlines how converts who are seemingly “odd individuals who are somewhat out of place” (Bjørgo 2011:282) feel a strong need to prove themselves as being worthy of the group. When further pointing to both ideological and political, as well as a need for belonging and youthful rebellion as variables for underlying motivation, it’s evidently necessary to bring these theoretical perspectives on to the following analysis (Bjørgo 2011).

As mentioned earlier, there have been severe amounts of terrorist attacks performed by radical extremists, over the last years, and months. There have been reports coming from The Norwegian Police Security Service (2015) that are pointing towards a high potential risk of the expanding radical milieus in Norway, both within the rightwing extremism groups, and the radical Islamic jihadists. As one can see from some of the presented theoretical contributions, the motivation for waging for these types of radical milieus is various, and there exists a broad individual variation for sympathizing with radical extremists, and further
travelling to war conflicted areas (Lia & Nesser 2014, Bjørgo 2011, Hegghammer 2011; 2013; 2014, Dalgaard-Nielsen 2008, Nesser 2006, Sageman 2004). The violent and drastic pictures and footage seen on television might motivate someone to wage for humanitarian efforts. Some might get attracted to war-conflicted areas and become influenced in search for excitement, and for others; the motivation of war experience in itself might be enough to become intrigued. Additionally, the motivation might also lie in the ‘heroic’ status they assume their contributions in Syria will attain them, perhaps also seeing it as a rebellion towards society. Further, explanatory reasoning has also pointed towards youths making a rebellion towards a more moderate and traditional parental generation (PST 2014).

1.5 Radicalization – The Role of Social Media

Various historical and individual personal factors have taken part in establishing the radical Islamic milieus. However, one of the aspects that seem to be special for the extremists living within the 21st century and the foreign fighters who have waged for jihad in Syria, is in fact the time they are living in, and what technological and modern resources they have right before them, at all time. It’s important to underline that both historical and contextual reason exist for the expansion of Islamic radicalization, and when discussing recruitment and extended sympathy today, a focus on our technological world is important. A focus on specific radical Islamic group has not been of primary interest for this thesis, and even though the Islamic State has received waste public attention, I will not be focusing or dividing my empirical data connecting it to a specific group. Instead, the empirical data of this thesis seeks to illustrate jihadist´s online behavior in general. It’s perhaps inevitable to not mention the IS, based on the fact that their constantly being referred to within the media, but the main focus is still; seeing how radical Islamic milieus performs their identity, and portray their ideology online.

In today’s society the social media, and the Internet have become very important tools, both related to our school- and work preferences, as well as in our personal lives (Aalen 2015). We use social media to make our lives more effective, and to provide us with the ability to reach
out globally. Earlier it was necessary to achieve physical contact in order to talk to one another, but now everything, and everyone have become available (at all time) through a computer or a smart phone. Related to radicalization, these tools have helped to diminish the practical barriers of having to achieve face-to-face contact (Nesser, P., Lia, B., Stenersen, A., & Ravndal, J.A. & Sunde I.M 2013:49). The ongoing discussion relating to foreign fighters, can been shaped by two main points referring to how both accessibility and publicity are equally important measures, when seeking to elaborate on why the conflict in Syria have affected people globally (Hegghammer 2014:280). When discussing recruitment of foreign fighters, and the radical ideological sympathizers worldwide, it’s necessary to elaborate further on how social media provides young, searching people with an all-time available tool for information and interaction. In order to search for possible answers for the tragedies that they are witnessing through their television and smart phones, the Internet and more specifically the social media channels become an important tool to look for, and consume answers.

When referring to radicalization, violent extremism and the ongoing questioning as to what seems to provide radical Islamic milieus with more sympathizers, this research project should be seen as a supplement to the discussion of a complicated and comprehensive global issue to fight further radicalization, extremism, and in final extent; terrorism. The main aim of this thesis, have been to illustrate how social media forums serve as interactive arenas that might create and enable a feeling of online inclusion. Assuming that this form of online inclusion can in some cases, be enough to assert oneself with a violent ideology (Stenersen 2008).

The primary focus of this thesis will seek to present and elaborate on the use of social media forums within radical Islamic milieus, and more specifically aiming to discuss a multiple jihadist’s online performance. Further aiming to elaborate on how social media forums are used to enhance both recruitment and global sympathy. My empirical material was collected throughout the end of 2015, and within the first months of 2016, and the focus of the collected data refers primarily to the conflicts within the Syrian border. The data was collected through three different social media forums: Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs. The collected empirical data, which is presented more thoroughly in chapter four, seeks to illustrate how the jihadists “perform” within each forum, and discuss how the online usage enables easy
accessible information for everyone to find, about the radical Islamic ideology. Additionally, discussing how this availability might form a so-called “cyber community” and establish newfound identities within the radical Islamic ideology.

1.5.1 Online Propaganda and Inclusion

As previously mentioned, and earlier research suggests (Nesser 2004, Sunde 2013, Hegghammer 2013, 2014) there have been reported various different reasons for waging for jihad, and travelling to war conflicted areas to fight as a foreign fighter. The war in Syria has attracted a historically high number of foreign fighters, and during the last four years it’s estimated that over 10 000 Sunni Muslim foreign fighters from approximately 80 countries have been recruited to the conflicted area (Hegghammer 2014:280). From some of the returning Western foreign fighters, there have been mentioned several different radical groups, and various explanations related to providing aid for the Syrian population (Hegghammer 2014). However, the focus for this thesis is not placed on foreign fighters in particular, as it’s more an illustration, elaboration and discussion of the online jihadist’s online activity when seeking to attract more recruits and sympathizers. The focus of this thesis relies more specifically on the jihadist’s performance of identity online, and the rhetorical aspects when proclaiming jihadism and radical Islamic propaganda.

Previous research suggests that online activity have provided jihadists and radical sympathizers with an opportunity to perform within online forums, describing the Internet as both “a library” for religious and ideological literature, as well as an interactive arena to gain practical knowledge for jihad (Stenersen 2012, Weimann 2004;2006). Further, the online forums enable an opportunity for jihadists to portray their chosen cyber identity. Many of the recruiters, the converts, and the men and women who have travelled to the conflicted areas in Syria are reportedly being very active online and New America states that:” (...) almost a third of the foreign fighters were reported to have been active in online jihadist circles or to have radicalized via interaction online” (2015:7).

However, it’s difficult to state complete explanations for radicalization and extreme mindsets, and further - that the Internet in itself is reason for people becoming radicalized. A lot of the
previous research might imply that radical implications and ideological outings are open and easy to trace online, but it doesn’t say anything about the changing over time, and whether someone have become more radicalized (Sunde et.al. 2013). This research can neither prove an increased radicalization for individuals, nor does it enable an opportunity to study the jihadists’ evolvement over time. This thesis simply seeks to illustrate and discuss the terms of online performance of jihadists, and further; seeking to be viewed as a project that enables a study on ideological propaganda and interactive aspects that might portray camaraderie and inclusion within a sub cultural milieu. There exists a broad consensus between academic researchers that social media and the Internet are both important tools in regards to the radicalization process, and to further recruitment (Sunde et.al. 2013). When using the Internet and social media as their tool to get in contact, and achieve an increased possibility for people to reach out, the radical milieus make themselves more approachable, despite cultural, religious, and demographic boundaries
1.6 Research Problem

The following research question(s) form the basis of this thesis:

- How do jihadists portray a radical Islamic identity on the social media forums Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs? Can the performances and activity within these online forums enable a sense of ‘cyber community’?

Following, some underlined probing questions:

- How are these types of social media forums used by jihadists and ideological sympathizers?
- What type of language, symbols and key words are penetrating when going through some of the activity within these online forums?
- What types of rhetorical tools of convincing are used?
- And further; can the use of these social media forums inflict and play parts in the further recruitment to radical Islamic milieus?

The main focus is placed on jihadist´s online performance and activity, discussing how their online behavior can affect recipients’ comprehension of them, viewing how it might result in further recruitment and internalization of a violent ideology. When aiming to address and discuss the research question(s), the process leading up to this thesis have been based on collecting hands on empirical data from online social media forums. The collection of material, have enabled an opportunity to shed a light on the online activity that are seemingly happening on some of the most common and well-known and used forums.
2. Theoretical Backdrop

For this chapter an elaboration of the theoretical perspective will follow. The theoretical contributions will color the analysis and the final discussion for this thesis. Focusing specifically on how online identities and communities can be formed and enhanced through interactive communication.

2.1 Jihadism Online: Identity and Community

The Internet is known as an important arena for the global jihadist movement today. Several websites and forums are used in different ways, varying in nature and running independently from one another. The online forums fulfill different objectives, and a primary focus is often placed on communication (Rogan 2006:8).

Several prominent researchers have elaborated on the power of the Internet, focusing on the abilities to form social networks and communities online (Sageman 2004, Rogan 2006, Weimann 2006). Sageman (2004) argues that global jihad has been made possible due to the revolution of technology in the 1990s. These types of connections have enabled contact across nations, evidently seeking to fight for the global Salafi jihad, fighting the “far enemy” instead of the “near enemy” (2004:158). Earlier research (Toboul 2005) further claims that two main objectives color the participants of the global online jihadism: sharing information and building communities online. These objectives are important theoretical terms when discussing and analyzing the empirical data for this thesis.

Earlier research also points out that the online activity seem to be shaped by typical Western models, mainly build up by Muslim immigrants, converts or students living in the West: “Their virtual ‘ummah’ thus represents a search for identity rather than a desire to act” (Rogan 2006:11). The online forums are used to share a simplification of religious content, ideological propaganda and practical knowledge about jihad, all contributing to an online mobilization of jihad.
Many previous researches on radicalization have referred to personal interaction as the first and foremost factor to push the radicalization process, explaining that the concept of radicalization considered a group process (Nesser 2013). Still, there are researchers that point to social media as a substitute for physical contact in general, and as mentioned; as an important tool for global jihad (Sageman 2004, Toboul 2005 Rogan 2006). The social information processing theory also points in this direction, and researcher Aalen (2015) states the following: “It’s fully possible to achieve close, and personal relations through interactive communication – it just takes a bit more time.” (2015:78). On the Norwegian National Conference Against Radicalization and Political Violence earlier this fall, this was one of the main issues, discussing how the propaganda network within The Islamic State work twenty-four seven, with interactive online contact. They would use hundreds of hours talking to one single person, and provide the person on the other end, with a “listening ear”. It might be difficult to understand how these measures can be successful, and further convince young men and women within welfare states and countries with valuable and democratic standards, to wage for jihad. However, statistics prove (Bergen et.al. 2015) that the recruiters from the radical Islamic milieus obviously manage to provide them with something they were in search for. But how does it happen? And how do the recruiters know which strings to play?

The networks, and the social relations (bonding) that occur within a sub cultural group is perhaps the most important aspect, in order for the milieu to expand and recruit new members, as the radicalization process is closely tied up to the individual’s feeling of community and belonging (Sunde et.al. 2013). When seeking to address the aspects of further recruitment through social media forums, it’s been stated that the social connections online could enable such bonding even though discussions and disagreements might occur (Lia & Nesser 2013). It’s further stated that the social connections seem to have an identity building effect, whereas active participation is known to be crucial (Sunde et.al. 2013:49). Internet and social media are reportedly extremely important tools for this type of further recruitment to violent radical groups, and the tools are of great relevance when discussing spreading of ideological, political and radical propaganda (Sunde et.al. 2013:47).

Earlier research has focused specifically on the reasons behind terrorist plotting, studying patterns and various components that work together in the context of planning plots (Nesser
2016). He elaborates on the existence of “core members of plots” defining them as: “the entrepreneur”, “the protégé”, “the misfit” and “the drifter” (2016:12). These roles are viewed as important; fulfilling different aspects within the terrorist cells. For this thesis, the role of “entrepreneurs” is viewed as most important in relations to further online recruitment. Nesser explains how the entrepreneurs can be described as religious-political activists who have a strong sense of justice. Further describing how they often seek out mosques and draws upon inspiration from militant ideologues: “They stage activities that promote group cohesion, take on a leading role in political and ideological discussions and refer to group members to acknowledged jihadi preachers and ideologues for further guidance” (2016:13). Even though the typology that characterizes “the entrepreneur” is viewed as important, the characteristics of “misfits” and “drifters” are also viewed as extremely relevant when discussing online radicalization. These typologies refer to individuals who are mainly driven by social factors. The misfits are driven by personal grievances, whereas the drifters tend to be motivated by social ties to “someone on the inside” (2016:17). Pointing towards radicalization as a social process – underlining how network and social bonds are important. Even though these terms and definitions are used to describe terrorist plotting, the terms are relevant when discussing how different identities and personal features can form the radical milieu, and the further expansion.

When addressing and discussing the expansion of radical Islamic groups, the activity on online social media forums has provided this thesis with empirical data, which have enabled a study on language and rhetorical tools of convincement. The material has enabled a discussion on how online communities are established and newfound cyber identities are created and performed. Based on this fact, one of the main theoretical bases of this thesis relies on social media, its culture, and its following consequences on our lifestyles, identity, and community. The newfound ability to expand networks across land- and cultural borders makes the Internet and social media forums especially important when trying to understand the expansion of radical milieus. The accessibility to the war conflicted areas within Syria have been discussed by Hegghammer (2014), discussing the possible reasons for an increase of foreign fighters waging for jihad. He underlines how technological features have enabled a different insight to war conflicted areas, enabling new ways to receive information and to show sympathy and support. Other researchers on social media, have further stated that the online tools play big parts on the shaping of our identities: “Social media is increasingly
infiltrating everyday media practices. As we witness the rise of smart phones that allow users to move ambiently between social media like Facebook and Twitter at all times of the day, how we define social networks sites (SNSs) is changing. As a series of cultural practices and artifacts that are both commercial and cultural, SNSs are becoming an integral part of identity, social and political management” (Hinton & Hjorth 2013:32). Social media have become an integral part of people’s identity, and combined all of these technological features are contributing to an “easy” access to a war conflicted area, and not to mention; the people who live within these areas.

The social media channels are not only used for private matters, they’re used by dozens of public figures for a various different reasons: opinion sharing, for advertisement, for political campaigns and to distribute blame or praise, to mention some (Aalen 2015, Dean 2010). These types of mentioned reasons are just as relevant for the upcoming analysis on the empirical data. The jihadist milieus online are knowingly aware of the power within communication, and are eager to spread their ideological propaganda and to build social networks online (Rogan 2006, Toboul 2015). In other words, when addressing the functionality of social media in context with radicalization, there seems to be little to no difference, as to discussing online activity in general. The use of social media to expand, confuse, react, measure, link and “like” other people’s postings, are not unique for the milieus that I’ve studied. The use of such measures, in order to create responses and reactions – to provoke confusion, anger and fright from your opponent is all part of the online behavioral patterns (Aalen 2015). Still underlining the relevance of the quote: “All PR is good PR.”

2.1.1 What is ‘social media’?

Before elaborating further on the concept of performing and portraying a chosen identity online, it’s necessary to briefly mention the features that characterize the concept of “social media”. The term social media is a collective term, without a specific definition. However, two features are significant in order for something to be described and perceived as a social media (Aalen 2015). First of all, there is no clear border between the “sender” and the “receiver” or “audience” on these forums. Meaning that; the same people can both produce and consume information on the same websites. Secondly, it’s pointed out that social media
allows for many people to interact at the same time, referred to as: “many-to-many-communication” These features are defined as new for social media, referring to how the digital communicative world has evolved, from primarily allowing one to one communication (Aalen 2015:19).

The social media forums that have been taken into use when collecting empirical data for this thesis are; Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs. These forums are defined by Aalen (2015) as “subgroups” to the main term of social media. More specifically, she refers to these forums as; social network sites. These social network sites (or SNSs) can be described as:” (...) a site that allows users to create some kind of online presence and articulate that with others” (Hinton & Hjorth 2013:33). Aalen (2015:20) further underlines three criterions for the categorization of SNS:

i) Every user has their own profile, which content have been created by the user himself or herself.

ii) The user can make a list of “relations” – for example friends or “followers”. The list is noticeable for other users, and one can follow the links to, again, view their profiles.

iii) The user can consume, produce and/or interact (for example “liking” and/or commenting) with news streams from other users’ behavioral content on the forums.

For this thesis, when referring to the empirical data, and the following forums that’s been studied – the term “social media” will be used, even though the “right” term might be SNS. The term “social media” is perceived as the most common and well-known term. Even though the studied forums are quite different in both use and shape, the term is evaluated as the most fitting.

An important aspect when discussing the Internet and social media when discussing radicalization and possible recruitment is the ability to reach out to a much broader audience than you originally would have been able to do. The merchandising that lies in the social media forums, individual web pages and blogs are profound, and have generally become more
and more important in today’s society (Aalen 2015, Hinton & Hjorth 2013, Dean 2010). Earlier research points out how sympathizers of Islamic radical milieus’ are, in fact, eager to spread out their messages and ideology to as many as possible (Sunde et.al. 2013:28). The Internet has provided a substantial shift for local terrorist group’s ability to inflict and affect their audience outside their immediate conflicted areas, and following; this has enabled a greater possibility to enhance an international network outside their local geographic areas. The extreme outings are to a great extent, happening openly online, in order to convince, recruit and instruct others on their ideology and their violent methods (Sunde et.al. 2013:28).

### 2.2 Online Activity and Performance

“A transparent identity that they disclose online, releasing habitual behavioral data and personal information in the process of socializing (Van Dijck 2013:200).

Long before the development and evolvement of social media forums, Erving Goffman (1956) theorized the concept of self-presentation in everyday life. A theory that conceptualized human activity and social interaction as a “performance” that unfolded by both conscious and unconscious human behavior further being left for interpretation by the social environment. Van Dijck (2013) used this theoretical backdrop as an influence when he studied social media forums, aiming to elaborate on how the different use of social media enables a public performance of identity: “Promoting and branding the self has also become a normalized, accepted phenomenon in ordinary people´s lives. Following the examples of celebrities’ self-promotion, many users (especially young adults and teenagers) shape their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness” (Van Dijck 2013:203). Further addressing how the evolvement within social media have enabled an opportunity to be part of a “connectivity”, moving beyond the earlier “connectedness” which enables social media users with an opportunity to actively “perform” online: “Towards the end of the first decade of the millennium, a noticeable change occurred in the organization and architecture of social media platforms, shifting their center of gravity from connectedness to connectivity. Key terms denoting routine human social activities – terms such as ‘friending’, ‘liking’,
'connecting’ and ‘following’ – rapidly penetrated the discourse of the platforms” (Van Dijck 2013:202). He further elaborates on how high levels of acknowledgements in this form, enables an important role within social media, as so-called “influencers” (2013). This reference is especially relevant for the upcoming analysis, acknowledging how online forums can enable a feeling and perception of influence by both the online “performer” and the “audience”.

These theoretical contributions, viewing human- and online activity in the light of “performance”, are viewed as important when illustrating and analyzing the empirical data for this thesis. Seeing how gender, status and ideologies are revealed through online activity, and discussing how the online “performance” by jihadists can enable an opportunity to form and shape a self-selected online identity. These features are shaped through online behavior patterns and rhetorical means, making it possible to discuss how identities unfold and evolve within online forums. The concept of attaining high levels of online acknowledgements is also relevant, seeing how it enables an opportunity to discuss the online charismatic leaders, and perhaps an increasing of global radical Islamic sympathizers. Van Dijck asks a relevant question: “(...) To whom and for what purpose you craft your self-image (...)” (2013:205) addressing the importance of the online audience. The same question is relevant when approaching the empirical data of this thesis analytically, seeing how the jihadists present the Islamic ideology and for what purpose they portray themselves online. Further discussing for whom and for what purpose they act in certain ways, and what they want to achieve.

As mentioned above, the main theoretical approach to the empirical data, relates to Internet and social media as an arena that enables a “performance” of a chosen identity, finding people with similar ideologies and mindsets, and further creating an online community. Earlier research discusses these abilities within the Internet sphere, saying how the platform is transforming human functioning (Kirmayer, L., Raikhel, E. & Rahimi, S. 2013). Different forums of social media are referred to as providing “(...) novel ways of accessing information, organizing memory and relating to others. To the extent these technologies change our modes of self-experience, understanding, and participation we can speak of new forms of self and personhood” (Kirmayer et.al. 2013). Some might say that the most appealing aspect in relations to the Internet and social media, are the effortlessly given opportunity to portray
yourself in whatever way you prefer.

You are unable to participate in the social media jungle without deciding what you want to share, and how you want others to perceive you. The esthetic features and decisions are of great importance in regards to how other people perceive your personality online, and your online identity can be shaped and evolved by colors, fonts, pictures and videos, and not to mention; by your followers, and the one’s you follow. Additionally, the life phase that we are currently in, our family, friends and our social network in general - are all taking parts in shaping our identity. Also, our language, use of jargons or slang, our humor and cultural references are all small signs to show off our identities, and can all be taking part in helping others to get a perception of who you “are”, and if none the less; how you want to be perceived (Aalen 2015:63). These aspects are especially relevant for the upcoming analysis, aiming to see how three social media forums enable different opportunities to perform and portray your cyber identity.

The way we use social media in our everyday lives and the way the tools inflict on our mindsets can both enable new ways of portraying our social capital and status (Bourdieu 1979) seeing how your social network is noticeable and “out there” for almost anyone to see. One might say that the social media forums are a much more “direct” and unfiltered way to show off your social network, and perhaps; even brag about it. Earlier research on social media (Aalen 2015) has pointed out possible consequences of having a big online audience, looking at our actions or so-called online “performance”. Reflecting on the possible consequences of people constantly being able to “look into our lives”. This research shows (2015) how our actions and verbal expressions become of greater importance when many people are watching and observing us. What we say, and what we do – turns out to become a bigger part of how we see ourselves, when we know we have a big audience. The term called public commitment (Aalen 2015:66), is relevant in this hence, because of the evolving of a newfound radical identity within the online community. It’s not specifically relevant whether the informants that have been studied for this thesis have changed over time – what matters is how they can underline and enhance their cyber identity through their own online activity, and by the conferment of others. The Internet has gone from being a place where you could express yourself anonymously, and portray yourself in whatever way you wanted, to
becoming a place where you can scream for attention and achieve global attraction in a heartbeat (Aalen 2015, Sunde et.al. 2013).

2.3 The Use of Rhetorical Appeals

In order to win an argument, and persuade others of your own convincing, the use of rhetorical appeals is crucial. During the Second World War, the focus on brainwash through propaganda was crucial in order to get people to do what was viewed as necessary at the time. The traditional rhetoric appeal was constantly in use when trying to persuade people to do the most gruesome, torturous and inhumane actions. And, not to mention, the rhetoric’s were used in order to get people to believe in the “authorities” and try and convince people of the “end goals” (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). The power of rhetoric’s was also noticeable when The United States was planning the invasion of Iraq. One of the most penetrating aspects in legitimizing the actions was grounded in rhetorical pictures and figures promoting a symbolic “us” – “us Americans”. The rhetoric’s that surrounded this time period were also described as not being gender-neutral, and instead rebuilding the meaning of traditional masculinity, as a way of proclaiming a need for the muscle power in the fight on behalf of America (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). Our language and the way we interact with others, as well as our way of talking about other people, races and/or cultures, can all be seen as part of a process. The way we talk reflect how we think, and our set of tone and body language are both taking part in forming how other people respond and conceive us. The word discourse is an important term in order to understand and describe the relationship between our use of language and our view to reality. Anne-Birgitta Nilsen (2014:9) defines the term as: a certain way to express oneself about reality, and this definition might be appropriate when discussing online hate speech, and the Islamic radical milieus conception and perception about Western societies and lifestyles.

The concept of rhetoric’s is related to the theory of convincing and persuasive speech. The aim is to promote actions or change in the world through rhetorical convincing. Basically showing how people’s mindsets can be changed through other people’s persuasive and convincing rhetorical use (Nilsen 2014:19). The way people talk should therefore never be
underestimated, and the way we interact both verbally, physically and through online forums, are taking great part in shaping other people’s perception of us – and might create bigger consequences than we originally imagined. The charismatic leaders, with convincing personal characteristics are able to establish a huge number of followers, relevant both today and in earlier days (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004, Weber 2000, Bjørgo 2011). When the Internet and social media have become so big and accessible for everyone, our ability to portray our charismatic features by the use of rhetorical measurements is easier than ever.

2.3.1 Ethos, Pathos and Logos

All in all, the heritage from Aristotle’s work in regards of rhetorical argumentation still seem to be standing tall (Eide 2006). According to Aristotle, the main key of rhetorical instruments – bows down to a good technique of argumentation. The power of persuasiveness primarily lies in the ability to justify your point of view, your statements, and your following actions. His well-known key to persuasiveness revolves around ethos, pathos and logos, which refers to the ability to convey your arguments with credibility, the appeal of the message your sending out, and whether you’re able to convince others of the content in your argumentation. In other words: how does the message affect the recipient? (Eide 2006, Nilsen 2014). A lot of the recruitment to these extreme radical subcultures might lie in their ability to persuade others to join them, and it seems like they put a hard focus in creating symbolic boundaries between themselves and “the rest”. By creating these walls, they are able to create a bigger illusion of how important their “mission” is, and at the same time they create a symbolic limited brotherhood. In the following analysis of this thesis, there will be an underlining focus on portraying how the traditional tools of rhetorical persuasion are used within the new modern online forums. As mentioned by Anne Birgitta Nilsen (2014:23) the most important rhetorical measurement in relations to hateful rhetoric’s is the rhetorical; pathos.

The power that lies in appealing to people’s negative feelings is especially relevant within the rhetorical categories, and specifically important within these milieus: “When people’s anger is provoked, they become less reluctant to performing attacks of revenge. This ability can be used for political reasons and become a part of a dangerous game, like we witnessed from Al-Qaida’s former leader Osama Bin Laden. Through his spread of hatred towards the West, Bin
laden became an important inspiration for further terror attacks” (Nilsen 2014:23). The term of pathos, refers to the ability to provoke big emotional feelings from the receiving end of communication, and the ability to engage and “touch” your audience’s emotions, in such a way that enhances their emotional engagement. Making them convinced that the speaker is talking the truth, and speaks what’s “right.” The rhetorical aspect is therefore important within extremist milieus, in order to enhance and further establish boundaries between “us” and “them”, to further underline and sort out the images of their enemies (Goffman 1951, Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004).

2.3.2 Performing Masculinity

When trying to shed a light, and discuss Islamic radicalization online, I analyze the online activity and characteristics that colors and shapes the portrayed cyber identities. A main emphasis is placed on the usage of rhetorical features in order to proclaim a specific online identity, and a fundamental analytical tool is placed on the performance of socially, and culturally accepted masculinity within the radical Islamic milieu online. The main theoretical emphasis when seeking to illustrate and discuss the rhetorical aspects of a portrayed masculinity draws upon Connell (1995), and his terms related to a constant negotiation of gender performance, within specific and various social settings. A further elaboration of this theory has been presented in Katrine Fangen’s (2003) study of right wing extremists, or so-called “skin-heads” where she refers to the gender negotiations as “processes of individualization leading on ontological insecurity (...)” (Fangen 2003:188). This study has been used as main inspiration when discussing the concept of performing masculinity, seeking to address how masculinity is expressed within a sub cultural group. The concept of performing an accepted “macho” masculinity within the radical Islamic milieu online, will be discussed on this basis, addressing rhetorical and photographic features that are used in order to portray and underline a masculinity that’s perceived to be respected and valued within this specific milieu.

The term of “genderism” introduced by Erving Goffman (1977) is also relevant to mention in this hence, because of the view to gender as something you “do” instead of something you “are”. This is interesting, because masculinity seems to be enhanced within the Islamic
milieus, and the online “performance” will be discussed in this hence. The concept of gender norms, and our roles in society is relevant, and important because the men that’s been studied for this thesis are all appealing to a hyper masculine masculinity (Connell 1995), striving towards performing their role as a masculine jihadist, for everyone to see. The concept of gender being something you “do” is interesting in this hence, seeing how your action and not your biological features (Goffman 1977) form other people’s perception of your sex. Enabling a further discussion of how the jihadist’s uses their gender performance as a way of proclaiming a certain image or identity online.

I want to use these sociological gender theories when discussing the importance of perceived and negotiated masculinity within these types of milieus, and I want to elaborate on how the men use women as an object, in order to enhance their own masculinity. By discussing theories about genderism and masculinity (Goffman 1977, Connell 1995, Fangen 2003) and also; the polarization between “femininity” and “masculinity”, believing that I might be able to reveal some of the rhetorical and charismatic characters that infiltrate the messages that’s sent via social media, both in verbal, and photographic settings. The definition of what is considered being a “macho” man can vary from what type of situation and milieu that’s being discussed. The performance of a “masculine jihadist” will be illustrated and further elaborated on, as these illustrations form the basis of the following discussion of performing accepted masculinity within the studied online jihadist circles.

2.3.3 Portraying Violence and Polarization

Another important tool when analyzing the empirical data of online performance is the focus on a portrayed violence, which correlates with the performance of macho masculinity (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003). The main theoretical tools and backdrop when analytically approaching the data’s violent content will refer to the performance of a specific type of accepted masculinity within the radical Islamic milieu, and the illustrations and discussions will enable an opportunity to describe the characterizations of an online macho and violent jihadist.
Former research and public speakers (Hegghammer 2014, Khan 2015) often point to youthful rebellion as an important factor when discussing the evolvement of extreme milieus and criminal subcultures. A rebellion towards a more traditional parental generation is relevant to point out when discussing these issues and an old theoretical perspective related to the seductive means of performing criminal actions is suitable. Since the beginning of time people have had a relationship and a fascination for violence, and Jack Katz has referred to these seductive aspects of committing crime. The main point of his theory revolves around the fact that crime itself can have a weird and distinctive attraction, and he tries to elaborate on how and what causes crime to have this sort of addictiveness (Katz, in Copes, Heith & Tropalli 2010). Katz proposes three individual, but inevitable and jointly sufficient conditions when committing crime: the first refers to a path of action, and defines the practical aspects of being able to successfully commit a crime. The second revolves around a line of interpretation, which by Katz is defined as a way of understanding how one is, and how others will see your actions. The third and final aspect refers to an emotional process. In relations to the theory of seductive means of crime, for this thesis and more specific research question, the third point of it being an emotional process, is the perhaps the most relevant. During the evolvement of this thesis, there will not follow an elaborating on criminal actions in itself, as this theory will first and foremost, be used to underline how the seductive and romantic view to violence, torture, and death within the online milieu of radical Islamic jihadists or sympathizers seems to be quite common. The theoretical backdrop is mentioned in this hence, based on the reference of charismatic figures (Bjørgo 2011) seeing how rhetorical use of seductive and romanticized views to violence can be used to further recruitment.

Additionally, an important tool for the analytical approach relates to the concept of polarization. Previous researches within social science have through all times been studying the concept of polarization related to social groups, religion, class and inequality (Bourdieu 1979, Weber 2000). Drawing upon Michèle Lamont (Lamont & Molnàr 2002) the elaboration on the theoretical concept of “symbolic boundaries” is further used to describe the studied online activity for this thesis:

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which
individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups complete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications. Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Lamont & Molnár 2002:167).

Drawing upon terms of behavioral patterns, roles and symbols this theoretical backdrop enables an opportunity to analyze the empirical data in a way that seeks to illustrate how the radical Islamist online are constantly establishing boundaries between themselves, and the people that don’t share the same ideology. The empirical data will be described in the light of polarization, aiming to discuss what rhetorical measures that are taken into use when “performing” within the self-presentation, and establishing symbolic boundaries to their enemies outside the online community (Goffman 1951; 1956, Lamont & Molnár 2002). The empirical data will be presented in a way that will elaborate on the online activity, seeking to illustrate how a creation of an online identity can be formed, as well as an online community, based on different sorts of “performances” within the selected social media forums.

2.3.4 Neutralization Techniques

When going through different sources to try and figure out some of the factors that may affect these men’s decisions to enroll in an Islamic radical milieu, one of the points that stand out is the constant disclaiming of responsibility. Hence Sykes and Matzas (1957) theory of neutralization techniques, and perhaps specifically the point about appealing to higher loyalties, the men who gets radicalized and the ones who also wage for jihad, and go to war in Syria – are fully disclaiming the personal responsibility for their actions, often referring to a “higher power”. To some extent it seems like the men are constantly trying to persuade themselves, and others, that they’re in possession of the “easy” solutions to all the difficult questions (Sykes & Matza 1957, Juergensmeyer, 2003).

Within the histories of religious traditions- from biblical wars to crusading ventures
and great acts of martyrdom—violence has lurked as a shadowy presence. It has colored religion’s darker, more mysterious symbols. Images of death have never been far from the heart of religion’s power to stir the imagination. One of the haunting questions asked by some of the great scholars of religion— including Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Sigmund Freud—is why this is the case. Why does religion seem to need violence, and violence religion, and why is a divine mandate for destruction accepted with such certainty by some believers? (Juergensmeyer 2003:7-8).

The use of such neutralizing techniques provides the men with a set of tools, when trying to underline the “need” for their actions and their beliefs. By using these techniques of neutralization they legitimize their own understandings, and they constantly disclaim personal responsibility for their actions by referring to higher powers. The horrible actions which have been performed are all justified with the fact that their enemy have done “worse”, there are always given different reasons as to why they need to keep fighting, and keep mobilizing.

Another important aspect when discussing neutralization of the violent actions and the chosen “lifestyle”, and perhaps an aspect that seeks to affect more people within extremist milieus; is the term of normalization of jihad (Nilsson 2015). Nilsson mentions three aspects, which helps to underline a normalization of the jihadists’ actions, culture and end goals within the milieu. First, he mentions how the global jihadism imprints the jihadists with an idea that the “legitimate target of the jihad is the whole world” (Nilsson 2015:351). The informants of Nilsson’s study imply that the whole world is the ultimate target, and that the warfare will be a permanent matter. Secondly, it’s pointed to the “normal way of living” within the conflict zone controlled by the IS, underlining the normalized way of living within these areas, and not to mention all the positive outcomes of the chosen lifestyle, such as education, family, and “true” performed manhood. The third factor that’s mentioned in order to help normalize jihad, is that “jihadists increasingly speak of an obligation not only to participate in jihad but also to migrate to a Muslim land” (Nilsson 2015:352). Further describing how they would view the waging for jihad as a duty, and that the support to help build the Islamic State is a duty for all “true” Muslims. All these factors are taking parts in shaping the extremist Islamic milieus, and these mindsets helps to neutralize the damage and normalize their way of living, and
seizes to further create and maintain a distance to the Western countries.

The use of neutralization techniques is not unique for the extremist milieus alone. The neutralization can be witnessed within several different social settings, referencing to simple conclusions for difficult, complex and all-grey conflicts. Jessica Stern (2003) wrote the book “Terror in the name of God” and the introduction to her book sums up the complicated picture in a great way, suitable to end this chapter of theoretical backdrop:

Religious terrorism arises from pain and loss and from impatience with a God who is slow to respond to our plight, who doesn’t answer. Its converts often long for a simpler time, when right and wrong were clear, when there were heroes and martyrs, when the story was simple, when the neighborhood was small, when we knew one another. When the outside world with its vulgar cosmopolitanism, didn’t humiliate us or threaten our children. When we did not envy these others or even know about them. It is about finding a clear purpose in a confusing world with too many choices. It’s about purifying the whole world. The way forward is clear: kill or be killed. Kill and be rewarded in heaven. Kill and the Messiah will come. It is about seeing the world in black and white (Stern 2003).
3. Methodological Choices

For this chapter I will be elaborating on the methodological choices that have shaped the research process for this thesis. I aim to elaborate on the empirical material and the collection of it, and the research method, as well as the mental preparations and ethical issues.

The empirical data have been collected from three different forums, seeking to illustrate the diversity within the online activity, evidently studying whether the activity and ideology is presented differently on each forum. By collecting material from Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs the ultimate goal have been to illustrate and categorize the material, seeking to describe and discuss the most penetrating aspects of the data, related to further recruitment and expansion of radical Islamic groups. The analytical focus has been placed on rhetorical tools of convincing, seeing how online interaction might be viewed as an opportunity to assert oneself within a new ideological convicement, and further enabling a feeling of “brotherhood” and inclusion.

3.1 My Empirical Data and the Collection Process

The first weeks and months of this project went by doing research on the field, attending seminars and conferences in relevance to the subject. I’ve met many competent people during this process, which have all helped and guided me in this final direction. One of the conferences, which I’ve found to be especially relevant, was the one arranged by the Norwegian Department of Law and Justice. Giving me the opportunity to listen to many great speakers, this also inspired my focus towards the online activity and Internet culture. The speakers at this conference helped me in regards of choosing possible theoretical implications, and where to ‘look for answers’.

Additionally, three separate pre-interviews with officials’ who’s either worked with- or in relation to preventing radicalization have been conducted. This information has not been used
as primary empirical data for the final thesis. However, the “interviews” have helped me open up to- and further shape the outlook on the radical Islamic milieu, providing an ability to study radicalization as a phenomenon more thoroughly. The interviews provided me with information and characteristics of the radical Islamic Scandinavian milieu, and additionally; certain characteristics that seem to shape the foreign fighters that have travelled to Syria to wage jihad. The pre-interviews and conversations have been of significance when developing the final research question(s).

As mentioned, the empirical material that creates the basis of this thesis relies on empirical data collected from three different social media forums: Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr. Following, I will shortly be elaborating on the technological terms of these forums, how they are used and their characteristic features. Further, the pros and cons of my empirical material will be discussed, as well as who’s considered being my “informants”, and the restrictions and boundaries in relations to the material.

3.1.1 Twitter

The first part of the analysis is based on material collected from the online forum Twitter. Twitter is an American based social media platform, first launched in 2006. The forum is known as a so-called “micro blogging service” and is characterized for enabling distribution of short messages online (Britannica Academic 2015). The forum claims they have approximately 310 million monthly active users and 1 billion monthly unique visits to sites with “embedded tweets” (Twitter.com 2016).

What characterizes this forum is that the communication happens openly, and people interact through their personal accounts, where they post messages (e.g. “tweets”) for others to see, or re-tweet to show support, or start a debate. A “tweet” is the name of the messages written on Twitter, and there are certain features about this forum that differs from many other social media forums. The length of the tweets is restricted to 140 tokens, and this is perhaps the most characterizing aspect of Twitter, as a social media forum. According to Van Dijck (2013) these restrictions were made, due to an aim for compatibility with mobile phones, and have stayed with Twitter as their special feature. Additionally the forum provides its users
with an ability to have “followers” or to follow the accounts that they choose (2013:70).

When you choose to “follow” someone, you will automatically receive notifications when this person posts a new tweet (message), and you will be able to receive this information in your news feed. However, there exist few exceptions. First of all: the person whom you choose to follow, can “block” you and thereby restrain your access to his or her account. Alternatively, the person can choose to have a closed account, which automatically gives the “tweeter” more control over whom can see his or her written messages. Everyone who wants to read tweets on Twitter have to create an online profile, and the posted tweets are open and “public” for all other users of the forum, unless chosen otherwise.

The ability to reach out globally online is without limits, and a simple “hashtag”, or a quick search on Google, can provide you with almost any information you could think of. A “hashtag” is a function that first was specifically linked to Twitter, and the concept was first launched in 2008 (Van Dijck 2013:71). To apply a so-called “hashtag” the user would need to write the token (#), in the front of a chosen collecting word. These hashtags make it possible to gather certain information under the same keywords, simply by writing a “hashtag” in front of the key word for the tweet. The ability to “hashtag” certain trends, words or groups makes it easier to locate and collect specific information, pictures or videos, making a lot of information open for collection through key words.

These hashtags have also made a difference in the way I´ve gathered my information during the research process, making it easier to find my way through the Internet jungle. By focusing on 5-10 different hashtags and keywords, I have managed to find and collect citations, poems, pictures and personal accounts dedicated to spread radical Islamic online propaganda. During the research for this thesis, I have found that there are enormous amounts of Twitter accounts that openly promote Islamic violence, or sympathize with it in different ways, and amongst the accounts that I have studied; the main part are managed by male figures. I´ve narrowed my focus down to 15 accounts on this forum.
3.1.2 Ask.fm

Secondly, a forum called Ask.fm has been used as grounds to collect online empirical data for this thesis. Ask.fm is a social media platform with hundreds of millions individual users each month, many of them under 18 years old (Ask.fm 2016). Within this forum I’ve studied 10 accounts, some more thoroughly than others’.

This forum is quite different from Twitter; however, this forum also provides the online users with an opportunity to create their own personal account and profile. The main technological characteristic of the forum further enables a possibility to ask other user’s questions and having their questions replied. Vice versa, it also enables an opportunity for the users to reply other people’s questions to them. The questioning and profiles are semi-anonymous by the means that profiles are public, but postings to these profiles by non-owners are anonymous. (Hosseinmardi, H. Rafiq, R., Li, S., Yang, Z., Han, R. Mishra, S & Lv, Q. 2014:1). In a way the forum might come across as an interactive online “chat”, and the questions and answers (which the users decide whether to answer or not) are posted openly on the individual’s profile, for other users to see. In order to get your own profile on Ask.fm, you have to register some personal information, and after creating this profile, you can actively engage in asking and replying to questions.

I haven’t personally been interacting with other users on the forum during the collecting process. I’ve restrained from asking questions on this forum myself, and have rather been using the forum to read questions and answers that had already been published on the different profiles. Various journalists have reported on jihadists’ use of Ask.fm and some of the empirical materials have also been posted on other websites. The illustrated empirical data have therefore been re-formulated making them not directly traceable online, preventing direct links to the individual profiles. I will address these ethical issues further in chapter 3.4.

3.1.3 Tumblr Blogs

Finally, some of the empirical data have been collected from Tumblr blogs. The concept of Tumblr blogs was first launched in 2007, and reportedly had over 102 million blogs by 2013.
(Duffy 2013). These blogs can include almost anything that the “blogger” (or writer) wants to share, including texts, citations, photography, music, cyber links or videos (Duffy 2013). There are many bloggers on Tumblr, and the forum differs from Twitter based on the ability to post longer texts, and it enables an opportunity for a more personalized outlook than Ask.fm.

The concept of “blogging” has during the last couple of years, become massive and very popular. The concept bases on online writing, where the writer is considered as the author of the blog (Duffy 2013, Dean 2010). Tumblr is known as an independent online platform for bloggers. The forum portrays their services as a service that enables an ability to share some of your interesting personality online:

> Turns out that when you make it easy to create interesting things, that’s exactly what people do. All those great, random blogs your friends send you, those are Tumblr blogs. We’ll help you find and follow blogs like that, and we’ll help other people find and follow yours (Tumblr.com April 17th 2016).

Like the two other forums, this social media provides their users with an ability to follow other bloggers, and have followers of their own. In similarity to Twitter the users (or bloggers) are able to show support by commenting, liking and sharing blog posts. When using Tumblr blogs as empirical data for this thesis, it was not necessary to create a personal profile or create a blog on my own. By focusing specifically on five different blogs, and additionally surfing over to the individual bloggers “followers”, I was able to collect material and adequate material to discuss jihadist’s usage and performance on the platform.

### 3.1.4 Who are my “Informants”?

When doing research online, and especially on social media forums, it’s necessary to elaborate on the empirical basis, and the “grey zone” between text and citations. Because the collected citations can, to some extent, be viewed as “private” or at least personal, it’s important to underline the complexity of my empirical data being somewhere “in-between” active informants, and plain text. I find it quite difficult to associate with the term
“informants” for this project, because I find the term to be quite unfitting. I haven’t talked or interacted with the individual’s that has provided material for this thesis, and they themselves have not “informed” me with hands-on information about the radical Islamic milieu. My material is as mentioned, gathered through the Internet, and more specifically; social media forums. Based on this fact, it’s quite difficult to claim that I’m giving specific and valid hands-on information about my “informants.” The empirical material has been gathered through forums that are built up on individual accounts. Making it impossible to maintain the person’s status as ‘anonymous’ if I reveal too much information about their nicknames, appearance or more specific details.

To my knowledge, all of the “informants” are male, and approximately within the age spread of 18-30 years old. The active jihadists on Twitter and Tumblr might be older, and the user’s asking questions on Ask.fm might be younger. They have all been extremely active online, but most of them stopped being active on the specific accounts around the year of 2014. All of my “informants” are what I’ve considered and concluded to be sympathizers with, or for The Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra. Based on the person’s connections (e.g. “followers” or the one’s he “follows”), the appearance of the individuals’ profiles (e.g. the black flag) or posing with weapons, and quotes about jihad or jihadi nicknames are all variables that have colored my decisions for picking out my material. As I’ve mentioned earlier, the process of collecting information and finding these accounts, profiles and blogs have happened through collecting specific hashtags and search words.

As mentioned, I’ve collected empirical data from 15 different Twitter accounts, 10 profiles on Ask.fm and 5 Tumblr blogs. The reason why I’ve studied more Twitter account relates to the restricted ability to write long texts within this forum, and the fact that these accounts had very rapid continuity to their “tweeting”, each profile providing me with thousands of tweets, which obviously forced me to be quite restrictive when choosing. Additionally it turned out, that many of the profiles on Ask.fm were “blank”. Meaning that some profiles where almost empty without any questions or answers to study, and administrators on this forum were actively suspending accounts with connotations to jihadism.

I want to underline the fact that I’ve also been using a lot of time online, since mid-November of 2015, until April of 2016. One might call it, to some extent, a fieldwork – surfing for
information to understand the social life that’s happening online. These hours are hard to categorize as straight down empirical material, but they have certainly been inevitable in order to understand where to search for information, and what to search for online. The fact that I’ve only decided to mention some specific quotes and a certain amount of profiles and accounts are only to give some kind of impression of the range of the material for this paper. There is no doubt in my mind that the empirical material could be much greater, but I’ve decided to end my collection process, in order to give the collected material as much time and thought as I’ve found necessary, in order for the analysis to become as thorough as possible.

3.1.5 Pros and Cons of the Empirical Data

At the starting point of this thesis, when collecting the empirical data, I decided, after careful consideration and discussions with my supervisor Willy Pedersen, that it would be easier to precede with the project if I restrained from gathering active consent to participate in the project. After consideration we also found that it might be difficult and perhaps dangerous, to actively chase the “informants” approval for me to directly use their quotes and citations in this thesis. Based on restricted time limit, I therefore decided to precede my project without concession – which meant that I had to be especially strict about the ethical points related to keeping my informants anonymous and non-traceable on online. This meant that I had to, as mentioned, change the sentences, citations and poems that are illustrated in this thesis. In the light of that fact, and the missing ability to show the material in its purest form, it might serve as a con for the empirical basis. However, the original meanings behind the citations have been upheld at its best effort, seeking to present the citations as similar as possible to the original. The re-written citations, poems and text presented in this thesis have been “tested” on Google, changing the text until the search prevented the original accounts or profiles to show up.

I’ve also made a choice not to engage in online groups or online profiles that were locked and restrained from the public. This decision was taken based on ethical restrictions, an also in relations to my safety as a student. In retrospect I’m content with that decision, despite the fact that gaining access to these locked groups could possibly have brought me more “juicy” material, and a more “real” view to the online radical Islamic milieus. However, I’m satisfied
with my material in the means of answering the selected research questions and this approach
have also underlined that the online jihadism is easily found, even when restraining from
digging into the darkest places of the Internet. By deciding to not engage in locked and
restricted groups, I find that I’ve been able to portray and underline the “easy” roads to
radicalization online, showing how it’s unproblematic to achieve both interaction and radical
ideological inspiration online, even from some of the most common social media forums.

By engaging in this kind of online research, one has studied and enabled a discussion of the
everday life of jihadists on social media. Seeing how the activity and performance is done
online, and portraying possible aspects within recruitment processes. This thesis searches to
answer how online social media forums are used by radical Islamic milieus, and possible
consequences of the performance. The empirical framework and the selected forums have in
my opinion, enabled that possibility, despite ethical considerations and restrictions.

3.2 “Internet Communication and Qualitative Research”

The basis of this thesis relies on Internet research, and more specifically using social media
forums, as the source for empirical data. Hence, the fact that the Internet and especially social
media forums have created a new way of and reaching out globally, I’ve aimed to illustrate
and underline the importance of such communication tools within subcultural groups, as well
as others. A methodological key word for the upcoming analysis of the radical Islamic milieus
behavior online, is the term: “Netiquette”, which is explained in the following way:

“Netiquette is a term used (a) to describe the established conventions for communicating
online and (b) to refer to the standards of being social and relation in the online environment;
or online etiquette. (Mann & Stewart 2000:14). This term is important in the way I’ve decided
to approach my research questions, studying online performances, quotes and text on
interactive forums. Mann and Stewart (2000) refer to the qualitative research of Internet
communication as a ‘CMC’, meaning: Computer-mediated communication, as a conduct to
the traditional qualitative research related to face-to-face methods, and the researchers point
out several different advantages of performing research based on CMC (2000:17).

An important aspect of Internet research (Mann & Stewart 2000:17-20) is the extending access to participants, which is especially important in relations to this thesis. Mainly because of the restricted possibility to achieve face-to-face interaction with a subcultural milieu of this character. Further, they point out an advantage related to achieving wide geographical access. This is also especially relevant, based on my goal to underline the global spread, and easy access to Islamic propaganda online. It would not be possible to achieve a widespread global access of this character if the empirical data relied on traditional interviews and face-to-face contact. Another advantage (2000:18) is how the methods of CMC enable the researcher with access to possibly dangerous or politically sensitive sites. They also mention how the method provides you with access to restricted or closed sites. The first point is somewhat relevant, seeing how this research method enables me with an opportunity to study sites with politically sensitive content. However, the last point is not particularly relevant for the collection process leading up to this thesis, because I have deliberately avoided achieving contact through neither closed nor restricted online pages, forums nor accounts. I will be elaborating on this part, further, in the chapter of ethical issues. The last point provided by Mann and Stewart (2000:17-20) that I find relevant for the methodological experience with this thesis is their point of being able to study “outsider accounts” through CMC:

Traditionally marginalized social groups have seized on CMC to pursue their own interests and agendas. (…) For emerging new subcultural phenomena, loosely referred to as cyberculture (Rucker et al. 1992), the medium is integral to the development of their communities. At the same time, one of the most worrying aspects of Internet use has been the growth of groups who use the absence of censorship to express extreme forms of prejudice and deviance (Mann & Stewart 2000:20).

The analytical approach for this thesis relies on a content (text) analysis on the empirical findings and jihadist’s performance on social media forums, by collecting citations and texts from Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs. The focus is placed on the online performance and
creation of identities, primarily focusing on the online texts in context. However, it’s also been necessary to mention and shortly elaborate on some of the power that lies in the use of photos, and publishing of violent content. I focus especially on the traditional use of rhetorical strategies, and the power that lies in the arts of convincing, by using the terms of ethos, pathos and logos. Using knowledge about rhetoric’s to understand how “the sender” is perceived, and discuss how the recipient on the other end might perceive it. I focus specifically on how these types of interactive forums might form a new online identity, and provide a feeling of being included in a group. I aim to elaborate on how the jihadists use these social media forums and how the performance might further create a type of cyber-integration, and online community.

3.2.1 Content Analysis – Text in Context

As briefly mentioned, the analytic approach to the research problem(s) of this thesis relies on a content analysis, or text analysis. One of the aspects that differs an analysis based on text, from other types of qualitative research relates to how the research is not happening through interactive contact with informants. The material is already “there” and the researcher can therefore not interfere with the material (Widerberg 2001). The collected empirical framework is collected through online social media forums, and it’s therefore important to place the text in context, and elaborate on the social and historical aspects that color the outings that are used for further studying. Based on this fact, the researcher can be viewed as the most important tool to research and analyze the empirical foundation (2001).

Further, the citations and texts that are published online can be viewed as personal outings and statements, and it’s important to evaluate the contextual surroundings before analyzing the material: “Qualitative researchers use multiple methods to collect rich, descriptive, contextually situated data in order to seek understanding of human experience or relationships within a system or culture. (...) Processes of analytical induction from the data might then lead to the formation of simple explanatory hypotheses or, using systematic approaches such as grounded theory, the development of complex theories” (Mann & Stewart 2000:2-3). The surrounding of a content analysis is important, and the heated debate related to extremism and terrorism makes it especially important to acknowledge the context when writing this thesis. Being that the contextual surroundings of the thesis throughout the last
year have been quite turbulent, it´s been important for me to take breaks, and approach the material and writing process with as much personal distance as possible. The constant ongoing conflicts, and frightening situations have made it especially important to firmly establish my role as a researcher, studying the material and aiming for as non-biased as possible when approaching the online scenery.

Another problematic aspect, when doing this type of research online, is how the material is vulnerable for change and how the field is very dynamic (Mann & Stewart 2000). The people behind the studied social media accounts could at any time have modified the collected material, and the material were also at risk of being deleted, or accounts suspended by administrators on the websites. Seeing how these are all variables that could affect this research, it´с been important to remain firm in the collecting process and sometimes deliberately shutting my eyes for newly published data online. The Internet and social media forums can provide endless amounts of empirical data, and due to restrictions in both time and space, the key has been to establish a firm line for when to end the collection of data.

3.3 Analytical Tools

Inductive design
The analytical tools that have come to steer the analysis and further discussion for this thesis is based on an inductive method. This type of research relies on an approach that’s exploiting, analyzing from empirical findings towards theoretical assumptions and not the other way around, which is key within deductive research (Blaikie 2009). Many of these types of analytical approaches, in regards to inductive designs, base their analysis on Grounded Theory. It’s difficult to state that the analysis will follow a strictly inductive design, as there are seemingly gliding borders between inductive and abductive designs. The abductive approach, have a varied relation between theory and empirical data, and theory might be viewed as necessary in order to understand the empirical material (2009). When using an abductive approach the theories will evolve through analysis of the material. The analytical
approach for this thesis draws upon characteristics of inductive exploiting research, but clearly also takes use of the abductive tools for research.

### 3.3.1 Coding based on Grounded Theory

The empirical findings were coded based on grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). When I collected the empirical material, it was important for me to first exploit and understand some of the contextual online frames around the milieu that I was studying, and it was further important to place a great deal of time categorizing the empirical data. Being that there are so many different “stories” and personal features that color the language and performance that’s been studied, I’ve found it especially necessary to write down the *main* subjects and stories that color the material. Therefore, I decided to place a lot of time on the categorizing- and coding process.

Charmaz (2006) inspires the analytical approach to the empirical data of this thesis, and more specifically the way she initiates a categorization and coding of collected empirical data. The first phase of the coding starts with an *initial coding* of the material. At this phase the researcher is open for all theoretical options. The researcher can, in a way, be described as having “an open mind” with a lot of possible options for which theoretical approach that fits the material. This is also an important essence in the inductive research design. Further in the process, the researcher moves towards the second part of the coding process; towards the *focused coding*. At this part of the process, the researcher aims to categorize the material, searching for specific codes that are significant in the material. In this case, meaning words or themes that are often coming up throughout the material. This creates an overall important role for the material – and for the further analysis (2006:42-57). The *initial coding* of the data during the collecting process of this thesis, started with a general outlook on my material – allowing the *material*, to some extent, stand “alone”, while at the same time having a general theoretical backdrop in mind. The theoretical connotations during this phase typically related to larger sociological theories, and specifically related to crime, marginalization and (sub) culture. When moving forward in the categorization process, I turned to *the focused coding*. In this phase I categorized the collected material more specifically, and ended up with a few categories, that have formed and created the basis for the upcoming analysis. When stripping
down the material and being strict about the categorization, I ended up with the following categories: masculinity, violence, polarization and martyrdom.

When implementing a text analysis, in this case text (or citations) gathered from social media, it’s important to remind yourself that the text you’re studying can be part of a specific interactional process. The process takes place in a specific place at a specific time, (Svennevig & Vagle 1995:129) and as mentioned earlier, it’s important to be aware of the social context that surround the text, outings, citations or conversations. The implementation of this analysis is further built up, following four analytical stages (Svennevig & Vagle 1995:131). The provided tools for analytical progress are based on the following stages: 1) Provide a provisional understanding of the context. In this phase one questions who’s the writer, who is he/she writing for or to? What is the meaning behind the message, and where does the interaction take place? 2) Write an initial description of the text itself, being quite general and superficial. 3) Moving on to the phase of interpretation of the material, and analyzing the material. This point correlates with the results of the focused coding (Charmaz 2006:42-57). 4) The fourth stage of this analytical approach seizes to explain the text, turning out to be the discussion of the empirical collections. In this phase one uses the sociological theories to further explain the data, and joining together the theory and empirical basis. When implementing and performing this analytical strategy, the stages 3) and 4) are melting together, and the analysis chapter and discussion of data and theory are difficult to tell apart (Svennevig & Vagle 1995:131).

### 3.4 Ethical Issues and Considerations

Performing research online imposes various ethical considerations, and when additionally doing research on extremisms and jihadists, the possible downfalls can be quite steep. During the process of writing this thesis a lot of months went by, focusing especially on ethical considerations. Considerations related to gaining access within the research field, discussions around my own safety when embarking on this project, and finally ethical considerations when deciding to perform online research in itself.
This research project has aimed to follow all the guidelines for ethics within social science research, as laid down in the National Research Ethics Committee for research in social sciences, law and humanities (hereafter: NESH). This means that I have worked from a basic respect for human dignity. All data have been kept confidential, all names and other information collected have been kept anonymous throughout the process, and also in the final thesis. The information has been treated so that it will not be searchable in any form, and in a way that restrains the information or quotes from being able to be traced back to individuals. Based on the fact that the empirical findings of this thesis have been provided through Internet research, I have been faced with a set of new and different ethical issues. The empirical basis of this thesis involves different social media forums, as earlier described: Twitter and Ask.fm and blogs. Being made familiar, and working in accordance with the guidelines and rules that apply to research on, with or through the Internet have been followed: "In continuation of the guidelines provided by NESH, scientists can generally freely use material from open forums without the consent from the person which the information is related to (Section 8). At the same time, this must always be weighed against the requirement to respect individuals' privacy and personal sphere (section 13)." Throughout the process I’ve been aware to the fact that distinctions between the personal and public sphere can be hard to distinguish, and that: “The context in which the information or communication takes place is important during the assessment of what is private and public” (NESH).

Throughout the research project, I have also been aware about the general rule of the need to obtain informed or active consents by participants for a research project. However, for this project we have found it difficult to receive active or informed consent from the people behind the studied accounts, and following ethical considerations have been given accordingly. During the process of collecting empirical data, personal data have never been stored electronically, and the material collected from different forums have been processed manually by hand. Furthermore, all the information has consistently been systematized within anonymous cases, stories or statements for this thesis. During the collection of the empirical material, there have at no time been established something resembling a person register. All information that has been perceived as interesting have been extracted, and written into an ordinary word document.
Caution have also been showed in relations to following the guidelines in connection to the use of citations from websites, as well as of the researcher responsibility for the data and content not being changed from its original purpose or meaning. The considerations embodied in the guidelines from NESH, and any trade-offs have been accounted for, more specifically taken into account the need for anonymity, personal integrity, "integrity of context" - and avoid disclosing any pseudonyms ("nicknames") (NESH). I have restrained from the use of direct quotes that could lead to an identification of the individuals, or that could be searchable online. The illustrated quotes throughout this thesis have been changed for them to not be traceable online, while at the same time aiming to maintain and portray the same accurate meaning of the original quotations. The citations have been changed, by replacing the original words with similar synonym words or terms, which seizes at its best effort to maintain the original meaning. When displaying the poems that’s been collected from Twitter it’s been decided to write most of it in its original form, based on the importance and relevance for the following analysis. Some of the “violent” terms in the poems have been changed, still making it not directly traceable online, while still maintaining the relevance of the poem’s original form. Many of the accounts on Twitter and Ask.fm have also been closed by administrations, enhancing the maintenance of ethical issues of keeping the information, citations and accounts non-traceable.

When using open blog posts on Tumblr as data, I’m also relying on the terms provided by NESH. Their guidelines say that scientists generally can use material from open forums freely, without obtaining consent. Considering that the users that’s been studied are actively seizing to attract attention writing in open and public forums, and the fact that their "authors" would probably prefer the attention, its perceived as reasonable that these can be interpreted as "open forums". However, the quotations and text gathered from Tumblr blog have been changed on the same basis as the material from Twitter and Ask.fm.

When performing online research, there are also ethical issues in regards of access limitations: "The stricter the access limitations, both in terms of the ability to collect information and communication within the forums. The restrictions in regards to opportunities to participate in the forum will also have an impact on the participants’ expectations of protection or anonymity. As a researcher one must be aware of how strict requirements for admission are,
for the forum under study. The stricter restrictions for participation, the greater care researchers ought to show” (NESH). These aspects have been taken into consideration, and the empirical data have been collected without attempting to gain access to restricted online forums or groups. To attain access to the material on Twitter and Ask.fm; I’ve created and used my personal profiles in order to gain access to the public information on the forums. However, all the material that’s been collected has been gathered through open and public forums, not engaging in closed or restricted groups within the forums.
4. What Happens on Social Media?

This chapter will present a descriptive elaboration on the empirical data collected from the selected social media forums Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs. First, addressing the empirical data from Twitter, following a presentation of the data collected from Ask.fm, finishing off the chapter with a description of the collected empirical data from Tumblr blogs. All the collected data will further be elaborated on, in a way that seeks to illustrate and discuss the studied online activity.

4.1 “Welcome to Twitter!”

“Get in touch with your friends, and other fascinating people!” (Twitter.com).

The hurdles when getting yourself a Twitter account are small, and in order to get yourself “logged on” and interact with millions of people, all you have to do is make a profile. By registering some of your personal information and selecting a user name - you’re basically good to go. It took me about five minutes to make myself a profile on Twitter, and about two more minutes to - indeed - find myself some “fascinating people.” This might prove, and underline an assumption that jihadists are quite active on social media forums (Bergen et.al. 2015, Sunde et.al. 2013), and for the following pages a presentation and description of the online activity will follow. The empirical data have been collected from a number of Twitter accounts, which all helps to illustrate rhetorical tools, language and often-mentioned subjects and features. Now, what seems to characterize the activity of online jihadists on Twitter? And what types of rhetorical features are used in order to portray their identity and ideology?

The people behind the accounts that’s been studied seem to be actively engaged in the use of online rhetorical, charismatic and ideological tools for convincing – and to say the least: they don’t save their energy when seeking to underline their points (Eide 2006, Nilsen 2014). The
people behind the studied Twitter accounts have all been extremely active during the time that their accounts have been up and running. Most of the people behind the studied accounts stopped being active during the spring of 2014, and by and large, the Twitter had an average of between 1000-5000 registered tweets in total, which refers to the manager`s profiles average number of written tweets (messages). It’s difficult to present an explanation as to why many of these accounts stopped being active during the spring of 2014, but it might be related to the stricter policy from the Twitter administration and it might also be related to them actively participating in fighting for jihad in Syria. Almost all of the accounts and the people behind the accounts that’s been studied on Twitter seems to have had their basis in Syria or within other conflicted areas of the Middle East, and all have seemingly been actively engaged in “the holy war.” The term of a participation in “holy war” is rapidly being referred to, both by the media and the jihadists themselves.

A penetrating aspect of the material collected from Twitter is how the jihadists aim to persuade themselves, and as many others as possible, to believe that the true meaning of life will be brought to them if they only follow the so-called “duty” of waging for jihad. To illustrate, one tweet states the following:

“To get info about Islam from journalist and media is like learning about the colors red and blue from a blind man, it´s not possible to teach what you do not understand.”

This quote places a doubt on the Western media coverage of Islam, and further makes a statement that no one, except “true” Muslims can understand a Muslims duty, and the fundamental beliefs that color a Muslim lifestyle (Rogan 2006). The jihadists on Twitter seem further eager to motivate and encourage violent actions, seeming especially eager to proclaim their political and ideological views. They work hard for their tweets and statements to reach out globally, and seem eager to portray their “side” as the better (or right) one. Underlining the points of earlier research (Toboul 2005) stating how information sharing and the building of online communities are the two most important objectives of online jihadism. The focus seems to be placed on a need to educate others of the injustice that Western countries have placed upon Muslims, underlining how “good actions” will pay off:
“If Allah finds any good in your heart, He will give you something better than what has been taken from you”

This tweet illustrates how Allah can provide the jihadists with something better than what (the West) have taken from them, drawing upon techniques of polarization (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). Another interesting aspect when studying the outings, pictures and symbols on this social media platform, is how the jihadists often use a youthful language that might make them seem, somewhat, easy to approach. The language is “down to earth”; using smiley’s and typical youthful slang words, and the messages often seems to be based on irony and humor, when at the same time they’re sending out violent and threatening messages. The use of these rhetorical features are often used within online communication (Aalen 2015) and can be viewed as a “substitute” for the lack of personal face-to-face interaction. Being unable to portray and underline your points by facial expression and body language, the use of slang and smiley’s might help to underline certain points, and portray specific characteristics of their identity based on communication (Rogan 2006).

To illustrate, one tweeter talks about the terrorist attacks that’s been happening in Kenya, and is able to be both ironic and threatening:

“The baboon kufars in Kenya try to prevent jihad from happening little did they know they just woke the lions up”

In another tweet, the use of irony, symbols and shortened online terms are especially noticing:

“LOL you infidels are so dumb. We send an invading army & you provide stewards to make sure we arrive safely. *Three laughing smileys*”

In the last tweet, one can see how the jihadist seeks to feed on the migration crisis, spreading fear related to the refugees who have fled to Europe, in order to escape the conflicted areas within Syria and the Middle East. Both of these tweeters are taking use of polarization techniques to proclaim their ideology, especially eager to polarize themselves and the West
(Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). The jihadist also uses the shortened term “LOL”, which stands for someone who’s “laughing out loud” and underlines the tone of the message by adding three laughing smiley’s. Leaning on the rhetorical pathos (Nilsen 2014) these “tweeters” are able to apply to their readers’ negative feelings, “shaking” them with provocative outing and the use of irony.

4.1.1 The Use of Western Language, Slang and Poetry

There is no doubt that many jihadists are extremely active online (Bergen et.al. 2015), and maybe especially on Twitter. This might be related to the less restrictive initiatives from the Twitter administration. For example, one of the accounts that’s been studied had written over 27 100 tweets, approximately being active between 5 to 15 times per day. All of the collected tweets are written in English, and if the tweets and accounts were written in Arabic or other languages, I’ve found that the “tweeters” often seemed to add even more violent pictures and videos. This makes it easy to be left with a feeling that they want and strive for global attention, and that they strive for their messages to be read and understood by as many as possible. For this thesis I’ve mainly been focusing on the English written tweets, due to restrictions in my language vocabulary, and the fact that the writing in English and thereafter global attention, have turned out to be important for the further analysis.

Due to the restrictive limit of 140 tokens on Twitter, the sentences are quite short, and many of the users seem to prefer writing in poetry, feeding especially on polarization- and a rejection of responsibility when referring to their (or “their brothers”) violent actions (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004, Sykes & Matza 1957). Many of their rhetorical characteristics are formed by terminologies about, the earlier mentioned; “us versus them”, and they are very often portraying The West as the root to all the problems and conflicts in the Middle East. When the messages are written in a short, violent and aggressive way, by for example writing riddles or poems, they are seemingly written with a clear attempt to spread fear. Many of the studied jihadists take active use of known poetry within the West, changing the rhymes to fit their (violent) agenda:
“Roses are Red
Violets are Blue
My Imam told me
To go kill a Jew”

And another example of the same type of known poem, with a different (but just as) threatening punch line:

“Roses are Red
Violets are Blue
Convert to Islam
Or I’ll stab you”

As one can see, the rhetorical characteristics in these poems and these types of tweets in general, often portray a violent content and a following encouragement to perform the “duty” of a true Muslim (Lia & Nesser 2014, Hegghammer 2014). The tweets often encourage converting to Islam, and they also encourage violent, and deadly actions for the ones who do not follow the “right” road. Additionally, the jihadists on Twitter seem eager to present Islam and Allah as the solution to the trouble’s in life:

“It’s beautiful how Allah guides and changes our lives, Alhamdulillah."

And further, in another tweet:

“We were living in a life of ignorance and sins, but rather than punishing us, Allah guided us and gave us a better life, Alhamdulillah”

1 “Al-hamdu lillāh” or “alḥamdulillāh” is an Arabic phrase meaning “Praise be to God”.
As briefly mentioned and illustrated above, they seem eager to state their political and ideological points, by talking badly about the West and democracy. One of the jihadist posts the following:

“Democracy go to hell”

And another follows up, and writes:

“It’s not necessary to get a PhD - in order to understand that democracy is kufr”

These ideological persuasions are most likely illustrated with an aim to further polarize, while at the same time closing the circle of their online community (Rogan 2006). As mentioned, a noticed feature that is especially interesting when studying the jihadist’s on Twitter, which haven’t been noticed in any other forum, is how they seem to be feeding and profoundly “milking” the migration crisis while proclaiming their ideology. Many of the jihadists on Twitter seem to be deliberately writing about the refugees, making sure to spread an extended fear. They write about the risks, and how easy it is to send foreign fighters back in simple “a change of clothes”, by hiding in the mass of refugees:

“Can you tell the apart a battle hardened jihadist and a refugee? A quick change of outfit.”

Or further:

“We travel to Europe undetected on a wave of compassion for the refugees – which we have created to mask our entry.”
The illustrated tweets above show how jihadists on Twitter perform their online identities by feeding on masculinity and violence. The jihadists use different rhetorical techniques to underline their macho masculinity by showing references to their weapons and their ability to kill for the cause (Nilsen 2014, Connell 1995, Fangen 2003). Seemingly the jihadists on Twitter are eager to underline feelings of a polarized world, by underlining and portraying symbolic boundaries (Goffman 1951, Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004) between an “us” versus “them”, further illustrating how waging for Allah can “change lives”.

4.1.2 Heroic Status and Martyrdom: “(...) There is no reason to fear death”

The online performance of a violent identity is taken to new heights when the jihadists refer to death and martyrdom, drawing upon seductive means of dying and killing (Katz, in Copes, Heith & Tropalli 2010). Being able to study and collect numerous amounts of “romantic” tweets related to death or martyrdom is interesting, as it enables an opportunity to discuss how death is belittled compared to the bigger picture of the end goal in their “holy war.”

To start of this underlining chapter I’ll present you with some of the tweets:

“Martyrdom is the greatest success a person can attain”

And further in a shortened tweet, which originally linked to a picture of a dead jihadist, while writing a message aiming for sympathy, saying that this person:

“(…) has been martyred in a drone attack”

This next tweet is also talking about martyrdom, and differs from the other two by using the so-called “hashtags” at the end:

“If you are ready there’s no reason to fear death #dying #martyrdom #ready”
As I mentioned earlier, the “hash-tags” are used in order to collect and gather tweets, messages or pictures that has a somewhat similar content. In this case, the used hash-tags will gather all tweets that use the same hash-tag “dying”, “martyrdom” or “ready.” Meaning that, when another user searches for these keywords, the following tweet might show up, and also other related tweets with similar content. For the sake of good order, underlining that the actual mentioned hash-tags have been reformed, and the tags above have been recited by the author to prevent the content from being directly traceable online.

It’s interesting to point out how the jihadists use the word “martyred” when talking about another jihadist being killed in battle. In contrast they are referring to Western soldiers as being much less heroic in their battling:

“Have you ever seen how the U.S. soldiers cry when still being alive, and that the mujahedins are smiling when they’re dead. Allahu Akbar <3!”.

As illustrated above, the jihadists on Twitter also underline their points by using smileys, emojis and heart shaped symbols, all according to what they seem to want to highlight or promote, and this is also the case for the tweet above (Aalen 2015). They seem to use the heart symbols when they write about death, “their brothers and sisters”, or about Islam.

In addition to the previous cited tweet, the following short tweet is a typical illustration of when the heart symbol is used:

“Sharia <3”

The jihadists often write these heart-shaped symbols when referring to subjects that seem to be meaningful to them, like the one above - writing about sharia law. Also, when writing about Allah, citations from the Quran, or when referring to their “brothers” in jihad, the heart symbol is used.
Finally, when addressing and illustrating the aspects of this heroic battling and martyrdom, I want to point out a tweet were the jihadist’s age is mentioned. On a picture of a “fallen” jihadist, the following text is presented:

“Age did not stop him from fighting in the path of Allah, may Allah accept your martyrdom, miss seen you around”

This tweet was found especially interesting and illustrating, because it underlines how the jihadist proclaim how; no excuse is good enough to not fight with (or for) Allah and sharia.

And on another tweet, there is a clear glorification of actual death in itself:

“Subhanallah he was martyred by the kuffar yesterday yet his body had nice scent till he was buried today, may Allah accept him as a shaheed”

In this tweet, which is linked to a picture of a “fallen” jihadist, one can clearly see how the tweeting jihadist aims to portray the death of this man as something beautiful, and meaningful.

To some extent, one might now be left with a perception that jihadists use Twitter as a “scene” (Goffman 1956) to perform and spread violent Islamic propaganda. The studied tweets seem to be characterized by a focus on promotion of their violent identity, macho masculinity (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003), and their brotherhood established by creating boundaries between themselves and the West, or the “non-believers,” by feeding on techniques for polarization (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004, Toboul 2005). The jihadists are also aiming to portray their battles as meaningful and heroic, underlining the importance of their violent encouragements. What seems to color the collected empirical data from Twitter is how the jihadists use this forum to share political and ideological propaganda (Rogan 2006). The

2 "Shahid” and “Shaheed” originate from the Quran. The term is used to denote a “martyr”. It’s used as an honorific for Muslims who have died fulfilling a religious commandment, especially those who die when waging jihad.
jihadists seem interested in communicating with other sympathizers, but data indicates that this social media is mainly used to spread information about Islam, and “educate” others. The typology of the “entrepreneur” (Nesser 2016) seems adequate to mention when referring to the figures that are represented on Twitter. They actively proclaim the violent and radical ideology by referring to injustice, and the need to “educate” and guide others. They seem to be motivated by great responses online, and they strive towards achieving an expansion of the radical Islamic milieu. Figures suited for the typology of an “entrepreneur (Nesser 2016) is also noticed within the other two forums, and they seem to know how to speak and bond with “the misfits and drifters”.

The following pages will illustrate some of the empirical collection’s from the forum Ask.fm, which have been collected through open and public accounts.

4.2 Ask.fm – Chatting with a Jihadist

To attain full access, the forum Ask.fm required me getting my own profile, also in order to properly study and get an understanding of the forum. When going through this forum, one is presented with a numerous amount of individual accounts, given the ability to look at the profile and study the questions that had been asked, and further viewing the answers coming from the owners of the profiles. Many of these accounts have been publically known for being managed by jihadists and have for that reason been closed down by administrators. Different journalist and online bloggers have earlier published some of the original citations and question from these accounts. Even though it has already been re-published by different public medias, the decision to transform the quotations at its best effort and aiming to maintain the original meaning behind the quotations, have still been maintained when again being published in this thesis.

As mentioned, the concept behind the online forum Ask.fm is based primarily on the users asking each other questions, and having their questions answered (Hosseinmardi, H. et.al. 2014). The empirical data for this thesis shows that the users are very often asking the jihadists “practical” questions about the travel, clothes and provided healthcare in Syria.
Earlier research has, as mentioned, claimed that a lot of jihadists use social media in order to communicate and attain practical information about jihad, all contributing to an online mobilization (Rogan 2006). Ask.fm might be perceived as the ultimate forum to attain information and educate themselves in order to create and establish a radical identity, their “virtual ummah” (2006:11).

The forum is quite plain, and provides the user with little to no ability to personalize the accounts. You´re able, resembling both Twitter and the Tumblr blogs, to choose a profile picture and you can also choose a picture for the “header” above your profile picture. An interesting aspect about Ask.fm have turned out to be that a lot of the jihadists´ profiles, are seemingly featured with these two pictures only, and a name to match the pictures, or to get a sense of their aspired ideology. On these profiles, one can neither find a single question asked, nor answered. At first I didn´t think to mention this aspect, but after finding that there were a lot of these types of “blank” accounts, it´s somewhat interesting to see how they´ve created accounts without being active, or perhaps even continuously deleting their feed of asked and answered questions. However, these accounts very often contain small words, phrases or “hashtags” that connotes to jihadism and especially martyrdom. They had no registered activity on their profile, other than these peculiar, small hints.

4.2.1 In Search for Practical Information: “Is it Internet there?”

Based on the questions and online interaction that has been studied, one might be left with an understanding that the people who are asking questions on Ask.fm about the ideology, lifestyle and not to mention the practical aspects of waging for jihad in Syria, are young and insecure. Drawing upon previous research on the field of Islamic radicalization and foreign fighters (Hegghammer 2014, Sunde et.al 2013) one can see that these variables are penetrating when discussing affecting variables for joining extreme milieus. It might be difficult to establish a fact about age based on texts only, there are only some clues within the content that makes them open for analysis, and conclusions within the following discussion are drawn upon on that basis. Alongside both theory and presented statistics in earlier research in regards to origin, age and sex of the registered foreign fighters (Hegghammer
When going through some of the material from Ask.fm, it’s interesting to see the types of questions that are asked. The fact that the jihadists are active online in these types of forums is interesting in itself, and the one’s asking questions seems to be curious about a great variety related to what they can expect if they decide to wage for jihad in Syria. The people asking questions on this forum seem eager to attain knowledge about wage, and at the same time – eager to establish bonds and be part of a community (Toboul 2005). When reading the questions, one automatically gets a sense of the user’s age, and they might come across as quite young and immature. Referring to the earlier mentioned “entrepreneurs” on Twitter, one can easily relate the typology of “misfits” and “drifters” to the users, or more specifically the one’s asking questions on Ask.fm. Seeing especially how they radical Islamic milieu online are interested in different types of identities and personal features, and knowing that people within these typologies are typically motivated by social aspects (Nesser 2016). One of the first and foremost give a way’s in relations to the users age and level of maturity, are the actual way of asking questions, and what they want to know:

“What do I do with my braces?”

“Is it possible to get contacts lenses there? Are they expensive?”

“Are there any central heating?”

As mentioned and illustrated above, the questions are very often related to superficial aspects like money, clothes or healthcare. Their curiosity about braces, contact lenses and other “everyday-questions”, might underline the perception of age and a low level of maturity. One can see from the illustrated questions above, that they seem eager to get information about prices, and how much money they ought to bring and would need when travelling to Syria. This makes it possible to draw a further assumption related to the fact that many of those who actively engage in these social forums are people who have general concerns about their restricted opportunities, and maybe at the time of chatting; their restricted economy. Such
assumptions are also confirmed by earlier research, when discussing specific attributes and characteristics of a “typical” foreign fighter (Hegghammer 2014). At the beginning of this project, I was also able to discuss some of the typical characteristics of the men who had travelled from Denmark to fight in Syria, with a representative in the Danish organization VINK – which works towards preventing young men and women from being radicalized. I was told that these youths were very often teens with little or no education, they were in search for excitement, and they had all been very active on social media during their converting process. Another aspect that was pointed out was the fact that many of the men (and/or women) was left without a job, and this might correlate well with the rapid questions related to money, and simple costs of braces and health care. Additionally, they seem to be quite young, and might not even be old enough to have had the chance to connect ties to the work life. These exemplified citations may indicate that the one’s in question; are used to a certain modern standard, in reference to their questions about central heating, and also that they’re used to a certain standard in relations to comfortable and modern health care offers, possibly having their origin within Western countries.

The people who went online in search for answers seemed to be replied within a short period of time on the interactive forums, which might underline an assumption that the interactive communication is important for the both the jihadists’ social life as well as the one’s asking questions. Underlining how the use of the Internet and social media forums are used for both information spreading and communicating in order to expand, mobilize and create social bonds across borders (Roy 2002, Toboul 2005, Rogan 2006). Some of the citations I’ve found online make it seem like they were very focused on the Internet access. Whether or not they will expand and improve the “Wi-Fi” within the Islamic State is also a big focus:

“Is it Internet there?”

“Do you think in the future they will improve wi-fi and stuff? Like it will be available to more people at once the state gets more stable and expands?”
“Do I have to clean, and make my own food?”

As one can see from the illustrated citations above, many of the questions that’s been studied relates to wanting to know about Internet and Wi-Fi, the temperature and weather, and another one asked if it’s possible to “go shopping”. As previously mentioned, earlier research (Toboul 2005) have implied that a lot of the online activity within jihadist circles are shaped and formed by typical Western models. Having in the back of our mind that a lot of the online activity is known to be shaped by Muslim immigrants, converts and students living in the West (Toboul 2005, Rogan 2006) the questions are perhaps more understandable. The questions related to Internet usage, WI-FI and whether or not their obligations to clean their own clothes are “still standing” when arriving to Syria –underlines how these people are most likely young. Tired of their obligations and restrictions in their origins and perhaps seeking for adventure without having to give up on their well-known luxuries at home (Hegghammer 2014, Sunde et.al 2013).

When reading many of the questions there is undoubtedly a lot of focus on the practical aspects of the travel and further emotional aspects prior to the wage for jihad (Rogan 2006). The user’s on Ask.fm also ask whether the jihadist ever gets scared in battles, and whether they would get proper training before joining these battles:

“Do you get scared in battles?”

“I am untrained for battle. Would I be a burden or should I still make wage for jihad?”

There are also questions related to emotions, and especially to aspects of love, and whether they should travel to Syria because of their romantic feelings:
“I think I am in love with a jihadist, what should I do?”

It’s interesting to see how the questions are relying on emotional aspects, related to having fears about “not being good enough”, and also asking questions about whether the jihadists ever sense a feeling of being scared in the battles. When the person asks question about the fear of being “a burden” it’s interesting to view the citation in light of previous research on radical Islamic extremism (Bjørgo 2011, Sunde et.al. 2013, Hegghammer 2010; 2014, Lia & Nesser 2014). Seeing how the men – as mentioned – often seemed to have been outsiders in the general society and perhaps seeking answers on the Internet in order to achieve a feeling of inclusion.

4.2.2 Jihadi Answers

The studied answers from the jihadist’s are very often encouraging, and I’ve noticed that the answers are seemingly replied on the same level (language-vice) as the questions that are asked. Whether or not this is a tactic from the ones who reply or not, is impossible to say based on this material – however it’s possible to draw assumptions in that direction. It seems like they aim to place the communication on a “low level,” and make them come across as approachable, by referring to the questioners as “their brother”, and proclaiming helping and understanding answers. These communication techniques can also be drawn upon in the lines of Nesser’s typologies (Nesser 2006). Seeing how “entrepreneurs” might be clever enough to spread information and ideology by playing the role of an understanding counter-part online, in order to recruit and educate perhaps especially the “drifters”. To illustrate; on one of the questions related to whether or not the potential foreign fighter would need to bring clothes for battling, the jihadists replied in the following way; saying that the IS (The Islamic State) would provide him with that, and further he said:

“(…) And you can also buy them here and have them custom made by a tailor.”
The illustrated answer might create a sense of exclusiveness within the milieu of the jihadists, seeking to underline how the “private tailors” can provide you with the clothes you need. On another question asking whether it would be possible to maintain the daily use of contact lenses, the answer is given by referring to an earlier fighting jihadist. He explains that another jihadist had formerly used contact lenses, but it had turned out to be a problem during battles, especially if an attack had happened surprisingly. Using up to five minutes to put the contact lenses in place, he had eventually preferred to use glasses. During the answer the jihadists uses the term “LOL” when referring to the contact lenses as being such a big problem time wise, especially during the hectic implementations during an attack. The use of slang expressions, and shortened online terms like “LOL”, and underlining the points of the answers with a dozen exclamation points is often registered, creating a compensation for the lacking ability to show off charismatic features in person (Aalen 2015). One might also assume that the people seeking answers of this character on Ask.fm are more vulnerable to the use of that type of convincing and charismatic features, and small hints and personalized messages of this character might be enough for persuasion (Nilsen 2014).

The replies from “the other end” is especially interesting to mention, when reading the answers to the worrying questions about duties, and also how the solutions very often seem to fall on their future wives, mothers or sisters. Creating an assumption that the men who wage for jihad in Syria seems to be tempted by the fact that within the radical Islamic milieus, the men are somewhat still in charge of their women, the jihadist answers:

“(…) You have to clean for yourself, unless you’re married or have your sister or mother come with you.”

This aspect is very contradicting to how people from Western countries live their lives today, and by portraying these mindsets and attitudes, they might be hoping to create an even more hostel outlook on their country or society of origin, illustrating how life could be so much “better.”
On questions that are related to how the foreign fighters can most easily cross the borders to Syria, further tips on how to make “hijra”, and on the questions regarding where to get weapons, the answer often seems to be:

“To hear the answer - message me on KIK”.

“KIK” is another type of social media that enables personal and private chatting through an app on your smart phone. KIK has over 300 million users and on the forums website their vision is stated: “We believe the smartphone era represents a transformation as big as the rise of the PC or the creation of the Internet. Your smartphone is actually part of you: always on, always connected, and always with you. And your smartphone puts the world in your pocket, wherever and whenever you want it” (KIK.com). In other words, it seems like the conversations about the “real stuff” is happening on different, more closed and private forums, which is preventing other’s from seeing the content.

As one have been able to see by the presented material, it might seem like Ask.fm is a forum which have primarily been used to attain practical information and knowledge about the wage for jihad, making it possible for jihadists to interact with possible foreign recruits to boost memberships within their milieu (Rogan 2006). Toboul’s two main objectives (2005) of information sharing and building communities online seems to be especially relevant, alongside earlier research claim of sharing information and knowledge about jihad (Rogan 2006). The simplification of religious content and ideological propaganda is penetrating the empirical data of Ask.fm, and both answers and questions are characterized by “easy language” and rhetorical features are used leaning on youthful slang and same-leveled communication (Nilsen 2014). The communication is leaning on rhetorical pathos, aiming to apply on the recipients feeling of both justice and curiosity. In many ways, this forum doesn’t seem to establish grounds for creations of newfound identities, but is more a practical arena to attain knowledge before waging for jihad. A lot of the studied participants on Ask.fm seem curious about the jihadi life style, and might be characterized as in search of their true identity. The propaganda that features the empirical data from Twitter is more ideological and political, whilst here: the focus is more directly connected to attaining practical information. The combinations of these two forums have enabled an opportunity to attain both ideological
propaganda and knowledge, combined with practical information about the wage for jihad.

As mentioned, the administrators of Ask.fm have closed down a lot of these accounts, and the accounts are no longer active in the same way that they used to be. However, when moving on to the next forum that enables a presentation of empirical data, this has not been the case – and the “jihadi bloggers” are still very active. Now, what kind of features are characterizing this platform and what can this social media bring for the “online jihadi package”?

4.3 Jihadi Bloggers on Tumblr

As previously mentioned, a Tumblr blog can in many ways be described as a personal website. The users of Tumblr blogs are the authors of their own blogs, and are able to post pictures, videos and text on these individual pages. The blogs are open and public, enabling a possibility for a global audience. As empirical data these blogs have provided a lot of visual and photographic content, generally containing ideological information and propaganda.

When discussing the need to attain an individual profile in order to fully explore the previously mentioned forum Ask.fm, this has not been the case when visiting Tumblr blogs. These blogs are open and public, while at the same time being individual and personal. The writer behind the blogs are able to create a personalized website where he or she can publish text, pictures and also answer questions and interact with the readers of the blog. The reader simply has to punch in a search word or the specific name of the Tumblr blog he or she wants to visit, and the blog and it’s features pops up. In this case, the blogs were found by using certain search words that I figured would present me with material that had connections to the radical Islamic milieu. The searching process was quite easy, and the numbers of blogs were plenty!

Both Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs are technologically built up in a way that enables online interaction between the writer and the reader. Making it possible to communicate, ask
questions and give positive or negative feedback. Whilst Ask.fm is primarily used for writing questions directly to a specific person or the owner of a certain profile, the Tumblr blogs are more personalized and the communication is shaped by the readers being able to write “comments” on the posts. To some degree one might even say that these types of blogs are somewhat resembling both Twitter and Ask.fm, because the forum enables posting pictures, writing blog-posts, and answering questions from the readers of your blog.

4.3.1 Anti-Democracy and Violence: “Jihad and the rifle alone”

The jihadi Tumblr blogs that’s been studied are seemingly shaped by a lot of ideological quotes, underlined with dark and threatening pictures - resembling much of the content which have been studied on Twitter. These blogs are obviously used by jihadists to share ideological information, in order to spread their knowledge and educate others of their ideological purpose (Rogan 2006). The jihadi blogs seem to be colored by the writer’s wish to show off their “dark side” - shaping their blog with violent pictures, showing off their weapons and generally posting frightening and horrific content (Dean 2010). The performance on these jihadi blogs enables a greater opportunity to portray their online identity in a greater way than the two other forums, because the restrictions on Tumblr are smaller than for Twitter and Ask.fm. The concept of Twitter is limited by a word limit of 140 words, and the technological features of Ask.fm limits the abilities to personalize the activity. The violence, and the accepted macho masculinity are transparent within all the studied blogs (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003) and the writer of these blogs are able to use both text, picture and videos to proclaim their ideological standing points. The features within the typology of “entrepreneurs” (Nesser 2016) is perhaps especially interesting when going through the personalized Tumblr blogs, seeing how they use the website/blog to both share ideological propaganda, pointing out the injustice and referring to important jihadi ideologues.

When using material from Tumblr blogs as empirical data for this thesis, it has enabled an ability to describe and illustrate material that is extremely violent, and crossing all borders of my initially perceived assumptions of extremism. Whilst the ideological propaganda that’s seemingly featuring Twitter, the user’s on the Tumblr blogs seems to lack all types of filters in order to portray and illustrate their violent capabilities. This might be related to the less (to
non-existing) administrative regulation on these types of blogs, and it almost seem like everything is allowed and non-regulated on these pages. What seems to characterize the Tumblr blogs is the excessive use of violent pictures, illustrating the most morbid and torturous situations. The pictures are often published with underlining citations or texts, and the texts can, in contrast to Twitter, be quite long. It’s challenging to give accurate descriptions of the studied content on the Tumblr blogs. Mainly because the data turned out to be much more graphic and violent than I imagined diving into this “scenery”. However, the content on this blogs have still been relevant for the upcoming analysis, as it portrays how the jihadists use different types of social media tools to portray and illustrate their lifestyles. From a theoretical perspective the empirical data from the Tumblr blogs have enabled an opportunity to discuss the violence and performed masculinity that are seemingly coloring the radical Islamic milieus. The studied activity indicates a specific way of performing accepted gender norms within the milieu (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003). When it comes down to the text and citations on these blogs; the Quran often seems to inspire the observed material, and the reference to Allah is rapid. Indicating how the need for information spreading, and a sharing of ideological propaganda is important also within this forum (Rogan 2006). Following, a presentation of the empirical data in the form of citations and text will be presented.

The citations and writings on the studied Tumblr blogs are very often portrayed and illustrated by referring to “the others” (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004) as something lesser, or at least someone they want to continue their fight against:

“For every day that passes along, we gain strength, by Allah’s grace, and you become weaker.”

As one can read from this type of outings, the writer initiates a process of how their ultimate goals will be achieved, and that for each passing day their enemies becomes weaker. By referring to a greater goal they are able to underline the reasons for the much needed separation and polarization, and their strengthening correlates with the ongoing fight “for Allah”. The same type of underlining message is observed on a posted picture, portraying a man posing in a battlefield armed with his weapon:
“We’ll be victorious despite the global crusader coalition - with the permission from Allah”

This picture seems to be a popular posting amongst the online jihadists, as the picture is spotted on several blogs, and websites. The picture illustrates a man posing while wearing black clothes, which is also covering his face. On the background of the picture one gets a glimpse of several airplanes flying above wrecked buildings, illustrating a wounded town that has turned into a hardened battlefield. The citation seems to point to their enemies, and that they – with Allah on their side – will be able to win their final battles and “be victorious”. A lot of the references on the blogs relates to religious and ideological aspects. All of these references can underline how the use of online forums and social media, have enabled an opportunity to fight for the global Salafi jihad. Focusing on the “far enemy” instead of the “near enemy” (Sageman 2004:158). The war is not only happening within the war conflicted areas, it’s also happening actively online – aiming to spread religious convincement and ideological propaganda to as many as possible. The accessibility and high publicity (Hegghammer 2014) that are featuring the conflicts within the Middle East are providing a newfound technological ability to join forces globally. The Internet has enabled an easy way to read, consume and indoctrinate ideological radical Islamic propaganda through easy accessible social media forums.

The language and rhetorical techniques used on the Tumblr blogs are often, as mentioned, featured by violent and direct form of communication, leaning on rhetorical pathos (Eide 2006, Nilsen 2014) One particular citation seems to be often spotted on the Tumblr blogs, and is featured on many pictures, often alongside the jihadists while they’re posing with their deadly weapons:

“Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues”

This particular message is known to have its origin from the 1980s, when Shaykh ’Abdullah Yusuf ’Azzam answered to the “(...) encroachments of the Western and communist worlds into Islamic lands” (McGregor 2003). Shaykh ’Abdullah Yusuf ’Azzam was known for
playing a leading role when establishing the modern concept of Islamic jihad (McGregor 2003). The citation leaves little room for creative interpretation, and one immediately sits with an understanding that jihad is about fighting for your end goals, fighting the injustice that’s been brought upon them by the West. Stating how the assets and features that colors and shapes the founding characteristics of democracy are, to put it nicely: unnecessary.

Further the writers of the jihadi Tumblr blogs seem eager to present the concept of jihad as the only solution, underlining how the jihad in itself should be viewed as the true meaning of life:

“Jihad is the peak of Islam”

And further, in another collected citation from a blog post – again – the text underlines a picture. This time the picture illustrates an old man, smiling from ear to ear whilst holding a gun in his hand. The man has a long beard, and also holds his other hand up, pointing his finger towards the sky. Under the picture, the following citation is written:

“Does he seem too old? Or perhaps, too weak? He is 83 years old”

The following citation on the picture seems to provide an assumption that age simply doesn’t matter when waging for jihad. A concept of jihad as being something for everyone is penetrating and they’re making a clear effort in illustrating how they’ll make room for everyone, despite their possible shortcomings. Moreover, and not to mention, they’re also underlining the fact that no excuse is good enough, when deciding not participate in jihad. The “normalization” of jihad is penetrating when going through the online citations on Tumblr, and the jihadists aims to underline how their mission is “right” and the actions and culture of the West is “kufr”. (Nilsson 2015).

When earlier elaborating on the concept of a “romantic death” on Twitter, this is also noticeable on the studied Tumblr blogs. Perhaps especially on the Tumblr blogs does the
concept of, and underlining of martyrdom seems important. The men who writes these blogs seems eager to present their view to dying as something beautiful, leaving no doubt about their view to martyrdom, and what they perceive and promote as being the end goal for all “real” Muslims (Nilsson 2015). Both of the following citations can illustrate:

“Dying - means absolutely nothing to me, but Allah means the world to me”

Further:

“On every path there exists a shortcut - and the shortcut to Paradise is through Jihad”

As I mentioned earlier a lot of the citations, texts and pictures on the Tumblr blogs show references to quotes in the Quran, or re-cites quotations from famous jihadists (McGregor 2003). The citations mentioned above illustrates how the romantic view to dying in battle is used as an important technique to provide a heroic view to the fallen jihadists, making it seem like the martyrdom – or dying in battle – is the ultimate goal in itself. These charismatic figures (Bjørgo 2011), and the reference to the Quran establishes a seductive and romanticized view to the violence within the milieus of extremists (Katz, in Copes, Heith & Tropalli 2010).

The collected empirical data for this thesis have provided an outlook on the different use of social media forums within radical Islamic milieus. Twitter have initially provided me with much more specific cited material leaning upon “intellectual” ideological propaganda often based on humor and irony. The data on Ask.fm have served this thesis with information about online scenery to collect practical information prior to a wage for jihad, and the life within Syrian borders. Finally, the empirical data from Tumblr blogs have served me with a lot more (and perhaps surprisingly) violent photographic content, leaning on religious and ideological references. The studied jihadi bloggers are serving their readers with a morbid and extremely violent way of presenting themselves online.
On the following chapter of analysis, the empirical data and illustrations of the online activity on Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr will be further elaborated on. Altogether, the collected data have enabled an opportunity to study jihadists’ online activity and performance, showing how three different social media forums are used quite differently, and creating an “online package” for jihad. Online identities and communities can be established, seemingly shaped and formed by rhetorical techniques – drawing upon masculinity, brotherhood, violence and polarization.
5. To Persuade With Online Rhetoric`s

For this chapter I will be discussing the empirical material, while at the same time aiming to show relevance to the theoretical framework. I aim to discuss the most relevant aspects of my material, in a way that, in my opinion, seeks to answer the research questions in the most adequate way. The main goal of this analysis chapter is to evaluate and discuss the jihadists “online performance” on the three social media platforms, Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs (Goffman 1956, Van Dijck 2013). Illustrating how radical Islamists use these platforms differently and possibly in order to expand and further their recruitment (Toboul 2005). I address how the social media forums might help to establish a newfound identity, and initially discussing how networking and bonding across social media forums enables an opportunity to create online communities. “Communities” that might end up feeling like a valid replacement for the general, and not always successfully, achieved social integration in society.

I have earlier aimed to present and describe the use of pictures, text, language, symbols and “emojis” on all of these social media forums, seeking to illustrate the different rhetorical and charismatic tools and assets that are taken advantage of, in order to portray a certain understanding and illustration of jihadist’s life online (Nilsen 2014, Rogan 2006). These features will be further addressed, when discussing how the aspects and characteristics of the collected material and citations from Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs might influence and enhance sympathizers’ feelings and pull-effects towards joining a radical Islamic milieu.

When the empirical collection of data took place for this thesis, and during the starting phase of the analytical approach, the tools for analyzing started with, as mentioned in the chapter of method, a process of initial coding (Charmaz 2006). Going through the grounds of my data, collecting material and letting the material speak for it selves was important, and the categorization of the material happened on a very general level at that point. During this phase, the main categorization connoted to theories of marginalization. More specifically a very general hypothesis that the people who eventually looked for online fellowship and camaraderie of this sort, were people who were in serious need for attention and people who,
for different reasons, had been left out of their general surrounding society (Bjørgo 2011, Nesser 2013, Hegghammer 2014). Other researchers’ work had pointed to jihadists, and discussed the overbearing story related to especially foreign fighters as being young people, generally been placed on the lower scale of society both culturally and economically and these theoretical assumptions colored my phase of initial coding (Nesser 2013, Hegghammer 2014). During some time, when moving forward to the phase of focused coding, the categorization got more specific in relations to my research questions, and the categorization illustrated somewhat of a process, initiating how the online propaganda on Twitter, interaction on Ask.fm and the postings on Tumblr blogs illustrated an online guide towards the radical Islamic milieus (Stenersen 2015, Weimann 2006). Drawing upon earlier research the collected material, it enables a discussion of how online communities are formed within radical jihadist milieus, and how these types of communities might be of quite importance among Muslim extremist diasporas (Rogan 2006).

A similar use was noticed, characterized by the different rhetorical tools of convincing, which seemed to stretch from an online performance of macho masculinity (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003), to violence and polarization underlined with a heroic view to violence and martyrdom (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). These three categories will form and shape the main discussion for the upcoming analysis. However, before I take on that task, I want to elaborate further on the theoretical aspects of rhetoric’s and the social power that lies in personal characteristics, as well as in our language (Nilsen 2014). The concept of establishing charismatic leaders and as earlier research points out, the means of “followers and drifters” (Bjørgo 2011) becomes quite literal when doing research on social media. Attaining “followers” and supporters is one of the first and foremost ways to proclaim your popularity online, and the way we interact with these “followers” are crucial when defining this modern form of social capital (Aalen 2015:128-131).

5.1 Online Radical Islamic Propaganda

The social media platform, Twitter, reportedly has over 320 million users each month (Twitter.com), and the administrators of the forum have had a much less active role in regulating violent ideological outings. To compare with one of the most famous social media
forums, the administrators of Facebook have been much stricter about regulating extreme
utterances, and this might be one of the main reason for the rapid use of Twitter amongst
jihadists. A couple of years ago Facebook was frequently used by radical milieus, by creating
open and closed “groups”, for members who shared the same radical Islamic views. One
example is the Norwegian group “The Prophets Ummah”, where all of their mobilization first
started on Facebook (Sunde 2013). The Prophets Ummah is a network of Norwegian militant
salafists following an anti-democratic ideology, and violent rhetorical statements and violent
encouragements initially characterized their Facebook group. The administrators on Facebook
have frequently closed down these types of groups almost as soon as they’d been opened
during the last years, including the one mentioned. This, however, have not been the case for
Twitter accounts, and in a report provided by New America, the following is stated:

ISIS relies on a multifaceted online strategy to recruit and advice potential foreign
fighters and supporters. This includes both active efforts by individuals with social
media accounts to recruit and organize other individuals as well as more broad-based
dissemination of propaganda. In the fall of 2014, J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan
estimated that there were “no fewer than 46,000 Twitter accounts supporting ISIS”
overtly and a maximum of 90,000 ISIS supporter accounts on Twitter (Bergen et. al.
2015:7).

Even though Twitter was, at first, a social media forum were all political statements would be
allowed, and free speech would be ranked as a number one priority, and as mentioned, where
there was little administrative controlling – something changed early in the month of February
of 2016. According to the British national daily newspaper The Guardian, Twitter have now
deleted more than 125,000 accounts linked to terrorists, and the company stated the following
on February 5th: “We condemn the use of Twitter to promote violent terrorism. (...) This type
of behavior, or any violent threats, is not permitted on our service” (Yadron, Danny-
February 5th of 2016, The Guardian). Twitter had, according to The Guardian, received a lot
of pressure from Western politicians to help collaborate in the fight against the Islamic State,
and other sympathizers. The radical Islamic sympathizers doesn`t, however, seem to be
worried about the more active administrative regulations, and to illustrate; one tweeting
jihadist responded in the following way:
“Dear Twitter Administration – You can suspend and delete all the accounts you want, but you are not going to win this fight” (*Laughing smiley*)

Twitter provides the users with an ability to join forces in spreading their beliefs and ideologies, especially enabled by the use of the so-called “hashtags”. These hashtags have spread across the Internet and on other social media forums in general, but in the beginning they were originally characterized and connoted to Twitter as a social media forum. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, by using these hashtags, the information and messages (or so-called “tweets”) are easily traced by the same search word, which one might assume can create a sense of group identity, or at least an understanding of whom is “on your side” and supports your point of view. When specific search- or key words are connected with a hashtag it enables an ability to measure how many people that are talking about the same subject, and it also enables an opportunity to show global and public support for certain events, ideologies or political statements. This is not, however, unique for radical Islamic milieus and jihadists alone, but it’s interesting to investigate how these innocent social media tools might provoke unintended consequences, when enabling such an easy way for people to connect and share their ideas, globally.

It’s stated that extremists’ usage of the Internet is similar to every other regular user of the Internet (Sunde et.al. 2013). They are focused on building social relations, reaching new contacts, further recruitment, and to hide themselves if necessary (Weimann 2004, Sunde et.al. 2013:27). The active use of social media forums amongst jihadists underlines how “high publicity” (Hegghammer 2014) can be seen and valued as one of the main reasons for a further recruitment. The ability to use social media to attain “accessibility” is also noticed (Hegghammer 2014) and provided by Ask.fm, in the form of encouraging rebellion, and giving practical information about the travel to Syria. The way the jihadists perform within these social media forums are seemingly enabling an opportunity to spread both ideological propaganda and practical information, making it possible to provide sympathizers worldwide with information about the ideological and political goals, as well as information of how to reach the war conflicted areas (Rogan 2006, Toboul 2005).
There is no doubt that the Twitter accounts, as well as the forums Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs are rapidly being used in order to spread and infiltrate the forums with information about radical Islamic propaganda, and different tools are being used in order to spread and expand the beliefs of the milieus. When going through the three forums, and more specifically studying the accounts and blogs, I automatically got an understanding that the social media forums are important in order for the jihadists to stay, to some degree, anonymous - and in order for them to make themselves, and their ideological mindsets more available. The citations, tweets and pictures written on the forums seem to be, to some extent, well planned and with a long-term goal in mind. Multiple of the texts, and especially the tweets have so-called “typos” (misspellings) at several occasions, however the language is still written in a way that makes it screams for attention, and their voices seems to be heard by the one’s they seek to attract (Nilsen 2014). To some degree the misspellings and the use of shortened online slang seems to be part of their online performance making them seem approachable and meeting their online viewers and readers on “their level”.

The people behind all the studied accounts both on Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs are all extremely engaged in sharing radical Islamic ideology, and they have rapidly been sharing political statements and encouragement for violence, in order to (according to themselves) achieve specific goals for the future. The “staging” (Goffman 1951; 1956) within these people`s accounts are profound, and they seem to take use of several different measures in order to portray themselves in the way they find necessary to achieve either respect, or fear from their followers or readers. As briefly mentioned, a characterizing difference between the use of the three forums is how Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs seem to be used in order to spread more “practical” information related to waging for jihad, and that the forums seem to primarily be used by the young adults, contrasting to what have been the perception on Twitter. When presenting some of the questions from the forum Ask.fm, and illustrating the way these people use the forum to attain practical information prior to their wage for jihad in Syria, one can see how it’s profoundly different from what has been registered on the mentioned jihadist’s Twitter accounts. In many ways, the rhetoric’s on Twitter can be viewed as personalized ideological propaganda inspired by the quotes and information from IS’s propaganda magazine – Dabiq. However, the language is taken down to basics, being

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3 Dabiq is an online magazine published by The Islamic State.
presented on a more “personal” level. It might seem to be three levels surrounding the ideological online performance within radical Islamic milieus, supplementing the professional and sophisticated journalistic propaganda on Dabiq, with a more “personal” ideological propaganda on Twitter, going further to the practical information and extension of knowledge on Ask.fm, and presenting graphic content and ideological texts and quotes on Tumblr blogs.

The language in itself, both on Twitter, Ask.fm and the Tumblr blogs, seems to be pretty “easy”. The jihadist’s use a lot of slang expressions, and the use of emojis and symbols seems to be especially popular, and are rapidly used on all three forums. An “emoji” is a small icon or smiley that can be used within interactive communication, both on your smart phone and your computer. They look like small symbols, and they’re used to illustrate certain emotions, or underline ironic, sad, or enthusiastic feelings. These symbols and emojis are rapidly used, and very often provided in an over exaggerated amount on the jihadist’s online accounts, often to underline specific points (Aalen 2015). In addition, the term “LOL”, which I earlier mentioned, stands for someone who is “laughing out loud”, and other shortened online terms are often used, which make help the jihadist’s come across as younger, and more “hip”. The use of smiley’s is perhaps especially profound in the jihadi tweets, and very often, as you have been able to see by the presented tweets: one alone - is not enough. The rapid use of emojis and symbols might also be related to the restricted word limit on Twitter, and it might enable a chance to underline your statement, when you’re short for words. The combination of the use of hearted symbols, smiley’s that laughs, and expressions like “LOL” establishes a youthful atmosphere online, and one might be left with an understanding that no questions or citations are “dumb”, and the threshold for asking questions on Ask.fm, and to join the writing of ideological propaganda comes across as low.

As one can see from the presented empirical data, many of the outings can easily be referred to when discussing rhetorical features, and they also show examples of how the use of irony and sarcasm might highlight, and at the same time; underline a political and ideological agenda or identity. Anne Birgitta Nilsen (2014) defines sarcasm in the following way: “Sarcasm is a set of mocking and grim remarks, with a more or less; humoristic tone. The sarcasm is very often directed to a specific person in order to mock and humiliate the individual” (Nilsen 2014:33). Sarcasm, in this hence, is very often used on social media in
general, and it seems to be an important rhetorical tool in order to portray your agenda, when performing within your cyber identity (Aalen 2015, Nilsen 2014, Sunde et.al. 2013). The use of sarcasm can be described as a neutralizing technique, which defuses the violent outings.

5.1.1 Neutralization of Violent Messages

Rhetorical neutralization techniques, and disclaiming of responsibility for the violent and deadly terrorist attacks in the West can often be noticed in the jihadists’ social media outings, both on Twitter and the other two studied forums. The theory of neutralization techniques provided by Sykes and Matza (1957) is appropriate in this sense – especially in relations to their point about the neutralization of personal responsibility by *appealing to higher loyalties*. The men online are actively aiming to proclaim themselves as not responsible for the jihadists (or their own) violent actions, based on their “duty” and obligations as a Muslim, by referring to a “higher power” (Vertigans 2009). It seems like they aim to persuade themselves, and as many others as possible, to believe that the true meaning of life will be brought to them if they only follow this so-called “duty”.

For instance, through many of the tweets, texts and illustrated pictures on the different forums, the jihadists actively engage in placing a doubt on the Western media coverage of Islam. Making statements that no one, except “true” Muslims can understand their duties, and their fundamental beliefs. In a way they neutralize the bad actions performed by violent radical Islamic milieus, when referring to something more important, and beyond their powers (Juergensmeyer 2003). To one extent, one can be left with a feeling that their ideological and religious motivations and beliefs, makes them free from all responsibility. The jihadists on Twitter seem especially eager to motivate and encourage violent actions in order to proclaim their political views, and they know, and work hard for their tweets and statements to reach out globally (Nesser 2013, Nilsen 2014).

This type of neutralization when referring to the violent actions is profound, and takes place on all of the studied social medias. As mentioned in the previous chapter, one particular tweet is quoting the Quran (8:70) saying that: “*If Allah finds any good in your heart, He will give*
you something better than what has been taken from you.” This message in itself, and the reference to the Quran can especially be related to the theory of neutralization (Lilly, et.al. 2011:103-104). In this hence the tweet can be related, more specifically to the appeal to higher loyalties, and further a denial of responsibility; meaning that the actions are viewed to be beyond their control, in other words; hinting that the “forces” were too strong, and that the actions eventually became inevitable. Secondly, is a denial of the victim; meaning that the (following, and ongoing) actions was deserved due to the circumstances of the “holy war”. And, finally a condemnation of the condemners; meaning that it’s acceptable to perform violent actions because, in this case, the West deserves it based on injustice, and due to all the that: “(...) has been taken from you”. It’s clear through tweets like these that the online jihadists aim to illustrate how religion, and their own ideology and political agenda will “save” other Muslims living in the West. They will “help” those who live within a democratic society, and they proclaim how “true” justice will be given in the end. One might perceive tweets and texts like these as leaning profoundly on the rhetorical pathos (Nilsen 2014:23). The way these online tweets and messages are formulated makes it noticeable that the writer aims to push the recipients’ feelings, either by provoking a feeling of injustice, and/or seeking to underline a feeling of being left outside of the goods in society. In the tweet above, the jihadist mentions Allah, and further the “good in your heart”, where the writer seizes to point to the recipients’ consciousness, which is an important tool within the rhetorical tool of pathos. Aiming to activate and provoke especially people’s negative feelings, enhancing a feeling of injustice, or making them dig into their bad self-esteem or guilt, is key within the rhetorical pathos (Nilsen 2014).

Picking up the thread from what’s mentioned above, the online jihadist’s language is “down to earth”; using smiley’s and typical youthful slang words. The messages and texts are often based on irony and humor, when at the same time they’re sending out violent and threatening messages. Even though these types of rhetorical tools are also differencing from the original meaning behind neutralization provided by Sykes and Matza (1957), the discussion is interesting. Seeing how symbols, irony and words of slang might also help to “neutralize” the message, making the content seem less threatening, while at the same time the being both violent and deterrent. The way the rhetoric’s are presented creates a sense of “distancing” between the writing jihadist and the actual attacks, and the presented violent messages might
become easier to write. One of the illustrated tweets refers to attacks that’s been happening in Kenya, and the jihadist is obviously feeding on the fright and insecurity that’s imminently marking societies after such tragedies. The way the tweeter sends a threat, referring to how the “kufars” in Kenya “just woke lions up” illustrates how the jihadists feeds on fear, and searches for societies to become torn apart, presumably knowing that this is important for their further recruitment. Creating fear and split societies, is key for further recruitment to radical milieus, furthering a feeling of a polarized world. These types of techniques for polarization will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 5.2 addressing jihadist’s performance and online tools feeding on violence and polarization.

When moving forward in the analysis, there are certain aspects within the empirical data that will be addressed more thoroughly. First of all, I will now be discussing the rhetorical characteristic within the online forums in relations to their use of brother-sister terminologies. The terminologies of “my brothers” or “my sisters” are rapidly used, and the need and obligation to fulfill your duty as a Muslim, for “your brothers” is noticed many times, both on Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs. Direct talk about Islam as a religion, on the other hand, seems to be quite rare, and the use of “brotherhood” seems to be one of the most important factors within my empirical framework. The use of these sibling-terminologies might enable a sense of group belonging, and might also be signalizing a perception of unconditional support and love within these types of milieus. When having in mind, that most of the people who wage for jihad in Syria (at least the ones from Norway) are people who have fallen on the outside of the regular social society, it’s not difficult to understand that these temptations of inclusion and an unconditional “brotherhood,” is very much tempting. They seem to promote a group culture that endures anything, and includes everyone who’s willing to follow “Gods way”. The following aspects will be addressed in the upcoming chapter, discussing and elaborating further on the jihadists performance of masculinity and brotherhood (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003).
5.2 Performing Accepted Masculinity Within the “Cyber Brotherhood”

As mentioned earlier in chapter three, the studied accounts on Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs are, as far as my knowledge, written and moderated by male figures. The importance of the jihadists underlining, and expressing an extremely “macho” culture (Fangen 2003) is noticeable on all the accounts, both in style and writing, which have already been illustrated and described. When aiming to further discuss how the jihadists aim to portray themselves in this masculine way, it’s important to show reference to the way they shape and design their profiles, aiming to gain respect, or to spread fear. On almost every account studied, one is presented with a profile picture, were the men are posing in a hyper-masculine way. In this case, their profile pictures feature the negotiation process of being perceived as hyper-masculine online (Connell 1995). The profile pictures are characterized by them showing off their weapons and guns, posing with other jihadists, often within something resembling a battlefield. The profile pictures often have threatening messages written on them, and the jihadists are often posing with serious mines looking straight into the camera.

The Tumblr blogs are especially featured with a lot of pictures of the violent kind, and the pictures are feeding on an assumption that “real men” play out their masculine roles by portraying and performing violence. The studied jihadists or radical Islamic sympathizers on Twitter and the Tumblr blogs are especially focused on displaying and portraying themselves as hyper masculine, providing an assumption that they have no fears in (or for) their life. The points of masculinity when discussing radicalization and violent Islamic cultures in general, have also been pointed to by Deeyah Khan, who’s addressed the dilemma by elaborating on how Muslim men growing up within Western societies, might be left with contradicting feelings in regards to society’s gender expectations (Khan 2015). She discusses issues that might follow when someone grows up under conflicting societal expectations, and how this might inflict on their identity. The conflict between being a good Muslim man, and being a good Western man might implicate difficulties, and also: the culture differences between the family and society might provoke a feeling of misplacement for some of the young men who wage for radical milieus. The words of Deeyah Khan are interesting in this sense, related
more specifically to her study on Muslim men in the Western world, and radical Islamists (Khan 2014). She points out how the Western Muslims grow up within a contradicting world, having issues finding out what type of masculine role they should take upon. She points out interesting issues, and a hypothesis that is relevant to discuss in this hence. There is no doubt that the average modern man living in Western countries, now, has a much more care giving role in the family and society in general, than what was the case earlier - and perhaps still is the case within many Muslim countries and Muslim families living in the West. Related to these cultural differences its eligible to assume that there might be difficulties in relations to finding the middle road, and having your feet grounded and “secure” within both parties.

Looking back at history that colors the conflicts in the Middle East, it’s also safe to say that there might be contradicting feelings towards the West. Deciding which foot to stand on, when your feet might be placed in both camps, or somewhere right in between can be difficult, and perhaps are these contradicting feelings and emotions harder than we presume. When being aware of these issues, “small” contradictions might become big, and masculinity, and being able to “find yourself” might become more important than ever. These issues can be drawn upon in the light of Katrine Fangen’s (2003) research within a different radical milieu; the right wing skinheads. In this study of right-wing extremists, she refers to Connell (1995) and his interpretation of the crisis within masculinity and within the gender order as a whole, due to modernity and its consequences on the traditional gender structure. Fangen (2003) states the following: “In other words, ritualized, dominant, violent forms of masculinity can be interpreted not only as ancient masculinities, displaced in modern society. Rather one can see them as distinct solutions to the dilemmas of modern societies, and the processes of individualization leading on ontological insecurity and the need to cope with the threats against a congruent self-feeling” (Fangen 2003:188). According to Connell (1995), and Fangen (2003) the terms of performing masculinity is always negotiated, in different social settings, according to what is viewed or felt as necessary.

There is little doubt that the jihadists need to perform and portray a specific accepted form of masculinity, and possibilities of being perceived as in lack of this accepted masculinity is profoundly avoided amongst the online jihadists. The negotiation of performed masculinity in ongoing situations (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003) might be formed by their perceptive view to
their surroundings, and the extreme and violent performed masculinity might also in this types of milieu occur as a result of the “rigid division between us and them” as referred to by Fangen, further explaining how they: “(...) actively reject the more “postmodern” identity projects of individuals who accept the diversity and ambivalence of multiple belonging” (Fangen 2003:187). The extreme performance of the violent and extreme masculinity might be observed in the use of symbols, pictures, text and citations on all of the mentioned social media forums. And as I mentioned earlier, when collecting empirical data from Twitter and Tumblr blogs especially, the accounts are penetrated with violent and extreme content. The colors that shape these profiles are, without exception, black and dark. They pose with weapons and guns, and illustrate and underline their competence (Pedersen & Sandberg 2009) in relations to violence, battling and standing firm within their ideological belief. The reference to having multiple belongings (Fangen, 2003) is relevant when discussing radical Islamic milieus, showing reference to how the jihadists seek to portray an enemy line between themselves and the West.

When discussing the ongoing polarization-process that’s happening online between the West and the Mid-East, we can also spot how the ability to perform and “do gender” (Goffman 1977) that correlates with the society´s expectations can provide further polarization. As mentioned, Khan (2015) elaborates on the contradicting roles and expectations, which can be found within a Muslim family, and how these may not always correlate with the expectations that form a modern Western society. The contradicting differences of what it means to “be a man” within these extremist radical milieus and the general Western societies can, in sum, cause some men to believe that it’s natural for a “masculine” man to act violently. Khan (2015) elaborates on how, when the children’s desire to live up to their parents expectations don’t go hand in hand with the general society’s demands, the young men might feel dis-masculinized. And because of that; they might overcompensate in other areas, whenever they feel vulnerable as to others perception of their achieved masculinity. Khan writes how one of her informants’ describes jihadists as being: “very macho ... they’re some kind of Alfa males”. Further addressing how they often felt like they were in lack of respect. And, in a position where they feel like they wouldn’t earn respect within The West no matter what- they would rather prefer to be feared (Khan 2015).
Additionally, the aspects of masculinity might be drawn upon when referring to the foreign fighters that have left Norway, to wage for jihad in Syria (Hegghammer 2014). One might be tempted to draw parallels to masculinity in itself, and the fact that being an outsider throughout your youth might encourage you to make a rebellion, by demanding some sort of respect – or at least; fear. One might get a feeling that the jihadist’s online shape each other, and that they make up their own new hyper-masculine portrait of themselves, in correspondence and relations to each other (Connell, 1995; Rogan, 2006). The performance of this violent and extreme masculinity is pointed to, in relations to the skinheads, by Fangen (2003:190) when she points out the asset of body capital brought up by Bourdieu (1993). These men’s “staging” (Goffman, 1956) of themselves on social media forums, posing with weapons and guns – might illustrate an over-compensation, due to their lacking ability to assert themselves within the hegemonic areas of society, and it might be interpreted as a way of regaining a feeling of control and respect.

The discussion revolving around the men’s constant negotiation of performing accurately within the expected gender norms of masculinity (Goffman, 1977; Connell, 1995; Fangen, 2003) is also interesting when being made aware of a contradicting feature of the posing with weapons and “deadly eyes” to suddenly and surprisingly including an element of posing with small, furry cats. For some reason, on various accounts, there will show up pictures of different jihadists holding a cat, and one might wonder for what reason. Showing of the soft side? Portraying his sensitivity? Perhaps based on a need to show his good heart, and the direction of his moral compass? The same might relate to all the pictures one can find of the battle-hardened jihadists, whom all of a sudden embrace each other in the middle of a battle. These images are interesting, and portray a very contradicting side to the Islamic radical milieu, and one might wonder whether it’s all part of a well-established propaganda device, in order to portray a camaraderie and “brotherhood” that can’t be match by anything or anyone else than the jihadist’s themselves (Rogan, 2006, Nesser, 2016).
5.2.1 Online Community

It might now seem like the studied social media forums are infiltrated with only darkness and violence provided by the online jihadists. That is not the case, and it would be difficult to point out reasons to join these types of milieus, if they were all staging themselves as individualists fighting to achieve these accepted and feared masculine features, and further: a wish to be perceived as the most macho man in the “crowd”. A lot of the presumably accepted and performed masculine features (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003) within the radical jihadists’ milieu on social media are colored by communication and community (Toboul 2005, Rogan 2006). There are multiple signs of brotherhood, and to some degree: an online staging of a “romantic” camaraderie within the studied online milieus. And, initially this milieu is portrayed in a way that seems to aim towards making you feel like you’re missing out of something big, if you’re not able to become “one of them”. One of the first aspects one is actually presented with when going onboard the “online train” to jihad is, and perhaps surprisingly, the perceived brotherhood and advertised camaraderie in the tweets, texts or pictures.

This brotherhood and the advertised camaraderie are noticeable both in the tweets, the Tumblr blogs and on Ask.fm (Rogan 2006). Perhaps especially on the Tumblr blogs, where the advertising is often followed up with pictures, that’s being posted either alone, or alongside the message or text. These pictures are seemingly characterized of an embracing “manhood,” showing and making sure to underline the tight bonds that occur between the jihadists. These tight bonds are especially promoted to occur between the foreign fighters in Syria, creating some sort of advertisement for the one’s seeking for this kind of brotherhood (Nesser 2016). The pictures can only best be described as some sort of romantic male collectiveness, showing how men embrace in the sunset, how they’re eating all types of great meals together, and generally sharing everything from clothes, weapons to women. One of the pictures especially underlines these types of connotations to a great brotherhood, showing how three men embrace each other whilst smiling, with an underlining text saying that: “Jihad is beautiful”. Referring to each other as “brothers and sisters” is also very common on the studied accounts, and the expressions and violent messages are often “softened” by referring to their “brotherhood” and their moral duties as Muslims. The use of these types of rhetorical tools (Nilsen 2014) in order to proclaim their beliefs, and perhaps further recruit despite their
violent encouragement, can also be described as a form of neutralization technique. Making it easier to maintain a belief that violent actions, terrorist attacks and the constant fight against the West is legitimate and necessary due to both their moral and religious duties, and because of their view of the West as being the actual enemy (Lilly, et.al. 2011:103-104, Lia & Nesser 2014).

It’s an interesting aspect seeing how social media forums might enable this type of camaraderie and brotherhood, because it’s an observed fact that the radical Islamic milieu are actively aiming to illustrate and expand globally, by feeding on rhetorical and charismatic features related to unity and camaraderie online. A hypothesis related to consequences of social media on marginalized groups, is called the “equalization hypothesis” (Aalen 2015:200). This hypothesis claims that marginalized groups and unknown people can become more powerful in their public opinions, because of the accessibility to social media forums. The hypothesis stands as a contrast to the “normalization hypothesis” which claims that original power structures are reflected in social media’s as well (Aalen, 2015:200). Even though Aalen (2015) is originally relating the presentation of these hypotheses to political parties, I find them relevant to mention, also, in this hence. The point of this reference, relates to how marginalized people, who might be categorized as “marginalized” for a various of different reasons, becomes capable of creating themselves a new cyber-identity (Rogan 2006:11), and further connecting with other people online who might have been facing some of the same struggles. Even though nothing indicates that social media’s are about to outsource the traditional face-to-face contact (Aalen 2015) it’s important to underline how these forums might be, for some people, the main tool to achieve social contact and a feeling of inclusion.

If one seeks to discuss and address the ability to attain meaningful online social relations: all of the mentioned social media forums enable the opportunity to manifest and directly count your “supporters.” Twitter provides you with the ability to have so-called “followers”, and you’re able to follow the people you choose, – from whom you want to receive tweets, and updates from. This ability to follow and be followed can; in other words, be understood as a modern online way to feel acknowledged, and to portray and display your popularity (Aalen
The participants on these social media forums are further easily relatable to the typologies provided by Nesser (2016) initially underlining the different personalities that shape and form a typical terrorist cell. The online community seems to be shaped by “entrepreneurs”, “misfits” and “drifters”, all summing up the bits and pieces to complete a group. The people who have more “followers” might be characterized as the “charismatic persons motivated by idealism and a strong sense of justice (…)” (Bjørgo 2011:280) and further knowing that these people are often altruistic, resourceful and well integrated they can come across as role models for the “drifters” (Bjørgo 2011, Nesser 2016). Research further implies how these youths need for belonging within a group might sometimes overrule other considerations, and that being part of a militant group might enable a feeling of a powerful identity (Rogan 2006). Being that these social media forums break down a lot of social and practical barriers, it’s possible to state that they also provide an easy access to a group belonging, either as a traditional or charismatic leader, a “role model” or as a “follower” (Weber 2000, Bjørgo 2011,
When actively using social media forums, proclaiming to be part of a milieu, and not to mention when writing and having your questions answered by jihadists, it might enhance a feeling of being part of a milieu or a group. It might enhance the feeling of being part of “something bigger” than yourself, and it might be seen as a valid replacement for a lack of social relations in “the real world.” Even though it might be difficult to imagine, research within social information processing theory (Aalen 2015) have shown that it’s completely possible to develop near, and personal relations through interactive communication, it just takes a bit more time (Aalen 2015:52). Being that these social media forums doesn’t provide you with the same ability to interact face-to-face, the features of real life communication seems to be compensated with different rhetorical aspects, such as emojis, smiley’s and others symbols (Nilsen 2014). Aalen (2015:52) addresses this subject by referring to how, when we are unable to change the tone in our voice, underline our feelings and thoughts with facial expressions, and not to mention our body language, we have to compensate by using words, more letters, symbols and tokens to underline our points. These aspects are easy to observe in all the studied social media forums, and on interactive forum like these, the use of rhetoric’s and tools to portray charismatic features seems to be very important in order for the jihadists to portray their online identity.

The social media tools provide us with an ability to be constantly “on”, making ourselves available for other people´s opinions, statements or need for confirmation (Aalen 2015). By being able to get in contact, or to be contacted at every hour of the day, the online relationships might feel and be comprehended as very important. When the jihadists use social media forums to promote radical Islamic propaganda, to chat with possible sympathizers and further blog about your experiences in the battlefield, they are actively making themselves available for people who might just need someone. In the beginning it might not even matter who they receive advice from, or who´s providing them with a listening ear; as long as it´s someone. With the fear of giving the jihadists too much credit, it might seem like they know exactly what they´re doing. It also seems like they use these different forums in ways that enables them to be contacted, and enables them to inspire, and possibly working for their ideology to be internalized by their online recipients.
5.3 Violence and Polarization: A Matter of “Duty”

There is little doubt left, when going through the empirical data from Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs that a lot of the online recruitment tactics and a further expansion of radical Islamic milieus might lie in certain individual’s ability to persuade and convince others to join their side, and take parts in their fight (Nilsen 2014). A second important rhetorical feature that seems to penetrating within the collected material is the jihadist’s aim to place focus on creating symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár 2002). They strive towards underlining the manifesting gap between “them” and “us” – as in “them versus The West”, and democracy ruling is particularly marked as a true enemy. By creating and enhancing these symbolic boundaries they seem to create an even bigger illusion of the importance related to their “mission”, and at the same time they enable a greater feeling of a symbolic, restricted and limited “brotherhood”. Even though the “online community” might come across as exclusive, it’s also perceived as open and to some degree including. As I mentioned when going through the empirical data, almost all of the tweets and texts I’ve come across and collected were written in English. If the tweets and accounts were written in Arabic or other languages, I’ve found that the “online jihadists” often seemed to post even more violent pictures and videos, to make up for the fact that some people’s attention might be lost due to a language barrier. Underlining previous research (Nesser 2013), being that they want and strive for global attention, and that they strive for their messages to be read and understood by as many as possible (Sunde et.al. 2013).

On Twitter, the jihadists are often “tweeting” encouraging messages about converting to Islam, and they also encourage violent and deadly actions for the ones who do not follow the “right” road. These aspects can be related to the term “religious nationalism” which is drawn upon by Stephen Vertigans (2009): “The concept of religious nationalism is defined as ‘a community of religious people or the political movement of a group of people heavily influenced by religious beliefs who aspire to be politically self-determining’” (Vertigans 2009:61). He further says that: “Religious beliefs, ideas and symbols are integral to the movement and are often closely connected to attempts to enhance levels of religiosity within communities” (2009:61). The online Islamic propaganda are seemingly signalizing and portraying violent and deadly actions, and the violent actions seems to be perceived as
acceptable, as long as the they are done on the basis of something bigger than themselves: based on religion. For example, when referring to “roses are red” poems, this might be perceived as a way of underlining their ties to the West – and it might also underline that fact that the online jihadists want their “tweeted” messages to reach out to as many as possible within Western countries (Sunde et.al. 2013). By using this well-known poem, they use Western rhetoric’s to underline their political and ideological agenda, using a technique for polarization that is, to some degree confusing, but powerful. Underlining how they “know” both cultures. The violence that’s being used in the jihadist’s tweets is drastic, and they leave little – or nothing - up to the imagination in regards to what they are capable of.

In many ways, it seems like this violent performance, both online and in real life, becomes part of the jihadist’s identity where the sub cultural sphere becomes their safe place, and the general society, no matter where they were born or what religion they were first connected to, becomes their enemy. The radical Islamic milieus become their safe zone, and they might, as earlier mentioned, have been in search for a type of group belonging – no matter what kind (Nesser 2006, Sageman 2004, Lia & Nesser 2014). When mentioning the creations of these types of criminal sub cultural groups and the following deviant actions it might also be worth briefly mention, and show relevance to Lemert’s framework of primary and secondary deviance. The primary deviance is performed and rationalized by the offender, making it part of a “socially acceptable role” within their group or milieu (Lilly et.al. 2011:145). The secondary deviance indicates that the offenders often organize their whole lives around their new identify, which might be perceived as especially adequate in this sense. These aspects are profound in the material, even though there is no possibility to prove a specific change in identity because the accounts and behavior have not been studied over time (Sunde et.al. 2013). Still, the way the online jihadists refer to their ideology as being part of their identity, saying how “Allah guides and changes their lives” are important to underline the fact that their self-identity is formed and re-shaped by their performance and involvement in Islam or jihad.

Like many researchers of extremism have indicated (Hegghammer 2014, Sunde et.al, 2013 & Lia & Nesser 2014), the main part of the foreign fighters, including those who have travelled to Syria from Norway, seem to have been part of a marginalized sub cultural groups within
their home countries. Being part of criminal gangs, experimenting with drugs, being without a job, and lower (or no) education, are all variables that seem to color the prior history of the median Western foreign fighter. These deviant indicators might be seen as fuel to the fire of polarization, and by being so caught up in their (new) deviant subculture, this might cause underlining and extended feelings of a polarized world. Especially when internalizing the illusion of an “us against them” or in their words: the “true Muslims” against the “kufrs” (non-believers). Similar to the rhetorical convincing during the Second World War, related to focus on “the end goal” of (at that time) assimilation, and in order to make people believe in authorities (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004), they seem especially eager to state their political and ideological point, by talking badly about the West, and the democracy.

A lot of the collected empirical material underlines the jihadists’ use of rhetorical tools for polarization. These features become especially noticeable when referring to their negative and sarcastic citations about The United States. Seeing how America is very often portrayed as the real enemy, and marked guilty for all the world’s injustice. A main focus is often placed on how the media only covers and focuses on tragedies happening to Western people, and not the “Muslim babies in Syria (that are) murdered in their sleep”. Even though a lot of the messages, especially those on Twitter, are as mentioned, punch lines based on irony and humor, a lot of these subjects seem to be discussed with an aim for sympathy, and an attempt to underline their political point of view, leaning on the rhetorical pathos (Nilsen 2014:23). These rhetorical tools are some of the most basic tendencies when stating hateful rhetorical outings, according to researcher Anne Birgitta Nilsen (2014). She claims how the most typical characteristics of these types of outings; are their aim to appeal on people’s negative feelings. By activating these types of feelings in their listeners, (or this case; readers) the speaker (or; “writer”) can help to further enhance these negative feelings. She further explains how these aspects help us tie our language to the following actions, and it can help enhance the feeling of fright, anger and further polarization. (Nilsen, 2014:23).

Another important aspect when discussing the jihadists’ use of rhetorical tools to enhance polarization relates to their text and statements about the migration crisis, referring primarily to the escalating conflict in Syria. The jihadists are actively engaging in the debate related to the “mass of refugees” that are crossing the borders to Europe, making sure to promote how
there are jihadists hiding amongst the refugees, and that they’ve send the refugees to mask their entrance. As one can see from the illustrated tweets, the jihadists on Twitter are deliberately writing about the refugees, making sure to spread an extended fear, writing about the risks, and how easy it is to send foreign fighters back in simple a “change of clothes,” by hiding in the mass of refugees. The two mentioned outings related to jihadists amongst the refugees are clearly relying on both pathos, but also the rhetorical ethos (Nilsen 2014:20). Showing how these persuasive means might secure the jihadist’s credibility, because the people who read the tweets are observing the refugees arriving Europe, and they might perceive the jihadists as proclaiming the truth, and the “us versus them” becomes even more profound.

These types of outings and rhetorical characteristics are obviously important in order to maintain and spread the feeling of polarization. As mentioned, these techniques might sharpen the borders of their symbolic brotherhood (Lamont & Molnår 2002) and further creating a stronger social bond between the participants of the radical Islamic milieus online (Hirschi 1969). Even though the central premise of Hirschi’s first theory was that: “delinquency arises when social bonds are weak or absent” (Lilly et.al. 2011:110), his theory can also be used to describe how criminal actions and violent tendencies can expand within a sub cultural group. Especially leaning on Hirschi’s point of the social bond of belie, (Hirschi 1969), even though he points out that crime only occur when people: “fail to internalize conventional beliefs to the degree to control them from succumbing to the seductions of vice, violence, or thievery” (Lilly et.al. 2011:119). In my opinion, his social bond theory can be drawn upon due to the fact that we are now living in a highly multicultural society, which can make some people feel and internalize several different so-called (and in this case; contradicting) “conventional beliefs” of society. This point was put perfectly by a young Muslim man in a Deeyah Khan documentary (2014), where he said he felt as if he belonged on in an airplane somewhere in between The Great Britain, and his home country Pakistan. With that in mind, I feel that it’s important to point out that the social bonds between people in today’s society, might occur across both land- and cultural borders. These issues might illustrate why these techniques of polarization might weigh so heavily, and why people eventually feel like they have to choose a side. Forcing a choice between two cultures and making the distance between the “us” and “them” even bigger. Additionally, the internalization of different
“conventional beliefs” becomes enabled due to social media forums in itself. Being that these forums enables an internalization of unconventional beliefs based on social bonds occurring through interactive communication.

I think it’s fair to state that the expansion and extension of cultural borders have been greatly influenced by the affects and power of social media. Earlier research claims that the Internet has created a considerable shift within the local terrorist groups’ ability to affect their audience outside the immediate conflicted areas, and that this has served to enhance and expand the international reach of contact to other geographically spread radical Islamic sympathizers (Nesser 2013, 2016). Underlining that: “(...) the extremist outings are, to a high extent happening openly, to create a support around the ideology, to convince, recruit and instruct on violent method” (Sunde et.al. 2013:28). These points are adequate, based on my material, in relation to the jihadists’ behavior on Twitter, Ask.fm and Tumblr blogs. And as mentioned earlier, the jihadists seem eager to display their political end goals, and spread their propaganda to as many as possible. They spread and re-post morbid pictures of dead and/or injured mothers and babies, and violent videos are spread to prove their upcoming “revenge”. These types of rhetorical features are characteristic for the extremists’ milieus, regardless of their political or ideological agenda. They underline the polarization based on a monologist approach, were they neither seek for answers or discussion, only seeking to achieve confirmation on their emotional content (Nilsen 2014:24).

When drawing upon the earlier mentioned ability to establish feelings of inclusion and camaraderie based on online interaction (Aalen 2015), the enabling becomes even more profound based on these rhetorical tools for polarization. When seeking to address and discuss the empirical data, on the basis of evaluating whether their online performances might enhance and further recruitment, the technique of polarization might be viewed as a way to underline the symbolic boundaries of the “brotherhood” (Lamont & Molnár 2002, Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). The feeling of being included and the ability to position yourself within a certain group or milieu, by a simple “tweet” or blog post, makes it quite easy to proclaim yourself as being an important member, or at least a member, of a radical Islamic milieu. Seeing how the jihadists activity online, clearly indicates that the West are viewed as the “true enemy,” and further seems to underline how “true” Muslims ought to know better than
positioning themselves on this “wrong” side. More specifically, underlining the points of Sageman (2004) where he states that the virtual communities enable jihad across nationalities, by globalizing the concept of fighting “the far enemy” (Rogan 2006).

Again, having in the back of our mind, that a lot of the foreign fighters that have travelled from various countries around Europe, in order to wage for jihad in Syria, it’s important to remember the reported background when discussing these online rhetorical techniques. Seeing how, as mentioned, a lot of the travelled foreign fighters and also the ones who have been known for performing deadly terrorist attacks have seemingly been portrayed as people coming from marginalized means (Hegghammer 2014, Nesser 2013, Sunde 2013 & Lia & Nesser 2014). These features are important facts when discussing why these rhetorical tools are important in order to further the recruitment and enlarging the milieu. Being brought up within marginalized sub cultural surroundings, being part of criminal gangs, being involved with drugs or being victim of racism are all variables that may inflict and play part in the decision to wage for a radical milieu, of any sort. One might assume that performing radically within a certain group might compensate for a feeling of being a constant “outsider” within the majority (Bjørgo 2011). Additionally, a lot of the men in Deeyah Khans former mentioned documentary (2014) expressed how they felt anger, towards the United States, and how some of them reported a feeling of not “fitting in” within any culture, can only be seen as risk factors when discussing further recruitment to radical Islamic milieus.

It’s perhaps difficult to point out causal explanations as to what causes some people to create and join these violent subcultures, and whether it is the deviant subculture that has created the stigmatizing labels or vice versa. With inspiration from Lemert’s framework, basing the deviant culture on two aspects: the primary and the secondary deviance, one can assume that the Western men waging for radical Islamic milieus might be formed by both their psychological tendencies, but also their social and physical environments. In the light of Lemert’s theory of primary deviance, it is stated that: “(…) the offender often tries to rationalize the behavior as a temporary aberration or sees it as a part of a socially acceptable role” (Lilly, et.al. 2011:145). The aspects of the secondary deviation presented by Lemert, also comprehend the fact that the men vouching for this kind of subculture organize their whole life around their new identity. One might also say that other people’s reactions
can be viewed as fuel to a fire, in which the stigmatizing creates an even bigger distance between “us” and “them”. Hence the social negotiation of performing accepted masculinity (Connell 1995, Fangen 2003) one can relate these negotiations techniques to polarization as well. This polarization that’s been created between the radicals Islamists and the West, underlines the understanding of difference. It magnitudes their illusion of the good against the evil, and they internalize and persuade others of an urge, and need to fix “the chaos.” In other words, when talking about the men’s way towards creating or joining a radical subculture, I would view the secondary deviance as the most penetrating aspect: “Secondary deviation is deviant behavior, or social roles based upon it, which becomes means of defense, attack, or adaption to overt and covert problems created by the societal reaction to primary deviation. In effect, the original “causes” of the deviation recede and give way to the central importance of the disapproving, degradational, and isolating reactions of society” (Lilly, et.al. 2011:145). Hence the primary and secondary deviance theory, one might assume that the constant feeling of not “fitting in” to the social norms and conformity of society, might provoke and reinforce a need to fight for something “bigger than themselves”, or simply anything at all (Bjørgo 2011). Some explanation value might also be found in the men’s escape towards creating a culture of their own, established on their own subjective way of looking at reality.

The use of these polarization techniques are also used by other radical and extreme milieus and within this discussion it’s perhaps most relevant to mention the right wing extremists. The use of terminologies of “us” versus “them” is profoundly used, also within these types of milieus and the technique seem important, in order to underline that certain characteristics, origins or ethnic features makes you “not worthy” of their symbolic bordered milieu. In fact, the use of such rhetorical techniques to underline superiority might seem to have been in use within politics, during all times (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). The use of ruling techniques are viewed as tools to portray a certain image that someone is right, and someone is wrong – and it often seem to miss the fact of an existing grey zone (Nilsen 2014). Seeing how these rhetorical tools were used during the Second World War is interesting, and learning how a leader was able to actively lead on so many people based on such simple rhetorical features fascinating and shocking (Kjeldsen & Meyer 2004). Perhaps what’s even more shocking is seeing how these rhetorical tools of convincing are still used by both powerful politicians, as
well as within the milieus of radicals and extremists.

5.4 Martyrdom – A Heroic Perception to Dying

The concept of martyrdom have been especially manifesting when going through the jihadist’s Twitter accounts. Being able to study and collect numerous amounts of “romantic” tweets related to death or martyrdom is interesting, and it enables an opportunity to discuss how death is belittled compared to the bigger picture of the goal in their holy war. The online messages and statements that are referring to martyrdom and “heroic death” are interesting because there are so many of them, and on that basis; they are not at all unique. On every jihadists Twitter account that’s been studied, there have been several different tweets about martyrdom and the glorifying view to dying in battle (Juergensmeyer 2003). The concept of martyrdom is also brought up on Ask.fm and the Tumblr blogs. Whilst the conversations are more based on feelings and allowing people to promote thoughts about fright on Ask.fm, the concept is brought to the surface on Tumblr blogs, by showing more graphic illustrations of violence, and following martyrdom.

When presenting some of the statements and texts that refer to this subject, from all of the forums, some key subjects and words are worth mentioning. First of all, seeing how the jihadists blend the words “success” and “martyrdom”, presenting it like (almost) the same thing. They promote the status of a “martyr” in a way that makes me think of the seductive aspects of crime, which is pointed out by Jack Katz (Katz, in Copes, Heith & Tropalli 2010). Although, in my opinion, Jack Katz’s theory can be added to the aspect of radical religious behavior, one of the things that challenge this theory, here, is the fact that the men waging for this belief, seems to be convinced that they are doing the right thing only – and it’s difficult to assume that the jihadists view their actions as committed crimes. It seems though, like the attraction and belief of these men draws upon different aspects than the crime itself, and I would rather want to “redefine” it as a seduction in the name of God. By constantly referring to a higher power, and neutralizing evil actions by distancing themselves personally, they convince each other of the great importance of their “missions”, and fabricate it as something
inevitable. They create a distance from the physical death, and address the risks of dying by referring to Allah, and the duties to serve their God. In other words, the seductive aspects doesn’t lie in the commitment to crime itself, but rather in the religious, and ideological end goals.

It’s further interesting to point out how the jihadists use the word “martyred” when talking about another jihadist being killed in battle. This is interesting, because this (also) underlines the mentioned terms of polarization – because they are, at the same time, actively referring to Western soldiers in a much less “heroic” way, making sure to tell stories of how the American soldiers cry in battle, talking ironically about how “U.S. soldiers cry when being alive” and that the jihadists are “smiling when dead”. This particular tweet is also in great company in relations to taking advantage of the previous mentioned polarization techniques when referring to martyrdom. The aim towards underlining how the jihadists are heroes, while the American soldiers are frightened, is a penetrating rhetorical tool for creating symbolic boundaries and proclaiming their identity (Lamont & Molnàr 2002, Roy 2002). When reading this tweet, one get an understanding that the fighting jihadists are battling for something “bigger”, while the Americans are fighting for themselves, which one might assume is exactly what the jihadist want to proclaim. As mentioned above, the jihadists on these social medias also underline their points by using smiley’s, emojs and heart shaped symbols, all according to what they seem to want to highlight or promote (Aalen 2015), this is also the case for the tweet above. When the jihadists’ talk about and show reference to other “martyred” jihadists, post pictures of other “fallen jihadists”, talk about “Sharia” or the glorifying aspects of jihad the use of heart shaped symbols and emotional emojs happens rapidly.

Still drawing upon the former discussion of techniques for an enhanced feeling of polarization, the same aspects are relevant when addressing another jihadist’s reference to martyrdom. In the presented empirical material, one of the messages collected from Twitter illustrates the writers point, by referring to a “martyred” jihadist, who has notably been killed by the “kuffars.” The “kuffars” are, as mentioned, a synonym to “non-believers.” The same connotations to polarization are also noticeable when the jihadist refers to the Western lifestyle’s as “haram” while their chosen lifestyle is described as “halal.” By proclaiming
these types of rhetoric’s, the tweeting jihadists manage to underline the waste difference between themselves, and the people who, in their words, are still “living in a life of ignorance and sins.” In the texts and messages that are referring to martyrdom, and also underlining the less heroic actions from Western soldiers, the jihadist’s are actively referring to higher loyalties, when discussing their violent actions compared to the others’ (Lilly, et.al. 2011:103-104, Vertigans 2009). Their “heroic” actions within this “holy war,” are constantly underlined, when they actively seek to portray the necessity and normality of their violent actions (Nilsson 2015). The types of messages that are referred to above, seem to proclaim how the jihadists view themselves as heroic martyrs, and it portrays a romantic view to dying in battle, or fighting for the caliphate and sharia- all in “the name of God” (Stern 2003). The use of symbols, and words that connotes to romance, and in a sense, the seductive means of the jihad, might seem to help them promote and glorify the fight, and seemingly their “end goal” (Katz, in Copes, Heith & Tropalli 2010).

The rhetorical tools in order to portray the life of jihad as something beautiful, seeing how true “brotherhood” can only happen within these types of milieus are rapidly used. It’s perhaps little surprising that the jihadist’s seeks to underline these types of features that is seemingly characterizing the radical Islamic milieus. The tools to portray camaraderie of this sort are important, and a further recruitment would most likely be quite difficult if they didn’t take time to portray a reality of this sort. However, a feature that is a bit harder to grasp, is how they are especially focusing on death in itself, aiming to underline the greatness of dying. In one of the tweeted messages the scents of the dead jihadist is described, stating how “his body had a nice scent” even though he had been dead since the day before. One might be left with wondering thoughts as to why these detailed leveled portraying of a dead jihadist is important, and further wonder who they seek to reach by these illustrations. The rhetorical pathos (Nilsen 2014:23) is also noticeable here, aiming to push certain buttons within the reader or recipient, perhaps to receive sympathy or curiosity, or even reluctance. Either way the jihadists aims to promote and enhance the reactions and responses to their tweets, messages and tweets, and in the light of assumption that jihadist’s strive to achieve attention, the success is a fact (Sunde et.al. 2013).
When discussing the term “martyrdom” and referring to how religious and ideological convincing might inflict on possible sympathizers view on jihadists, it’s also interesting to discuss whether this can enable a further recruitment to these radical Islamic milieus. This is the main reason why this subject is being presented at the very end of this chapter of analysis, seeing how martyrdom is viewed, illustrated and presented by the jihadists as the ultimate “end goal.” Seeing and discussing how the previous mentioned online performance of masculinity, brotherhood, violence and techniques for polarization might enhance a further recruitment is perhaps not so difficult to grasp. However, the questions are plenty when discussing how martyrdom can enhance recruitment and the number of radical Islamic sympathizers. When illustrating how the rhetorical tools for inclusion and camaraderie through online social media forums is enabled by referring to other jihadist’s and their unbreakable unity, it’s interesting to notice that a lot of the portrayed stories of “brotherhood” seems to feature a glimpse of death. The concept of dying in itself seems to be used as an important tool to illustrate the importance of the jihadist’s battle, and the romantic view to death is used as a way to illustrate that their fight is more important than anything (Nilsson 2015). Roy (2002) points to how the religious content is simplified on the Internet, seemingly adapted to those living outside Muslim countries or communities (Rogan 2006). Rogan (2006) further refers to Sageman (2004) when specifying how a generalization of Islam happens online: “The mass nature of Internet communication encourages sound bites and other reductionist answers to difficult questions” and that “these views encourage extreme, abstract, but simplistic solutions without regard to the reality and complexity of life” (Rogan, 2006). These type of rhetorical tools are important when going through the material collected on the social media forums, seeing how complex questions about life and general existence are often answered by simple references to Islam and “a higher power.”

Seeking to discuss and elaborate on how the social media forums in themselves, and the portrayed camaraderie and brotherhood might be perceived as the most important factor when deciding to wage for jihad (Toboul 2005). The romanticized view to both brotherhood and martyrdom is rapidly used, and the rhetorical aspects might enable a chance to claim to be part of a milieu, even though you’ve might not ever met someone from the milieu, in person. When going through the online material, one has no possibility to know whether the people on the other end are, in fact, who they claim to be. Even though this might be described as having a negative impact on the collected empirical data, it also underlines the fact that people
can show sympathy, claim a newfound identity, and internalize radical ideology by a simple Google search, and hours of online reading, chatting and blogging. Seeing how the presumable jihadist’s are actively engaging in spreading online Islamic propaganda, seeking to be approachable and available in all three forums (and probably more) it’s noticeable that the subjects and used terminologies seeks to spread information about their ideology and about their “end goals.” Without leaning towards giving the jihadist’s too much credit, it might seem like the different social media forums are deliberately used differently, mentioning certain topics and subjects rapidly possibly hoping to push the buttons that are necessary to further the recruitment. Possibly aiming towards fragile, and vulnerable teens seeing them as easy targets, and further aiming towards being available and spread out different types of propaganda based on what they notice and experience to be necessary.
6. Main Findings

The three social media forums are used quite differently, and they seem to offer individual’s both information around the radical ideology, online interactive communication and ideological propaganda feeding on rhetorical features of sarcasm, ironic features and humor. As one can see from the illustrated empirical data, the online jihadist’s seems to aspire towards being available on social media forums that are used by millions of people on a daily basis, and they aim to post, tweet or write about topics and subjects that will receive the most attention. While the Western media coverage seek to report and portray terrorist attacks, by illustrating the damage that’s being caused by the radical Islamic milieus, the radical Islamic milieus are doing exactly the same. Techniques are used to further polarization, and the online jihadists are seemingly feeding on the contradicting worldviews between themselves and the West. The online jihadist’s are performing at their best effort to underline who’s the true enemy in the game of conflict.

The illustrated, and the further discussion of the empirical data serves to address how the use of rhetorical tools for convincing are used in order to persuade and attain more ideological sympathizers, and possible recruitment of foreign fighters. The traditional tools of pathos are rapidly used, in order to “play the strings” of their readers and or followers emotional instruments (Nilsen 2014). Drawing upon features as masculinity, brotherhood and polarization are constantly noticed within the different social media forums. Seeing how the online jihadist’s aims towards portraying an invincible and specifically collective camaraderie. The ideological persuasion in relation to martyrdom have also been illustrated and discussed, aiming to underline how the aspects of “heroic” battling might cause, not death, but “heroic” martyrdom. Using tools that seek to illustrate the importance of the jihadists’ battle, but also normalize the wage for jihad (Nilsson 2015). Overall the rhetorical tools of convincing seem to be compound, complex and thoughtfully presented within tweets, blog posts or through interactive conversation in a “down to earth” kind of way, making the jihadist’s come across as easy to approach. In fear of giving the online jihadist’s too much credit, one might be left with a feeling that these appearances on social media forums are all part of a well-established apparatus for spreading ideological and violent propaganda. Aiming
to connect with vulnerable people, who might use social media forums as their main tool for social interaction. The social media forums enable an opportunity to proclaim a newfound identity, seeing how the forums provide an opportunity to take on a chosen online identity, and claim membership within a new group or milieu (Toboul 2005, Rogan 2006).

The online research and the empirical data might indicate that social media forums enable an ability to be part of a group or milieu, that you normally wouldn’t be able to get in contact with. The accessibility (Hegghammer 2014) to observe and actively engage in the ongoing conflict in Syria has become enabled and extensive due to both television and Internet, and the high publicity might have enabled an opportunity for more people to become involved and feel connections and obligations towards the Syrian population. The social media forums have further enabled an opportunity for everyone to speak their mind publicly about the ongoing situation, and all of a suddenly every “man on the street” can take part in the public debate, speaking their mind about the ongoing situation and possibly be heard across the globe. These modern features are by no doubt challenging the hypothesis of “normalization” saying how the most powerful people in real life, are also most powerful online (Aalen 2015:200)

6.1 Indoctrination of Radical Islam Through Social Media

The collected empirical data for this thesis have enabled an opportunity to view how members or sympathizers of radical Islamic milieus use three different social media forums differently online. Whilst Twitter is seemingly used for sharing short, humoristic and sarcastic “tweets” about radical Islamic ideology, Ask.fm provides sympathizers with an ability to actively communicate and ask questions to a jihadist. Following, the collected material and research on Tumblr blogs have enabled an illustration of how jihadist’s use “blogging” as a tool to post graphic violent material, featuring personal texts and citations from the Quran. Even though a lot of the explanations related to the difference of use in these forums might be pointed towards technological differences, the descriptions and illustrations of the actual use is important in order to highlight how it’s possible to take advantage of several different forums to underline your points and ideology online. All in all, the collected empirical data enables
an opportunity to illustrate how the active use of these forums might provide a feeling of inclusion in a “group” or limited milieu. The ability to show support, and proclaim a “membership” within these types of milieus is easily enabled by these online forums, and so is the ability to connect worldwide (Weimann 2004; 2006, Sunde et al. 2013, Aalen 2015).

During the research for this thesis I’ve learned that recruiters, especially within the Islamic State, would use hundreds of hours talking to one single person, providing them with whatever the person on the other side would ask for, or seemed to need; are you in search for a father figure? They would give you a father figure. Do you need a purpose in life? Oh, don’t worry - they would provide you with a purpose as well. I find it necessary not to underestimate the power that lies behind the online conversations, and underline how many young men and women, today, that use these tools in order to achieve and maintain social interaction. Young people use it to get in touch with their friends, to get updates from their schools, and not to mention in search for love. Internet dating can, especially, be used as an example to underline how easy it is for people to gain trust, and mutual fascination using social media forums only. It seems to be more and more difficult to maintain a firm line between social media and “real life” (Aalen 2013:12), being that these forums are with us at all times. “The digital social integration” (Sunde et al. 2013) has increased, which in my opinion, makes it relevant to present social media and the Internet as important tools to further radicalization.

When learning how these radical Islamic groups would listen and talk for hours with the people who reached out online, one might get an understanding that the recruiters would easily understand which people that would be worth focusing their time on. The people, who go online in search for answers, are very often young (Bergen et al. 2015:3), – and, as it seems, in search for a meaning behind the injustice they witness from conflicted areas, through the Internet and television. According to previous research (Hegghammer 2014) the average foreign fighter from Europe is male in his early twenties, often with a non-Western origin, and connections to Islamic milieus. Most of them seem to belong on the lower scale of income, some of them are unemployed, and some of them have criminal records (Hegghammer 2014:281). Hegghammer further elaborates that there are several different reasons for why someone chooses to leave their country to become a foreign fighter. Related to both consumed feelings of injustice, religious convincing and their “duty” to help other
Muslims, but also – he points to how motivation can be built up by consuming Internet propaganda, and observing pictures and videos on social media (Hegghammer 2014:282).

Even though the active travel to fight in Syria is often completed in groups, there is no doubt that the access to debate and include oneself in the radical Islamic milieus online is easy (Rogan 2006, Stenersen 2015). The radicalization is mainly considered to be a group process (Sunde et.al. 2013), however one might question which aspects that needs to be involved in order to maintain, and create a “group” (Sunde et. al. 2013). Being that we daily use the Internet and social media to reach out to new acquaintances- and keep in touch with old friends, how can we ignore the fact that the physical barriers are more or less wiped out? If the people who search online for their answers, are able to be part of an online collective community, is it even possible to state that this doesn’t serve as a modern time social “group”? A “community” which can take great part in the process of further radicalization? It’s interesting to shed a light on how the Internet and social media have created a space for everyone to connect, where they can portray themselves like they want to, and connect ties with other people who might have the same struggles. It might seem eligible to conclude that social media can provide a feeling of belonging, and a feeling of being able to gain respect within a group. When using the Internet as your main source of communication you are, in some ways, able to create yourself a new cyber identity – proclaiming the ideal ‘you’ for your followers (Rogan 2006, Aalen 2015, Nesser 2016).

Further research
There is little doubt that the Internet and social media is here to stay, and that a lot of our social relationships are maintained and formed through virtual interaction. At the very beginning of the research process for this thesis, it became quite clear that the field is seemingly without limits when collecting empirical data from online forums. The aim for this thesis have been to illustrate how three different forums are used by jihadists and Islamic sympathizers, and hopefully the research have served to illustrate how easily some of the most common social media forums are openly used to spread violent Islamic propaganda. In order to further investigate and understand possible factors for recruitment to radical and extreme milieus, I find it inevitable not to place a specific focus on the online interactional aspects. The use of online forums is not merely related to Islamic milieus, but extremist
milleus in general (Sunde et.al 2013). The use of online forums enables an ability to maintain a certain amount of anonymity, and the forums enables an easier ability to feel part of a joint fellowship. These features are, in my opinion, underlining the need for further research of radical behavior within online forums. Focusing on the online users change and evolvement over time, studying how individuals might change. By having the opportunity to study this internalization process over time, one might come a step closer to understanding how online interaction might lead to further recruitment and a radical involvement of a more serious character.

6.2 Final Conclusions

Combined, the studied forums are providing different ways of portraying and proclaiming a newfound radical identity online. The interactive aspects of the forums enable an ability to connect and communicate with other jihadists and sympathizers, forming “brotherhoods” and online communities. As mentioned, the studied users are mainly young men – and the forums might provide opportunities to feel included within a fellowship. The three forums are different, and combined they provide ideological propaganda and a possibility for interactive contact, making the jihadist milieu seem easy approachable.

As mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, when referring to terrorist attacks and the fear of future terrorism, this type of research is important. When discussing the underlining questions as to what seems to provide these radical Islamic milieus with even more sympathizers, this research should be seen as a supplementing illustration and analysis to a complicated and comprehensive global issue. The aim of this thesis, have been to illustrate how social media forums might create and enable a feeling of online inclusion, which in some cases might be viewed as enough in order to assert oneself with a violent ideology. The thesis might even allow asking questions around the public term “lone wolf,” based on the illustrated empirical data of online interaction. The collected empirical data illustrates how the world online can serve individuals with all the amount of social interaction that they could wish for, and the hurdles in order to achieve this type of contact are seemingly small.


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