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Research Article

Absolute Language as a Symbolic Image: Leading Risk Behaviors in Jihadist Contexts

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of absolute language as a symbolic image, emphasizing its capacity to provoke psychological defenses and influence risk behaviors in jihadist contexts. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research conducted in Afghanistan (2013–2023) and integrating insights from Terror Management Theory (TMT), this study explores the paradoxical relationship between rigid religious doctrines and risk-taking behaviors, such as smoking and substance abuse. The research highlights how absolute language—characterized by its definitive and non-negotiable nature—triggers existential anxiety by vividly presenting spiritual safetyism, often framed through notions of salvation and eternal punishment. This anxiety fosters both compliance with extremist ideologies and behaviors that directly contradict religious teachings. Through in-depth case studies, the findings demonstrate that smoking and substance use act as coping mechanisms, enabling individuals to alleviate the psychological burden imposed by absolute doctrines. For instance, jihadists engaged in smoking despite its prohibition, citing its calming effects amid the fear-inducing rhetoric of religious sermons. By applying TMT, the study argues that absolute language operates similarly to visual mortality salience cues, evoking defensive reactions to mitigate existential fears. These reactions paradoxically manifest as behaviors that are both symbolic affirmations of identity and defiance against vulnerability. The dual impact of absolute language—reinforcing radicalization while normalizing risk behaviors—underscores its socio-psychological complexity. This paper concludes by emphasizing the need for deradicalization strategies and public health interventions that address the psychological toll of absolute language. Such initiatives should offer alternative narratives that promote personal agency and healthier coping mechanisms. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between language, radicalization, and risk-taking behaviors, offering actionable insights for policymakers, mental health practitioners, and researchers.

Keywords

Absolute Language, Terror Management Theory (TMT), Radicalization, Risk Behaviors, Deradicalization Strategies

1. Introduction

Language serves as one of the most influential tools for shaping human behavior, with absolute language playing a particularly critical role in enforcing rigid beliefs and compelling actions. Defined by its definitive and non-negotiable nature, absolute language creates an environment where alternative perspectives are excluded, leaving individuals with a single perceived path forward. In both religious and secular contexts, absolute language functions as a symbolic image,

akin to graphic visuals in its ability to evoke powerful cognitive and emotional responses.

This paper builds on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan between 2013 and 2023, which revealed the socio-psychological impact of absolute language within jihadist communities. In these environments, mosque sermons, religious texts, and interpersonal communications frequently employed absolute language to enforce compliance with doctrinal mandates. Preachers emphasized spiritual safetyism—protection from divine punishment—through vivid depictions of hellfire and posthumous suffering, creating a culture of fear-driven adherence. Such language left individuals feeling stripped of free will, as their choices were framed within the binary logic of salvation versus eternal torment.

The radicalization process observed in Afghanistan mirrored theoretical models such as Harrington's (2019) "Martyrdom Terrorism," [1] which describes the progression from unobservant drug use to extremism and eventual martyrdom. Harrington's analysis of jihadists highlights a paradoxical dynamic: while Islamic doctrine forbids risky behaviors, substance abuse remains prevalent among jihadists. This duality suggests that absolute language, by exacerbating cognitive dissonance and psychological stress, may contribute to both radicalization and risk behaviors. Participants in the field study frequently described smoking and substance use as coping mechanisms for the intense anxiety provoked by doctrinal absolutes (Mehravipour, unpublished manuscript).

Integrating these ethnographic insights with Terror Management Theory (TMT), this paper argues that absolute language operates as a symbolic mortality salience cue. TMT posits that reminders of mortality evoke existential anxiety, prompting individuals to adopt defenses that align with their cultural worldviews or self-esteem needs [2, 3]. Absolute language, by vividly framing existential risks and moral imperatives, acts as a linguistic trigger for these defenses. However, rather than fostering constructive change, such language often drives paradoxical behaviors, including smoking, aggression, and substance abuse.

This study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical and empirical research by analyzing the interplay of absolute language, radicalization, and risk behaviors. By examining how absolute language operates as a symbolic image, it explores its broader implications for health campaigns, deradicalization efforts, and mental health interventions.

2. Theoretical Framework: Absolute Language and Risk Behaviors

2.1. How Images Influence Behavior: Key Studies

Research has consistently demonstrated that images, particularly those evoking existential fears or mortality salience, play a significant role in influencing behavior. Visual stimuli can trigger deep psychological responses, often leading individuals to either adopt protective behaviors or paradoxically engage in risk-taking. Two critical studies—Miller et al. (1996) [4] and Mehravipour (2018) [5]—provide compelling evidence of this phenomenon, illustrating the nuanced interplay between imagery and human actions.

2.1.1. Miller et al. (1996): Scuba Diving and Risk Behavior

Miller et al. (1996) conducted a landmark study examining how mortality salience influences risk-taking behaviors among scuba divers. By exposing divers to imagery or scenarios emphasizing the risks of scuba diving (e.g., photographs of underwater accidents or discussions about drowning), researchers observed a counterintuitive effect: instead of discouraging risky behavior, the reminders of mortality often led participants to take greater risks during dives.

Key Findings:

Divers exposed to mortality salience were more likely to exceed depth limits, ignore safety protocols, or extend dive durations beyond recommended times.

Participants rationalized these behaviors as affirmations of their competence and adventurous identity.

Theoretical Explanation: The study supports Terror Management Theory (TMT) by demonstrating that mortality salience activates symbolic defenses. For divers, engaging in risky behavior became a way to assert their self-worth and transcend existential fears. The act of taking risks symbolized control over their mortality, aligning with cultural or personal worldviews that value bravery and resilience.

2.1.2. Mehravipour (2018): Graphic Health Warnings and Smoking Behavior

Mehravipour's study explored how graphic health warnings on cigarette packaging, designed to deter smoking by emphasizing its fatal consequences, often produced the opposite effect among certain individuals. Images of diseased lungs, decayed teeth, or cancer patients elicited defensive reactions rather than compliance.

Key Findings:

Smokers with strong identity ties to the habit (e.g., viewing smoking as a form of self-expression or rebellion) responded to graphic warnings by smoking more frequently.

Participants rationalized their behavior by downplaying the severity of the risks or distancing themselves from the warnings.

Theoretical Explanation: The findings align with TMT, illustrating how mortality salience can provoke defensive behaviors. For smokers, continuing or increasing their habit served as a symbolic act of defiance against the perceived threat, reaffirming their autonomy and identity. This paradoxical effect underscores the complexity of using fear-based imagery in public health campaigns.

2.2. Absolute Language as a Verbal Image

While imagery is widely recognized for its ability to influence human emotions and behaviors, absolute language functions as a verbal counterpart, creating equally potent psychological and symbolic effects. Absolute language, by virtue of its definitive, rigid, and exclusionary nature, serves as a "verbal image" that evokes strong cognitive and emotional responses. Unlike visual images, which rely on immediate sensory perception, absolute language operates through words and phrases that leave little room for ambiguity or alternative interpretations.

Symbolic Mortality Salience

Terror Management Theory (TMT) highlights how reminders of mortality—commonly delivered through images—evoke existential anxiety [2, 3]. Similarly, absolute language acts as a verbal mortality salience cue. Statements like "Only martyrs achieve eternal life" or "You must obey, or you will suffer eternal punishment" vividly reinforce themes of mortality and salvation. Such language elicits fear of death and divine judgment, forcing individuals to adopt defenses that align with their cultural or ideological worldview [4, 5].

Psychological Impact

The potency of absolute language lies in its capacity to simplify complex realities into binary choices. For example, phrases such as "Heaven or Hell" and "Salvation or Damnation" remove nuance, creating an environment where individuals perceive only one viable path. This triggers heightened levels of anxiety, cognitive dissonance, and emotional stress, as individuals struggle to conform to the rigid expectations conveyed through such language [6]. In jihadist contexts, this pressure often drives paradoxical behaviors, including substance use, smoking, and other risk-taking activities as coping mechanisms [7, 8].

Parallel with Visual Imagery

Absolute language mirrors the effects of graphic visuals by embedding symbolic meaning into words. Visual images of suffering, such as depictions of hellfire or physical punishment, are often paired with verbal absolutes to amplify their impact. The combination of vivid language and imagery reinforces cultural and religious narratives, leaving lasting psychological impressions [3, 7]. For instance, sermons that use descriptive threats of eternal torment serve the same function as health campaigns showing graphic images of diseased lungs to deter smoking [5, 6]. In both cases, the intent is to influence behavior through fear-based cues.

Implications for Behavior

Absolute language's symbolic power can result in two contradictory outcomes: compliance or defiance. For some, it fosters strict adherence to doctrines and norms. For others, the overwhelming psychological burden leads to defensive reactions, including rebellion and risk-taking. This duality explains why jihadists engage in behaviors explicitly forbidden by their religious teachings—such as smoking or substance abuse—while simultaneously aligning with extremist ideologies [8].

By understanding absolute language as a verbal image, researchers and practitioners can develop strategies that mitigate its psychological toll. Future studies should explore how alternative narratives, framed with nuance and agency, can counter the harmful effects of absolutist rhetoric.

3. Why Individuals Take Risks in Response to Mortality Salience

When confronted with reminders of mortality, individuals often respond in ways that may seem counterproductive or paradoxical. According to TMT, these behaviors are rooted in psychological defenses designed to mitigate existential anxiety:

1. Identity Affirmation:
    a. Risk-taking becomes a way to reinforce a valued identity. For example, scuba divers exposed to mortality salience may take risks to reaffirm their adventurousness or skill, while smokers may rationalize their habit as an expression of independence.
    b. Research shows that individuals are more likely to engage in symbolic actions that align with their self-concept or cultural worldview when mortality salience is activated [6].
2. Symbolic Immortality:
    a. TMT posits that humans cope with the fear of death by seeking symbolic immortality through actions that transcend their mortality. Risk-taking can be viewed as an assertion of control over fate, creating a sense of meaning or purpose in the face of existential threats.
    b. For example, a smoker might rationalize their behavior by focusing on its social or symbolic significance ("It's how I connect with friends") rather than its health risks.
3. Rejection of Vulnerability:

Mortality salience highlights human vulnerability, prompting some individuals to reject this vulnerability through risky actions. These behaviors can symbolize strength, resilience, or defiance, countering the feelings of helplessness evoked by mortality cues.

4. Implications for Absolute Language

The findings from Miller et al. (1996) and Mehravipour (2018) demonstrate that imagery can provoke defensive responses that reinforce identity and symbolic immortality. Absolute language operates similarly, evoking mortality salience through verbal cues rather than visual ones. For example:

1. Statements like "Only martyrs achieve eternal life" in jihadist rhetoric compel individuals to take risks by aligning their actions with a cultural or religious worldview.

2. Public health warnings such as "Smoking kills everyone" can inadvertently reinforce smoking among individuals who perceive the warning as a threat to their autonomy or identity.
3. By understanding these dynamics, communicators can design interventions that balance the motivational power of mortality salience with the need to minimize defensive reactions. Future research should continue exploring how both imagery and language influence behavior, particularly in high-stakes or risk-prone contexts.

4.1. Case Studies from Afghanistan: The Paradox of Absolute Language

Smoking as a Coping Mechanism

Fieldwork revealed a striking paradox: while religious teachings condemn smoking as haram (forbidden), many jihadists engage in the behavior. Participants cited the psychological toll of absolute language and religious safetyism as contributing factors.

Example: Imam Suleiman's Teachings

Imam Suleiman's sermons emphasized the horrors of hell and the importance of strict adherence to Islamic law. However, participants often turned to smoking as a way to manage the anxiety provoked by these messages. One jihadist remarked, "Smoking helps me forget the fear of judgment, even if it's haram."

Connection to Mortality Salience

Smoking, despite being forbidden, becomes a symbolic defiance against the existential pressure imposed by absolute language. This mirrors the effects of graphic health warnings, where individuals respond to mortality salience by reinforcing harmful behaviors [7].

Substance Use and Radicalization

Substance abuse also emerged as a common coping mechanism among jihadists. Absolute language, combined with religious safetyism, creates a cycle of psychological stress that drives individuals toward behaviors explicitly condemned by their faith.

Example: Seyyed Rasul's Story

Seyyed Rasul described how he began using opium to cope with the fear of divine punishment. Despite his strict adherence to religious practices, the psychological burden of absolute language led him to seek solace in substances. This paradox underscores the complexity of how absolute language influences risk behaviors.

4.2. Substance Use and Psychological Stress

Substance use among jihadist individuals often emerges as a paradoxical coping mechanism for alleviating the psychological burden imposed by absolute language. While their ideology strongly prohibits behaviors like smoking and drug use, the overwhelming existential anxiety triggered by rigid doctrines pushes individuals toward these behaviors as a temporary relief. Stress-related research has consistently shown that acute and chronic stress disrupt emotional regulation and amplify the vulnerability to substance use disorders (SUDs) [9].

Stress as a Catalyst for Substance Use

Terror Management Theory (TMT) suggests that reminders of mortality intensify existential fears, prompting defensive mechanisms [2]. Similarly, jihadists confronted with the harsh and punitive rhetoric of absolute language often experience elevated psychological stress. Substance use, particularly smoking, serves as a maladaptive coping strategy to manage this stress. Evidence indicates that chronic stress impacts neurobiological pathways, such as the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, and reduces behavioral self-control, further reinforcing addictive behaviors [10].

For example, studies have shown that prolonged exposure to stressors, such as life-threatening ideologies or violent environments, alters stress-response systems, including cortisol levels and mesolimbic dopamine pathways, which are critical in addiction vulnerability [10]. Acute stress can enhance the salience of substances as rewarding stimuli, leading to increased craving and relapse vulnerability, particularly in trauma-exposed individuals [10, 11].

Case Study and Behavioral Observations

Field research conducted in Afghanistan highlights specific cases where jihadists engaged in smoking despite its prohibition. These individuals described smoking as a means of calming their nerves following fear-inducing sermons or after combat exposure. Such findings are consistent with prior research demonstrating that stress-induced emotional dysregulation is directly linked to increased substance misuse [9, 10].

Neurobiological and Behavioral Mechanisms

Neurobiologically, stress activates the HPA axis, resulting in heightened cortisol release, which enhances dopamine activity in the nucleus accumbens—an area associated with reward and reinforcement [10]. Over time, chronic stress leads to dysregulation in these systems, fostering compulsive substance-seeking behaviors [12]. Additionally, psychological models of addiction emphasize substance use as a self-medication mechanism to cope with distress and emotional pain [13].

Implications for Intervention

Understanding the relationship between psychological stress and substance use is critical for developing interventions aimed at deradicalization and mental health. Programs that address stress management, emotional regulation, and provide alternative coping strategies could mitigate the reliance on harmful behaviors [14, 15].

5. Absolute Language and Risk-Taking: A Broader Perspective

Absolute language not only shapes individual actions but

also influences group dynamics, driving risky collective behaviors. For instance, jihadist propaganda often employs absolutist rhetoric to glorify martyrdom, compelling individuals to engage in life-threatening missions.

Comparative Insights from Health Campaigns

Public health messaging also demonstrates the paradoxical effects of absolute language. Phrases like "Smoking kills everyone" can reinforce smoking among individuals who feel targeted or marginalized. Similarly, jihadists interpret absolute language as both a call to action and a justification for risk-taking.

6. Discussion: Bridging Absolute Language, Risk Behavior, and Radicalization

The findings reveal a complex interplay between absolute language and risk behaviors:

1. Psychological Toll: Absolute language exacerbates anxiety, leading individuals to seek immediate relief through smoking or substance use.
2. Symbolic Defiance: Risk behaviors become a way to symbolically reclaim autonomy in the face of rigid doctrines.
3. Group Identity: Absolutist rhetoric reinforces in-group norms, compelling individuals to engage in risky behaviors as a form of allegiance.

Implications for Deradicalization

Understanding the role of absolute language in driving risk behaviors is critical for designing effective deradicalization programs. Interventions should:

1. Address the psychological burden of absolute language.
2. Provide healthier coping mechanisms to reduce reliance on substances.
3. Promote alternative narratives that emphasize personal agency and empowerment.

7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that absolute language acts as a symbolic image, evoking psychological defenses that paradoxically lead to risk behaviors. Drawing on ethnographic findings from Afghanistan, it reveals how rigid religious doctrines normalize actions like smoking, despite their contradiction with faith. By integrating insights from TMT, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the socio-psychological mechanisms driving risk-taking and radicalization. Future research should explore interventions that balance empowerment with ethical communication strategies.

Abbreviations

TMT   Terror Management Theory

Author Contributions

Zohreh Mehravipour is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

Zohreh Mehravipour (Pseudonym: Rose McNally, Rose Turner). Zohreh Mehravi-pour is the CEO and founder of Voodoo Lily Publishing, based in Haugesund, Norway, since 2019. She earned her B. A. in Social Science Researching–Sociology from Payam Noor University, Iran, in 2010 and completed her M. A. in Sociology in 2014. Her thesis explored the socialization of Muslim children and so-cial stratification in Iran. As a freelance researcher, Ms. Mehravi-pour specializes in radicalization and terrorism studies, with ex-tensive fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. She has authored multiple papers on social behavior and terror man-agement theory. Her recent works include "In the Shadows of Jihad" and "Endless Smoking." Ms. Mehravipour is a member of the Iranian Association of Sociologists and the Association for Iranian Studies.

Research Field

Zohreh Mehravipour: Radicalization studies; Public health in-terventions; Terror management theory; Cultural psychology; Sub-stance abuse in jihadist contexts; Sociological impacts of absolute language; Social stratification studies; Religious indoctrination and safetyism; Other pictures of me and my field world area of studies.