The lone wolf extremist is now the most likely type of terror attack to happen anywhere on earth (Spaaij, 2010). These individuals, though, are hard to predict, as often they have little to no tangible or physical connection with an existing terror group or cell. They identify, usually only in a digital sense, with existing and accepted beliefs, faiths and values, blending into the mainstream. The methods they use in attacks, such as knives, suicide vests and vehicles, mean that they lie below traditional detection methods until the very last second when they carry out attacks.

However, the use of digital communication tools, such as social media and websites, means that the lone wolf is not necessarily that alone, as their interactions, engagement and reinforcement of behaviours now take place within larger packs through online communities of like-minded individuals (Berntzen and Sandberg, 2014). Within this echo chamber, where most content is created by those in the group, the lone wolf not only feels part of a brand community (Hakala et al., 2017), but also believes that they provide value to that community through protecting and defending it against those perceived as likely to destroy or threaten the community’s existence.
The brand community lends a form of legitimacy to the individual (Hakala et al., 2017), creating value, and an experiential element that creates a strong resonance and identification between the individual and community. This chapter explores what role a brand community has in the creation of a lone wolf, and how that community validates the behaviour of an individual leading up to, and even after, a terror incident.

Next, the chapter considers how the creation of intense emotional responses towards media may be another important antecedent in the creation of a lone wolf. The relationship between valence and media content in creating intense emotional responses is already well-established, but there is emerging evidence that media type can also be influential (Bolls et al., 2019) and that the valence in video games may influence the adaptation, learning and reinforcement of certain behaviours (Coyne et al., 2018). This concept will be explored in more detail in relation to the motivational role played by media and valence type on creating intense emotional responses in an individual that may turn them into a lone wolf.

Finally, the chapter examines the relationship between the creation and desire of a lone wolf experience, and the role of the brand community, media types and valence in legitimising and validating a lone wolf act. While the lone wolf experience is unique, there are similarities in sensation and adventure-seeking behaviour with those who may undertake risk-taking activities, such as adventure and outdoor pursuits, or even dark or disaster tourism. The chapter will propose a conceptual model of how a lone wolf may seek to calibrate their behaviour and emotional responses with the experiences of others in the brand community, and also those who may have already committed lone wolf acts.

The lone wolf brand – definition, background and context

The lone wolf can be defined as any individual, who is not part of an established terror group, who carries out an act of terror against those they identify as enemies, threats, opponents or persecutors. Acts of terror may not necessarily just be those that are violent, and may also include acts online, such as doxing, denial of service attacks, harassment, trolling or cyber stalking.
The lone wolf is largely male (McCulloch et al., 2019) and, increasingly in many developed parts of the world, can no longer be stereotyped as being from one type of religious background. Instead, lone wolves identify according to the community they feel they are part of. In more recent times this means that they can appear to be someone who is part of the norm (e.g. white collar, good education, good prospects in life, or even, as in the 2015 San Bernardino attack, married), making them very difficult to spot.

However, they are usually likely to feel that they are outsiders to mainstream society, even when it comes to their immediate family and reference groups. They may show little empathy to others whom they target, which might be a sign of an underlying mental health condition, such as the cluster B personality disorder type, seen through borderline narcissistic individuals, or because they are introverted and have had trouble integrating into a mainstream group.

They are also likely to feel that the norm that they are seen to be part of, usually achieved through mirroring the behaviour of people they interact with outside the home, cares little for their existence. Again, these things are not unique: what makes the lone wolf unique is the feeling that they are always up against it – fighting evil alone – in the role of victim hero. This is important when it comes to the lone wolf finding resonance with the messages they search for and view on the internet, or in other places, as they are searching for a fit between their perceived narrative and that of others.

Like most who may be feeling lonely and isolated, they turn to the internet to find a community they can identify with, and find acceptance in. In a way, doing so is one of the first steps in the creation of the lone wolf brand, which is that they consume and experience media content made by that community for that community. It also implicitly demonstrates to the lone wolf how to target individuals digitally because this is exactly what has happened to them.

**Brand community and brand equity: Turning extremism into normality**

Keller’s seminal work on brand equity (Keller, 2003) is relevant in this space as it provides guidance on how a lone wolf brand identifies with an online community. The brand equity models of Aaker (1992, 1996) and Kapferer (2005) are also useful. Keller’s model demonstrates that it
is about the perceived and real equity, or value, of the brand, even if the brand is an online extremist group, or identifying with one, as in the case of the Christchurch lone wolf. It provides guidance on why, and how, hate can be normal, even fulfilling and sought after, due to the high level of positive emotional feeling it provides. Keller’s model and others like it also provide reasons why the lone wolf seeks out similar narratives that complement theirs.

Most brand equity models start with the notion of awareness and salience of a brand providing a perception that helps create the brand identity. Although the different models are split on the exact sequence of what happens next, they agree that, essentially, this identity helps develop the imagery and performance perceptions and expectations of a brand with a person, which then leads to how a person judges and feels about a brand. All these concepts provide the foundation of how much connection, engagement and loyalty, or, in a nutshell, resonance, a person has towards a brand. Resonance with a brand then provides the equity, for both the person and the brand itself, which then becomes a guide on the sustainability and viability of that relationship.

So, the more positive the feelings elicited at each of these steps of the brand equity model, the more likely the person will engage at a higher and more intense level than those who do not have that same resonance. Using this criteria helps to explain why a lone wolf may not only act the way they do, but also how they got there in the first place. Table 5.1 shows how a lone wolf, such as the one in Christchurch, might be created.

Internal value for the lone wolf is not created just through interaction and engagement in social media: it is also achieved through ego and self-actualisation – as in being seen as a hero of the community, even in the sense of competing with others through surpassing the death toll of previous attacks, and then through raising interest towards one of the ultimate user-generated content items, the manifesto of the attacker.

This makes this last step – unique as it is – the pinnacle for many lone wolves, as it also ensures that they are recognised by society as being an individual who carried out a mass-casualty event, adding further equity to their personal brand. The Christchurch attacker noted this by listing previous attacks and conflicts on the weapons he used to carry out the attack as a way of recognising those he perceived as being the brand leaders for his community.
Table 5.1: The lone wolf actor brand equity model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand equity steps</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Evidenced by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Identification and matching</td>
<td>Awareness, searching and salience; laying the foundation stones</td>
<td>Searching for and identifying content, communities and subcultures that closely match the narrative of the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Building trust – perception and expectations</td>
<td>Perception and imagery; joining a community</td>
<td>Watching and assessing groups or communities and subcultures to ensure that they can trust their decisions and those of the group, perhaps liking and commenting on some posts to see what happens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Solidifying</td>
<td>Performance, reinforcement and intensity of feelings; contributing to a community</td>
<td>Seeing what value is offered by different communities and subcultures, and, if these match the feelings sought, adding content internally to obtain group validation and authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Resonance</td>
<td>Engagement, community leader brand, connection, networking</td>
<td>Making and sharing content, especially user-made, directly with communities or subcultures of which they are a member; seeking validation and value through likes, comments and shares, especially by other leaders or ‘celebrities’ in the group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Loyalty and ego</td>
<td>Actions in the external community validated by the internal community; high levels of positive emotional feelings</td>
<td>Undertaking targeted actions on those not part of the brand community or subculture, the more harmful and public the better, especially as rated on a scale from local, to national, to global and, finally, to historical; provides value, especially in being seen as a leader for other lone wolves</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is perhaps another reason why it may be difficult to identify the next lone wolf, as this final step in the process – achieving the ultimate ego and adulation within the internal community, and creating fear within the external community – is usually buried deep within the individual until the very moment they decide to carry out a mass-casualty event.
The ‘match-up’ theory: Content and narrative

The match-up theory means that the lone wolf is seeking to match their narrative with that of others. The closer the match, the more relevant (and, therefore, more viewed, shared and engaged with) content found on the internet becomes.

As Vargo and Lusch (2004) note, this is co-creation of value, whereby two actors exchange something of value that they have helped to create. In this case, the content provider is getting value from views in the form of affirmation that what they have made is being seen by the right audience; for the viewer, the content affirms that their feelings are not unique and that there are many others who feel the same way. This notion may be perhaps assisted by mental illness (Spaaij, 2010), such as cluster B illnesses like borderline personality disorder and narcissism, which Fjotolf Hansen, who carried out the 2011 Norway attacks in Oslo and Utoya Island, may have suffered from.

Either way, the lone wolf is perhaps more vulnerable than others to falling foul of the echo chamber effect of large social media brands, be they open or dark, and thereby of consuming media that reinforces feelings, beliefs and perceptions about the world at large that may not necessarily be so. As the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019 (2020) found, the perpetrator had used YouTube widely in the lead-up to the attack, and had searched for and watched content that closely matched the narrative they had developed about their own life.

But what makes a person move from watching content to carrying out an attack on people peacefully worshipping in a mosque in Christchurch where the youngest victim was only three? This is the where the development of a narrative by the lone wolf that matched the content they viewed needs to be better understood.

For the content to change someone’s behaviour to the level where they carried out an attack, it would need to exactly match the narrative that had already been constructed (Solomon et al., 1992; Kamins, 1990). If these did not match, cognitive dissonance could be created within a person, reducing the impact of both the narrative and the content. However, since the content is created by users in a community for other users in that
community, dissonance is reduced, and congruence increased, making for a good match between each. This process reinforces the positive, emotional appeal and intensity of positive or rewarding feelings by a lone wolf.

When negative visuals are used, such as that of previous terror attacks, or threats of being harmed, this can magnify the impact even further, as negative images are more likely to elicit deeper emotional feelings and responses, and thus are more likely to be remembered, than positive images (Lang, 1991).

This is essentially what creates the echo chamber effect, as a person is likely to seek reinforcement of perceptions and beliefs through replicating past behaviour, leading to those perceptions and beliefs being formulated. This is likely a key reason why the Christchurch terror suspect watched YouTube: the platform would have provided ready-made menus of content it knew he would like, leading him to spend more time on the platform – a plus for advertisers, of course but not for society.

The algorithm helped to create a nightmare scenario for those who would become part of the worst terror attack in the southern hemisphere, committed by someone who believed that he was acting as a hero in saving the rest of us from a threat that we could not see or comprehend.

**Developing the narrative and laying the groundwork: User-generated content**

For visual content to be motivationally relevant, and therefore acquire and keep the attention of the person at whom it is targeted, it needs to be connected to a wider narrative that resonates with the viewer (Keller 2003).

As noted earlier, part of this, especially from an effectiveness viewpoint, is community-made content, or user-generated content. User-generated content has been around for centuries, and the use of it as a way of telling stories and building emotional appeals in those who view it can be traced back to the earliest human civilisations. Its power, though, on human behaviour, is linked to authorship. Content made by those in the brand community is far more motivationally relevant than content that is not made by that community. The former type of content is likely to be viewed and remembered far more than content made by other sources, and is therefore likely to have more influence on human behaviour.
The visionary narrative: The manifesto of the victim hero

User-generated content may not necessarily be visual; it can also contain other elements. One type of user-generated content often used by lone wolves, such as in Norway and Christchurch, is the manifesto. A manifesto – created to act as inspiration and motivation for others in the community, to boast of the achievements of the writer and to show brand superiority over other lone wolves – is becoming the norm for those who carry out mass-casualty events. The popularity of this type of content in the far right should come as no surprise considering the enduring popularity of publications such as *Mein Kampf* within these communities.

A manifesto, though, also serves as an important tool for defining a narrative and making the lone wolf distinctive from others who have carried out attacks. The narrative constructed in the document helps to provide validity and reinforcement to the more visual elements of communications that may be shared and viewed by the lone wolf. Importantly, a manifesto provides the logic and rationale to behaviours that are anything but, further reinforcing the perception that the lone wolf is not doing anything evil. In fact, as the victim hero they are only standing up for what is good, and taking on the monsters that the rest of us are not able to fight. Again, this is perhaps another important finding to note, as the perpetrators of recent lone wolf attacks do not tend to see their actions as being wrong, just misunderstood.

The manifesto is representative of so much of what lone wolves seek through content associated with their narrative: the same emotional level and intensity of response from their internal community and reference group that they receive from the external community, but in equally opposite ways. There may be times when both a positive and negative external response is desired by the lone wolf, such as with a mass-casualty event on a targeted group or group of people, but for the main, the lone wolf seeks positive reinforcement from the content they seek, like and make from their community, compared to obtaining positive emotional responses internally through the negative emotional responses and feelings from the external community that they are a part of.
### Table 5.2: Key user-generated content items of the lone wolf

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emotional response desired (influence, impact, reach, emotional response)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meme</td>
<td>Static image that is usually based on popular images from the internet and adapted with text</td>
<td>Internal – high+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External – low to medium–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Static image usually taken by the creator on a mobile device, sometimes modified for basic enhancements such as text or photo imaging</td>
<td>Internal – high+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External – low to medium–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manifesto</td>
<td>Written document outlining the vision, values and views of the author, based on their perception of their world</td>
<td>Internal – very high+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External – low to very high–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>Usually shot on a mobile phone device, can be first-person point of view, or taken of an incident, person or event</td>
<td>Internal – very high+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External – low to very high–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media post (open)</td>
<td>Any post on social media that can be seen by anyone, usually targeted individuals, groups or organisations external to the lone wolf’s community or reference group; these types of posts are known as trolling, negging or shit-posting</td>
<td>Internal – very high+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External – very high–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media post (closed)</td>
<td>Any post on social media that cannot be seen by others outside the selected audience; will usually include some other type of content to increase impact and response</td>
<td>Internal – very high+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External – none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Usually open to all to see; will carry much of the previous content items, especially the manifesto, and may be more noticeably active in the months leading up to a mass-casualty event</td>
<td>Internal – very high+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The manifesto, though, gives the lone wolf an audience, both pre- and post-event, especially through sharing and seeking out other content they have made, creating a virality effect that, to the lone wolf, is near peak ego and self-actualisation in relation to their behaviour. The audience then becomes like another target, in this case for the content the lone wolf makes, shares, likes and comments on, and eventually even witnesses to what may be a mass-casualty attack, as was seen through the livestreaming of Christchurch by the perpetrator.
A manifesto guides, centres and validates nearly all that the lone wolf does, and to the lone wolf it is a critical part of not only their brand but also their brand activities, both pre- and post-event. If anything, it is usually the most important piece of content made by a lone wolf, as it helps explain their narrative and who they really are.

**Visual content, social media and the echo chamber**

User-generated content helps the echo chamber effect (Hughes, 2018), helping to create within the lone wolf a feeling of a ‘safe’ space, a supportive community, but also developing a conditional response emotionally towards content that they see as being supportive of their narrative, and, conversely, content that is to be hated or disliked (Zeki and Romaya, 2008).

The power of images, especially negative ones, to create high levels of arousal in emotional responses helps to move the lone wolf towards action. This power has been well documented in contexts such as television news (Lang et al., 1996), cancer advertisements (Lang, 2006) and news reports (Grabe et al., 2000). And, of course, throughout history the power of negativity to motivate, engage and change behaviour has been acknowledged from the time of the pyramids to the use of images in war recruitment to the propaganda machine of Goebbels in Nazi Germany. More recently, the Trump Presidential campaign of 2016 used negative images, and especially social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as a key part of its campaigning, and then during the presidency. Groups such as QAnon have also helped to make extreme views seem normal, using social media methods to lend validity and credibility to their views. These types of examples illustrate how hate speech is no longer seen as unusual but has become mainstream – even acceptable – to many who, in the past, may have questioned its validity and construct.

The use of iconography, such as tattoos, flags, posters and even brands, by movements has an influential role here as well, as demonstrated in the storming of the US Capitol Building in 2021. In the US and Australian defence forces, the ‘Punisher symbol’, from the movie and book of the same name, was used by small groups aligned to far-right causes to justify and support their actions and to obtain members.
Iconography not only acts as a signal to others who identify with the movement, but also as a motivator and reinforcer of behaviour. Iconography has been used for centuries by movements. In the modern era, where a movement can start within minutes, it provides a useful identifier to those who may not want formal membership of a group attached to that movement, but instead identify just with the core values and belief of the community engaged with that movement.

Iconography, and its use by lone wolves, be they the person who committed the attack in Christchurch or another individual, has turned hate into an acceptable belief, a form and type of political expression protected by free speech laws, defended as being a stand against political correctness and woke views. Perhaps it needs to be examined with a far more critical eye on the likelihood of that being a sign of someone who may one day be involved with committing a serious atrocity against society?

More recently, the power of visual content has increased because of the move to using visual platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest and others, as a way of disseminating information. This may be in response to the growth of an increasingly information-intensive culture and society (Lang, 2006), but it also reflects the fact that visual information is usually easier and quicker to comprehend and understand than non-visual information. A good example of this is the meme factories of lore that have become so well used during nearly every single election in Western democracies since the 2016 US presidential race, in which they became a tool of influence and infamy. Even more recently, emojis are being seen as a way of assisting in the conveyance of information and eliciting recall (Chatzichristos et al., 2020).

These methods have increased the influence of internet platforms that use large amounts of visual information and enable users to curate the content they want, and do not want, to see. Visual content takes seconds to create; even a video filmed in 8K image quality can take under an hour to create, upload and then be ready to be viewed by a potential audience of billions around the globe. Sometimes content filters used by social media brands are incapable of spotting questionable material, which means that it remains viewable for far longer than intended, being seen by who knows how big of an audience before it is taken down and removed. As much as digital media has transformed entire industries, it also has transformed how lone wolves operate and the speed at which they may
move from looking at content to acting on it. The use of visual content is also complemented by other forms of content available on social media, such as posts, that help with building equity of the lone wolf.

**Make them angry: Hate speech, negging and sh*tposting**

Negative content has proven to be more powerful than positive content (Lang et al., 2015), especially when it comes to recall and effect on behaviour and cognition (Nabi, 1996). People with pre-existing mental conditions that make them susceptible to depression and anxiety, a common background trait with lone wolves, are even more likely to recall and be influenced by negative information (Gotlib, 1983).

What this means in the context of the lone wolf is that the use of negative content by them is more likely than not. This may be sometimes hidden by a wider trend in using negative content across society, most notably politics, but it means that it has become a weapon of choice of the lone wolf, as its real motivation can easily be obscured behind subjective lines in a debate.

At times this escalates into more deliberative actions, be it trolling those who are perceived as the enemy or bad people, or undertaking negging behaviour, as in intentionally being harmful through actions such as ‘sh*tposting’ or posting negative content with the objective of hurting the perceived bad people in the external community. This creates a positive emotional response internally for the lone wolf, usually through negative reactions from the targets and positive responses from the lone wolf’s internal community. This conditions the lone wolf into a cycle where they see their posts, and the ones they like, comment or share, as being part of standing up for the good of the cause and society, and the negative responses as proof that their targets are indeed the right ones due to the nature and intensity of their responses.

In a way, these methods become part of the operating policies of the lone wolf, be they current or future, as they feed into the broader narrative that the lone wolf is building, of them being the victim hero in a society blind to what they see. Unwinding this mess is not as simple as stopping the posts on social media, even though that would help significantly, but is also connected to the perception of the lone wolf, which may be influenced by
a pre-existing mental health condition, diagnosed or not. Negging helps the lone wolf justify their behaviour. Understanding the effect of these behaviours can help researchers understand the role of user-generated visual content in constructing the narrative of the victim hero.

**Conclusion**

Lone wolf terror attacks are increasing throughout the world, but especially in the United States and other Western nations. The lone wolf, though, does not see themselves as being radicalised. They instead see content, iconography and visual information that reinforces the belief that they are good, doing their community and us a favour by killing those who threaten our way of life. That is the power of visual communication – to make us believe something to be true that is not.

To change this there needs to be changes to algorithms on violent and extremist content on social media sites, on how search engines produce results that may assist those looking for a match-up with their behaviour with what they can find online, so that they feel that they are normal and it is we who are the ones living as outliers.

Visual communication methods are providing the lone wolf with validation at the individual and community level: individually through reinforcement of behaviours; at the community level through engagement and connection with others to share content, ideas and methods, and via competition over the power of their manifesto and narrative.

Reducing visual content online is problematic and may push it into spaces on the internet where there is no light. Yet, to allow it to exist only further increases the chances that others will one day move from just having an interest to actually taking the lives of innocent people in the name of loyalty to brands and movements that most of us have no identification with.

A easier solution is to change how the content is found and the underlying reasons for its emotional relevance to people who should see hope but instead only see darkness. To the lone wolf, darkness is love, a familiarity that provides comfort, but, sadly, for the rest of us, only gives nightmares and loss. In the digital age, though, with the normalisation of violence, hate and aggression, and ease of access to information and content to
reinforce a co-created narrative, lone wolf attacks are growing in number and intensity. But this does not mean we should give up, because the power is in each of us to change the narrative and thereby change the end on the story of the lone wolf.

References


This text is taken from *Rethinking Social Media and Extremism*, edited by Shirley Leitch and Paul Pickering, published 2022, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/RSME.2022.05