

Islamists between beauty bloggers and pop stars

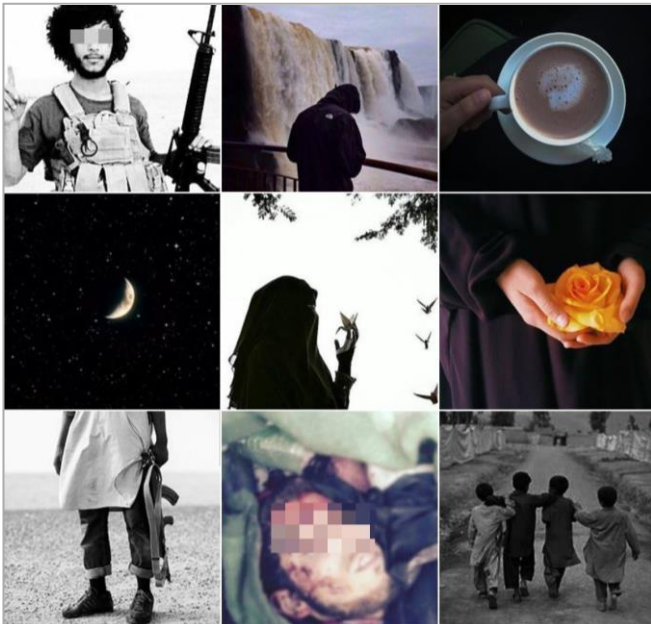
Aesthetics and lifestyle to lure young people on Instagram

Instagram is one of the biggest social media platforms and enjoys great popularity specifically among young people in Germany. Islamists have also discovered this social media network for spreading propaganda. In special 'Instagram style' they approach young users with their inhumane ideology. Subtle messages also meet numerous posts that openly glorify militant jihad.

Aesthetic staging: Jihad as a 'cool' lifestyle

SEEMINGLY INNOCUOUS IMAGES AS BAIT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Instagram has become part of common daily communication in youth culture. Young people specifically use the Instagram app where users share short videos and, in particular, photos staging 'their life's moments' in an aesthetically pleasing way. For example, photos of food, make-up and outfits are presented in a cool look. Islamists also use this service where they meet Instagram users' viewing habits and try to win over young people to propaganda.



Aesthetic staging of jihad: Promotion of jihad between innocuous photos. (Source: Instagram; original not pixelated)

Islamists focus on using seemingly innocuous, aesthetically staged photos of everyday life as bait to attract users to their profiles. They use popular hashtags, for instance, to spread them, make them easy to find and increase their reach. Young users who 'like' these photos or follow the accompanying profile come across other aesthetic depictions introducing them to the Islamist ideology: e.g. jihadists staged as heroic warriors and meant to communicate a 'cool' lifestyle. This mix of 'photos of everyday life' and jihadist content makes the violence promoted less of a taboo and more desirable.

Hashtags and language barrier? Instagram – an international service

Among all social networks the use of hashtags is the highest on Instagram. These are generally in English, the most common language on the platform. Users from all over the world use these hashtags even if the post itself is not written in English. Popular hashtags like #TBT encourage users to post nostalgic pictures of their past every Thursday (ThrowbackThursday), but also #love and #photooftheday are used to reach a wide audience.

Explore feed: Islamists take advantage of the 'explore' feature

POLITICAL ISSUES WITH IMAGES OF ATROCITY

The essential way to see new content on Instagram is the explore tab. There, users receive recommendations for photos and short video clips. The feed is based on the user's individual behavior on Instagram. When searching for specific key words related to Islam the explore feed will show automatically sourced content associated with the search. Islamists take advantage of this mechanism to spread propaganda. Searches for 'Prophet Mohammad' or 'Shahada' (Islamic creed) reveal images with aphorisms, quotes by Islamic scholars or historical figures, most of them harmless. However, in between they always also lead to Islamic profiles.

When searching for up-to-date political topics such as the war in Syria or the Muslim ethnic minority of the Rohingya, persecuted by Myanmar's military, images and videos of atrocities appear in the explore feed the next time the Instagram app is opened. It is only very rarely that this is verifiable information about war crimes. In many cases, depictions of dead or seriously injured children, of persons exposed to massive violence are posted from extremist profiles. In addition, the explore feed also makes automated suggestions for explicit jihadist propaganda such as videos and images of the terror organization 'Islamic State' (IS), for instance, after a search for 'caliphate'. This is how users can also come across gruesome images of executions and torture on the platform.



Explore feed: The forbidden IS symbol shows up between stars of the Harry Potter films and a well-known beauty blogger. (Source: Instagram)

Instagram stories: Islamists use popular feature to lure young users

CONTROL IS VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE

Instagram constantly offers new features such as 'stories'. Stringing together photos or videos to form an automated slideshow gallery can be an attractive way to tell a 'story'. jugendschutz.net observed Islamist profiles using this Instagram feature to spread propaganda. Here, they rely on an Instagram communication tool very popular among young people.

The 'stories' automatically disappear 24 hours after being shared. This makes the function so popular since it is a great way to easily share a number of posts and avoid profile overload. The fleeting nature of the stories makes endangering content difficult to control. When young people stumble across Islamist 'stories' the risk is hardly calculable.



Feature targeting youths: Salafist 'story' arouses fear of 'non-believers' among a female target group. (Source: Instagram)

Far-reaching images: Approach through comments feature

ISLAMISTS FROM GERMANY ARE SUBTLE IN THEIR ACTIONS

Far-reaching images with uncritical Islamic religious content often also attract 'likers' and commenters with extremist ideas. jugendschutz.net observed how German Salafist players comment on particularly popular images in order to attract attention to their own subtle profiles designed to specifically target young people.



Hijacking hashtags: Tagging content with youth oriented keywords shall lure young users. (Source: Instagram)

Islamists often also add hashtags to their photos and short videos that are specifically popular among young people, e.g. names of well-known rappers. Their content then appears in an environment highly attractive to young people among posts from and about pop stars; this lowers the threshold to access Islamist ideology.

Media education: Prepare young people for Islamist propaganda strategies

TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE ON INSTAGRAM

Young users must particularly be made aware of subtle forms of Islamist propaganda in internet services that are specifically attractive to young people like Instagram. Within the media education in and out of school they need the basic skills to uncover the inconspicuous appearances and resist manipulative attempts. Furthermore, it is essential to report potential offences and object to inflammatory language.

Assistance on how to use Instagram safely is provided on www.kompass-social.media, a service offered by jugendschutz.net. There, young people can find assessments of safety settings, reporting options and data protection risks. Additionally, the website introduces Instagram's functionalities and provides tips on how to minimize risk exposure.

Further information

<http://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/radikalisierung/spraevention>

<http://www.hass-im-netz.info>

What can you do?

<http://www.hass-im-netz.info/was-tun/user>

Reporting options

<http://www.hass-im-netz.info/hass-im-netz-melden>

Background information

Within a project on political extremism, jugendschutz.net looks closely at Islamist content on the internet and develops counter activities. This work is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth within the program 'Demokratie leben!' i.e. 'Live Democracy!'.

Gefördert vom



Bundesministerium
für Familie, Senioren, Frauen
und Jugend

im Rahmen des Bundesprogramms

Demokratie **leben!**