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Ideological Warfare and Islamic State: A Narrative Criminology Perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines how the Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP) establishes ideological warfare through narrative tactics using ISKP's literature, Voice-of-Khurasan (VoK) and interrogation reports of detained militants of ISKP in Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Using narrative criminology as the theoretical framework, the analysis explores how stories shape militant identities, motivations, worldview and closure mechanisms that sustain violence. The findings reveal a four-tiered structure: identity narratives with five dimensions that are true-believer, victimhood, rejection-of-worldly-life, enemy-oriented and ummah-based identities, motivational narratives with eight dimensions that are revenge and justice, religious-obligation, spiritual-consolation, promise-of-paradise, sacrifice-for-'deen', rejection-of-hypocrisy, loyalty-to-the-organization and call-for-collective-action, master narratives with three dimensions that are global-khilafat-vision, struggle-against-apostates/crusaders and historical-continuity-of-resistance and narrative closures with three dimensions that are martyrdom-as-fulfillment, eternal-salvation and victory-of-islam. A cognitive map illustrates the interconnection among the dimensions, demonstrating that identity frames enable the motivational narratives which are further legitimized through the master narratives and accomplished through the narrative closure. The study confirms the existing insights from narrative criminological perspective about the role of stories in shaping violent action, while extending the literature by identifying new sub-dimensions that are the rejection-of-worldly-life identity and rejection-of-hypocrisy as motivational tools. Importantly, the findings point-out how ISKP localizes global jihadist scripts into the socio-cultural fabric of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, blending universal Islamic narratives with regional grievances. The study has implications for counter-extremism policies, suggesting that effective counter-narratives must address not only ideological claims but also emotional, cultural, closure-oriented appeals that sustain militant activities.

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1. Introduction

Narratives perform a vital role in construction of identities and motivational behaviours of extremist groups. Understanding of 'the self' is rarely explored within literature of criminology, while the term is being persistently used. As per narrative criminologists, the sense of self is stimulated and produced through story telling; the identities develop through stories in the scripts of narratives and further motivate action (Laws, 2022) ^[28]. The narrative identity symbolizes the stories of persons and groups regarding themselves, that are identifying oneself as "true believer" or "protector of islam," which further guide their course of actions (Somers, 1994) ^[52]. Motive is an internal force that coerces, or compels, one to act in a certain way. So, it

incites one to behave in the manner one does. Motive can be associated either to internal psychological processes or to an external objective that produces a coercing force on individuals (Jain & Pareek, 2022) ^[20]. Motivational narratives justify the urgency of violence, enclosing violent acts as an expressive response regarding perceived threats or injustice (Presser, 2009) ^[39]. The master narratives originate from the internalization and becomes models giving meaning to experiences (Tokle *et al.*, 2024) ^[55]. The narratives gain legitimacy and consistency when entrenched within master narratives, wider cultural contexts such as worldwide jihad or colonial resistance, provide context and joint meaning to personal and group stories (Bamberg, 2005) ^[6]. Furthermore, narrative closure bids redemption's stories and giving meaning to sacrifice or death, providing psychological resolution to militants considering violence as purposeful activity (Pemberton *et al.*, 2019; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016) ^[38, 48].

Beyond the construction of identity, narratives serve as a strong motivator for violent activities through framing these activities as essential, heroic, or divinely injunctions (Presser, 2009) ^[39]. The narratives generate identity by creating self-conceptions that are defenders, martyr or avenger, which direct behaviour and reinforce membership of the group (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016) ^[48]. Narratives rationalize violence by representing it as authentic, defensive, or delegated by supernatural authority (Presser & Sandberg, 2018) ^[41]. The sociocultural embeddedness of the narratives—their linkages to social values, grievances, and shared memories—makes them more impactful within target communities (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) ^[15]. Notably, extremist narratives are dynamic and constantly opposed by government, communities, and rival groups, stressing the enduring struggle over meaning and lawfulness in violent extremism (Sandberg, 2022) ^[46]. Understanding the notions are crucial to analysing the upsurge and sustainability of groups; the Islamic State in the localized contexts.

Narrative criminology provides critical outline for studying violent extremism by stressing the active role stories play in motivation, justification, and nourishment of criminal behaviour. Traditional studies in terrorism focus on ideology, approach, or structural aspects but risk overlooking how narratives make human action and identity (Presser & Sandberg, 2018; Sandberg, 2022) ^[41, 46]. As per narrative criminology, criminals do not just react to external circumstances; rather, they act within self-made stories about their identity—such as "defenders of Islam" or "martyrs"—justification that why their violent struggle is required, and how their detriments carry deep meaning (Presser & Sandberg, 2019; Somers, 1994) ^[42, 52]. These narratives play role at multiple levels, including motivational that explain urgency of violence, master narratives provide cultural validity, and narratives of closure that provides redemption through sacrifice (Bamberg, 2005; Presser, 2009; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016) ^[6, 39, 48]. In terrorism case, narrative criminology reveals how extremists make and propagates identity and motivational narratives that echo deeply within sociocultural contexts, intensifying their supremacy and mobilization for recruitments (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Sandberg, 2022) ^[15, 46]. The Islamic State integrates its literature with prevailing resource grievances, tribal codes of honor, and sectarian conflicts, demonstrating sociocultural embedment and dynamic contest within communities of narratives (Presser & Sandberg, 2018) ^[41]. Such narratives

offer not only a context for studying violence as expressive but also create self-conceptions that direct behaviour and justify actions often regarded as illogical from conventional perspectives of criminology. So, narrative criminological perspectives shift systematic focus toward stories as causal forces, underlining extremism and crime as much about expression through narrative about material or structural circumstances (Presser & Sandberg, 2017; Somers, 1994) ^[41, 52].

Narrative criminology has exposed how stories form identity and arouse offenders (Presser & Sandberg, 2015, 2018) ^[40, 41], its theoretical development is still limited that constrain its application to the study of extremist groups as ISKP. Firstly; the perspective mostly emphasizes individual criminal narratives in Western contexts, under-theorizing the shared, ideological storytelling adopted by militant organizations for mobilization (Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016) ^[48]. 2ndly, narrative criminology treats stories as a sole expressive device, paying insufficient consideration to their connection to ideology and theology, which in the case of the "Islamic State" establish a binding structure of ethical duty (Gerges, 2016; Lister, 2015) ^[29]. lastly, the narrative criminology has under-theorized temporality, overlooking the extremist movements deploy revelatory timelines, martyrdom aptitudes, and narrative closure for long-term commitment (McCants, 2015; Weiss & Hassan, 2015) ^[31, 56]. The identified gaps highlight the necessity for extension of narrative criminology beyond the individuals, Western and more comprehensive framework to theorizes collective, ideological, contested and temporally charged narratives—surely the case study the rise of Islamic State in Karak can offer.

Karak, a district in southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan has experienced militant activities of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Though ISKP first united itself in eastern Afghanistan, its networks stretched through porous borders into Pakistan, exploiting weak governance and prevailing socio-economic grievances (Jadoon *et al.*, 2023; Clarke & Kanwal, 2017) ^[19]. Within Pakistan, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has proven particularly vulnerable to militant resurgence due to decades of conflicts, unequal development, and the enduring effects of the "war on terror" (Ishfaq *et al.*, 2022) ^[18]. Karak specifically faces resource-related grievances, including clashes over natural resources extraction deeply embedded in socio-cultural psyche of the region that can be exploited by extremist narratives (Smolucha, 2024; Khan & Khan, 2025) ^[51, 25]. The local dynamics interconnect with ISKP's global ideology, allowing them to frame its fight in continuation of global jihad and solution to the perceived injustices (Rana, 2010) ^[43]. Therefore, studying Karak's context is vital not only for the understanding of ISKP local appeal but also for redressal of the wider challenges of global extremist ideologies adapt to and flourish within specific socio-cultural circumstances. The study is significant as it expands theoretical development of narrative criminology by applying it to the unexplored context of Islamist militancy within Pakistan. Existing studies have largely studied individual criminal narratives in Western context (Presser & Sandberg, 2015; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016) ^[40, 48], but it has not completely theorized extremist organizations' (for example ISKP) construction of collective, ideological, and future-oriented narratives. Analysing data related to ISKP in Karak, the study expands narrative criminological perspective in two ways: 1) it

determines how organizational narratives act beyond the individual self-stories; 2) it integrates theological and ideological dimensions into narrative analysis, focusing on the interaction of doctrine and story. In doing so, the study not only enriches theoretical understandings of how stories drive extremism but also provides a model for analysing the adaptation of global jihadist discourse to specific local environments.

Literature Review

Narrative criminology highlights the fundamental power of stories in shaping crime, harmful behaviour and violence (Presser & Sandberg, 2015) ^[40]. It argues that stories constitute social realities, influencing people perception as legitimate or necessary (Presser, 2009) ^[39]. Stories of victimhood, retaliation and obligation not only organize memories but also offer scripts for actions. In criminological studies the insights have been applied to diverse settings such as prisons, drug use, street gangs, and extremism (Fleetwood, 2016; Sandberg, 2016) ^[14, 45]. Narrative criminology claims that the stories are enrich with power, morality and symbolic meaning that guide behaviour (Presser & Sandberg, 2019) ^[42]. The theory has been richly developed in the context of West, its application to Islamic militancy as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) still remained as limited. Yet ISKP's literature, particularly its VoK magazine, relies heavily on narrative strategies for mobilization of recruits and justification of violence. The study seeks to extend narrative criminology into a new empirical and geographical domain by classifying these into identity narratives, motivational narratives, master narratives and narrative closure.

Narrative criminology rotates around the central point of identity. Stories offer the actors with a sense of "who they are" and "who they are not" (Fleetwood, 2016) ^[14]. Presser (2009) ^[39] claims that criminal narratives often revolve around the identities that the "aggrieved victim" or the "blameless avenger". This provides justification for criminal activities. Similarly, Sandberg (2010) ^[47] transcribes that identity stories are constituent, offers recognition to the individual within groups that legalize their roles as a gang member frequently adopt narratives of toughness and loyalty that strengthen their status within the group (Sandberg, 2016) ^[45]. Application of identity narratives to violent extremism is crucial. Simi and Futrell (2024) ^[50] revealed how white supremacists endure joint identity by narrating themselves as a mistreated "true-race." Schuurman and Taylor (2018) ^[49] found that radical biographies construct identities of the believers who have surpassed the worldly life to embrace jihad. In IS narratives, militants are often represented as true-believers with divine acceptability, while their communities are portrayed as victims of oppression.

Narratives not simply describe identities; they motivate actions as well. Presser and Sandberg (2015) ^[40] claim that stories provide compelling reasons to the actors to act, often framed in morality or emotions. Motivational narratives rationalize crime as obligation, retaliation or necessity. As, Fleetwood (2016) ^[14] discovered that drug dealers' stories frequently rationalize their illicit trade with familial responsibility. In the context of militancy, motivational narratives are often religious, moral or ethical requirements. Ingram (2015) ^[17] shows how ISIS propaganda inspires recruits by amalgamation of grievances and utopian potentials. Similarly, Simi and Futrell (2015) ^[50] describe how narratives of revenge against perceived oppressors

sustain white power militancy. Similarly, in the context of jihad the dominant motivational themes are religious duty ('jihad'), revenge and the promise of paradise (Hafez & Mullins, 2015) ^[16]. These stories provide not just psychological comfort but also a script for mobilization.

Master narratives are the holistic narratives that offer cultural and ideological consistency. These are wider than personal stories, effective as a grand script embedded with personal and group stories (Presser & Sandberg, 2019) ^[42]. In western criminology, the "American dream" narrative has been shown to reinforce legitimate and illegitimate pursuits of success (Messner & Rosenfeld, 2001) ^[35]. In the context of violent extremism, master narratives are frequently in the form of historical struggles, clashes of civilizations or utopian futures. Ingram (2016) ^[17] pointed how ISIS linked its propaganda to Islamic history, presenting its caliphate as the continuation of an eternal struggle. Simi and Futrell (2015) ^[50] observe similar mechanisms in white supremacist groups, where stories of racial decline and betrayal become overarching scripts. In the case of ISKP, the master narrative rotates around global jihad, the establishment of Khilafat, and a stark "us versus them" worldview that divides believers from apostates, crusaders, and local governments.

Narrative closure resolves the tensions arising from identity, motivational, and master narratives. Narrative closure involves redemption of stories (Maruna, 2001) ^[34], where offenders turn their lives around or fatalistic endings that accept imprisonment or death. In the context of extremist narratives, closure frequently centers around the martyrdom and eternal salvation. Sandberg and Colvin (2020) ^[47] stated that closure is not just about individual comfort but also about sustaining group cohesion, stories of fallen martyrs inspire continued struggle among the living. ISIS portrays death in jihad as an ultimate success and a gateway to the paradise (Ingram, 2016) ^[17]. That creates a narrative rationalization that in militant operations or conflicts a violent death is victory instead of loss.

The upsurge of Islamic State (IS) marked a crucial instant in the trajectory of the ongoing extremist activities, reshaping not only the dynamics of Middle-East conflicts but also global studies on militant narratives. Evolving from the leftovers of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), IS differentiates itself from others through its territorial ambitions, establishment of so-called caliphate, and a strong propaganda system that attracted diverse populations (Lister, 2015; Weiss & Hassan, 2016) ^[29, 56]. It was ideologically built on synthesis of jihadist thought and visions of global struggle, advancing its urgency and spiritual validity (McCants, 2015) ^[31]. Though the broader ideological aspects of IS have been explored while, specific ways the narratives manifest and adapt in the contexts of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remain unexplored. This penpoint a gap in narrative criminology: must of the existing studies emphases on individual radicalization or Western recruitments, overlooking the collective storytelling activities in culturally separate situation where theological, ideological, and local grievances interlace to yield exceptional mobilization narratives.

IS's strength is perceived to be its ability to construct persuasive stories that frame violence as virtuous and obligatory. Its propaganda layer within themes of victimhood, revenge, justice, and religious mission, portray the organization as a protector and avenger of the worldwide Muslim community (Winter, 2015; Ingram, 2015) ^[58, 17]. Embedding the narratives in emotionally echoing symbols—

martyrdom, brotherhood and honor—IS has recruited thousands across continents. The Scholars of extremist communication highlight that IS propaganda is not just verbal but performative; it generates fictional communities bound by collective grievances and objectives (Al-Rawi, 2017). The literature provides critical insights but it is silent regarding IS narratives from the localized adaptations.

The Islamic State evolution into its Khorasan Province highlights the significance of study on regional variations within adaptation of narrative. Since the Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP) proper announcement in 2015, it has endeavored to root its ideology in South and Central Asia, exploiting the porous borders, sectarian detachments and weak governance, (Giustozzi, 2018). The ISKP's literature attempts to position the group as a clearer substitute to Taliban, stressing intercontinental jihad over local insurgence (Clarke & Amarasingam, 2021). The position echoes with individuals disappointed by the Taliban's conciliations and offers an identity rooted wider rather than leaner struggle. The criminology literature has still to systematically analyse the identities, narratively constructed in the local contexts. The narrative criminology perspective provides a valuable lens for exploring the issues, as it stresses that stories do not just show reality but actively generate identities actions, and choices (Presser & Sandberg, 2015) ^[40]. Conferring to this framework, the offenders commit violence not just because of grievances but because they consider themselves and their actions through specific narrative patterns that rationalize and impose offence. Applying to the studies of terrorism, narrative criminology has illuminated that the extremist propaganda offers scripts of identity that turns youth into avengers or martyrs (Sandberg *et al.*, 2019). Much of the studies in narrative criminology has been developed and conceptualized in contexts of an individual. Less theorized is that the extremist organizations make collective stories that interweave ideology, theology to mobilize communities rather than just individuals. This study pushes the edges of narrative criminology by illustrating that ISKP's narratives acts not just as an individual identity scripts but as a shared storytelling projects that restructure local grievances into a global agenda of jihad.

Earlier studies on IS literature provided extensive records of the group's media output, ranging from literature and videos to locally distribution of pamphlets. The ingredients disclose thoughtful communication, exploitation of emotional appeals, religious transcriptions, and strategic framing to inspire recruits and enemies (Winter, 2015; Ingram, 2015) ^[58, 17]. In context of South Asia, ISKP has replicated this approach, pinpointing the failure of the state, the corruption of elites and disloyalty of the "false Muslims" in competing groups (Clarke & Amarasingam, 2021). ISKP's discourse have the capacity to frame violence not just as a retaliatory effort but also as religiously mandated justice. Scholarships regarding jihadist rhetoric consecutively noted that religious transcriptions are selectively mobilized for construction of a divine imperative for martial struggle, showing martyrdom as the zenith of faith and violence as an obedience to the creator (Gerges, 2016; Abbas, 2014) ^[29, 1]. ISKP's literature, including VoK, demonstrate this strategy by inserting theological references in narratives of victim and revenge, thereby merging religious obligation to grievances. The available literature treats such religious pleas as static invocations of policy rather than as active storytelling strategies that structure actions and identity. while it

acknowledges the stories as drivers of violence, here the gap in narrative criminology is to analytically discover how religion is narrativized—transformed from abstract sacred scripture into lived ethical imperatives that shape the collective identities.

The ISKP's ideological literature criticises its rival groups, specifically the Afghan Taliban. Studies explored that ISKP considered itself as an uncompromising, rejecting the Taliban's rationality and inclination to negotiation (Jadoon *et al.*, 2023) ^[19]. By showing itself as the precursor of "true" jihad, ISKP conceptualize a narrative of purity that diverge with the supposed corruption of others. The plan generates a binary moral space where commitment to ISKP characterizes loyalty to divine truth, whereas all alternatives are framed as disloyalty. Existing studies highlights the tactical reason of such aligning (Clarke & Kanwal, 2017) ^[19], but often underplays how these competitive frames echo contrarily across circumstances. The digital media role in extension of ISKP's narratives also needs attention. Studies have explored how extremist organizations exploit digital services in dissemination of propaganda, recruitment, and cultivation of global solidarity (Al-Rawi, 2017; Winter, 2015) ^[58]. ISKP reflects this tactic, but also add online materials with distribution magazines locally and face-to-face campaigning, creating a hybrid communicative ecosystem. Studies highlight the worldwide outreach of digital jihad but often neglect its interface with local, face to face preaching. Additionally, structural factors play a crucial role in empowering extremist narratives flourishing. studies on militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa portray that resource exploitation, underdevelopment and political marginalization make fertile ground for radical ideologies (Khattak, 2019; Rana, 2019) ^[43].

The existing literature discovers the role of identity in radicalization and penpoint that the extremist groups offer narratives to resolve identity crises through offering clarity, belonging and purpose (Bamberg, 2005; Somers, 1994) ^[6, 52]. ISKP's literature stresses the creation of heroic identities that mujahid as guardian, martyr as eternal victor and the community as chosen frontline of faith (Presser, 2009) ^[39]. Counter-narratives emerged as distant approach in counterterrorism efforts to disrupt extremist propaganda by alternative stories of affection and justice. Studies have explored the effectiveness of counter-narratives dissemination through social media utilization and programs (Khalil *et al.*, 2022) ^[23]. However, critiques porty that such efforts are unsuccessful because they lack cultural character, appearing imposed rather than naturally embedded in the local circumstances (Crisis Group, 2022). The interaction of global and domestic narratives is another aspect discussed in literature. ISKP's literature is concurrently intercontinental, appealing the worldwide struggle of the ummah and locally referencing specific injustices (Byman, 2016) ^[9]. This dichotomy allows it for mobilization across scales, offering cosmic worth and instant significance. Studies acknowledge the elasticity but rarely dissect the global scripts that are interpreted into the local expressions. The available literature also points gendered aspects of militant narratives. ISKP literature penpoint women's roles as an educators, supporters and reproducers of faith, enclosing them as vigorous to nourishing the jihadist activity (Bloom & Lokmanoglu, 2020) ^[5]. These narratives serve the naturalization of gendered hierarchies with mobilization of women within specific roles. Yet the narrative criminological perspective has given limited

attention to the gendered based construction of narrative, concentrating mostly on male subjectivities.

The strength of militant narratives needs scrutiny. Studies shows that when extremist groups lose regional control or loose leadership, their stories persevere, behind networks of compassion and latent resurgences (Ingram, 2015; Jadoon *et al.*, 2023) ^[17, 19]. ISKP, while facing military pressure from Taliban and state continued circulation of its ideological literature through social media networks and magazines keep flourishing the ambition of Khilafat in Khorasan. This elasticity highlights that narratives are constituent of the militant persistence. While the criminological theories treat narratives as illustrative indicators rather than enduring meaningful structure that outlast organizational decline. The significant theoretical gap is that narrative criminological perspective should analyse not just inspirational actions stories in the moment but also implantation in collective memory, confirming the endurance of militant poster even in the absence of instant strength.

The rise of Islamic State (IS), also known as Daesh, is the most crucial change in global jihad over the past twenty years. Emergent from the leftovers of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) subsequently the U.S. invasion in 2003, IS distinguished itself by its prudent state-building mission, its blend territorial authority with online propaganda that set it separate from the earlier jihadist organizations (Lister, 2015; Weiss & Hassan, 2016; McCants, 2015) ^[29, 56, 31]. With announcement of the caliphate in 2014, IS not only pursued consolidated control over Iraq and Syria but also intended to inspire a global jihadist movement. Its policy depends upon enormous violence, information warfare and creation of global identity capable to attract transnational fighters. Preceding to irreparable damage to its regional control in 2019, IS endured as a dispersed global insurgency, nourishing affiliates in Middle East, Africa, South Asia (Byman, 2016) ^[9]. This discloses that Islamic state not limited to its battleground victory or defeat but also heavily relies on ideology-based narratives that links individual grievances to a shared narrative of confrontation and improvement (Ingram, 2015) ^[17].

The Islamic State (IS) extension to Central and South Asia occurred through the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) emergence in 2015. ISKP carried on its ideological blueprint and challenged new circumstances defined by local insurgencies and sectarian conflicts (Jadoon *et al.*, 2023) ^[19]. Its rise was facilitated with the defection from the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other groups disillusioned of leadership crises (Osman, 2016; Rassler, 2015) ^[37, 44]. Contrasting to al-Qaeda, which stressed coalitions with indigenous insurgents, ISKP illustrates itself as rigorously pure, clashing with TTP and Afghan Taliban. Studies has recorded the brutality of ISKP, such as destroying shrines, target killing of Hazara Shias, imposition of harsh principles (Johnson, 2016) ^[22]. Yet researchers have mainly engrossed on ISKP's military tactics and its narrative construction is less explored, while battlefield tactics may explore short-term existence and does not explain why ISKP's propaganda stays to echo even after territorial hindrances.

Classical terrorism studies emphasize ideology, grievances, or tactical behaviour, nevertheless the outlines can oversee the performative function of storytelling. Narrative criminological perspective proposes remedial by theorizing stories as constituent of human action rather than simple

replications of the reality. As Presser and Sandberg (2019) ^[42] argue, narratives construction of identities, motivation of violence, and justifications for offensive acts. Stories convert personal frustrations into collective assignments and empower actors to place their-self in a broader struggle. Applying to terrorism studies, the framework shifts concentration from ideology in abstraction to practical narratives. Sandberg and Ugelvik (2016) ^[48] reveal that narratives of identity, motive, master agendas and closure withstand within extremist groups throughout the circumstances. For ISKP, such narratives contain showing itself as the true defender of islam, aligning jihad as an honourable act of revenge, enclosing martyrdom as redemption and positioning Khorasan as a battleground. Yet much narrative criminology literature has focused on European and Middle Eastern contexts (Presser & Sandberg, 2018; Sandberg, 2022) ^[41, 46], with less consideration of South Asian context. The gap underscores the need to study the narrative criminology application in local South Asian context.

The Islamic State's worldwide propaganda approach has been extensively studied regarding its sophistication. Scholars explored its glassy videos, digital magazines and intercontinental social media campaigns (Winter, 2015) ^[58]. Significantly, the studies recognized frequent narrative components that is victimhood: portraying Muslims as a victim of hostility), heroism: "mujahideen" as martyrs, battle visions: perceive Khorasan as a battleground and redemption: martyrdom as a closure (Ingram, 2015; Ashour, 2010; McCants, 2015; Presser & Sandberg, 2018) ^[17, 3, 31, 41]. ISKP exploits sectarian divisions by targeting Hazara Shias (McNally, 2016) ^[32]. Their narratives stress corruption, betrayal and injustice (Abbas, 2014; Rana, 2010) ^[1, 43]. ISKP also demonstrates self as a clear alternate of Taliban, accusing it of divulging jihad through consultations (Jadoon *et al.*, 2023) ^[19]. These studies demonstrate ISKP's adaptability but often stop short of conceiving how the narratives intersect with indigenous cultural repertoires. The research gap, therefore, lies in systematically analysing how global jihadist stories attain tone when entrenched within indigenous code of honor, grievances and sectarian landscapes.

Narrative criminological perspective offers valuable theoretical framework tools for the study. Narrative construct's identity, acts as motivators for action, and provides justifications of actions (Presser, 2009; Somers, 1994; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) ^[39, 52, 15]. Militants' organizations excel in producing recruitment stories to convert frustrations into heroic tasks, justification stories that validate violence and resilience stories that reframe the overthrows as a divine trial (Khalil *et al.*, 2022; Sandberg, 2022) ^[23, 46]. ISKP's literature align with these dimensions by framing "mujahideen" as a defender of the religion, aligning violence with purification and representation of martyrdom as an ultimate form of closure. Much of the studies scrutinizes these narratives in general without implanting them in micro-contexts such as Karak's political economy and local 'pakhtoon' culture. The omission withstands the gap of the study addresses to understand how ISKP's ideological narratives interconnects with the indigenous codes of honor, grievances regarding the exploitation of resource and sectarian conflict in the ways that general radicalization models cannot fully cover.

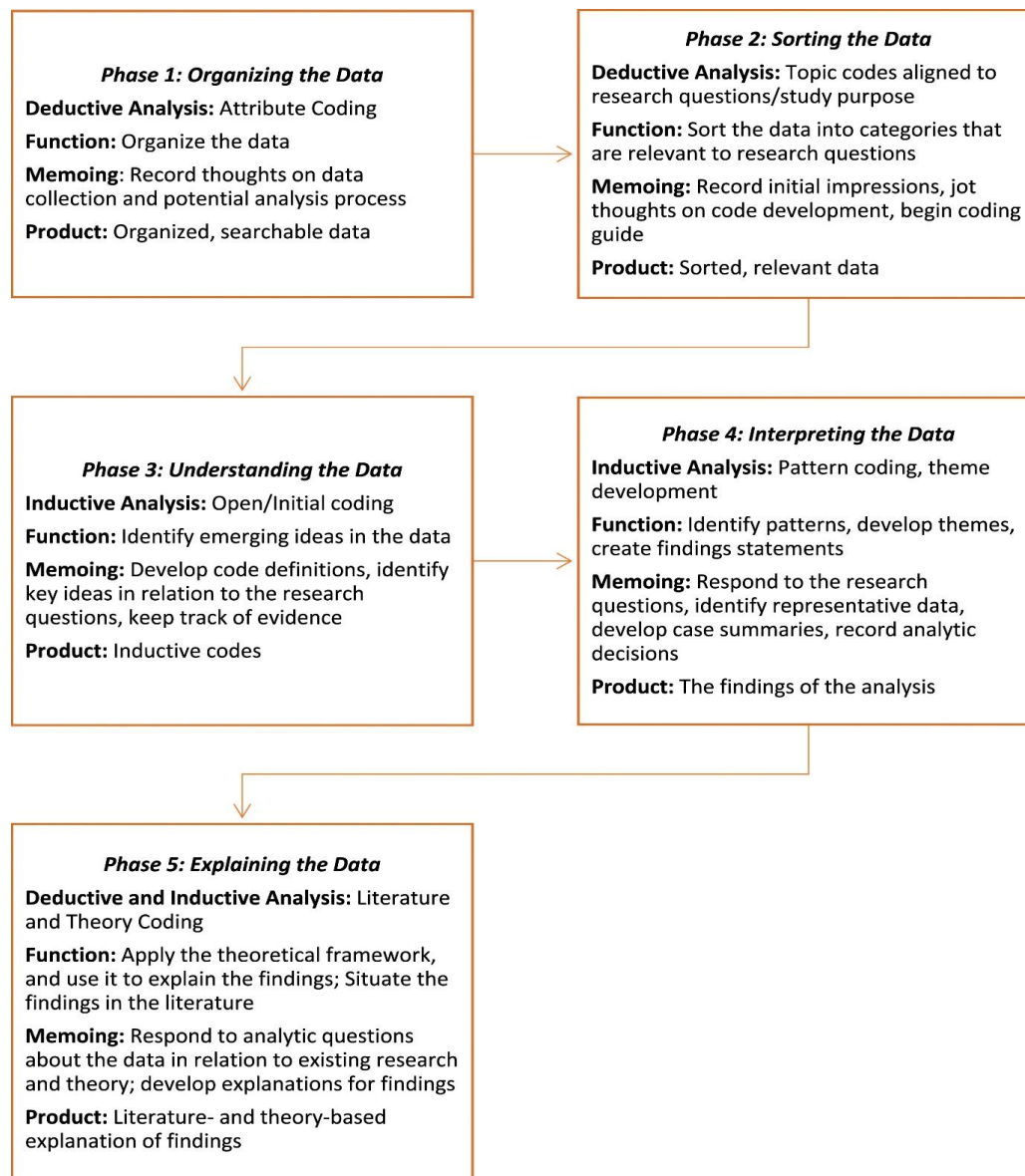
Socio-Cultural & Geographic Context

The significance Karak's in this discourse lies in its exceptional geographic & socio-cultural background. Situated in the southern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and dominated by the Khattak tribe, Karak represents strong Pakhtun traditions that are 'badal': revenge, 'ghairat': honor 'milmastiya': hospitality (Smolucha, 2024; Khan & Khan, 2025) ^[51, 25]. Unlike Newly Miraged districts (NMDs) that are acknowledged extensive research attention, Karak leftovers unexplored despite its acquaintance to militancy. It is rich in natural resources that are Oil, Gas, Uranium and Salt though remained marginalized and underdeveloped in terms of infrastructure and services (Khan *et al.*, 2023; Ishfaq *et al.*, 2022) ^[27, 18]. That professed frustration leading to aggressive behaviour against state and the elites, aligning to the resource curse. (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024; Khan *et al.*, 2016) ^[2, 24]. Intensification of the grievances is a compact system of "madras" mostly affiliated to Salafi and Deobandi thoughts, contributing a conservative theological climate (Naz *et al.*, 2013; Candland, 2017; Mehmood, 2025) ^[36, 10, 33]. The theological conservatism not only forms the social life but also makes ground for sectarian and takfiri stories promotion of ISKP (Borchgrevink, 2011) ^[8]. Studies explores that political fluctuations between nationalist and religious parties in Karak, linked with weak governance and porous margins further empowering infiltration of militants (Din *et al.*, 2023; Jones, 2010) ^[12, 21]. Though, the literature demonstrates the empowering situations of militancy, it rarely explored how ISKP weaves the grievances and cultural codes into substantial narrative. The gap emphasizes the necessity for a narrative criminology approach to analyse that situates propaganda within Karak's socio-cultural context. Karak's indigenous conditions offer a crystalline lens for exploration of the gap. The area experienced socio-economic grievances although rich with natural resources wealth, feeding perceptions to exploit (Ahmad *et al.*, 2024) ^[2]. The 'pakhtun' identity highlights 'ghairat'; honour and 'badal'; revenge naturally aligned to ISKP's interpretation of jihad as revenge and defence. The religious conservative environment formed by 'Madris' systems allows sectarian narratives to flourish (Rana, 2010; Borchgrevink, 2011) ^[43, 8]. Feeble governance and permeable borders between Karak and militant-prone districts, worsening the vulnerability (Khan, 2024) ^[26]. Unpredictability of political setup, reflects in fluctuation of nationalist and religious parties, produces disappointment within the state institutions (Misra & Clarke, 2013) ^[30]. While studies explored these vulnerabilities while little consideration has been given to the ISKP active weaves them into stories for the mobilization of recruits. The study gap lies in linking militancy with narrative criminological approach that highlight the way propaganda makes grievances actionable and intelligible. The literature on narrative criminology highlights how stories shape identities, motivate actions, sustain master narratives, and provide closure. Applications to extremism show that

these mechanisms are vital in sustaining radical groups. However, most studies focus on ISIS in Iraq and Syria, white power movements in the West, or individual radicalization stories in Europe. There remains a significant theoretical and empirical gap in understanding how narrative criminology operates in the South Asian militant landscape, specifically ISKP in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By applying the constructs of identity, motivational, master, and closure narratives to ISKP propaganda and community responses in Karak, this research not only contributes to terrorism studies but also advances the theoretical reach of narrative criminology. It demonstrates how stories travel, adapt, and gain power in localized contexts that blend tribal traditions, state marginalization, and global jihadist visions.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative approach grounded in narrative criminological framework to examine the rise of Islamic State in Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan with particular attention to explore role of narratives in shaping the ideological mobilization. Analyzing the secondary data sources "fifteen articles" (english version from ISKP's VoK and "five Interrogation Reports of individual accused" (Official Document Urdu Version) of accused belonging to District Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan in the custody of Counter Terrorism Department, (1st: teacher at 'madrasa'; religious educational institute, 'hafiz-e-Quran' having 8th stage religious education and intermediate level (12 years) general education, 2nd: primary school teacher, religious scholar and having master of arts (16 years general education) in 'islamiyat'; islamic studies, 3rd: 'muhtamim'; administrator of 'madrasa'; religious educational institution having 8th stage religious education with specialization in 'fatwah' as 'mufti' and matric level (10 years) general education, 4th: tailor master by profession, hafiz-e-Quran, having 3rd stage religious education & have Matric level general education and 5th: Student of final stage in religious education & have matric level general education) while narrative criminology perspective approach was applied. Narrative criminological framework offers the analytical lens for exploration of stories from the scripts, empowering the processes to identify meaning-making, construction of identity and justifications of offensive activities employed by ISKP within socio-cultural circumstances of Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Five dimensions of identity narratives, eight dimensions of motivational narrative, three dimensions of master narratives and three dimensions of narrative closer dimensions were found out from the analysis of the study. The analytical framework of Bingham (2023) ^[7] is adopted for this study, whose process of five-phase supports researcher regarding planning, articulation and execution of qualitative data analysis systematically and transparently rising an audit trail of insurance dependability and trustworthiness of the study.

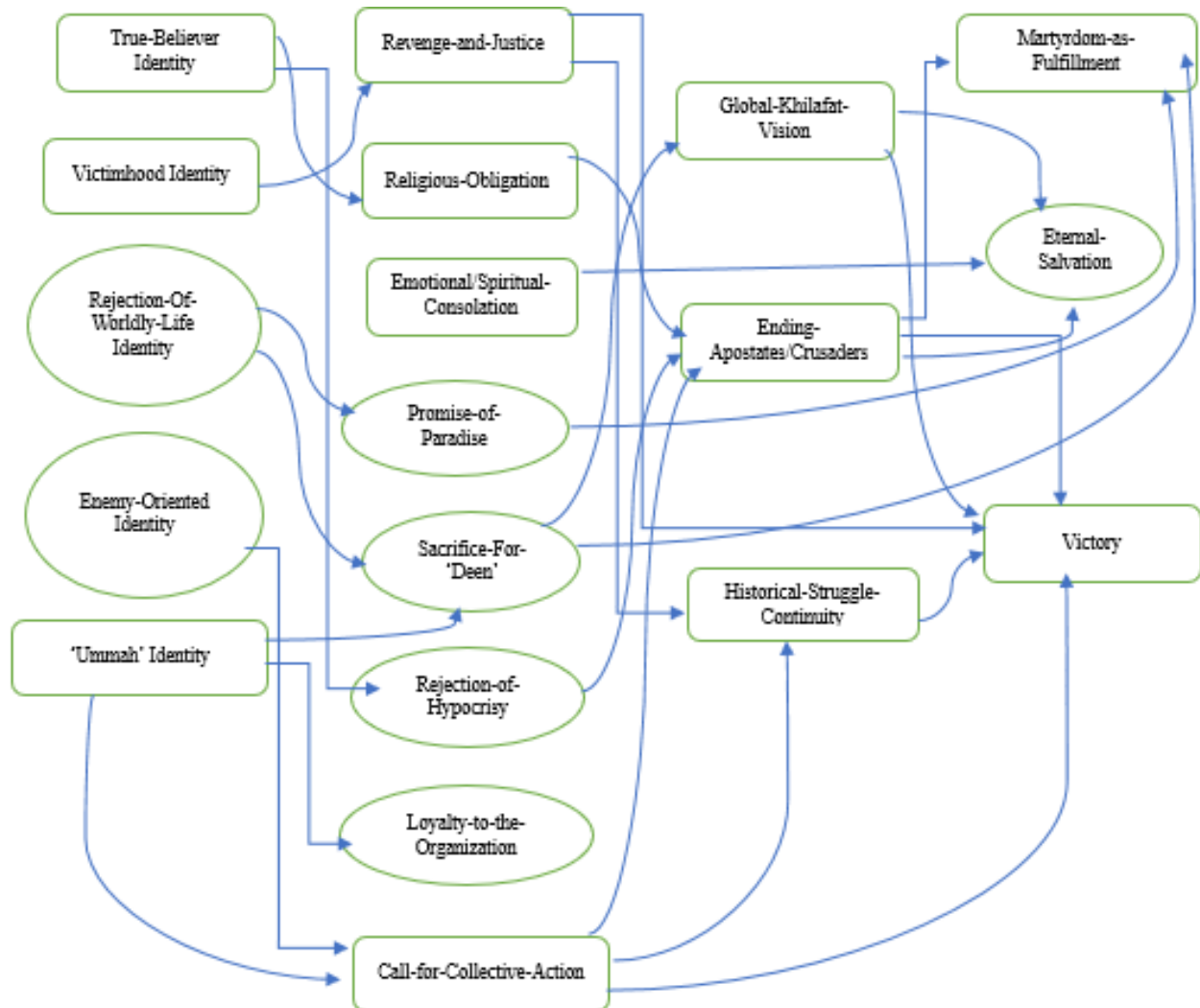


The five-phase process, Adapted from Bingham (2023) ^[7]. Ethically efforts were carried out to anonymize the sensitive data and critically situating the extremist stories to avoid unintentional amplification. The approach not only enlightens the narrative criminological perspective over ISKP sought of legitimation in Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan but further contributes to the theoretical expansion by application of narrative criminological approach to the circumstances where it has been rarely applied. This methodology aligns the wider study objective and fills the gaps between global theorization of extremist narrative and indigenous narrative construction practices in Pakistani periphery.

Results & Analysis: The analysis of qualitative data including ISKP's VoK and interrogation-reports reveals a five dimensions of the identity narrative that are true-believer identity, victimhood identity, rejection-of-worldly-life identity, enemy-oriented identity and 'ummah' identity while

eight dimensions of the motivational narratives that are revenge-and-justice, religious obligation, emotional/spiritual-consolation, promise-of-paradise, sacrifice-for-'deen', rejection-of-hypocrisy, loyalty-to-the-organization and call-for-collective-action furthermore three dimensions of the master narratives that are global-khilafat-vision, ending apostates/crusaders and historical-struggle-continuity moreover three dimensions of the narrative closure that are martyrdom-as-fulfillment, eternal-salvation and victory. The Analysis also reveals protentional interconnectedness between one dimension of a single narrative level with the dimension of the other narrative level. To illustrate results a cognitive map has been developed (rectangle shape for the dimension supported by both dataset while, the oval shape for the dimension supported by single dataset) as below.

Identity Narrative → Motivational Narrative → Master Narrative → Narrative Closure



Identity Narrative: The analysis of the data pointed out five key dimensions of the identity narratives. 1) The true-believer identity that frames militants as divinely chosen actors. 2) The victimhood identity positions them as oppressed by internal and external enemies, thus emphasizing the grievances. 3) The rejection-of-worldly-life identity describes their detached from materialism and fully committed to the spiritual sacrifice. 4) The enemy-oriented identity detects apostates, crusaders, and enemies as an existential threat. 5) The 'ummah' identity encompasses relationship beyond the familial and ethnicity, replacing it with a worldwide Islamic brotherhood network.

Motivational Narrative: This study revealed eight dimensions of the motivational narrative. 1) The revenge-and-justice legitimates violent retaliation to their perceived injustice. The dimension is linked to identity narrative through victimhood identity dimension. 2) The religious-obligation upheld the jihad to the command of the divine super-power, replacing militancy with duty instead of choice. The dimension is linked to identity narrative through true-believer identity dimension. 3) emotional and spiritual consolation offers psychological elasticity, framing militancy as a source of relief from grief and desperation. 4) The promise-of-paradise is concern to assurances of eternal rewards for the sacrifices, playing role in recruitment and commitment. The dimension is linked to identity narrative through the rejection-of-worldly-life identity dimension. 5) Sacrifice-for-deen strengthens severity and durability of militancy. The dimension is linked to identity narrative through the rejection-of-worldly-life identity & the 'ummah' identity dimension. 6) rejection-of-hypocrisy criticizes contending rival groups for conciliations, placing them as a defender of Islam in a realistic sense. The dimension is linked to identity narrative through true-believer identity dimension. 7) Loyalty-to-the-organization nurtures stringent adherence to ISKP's secrecy and hierarchy procedures. The dimension is linked to identity narrative through the 'ummah' identity dimension. 8) Call-for-collective-action inspires the individuals to be the part of a collective mission of militancy, reinforcing cohesion and solidarity. The dimension is linked to identity narrative through the 'ummah' identity & the enemy-oriented identity dimensions.

Master Narrative: The findings unveil three dimensions of the master narrative that organizes the identity and motivational dimensions into a wider ideology. 1) global-khilafat vision positions ISKP as the vanguard for the establishment of the worldwide caliphate, transcending the struggles at local level. The dimension is linked to motivational narrative through sacrifice-for-deen dimension. 2) Ending Apostates/Crusaders generates a division of believers and enemies, reinforcing restricted boundaries. The dimension is linked to motivational narrative through sacrifice-for-deen, The religious-obligation and call-for-collective-action dimension. 3) Historical-struggle-

continuity connects ISKP's current struggle the past resistance to Islam, establishing legitimacy through the past memory. The dimension is linked to call-for-collective-action dimension.

Narrative Closure: The narrative closure provides grounds to resolve the doubts of the militant's life at three dimensions. 1) The martyrdom-as-fulfillment frames demise during the militancy as the ultimate goal and as considered as an honor for the believer. The dimension is linked to motivational narrative through the promise-of-paradise, sacrifice-for-deen dimension and master narrative through ending apostates/crusaders dimensions. 2) The eternal-salvation guarantees the militants for a divine reward, eradicating the fears regarding death. The dimension is linked to master narrative through global-khilafat vision and ending apostates/crusaders dimensions, while to 3) The victory dimension constructs ISKP's ultimate achievement as certain, irrespective of any impediment, strengthening persistence and durability of commitment. The dimension is linked to master narrative through global-khilafat vision, ending apostates/crusaders and historical-struggle-continuity dimensions while to motivational narrative through emotional and spiritual consolation dimensions.

Discussion

The study findings determine that ISKP's literature in VoK (organizational stories) with insights from accused interrogation reports (individual stories) makes a meaningful framework to answer the question of how ISKP crafts and circulates militant narratives in Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The evidence demonstrates a four-tiered multi-dimensional narrative structure that are identity, motivational, master and closure of narratives, interlink to produce an influential ideological framework. The framework is aligned with Narrative Criminological perspective main argument that "stories do not simply reflect reality but constitute it" (Presser & Sandberg, 2015) ^[40]. In the ISKP's case narratives assist as a recruitment apparatus and a framework as well, through which militants infer their subsists, operations and deaths. In this discussion, I place the study findings within available literature, display what is established, what is new, and where does the theoretical gaps lie.

The five dimensions of identity as discovered that are true-believer identity, victimhood identity, rejection-of-worldly-life identity, enemy-oriented identity, and ummah identity demonstrate the militants looking themselves as in actors in a screen of divinely sanctioned theatre. The study mirrors and extends prior literature on identity fusion and collective identity as risk factors for extremism that a recent systematic review shows that identity fusion—where one's personal identity becomes deeply bound to a group identity—is strongly correlated with support for extremist violence (Echelmeyer et.al., 2023) ^[13]. "victimhood identity," in particular, appears frequently in the data as a foundational narrative for ISKP recruitment and justification of violence. This resonates with the broader literature on how narratives of humiliation, persecution, and identity loss feed into extremist mobilization Hafez (2007) ^[16] claims that the jihadist actors frame Muslim suffering at the hands of foreign states and oppressive regimes to legitimize violence.

Thus, the findings confirm that extremist groups often employ victimhood and identity fusion to produce strong adherence. However, unlike much of the existing literature,

the data shows the rejection-of-worldly-life identity as another frequent dimension, something less emphasized in studies elsewhere (many focuses mostly on victimhood or identity fusion, but less on rejection of mundane life). That dimension seems to represent an ascetic impulse (or renunciation of worldly pleasures) which the data suggests is an important bridge toward motivating militant action in ISKP's narratives. This contributes a novel dimension to theoretical work on identity narratives. The eight dimensions of motivational narrative identified align well with what is already known, but also extend it in important ways. revenge & justice and religious obligation are well-documented themes in Islamist extremist propaganda. ISIS intermixes religious messages, power projection, and violent imagery to appeal to recruits' sense of religious duty and revenge (Yarchi, 2019) ^[59]. Another parallel is evident which specifically unpacks how propaganda uses notions of hijrah (migration), establishment of the caliphate, and martyrdom to provoke moral obligation among believers (Toguslu, 2019) ^[54].

Additional motivational dimensions identified in this study that are emotional/spiritual consolation, sacrifice-for-'deen', rejection-of-hypocrisy, loyalty-to-organization and call-for-collective-action add thickness to the motivational level, showing that ISKP does not rely solely on anger or duty but also appeals to spiritual comfort, communal belonging, moral pureness, and organized loyalty. The dimension of rejection-of-hypocrisy, for example, resonates with studies of intra-Muslim critiques in extremist propaganda (that is propaganda not just against "the state" or "the West" but also against other Muslim groups seen as impure or compromised). This suggests that existing theory should more explicitly incorporate these additional motivational sub-dimensions for extremist groups in contexts like Pakistan, where moral purity and intra-community critique often play powerful roles.

Findings of this regarding master narratives particularly global-khilafat-vision, ending apostates/crusaders and historical-struggle-continuity resonate strongly with the literature on how extremist organizations embed their cause within broader historical or theological frameworks. Toguslu (2019) ^[54] discovered how ISIS frequently invokes prophetic history, the establishment of the caliphate, and cosmic struggle (good vs evil) as master narratives. Likewise, identity works such as identity fusion show that fusion with an ideology or religious/political cause is often mediated by master narratives that promise transcendence beyond local or immediate concerns.

However, what the data adds is the depth of interplay between local culture (local grievances in Karak, social marginalization, tribal dimensions) and these global master narratives. ISKP is not merely adopting global scripts; it adapts them to resonate locally. For instance, historical-struggle-continuity in the findings links not just generic Islamic history but also relevant figures and memory. This suggests that theoretical models of master narrative need to better account for local cultural anchoring; how universal scripts are "localized" to make them persuasive.

The three dimensions identified in this study regarding narrative closure that are martyrdom-as-fulfillment, eternal-salvation and victory are well represented in the literature but often treated individually rather than as part of a structured narrative cycle. Hafez (2007) ^[16] discovered that the jihadist groups promote martyrdom by offering redemption and

promise of paradise as closure for suffering. Bloom et al., (2016) ^[5] also find out that young fighters are portrayed as martyrs, offering emotional and narrative closure in their early deaths.

The study confirms this pattern, but also highlight how closure is not only aspirational but used tactically to maintain recruitment, to reassure those on the margins or undergoing suffering, and to portray losses (casualties) not as failures but as victories in a longer divine trajectory. The dimension victory, is particularly strategic: it instils hope and sustains morale even when group is under pressure.

In sum, the empirical findings both confirm many existing elements of narrative criminology and extend it: by explicitly defining new dimensions (rejection-of-worldly-life and loyalty-to-organization), showing how narrative levels interconnect, and highlighting the centrality of spiritual and eschatological closure. The discussion suggests that theory needs to be broadened to encompass these realities, especially in Islamist militant settings like ISKP in Pakistan.

Theoretical Implications: Narrative criminology must incorporate local cultural codes (like tribal identity, honor, local grievances) more explicitly when analysing extremist groups; many current studies generalize from Western or Middle Eastern contexts without sufficient attention to how local identities shape narrative uptake. Religious and eschatological dimensions (duty, martyrdom, promise of paradise, victory) are not peripheral but central in extremist motivational and closure narratives, especially in ISKP-like settings. The current literature often treats these as add-ons rather than core narrative dimensions. There is a need for a model of narrative interconnectedness: the data shows that dimensions across identity, motivational, master, and closure narratives are not just additive but interdependent, they fuel one another in a coherent cycle. Many prior studies examine one of these constructs in isolation; fewer examine the entire structure or how motivation leads into master narratives and closure in the way the cognitive map shows. Counter-narrative efforts (as seen in Pakistan through Paigham-e-Pakistan and educational initiatives) often focus on logical or moderate religious rebuttals, but may not address deeply emotional or closure-oriented narratives of martyrdom or promise of eternal reward. For theories of counter-extremism, this suggests that counter-narratives must imitate or counter closure and master narratives, not just factual corrections. For example, the Paigham-e-Pakistan initiative is a narrative effort to provide alternative religious framing (Babur & Noor, 2023) ^[4].

Practical Implications & Policy Suggestions

Counter-narrative design should address each narrative level: identity, motivation, master, and closure. Ignoring any one level (especially closure) may leave recruits vulnerable to the appeal of martyrdom or promise of paradise. Leverage local identity and culture to produce effective counter-narratives. Because ISKP's identity narratives are rooted in local grievances and cultural resonance (tribal, religious, historical), counter-narrative programs should similarly use local symbols, histories, and voices to reframe grievances. Address emotional and spiritual dimensions, not just ideological or policy arguments. The themes of spiritual consolation, promise of paradise, and emotional repair for trauma are strong motivational levers for ISKP; counter-extremism efforts must offer emotional resonance. Policy

must recognize the interconnectedness of narratives. For example, interventions targeting "victimhood" stories without offering alternative closures may be limited. Reconciliation, community healing, or symbolic gestures of justice might help mitigate victimhood identity.

Limitations and Future Research

While the findings deepen understanding of ISKP's narrative structure in Karak, there are limitations: VoK articles and interrogation reports represent the narrative the group wants to present and what detainees are willing to confess; less access is given to counter-narrative reception among the population. Narratives change over time; this analysis may not capture shifts or adaptations ISKP makes in response to counter-measures. Future research should track how these narratives evolve over time, how reception among local communities modifies or resists them, and how counter-narrative interventions might disrupt entire narrative cycles (identity → motivation → master → closure).

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