

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Imagined Extremist Communities: The Paradox of the Community-Driven Lone-Actor Terrorist

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Abstract: This article introduces the concept of “imagined extremist communities,” a term that encapsulates the unique social landscape where right-wing lone actors, despite not being affiliated with organised groups, partake in a form of communal interaction. By examining the cases of Anders Behring Breivik, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, and Philip Manshaus, this article illuminates how group-based and lone actors are more alike than what is conventionally expressed in existing research. Although lone actors are not subject to an external command like group-based actors are, the imagined extremist community functions as a “group” for lone actors and is, for all practical purposes, a corresponding alternative to a terror cell. During the radicalisation process, these individuals seek and turn to the imagined extremist community, enabling them to form a sense of belonging and identification and underscoring that these actors, although conventionally labelled as “lone,” are immersed in an alternative culture that nurtures their ideas and sustains their extremist ideology. This becomes particularly evident through their cognitive radicalisation, a process amplified by their psychological predispositions. The concept of the imagined extremist community elucidates how lone actors, especially those embracing right-wing ideologies, are subject to radical influences. Their conservative traits and psychological dispositions make them particularly receptive to the appeal of such communities.

Keywords: Imagined communities, terrorist personality, situationism, terror motivation, lone-actor terrorists

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Introduction

It is widely accepted that lone-actor terrorists are defined as operating independently with no outside network or chain of command.¹ This is true to the extent that lone actors are not given an authoritative order to act. However, they appear to believe that they are instructed to act when they canonise other lone actors who have comparable motives and goals. This social influence between the actors can be encapsulated as an imagined extremist community. Benedict Anderson coined the phrase “imagined communities” to define a nation as an “imagined political community”; he further explained that despite never meeting, “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”² In an imagined political community, Anderson asserted that “people in a community *consider* themselves to form a nation, or *behave* as if they have formed one.”³ Anderson prefaced the concept with the idea that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”⁴ This article builds on Anderson’s conception of imagined communities by presenting an integrated model of violent extremism that describes how an imagined communion among violent extremists is an integral part of the radicalisation of lone actors. Although previous scholars have applied Anderson’s imagined communities in the context of group-based extremism such as Jihadism, in the current article, the concept is applied to the context of lone actors and right-wing extremism.⁵

This approach presented in this article poses potential implications for the treatment of lone actors in the judicial system. For instance, the trials of the White supremacist Payton S. Gendron and the Islamist Sayfullo Saipov, as covered in the New York Times, presented stark contrasts. Although they questioned Gendron’s psychological health and the emotional ramifications of the attack, the coverage of Saipov focused on political motivations and his interest in IS (also known as Islamic State and ISIS).⁶ Subsequently, the majority of the charges against Saipov claimed that he committed the murders “for the purpose of gaining entrance to ISIS.”⁷ Although research largely indicates that these perceptions are based on inaccurate stereotypes, they remain widespread.⁸ This is concerning because of the potential to reinforce the perception of lone actors as distinct from group-based actors. Moreover, “solo terrorism” or “leaderless resistance,” i.e., terror attacks by actors who operate autonomously without receiving direction, is an increasing risk.⁹ Certain extremist terror cells including al-Qaeda have been known to entice their supporters to carry out attacks alone; in 2015, attacks attributed to IS that were not directed by a centralised leadership outnumbered plots instigated by foreign fighters.¹⁰ In 2022, intelligence services from both the United Kingdom and the United States observed that domestic terror cases increasingly have international dimensions, as lone actors are inspired by sources from abroad via social media.¹¹ It is a rising concern that extremism is not solely rooted in traditional extremist organisations; instead, extremist ideologies are being increasingly accessed through the mainstream media and online platforms.¹² In the latest terrorism threat assessment for Denmark, a representative country in the Euro-American region, solo terrorism was listed as the primary threat in the event of an Islamist or a right-wing extremist attack.¹³

This article argues that lone actors act alone but are not radicalised in isolation. Breivik, Tarrant, and Manshaus carried out their respective attacks alone, but they established a connection to the same imagined extremist community through statements and comparable ideologies.¹⁴ Breivik carried out the 22 July 2011 bombing and consequent mass shooting in Oslo, Norway, leaving 77 dead. Shortly before commencing his attacks, he published a manifesto to present his motivation for the attacks. Nearly a decade later, Brenton Harrison Tarrant carried out the 15 March 2019 mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people. In his own manifesto, Tarrant claimed he was inspired by right-wing terrorists Dylann Roof, Luca Traini, Anton Lundin Pettersson, and Darren Osborne, but it was later reported that he claimed that his

“true inspiration” came from Breivik.¹⁵ Several other extremists and would-be terrorists have claimed to be, been accused of, or presumed to have been inspired by Breivik. This includes but is not limited to Adam Lanza, Christopher Hasson, Patrick Crusius, and most recently the Norwegian lone actor Philip Manshaus and the perpetrator behind the Buffalo attack, Payton S. Gendron.¹⁶ Philip Manshaus was the perpetrator behind the 10 August 2019 mosque attack in Bærum, Norway, that killed one person. Instead of drawing direct inspiration from Breivik, Manshaus self-proclaimed that he was chosen by Tarrant.¹⁷ These three cases show that Breivik’s ideas first gained traction abroad, inspiring Tarrant and subsequently Manshaus to conduct an attack in Norway. Indeed, Manshaus wanted to livestream his attack just like Tarrant did instead of drawing direct inspiration from Breivik for his *modus operandi*.¹⁸ Although no direct link between Breivik and Manshaus exists, Manshaus’ actions could be seen as motivated by the “imagined extremist community,” illustrating the potency and influence of this powerful network. By using these three high-profile and conventional right-wing lone actor profiles, this article explores one specific imagined extremist community. Although not considered here, Stephan Balliat, Payton S. Gendron, and Anton Lundin Pettersson are prominent cases that could be included in future research because they fit the profile. Contrary to common belief, these connections of influence between extremists and would-be terrorists show that the perpetrators are not entirely alone when they radicalise.

Although it is not contested that lone-actor radicalisation is socially influenced, it has not received the same level of attention as the group dynamics among group-based actors.¹⁹ Instead, the value of the lone actor typology is increasingly called into question.²⁰ These arguments emphasise social influences as contrasted against dated preconceptions of lone actors as socially isolated, mentally ill, less likely to be politically motivated, and generally less sophisticated than group-based actors.²¹ Nonetheless, the depiction of the actors tends to remain starkly contrasted, if not dichotomous. Although Schuurman et al. offered a novel approach, arguing that lone and group-based actors are better understood on a spectrum that depicts the degree to which the actors are socially influenced, they do not depart from the contrasted typologies of the actors.²²

This analysis draws on the assertion that radicalisation processes are multifaceted and encompass personal, sociocultural, and political factors.²³ To highlight the imagined extremist community shared by the actors, these factors are used to structure this article, which begins with a section on personal factors where attention is paid to the role of psychological characteristics in pursuing extremist milieus. The next section targets societal factors, which are discussed through concepts of situationism and groupism; the former examines how the actor views society and how society views the actor, and the latter explores the relationship the actor has with groups in terms of what they offer the actor. Here “groups” do not refer to traditional terror cells but to the myriad of identity groups and abstract communities that invoke a feeling of belonging. The subsequent section on cultural factors offers a discussion on the intersection between culture and cognition and explains how lone actors self-rationalise their radicalisation. Lastly, the section on political factors examines the role of scripts, including manifestos and other text left behind by perpetrators of violent extremism, and conservative dispositions—that is, conservative values and traits associated with right-wing ideologies.

Personal Factors

Anderson emphasised the significance of “deep horizontal comradeship” within the community, prompting an important question: What are the factors that draw individual actors together? Previous research suggests that both personal and societal factors play a role in this phenomenon.²⁴ For instance, van Zuijdewijn and Bakker showed that certain personal characteristics such as social isolation, mental health problems, perceived grievances, and a fascination with violence may contribute to the radicalisation of lone actors.²⁵ Thus, to comprehensively examine the formation of comradeship among individual actors, it is essential to consider the personal factors that contribute to this process.

From the 1970s to the late 1990s, psychological research on terrorism was mainly influenced by the attribution error paradigm, wherein individuals involved in terrorism were often depicted as psychologically disordered or abnormal.²⁶ However, because early models focused on psychopathology did not find substantial empirical evidence supporting mental disorders as the principal cause of terrorism, this perspective gradually lost traction.²⁷ In recent years, the rising number of lone-actor attacks, particularly those with “disturbed profiles,” has sparked a renewed interest in researching the psychological characteristics associated with terrorism.²⁸ However, the current wave of research relies on a more nuanced approach, exploring a wide range of psychological traits, and these methods have revealed a slightly higher prevalence of schizophrenia, autism spectrum disorder, and delusional disorder among lone actors compared to the general population and group-based actors.²⁹ It is important to note that the nature of the current wave of research does not establish a clear causal relationship between mental illness and lone-actor terrorism.³⁰

The term “personal factors” typically encompasses an individual’s psychological characteristics, including prevalent mental disorders, personality disorders, nonclinical personality traits, cognitive dispositions, and neurodevelopment disorders. Personal factors are commonly given importance by their capacity to explain cognitive radicalisation. Much of the discussion around personal factors relies on the degree of importance assigned to an actor’s psychological traits in predicting potential trajectories toward terrorism.³¹ In that, cognitive radicalisation is considered a precondition causally leading to violent action.³² It is widely accepted in studies focusing on group-based actors that the cognitive opening, which refers to increased susceptibility to new world views after a personal crisis or catalytic event and is facilitated by cognitive factors, instigates indoctrination within a group or milieu before the actor progresses to terrorism.³³ This is also the case for lone actors.

Individuals’ psychological characteristics lead them to gravitate toward others with similar traits, and this principle extends to potential terrorists. Individuals tend to seek friendships and engage in environments populated by those who share similar psychological traits.³⁴ For instance, research indicates those who score high on openness, extraversion, and agreeableness tend to gravitate toward those with similar personality traits. Indeed, individuals demonstrating high levels of openness to experience typically seek out others who also exhibit this trait, and individuals who are prone to black-and-white thinking are drawn to others who also think in the same binary manner.³⁵ Recent experimental studies suggest that personality traits such as low openness to experience and high social dominance orientation predict the inclination to

participate in scenarios involving intergroup aggression. That is, individuals with low openness to experience tend to opt for an aggressive intergroup game.³⁶ It resonates with the idiom “birds of a feather flock together,” or in other words, people who have similar traits will gravitate towards each other.

An examination of the case studies in focus reveals several prevalent psychological traits. Breivik, based on psychological assessments, allegedly exhibited several distinctive clinical traits such as narcissism, dissocial personality disorder, and delusions.³⁷ Tarrant reportedly displayed nonclinical traits of narcissism and delusions as he was described to be overly concerned with his self-image; he also compared himself to Nelson Mandela, envisioning that he would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in the future.³⁸ Tarrant was also described as displaying clinical traits such as grandiosity and superiority coupled with bouts of depression and mood swings; indeed, the court-appointed psychiatrists noted that he “displayed a range of traits akin to a personality dysfunction,” although not sufficiently pronounced to diagnose a personality disorder.³⁹ On the other hand, Manshaus was described as a “person who is insecure of his identity, experiencing ideals about renunciation and courage, while duty, obligation and sacrificial will control him.”⁴⁰ These psychological traits provide valuable insight into these actors’ individual personalities and reveal shared psychological traits including narcissism, delusions, antisocial behaviour, and grandiosity, all of which are traditionally identified among lone actors and underscore the psychological parallels between these cases.⁴¹

Although certain psychological disorders were notably pronounced among these actors, they were found to be legally responsible for their actions. As part of the trial proceedings, Breivik underwent two psychological evaluations and ultimately was declared fit to stand trial. There were no indications that he was psychotic at the time of the act.⁴² However, this conclusion generated extensive controversy.⁴³ Tarrant was also subjected to two psychological evaluations but was declared accountable with less debate.⁴⁴ In Manshaus’ case, the defence raised doubts during the proceedings.⁴⁵ Although attention was given to early bereavement in Manshaus’ life, this was not indicative of abnormalities in his personality. There was no evidence to support psychosis, personality disorders, consciousness disorder because of substance abuse, or intellectual disability. In the end, he was also declared accountable.

Societal Factors

Although personal factors provide insights into why individuals may be drawn to comradeship, it is imperative to consider societal factors to understand the emergence of this interest. Societal factors here refer to the role social environments have in the radicalisation of lone actors and how that influences their shift towards an imagined extremist community. This section highlights how lone actors relate to wider society and vice-versa, encompassing the arrangement of and relationships between different elements of social environments.

Situationism contends that the social environment is instrumental in shaping behaviour and that the “power of the situation” compels the individual to engage in harmful actions.⁴⁶ In that sense, the willingness to plan and execute atrocities can be explained by the mechanisms inherent in the individual’s interactions with wider society. It has been hypothesised that resorting to “evil” actions, or intentionally harming innocent people, can be considered a survival mechanism by

which individuals adapt to their external circumstances.⁴⁷ In other words, lone actors rationalise their actions by viewing some segment of wider society as a threat.

This perspective is highly discernible in the ideologies of lone-actor terrorists: For instance, Breivik claimed that the former Labour Prime Minister Brundtland had allowed mass immigration, which he perceived as a threat to his nation as he feared his people being “diluted.”⁴⁸ He also saw Islam as a civilisation posing a direct threat to the Nordic ethnicity and White supremacy.⁴⁹ In an excerpt from his manifesto, as quoted by the Norwegian News Agency (the central news provider for Norwegian Press), Breivik stated that the worst consequence of this threat would be the outbreak of a bloody war. As a result, he felt compelled, albeit reluctantly, to act to prevent such an outcome.⁵⁰ This perceived threat was real to Breivik and fundamentally influenced how he viewed his external structures.

Tarrant and Manshaus echoed Breivik’s ideological claim. Tarrant falsely claimed to have been in contact with Breivik and identified the Replacement Theory as one of his leading political motives, expressing the view that immigrants were a threat to the European lifestyle and White supremacy.⁵¹ Manshaus praised Breivik and Tarrant and explained in court that he was critical of the “system” that has allowed “multiculturalism” to flourish.⁵² The political motives of all three are articulated in a way that identifies threats in their external structures, and ultimately, this threat perception is a result of their ideological conviction.

Lone actors gravitate towards each other to gain a sense of belonging and support for their convictions and beliefs when these fall outside the cultural norms of broader society. In other words, they are subjected to groupism, a concept that encompasses various sub-phenomena. Among these, echo chambers and identity fusing explain how lone actors, like their group-based counterparts, increasingly merge with a group. More specifically, in an echo chamber, “individuals expose themselves to information that simply reinforces their existing views.”⁵³ On the other hand, identity fusion refers to a process where an individual’s identity fuses with that of the group.⁵⁴ This process has been observed within “more abstract higher-order groups, or imagined communities, for which actual genetic relatedness or even personal relations between most members is low.”⁵⁵

The process of identity fusion and finding echo chambers often occurs online through the actors’ activities on various platforms: Breivik, Manshaus, and Tarrant were active on, and actively sought, platforms ranging from mainstream platforms like Facebook and X (formerly known as Twitter) to more fringe subsections of forums including 4chan, 8chan, Endchan, Gates of Vienna, and the neo-Nazi forum called Nordisk.⁵⁶ Based on this activity, several milieus can be identified, ranging from broad ideologies to more particular online milieus. These ideologies include but are not limited to various forms of fascism, anti-Islam, antifeminism, and cultural conservatism.⁵⁷ Some online milieus have garnered more attention, including Breivik and the “Counterjihadist” online milieu and Tarrant and the Identarian Movement.⁵⁸ For Manshaus, specific milieus have not been defined beyond the name of the forums he used. Two years following his attack, Manshaus discussed the significance of online activity in a documentary interview featured on the Norwegian Broadcasting Agency’s television channel:

The Internet is a sort of super-highway for ideas, where ideas and opinions come into contact. And in such a speed that is just unprecedented in history, where communication occurs so quickly. Of course, it depends on the person. For some it is probably easier to acquire new attitudes and ideas than for others. However, I can safely say that the main actor in my political conversion—it was through the Internet. That is for me completely obvious.⁵⁹

Manshaus further expressed pride in the speed at which he was able to develop and internalise extremist opinions through his online activity. He said, “I only used a year, almost. One and a half years to come up with the opinions [that] I did [come up with].”

Groupism focuses on the problems defined by movements, values, and beliefs. An intellectual movement can also define an intellectual problem around which individuals gather. Although group-based terrorism can be related to a defined terror cell, lone actors are likely to be associated with a larger intellectual movement. For instance, “Kaczynski [who] related to a larger movement of survivalists, Furrow associated with white supremacists, and [John Allen] Muhammad who participated for a period in the Nation of Islam.”⁶⁰ Similarly, some scholars focus on the importance of values and beliefs in contributing to lone actor’s justification for committing acts of terror.⁶¹ Others emphasise the role of dichotomous relationships and their contribution to labelling, which potentially can attract a wider following to intellectual movements.⁶² These notions generally reflect the actors’ ideologies.

These theories and notions of groupism inherently involve the idea of group formation. Although lone actors are not associated with a defined terror cell in the same way as group-based terrorists, the phenomenon of groupism suggests that they are connected to broader groups. This concept can be conceptualised through imagined extremist communities, and it has been used in terrorism research; still, these studies typically involve discussions of nationalism in alignment with Anderson’s conception of imagined communities.⁶³

Both Tarrant and Manshaus, with their common admiration for Breivik, overtly expressed a sense of belonging to the same imagined extremist community. Tarrant claimed to have been in contact with Breivik, but Breivik’s lawyer later refuted this.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, it is evident that Tarrant admired Breivik. Additionally, Manshaus was reported to have been inspired by individuals such as Patrick Crusius, the perpetrator of the 2020 El Paso shooting, and John Timothy Earnest, responsible for the Poway Synagogue shooting, but most notably Tarrant. Manshaus went so far as to describe himself as the third disciple of Tarrant, considering Earnest and Crusius as the first two. This declaration was largely based on Manshaus’ online activity in the hours before the attack during which he glorified Tarrant and lauded Earnest and Crusius for their attacks. During the court proceedings, it became evident that Manshaus had also kept a diary expressing sympathy for the aforementioned, as well as for Breivik and various Nazi figures, even writing “Praise the lord” in reference to Breivik.

The idea of camaraderie is prevalent in existing terrorism research, albeit predominantly used to explain group-based terrorism rather than lone-actor terrorism. A radical group can offer an individual love, friendship, shared experiences, and commonalities, which play a significant

role in identity fusion. Similarly, Harari suggested that imagined communities have been growing because people rely less on close-knit, intimate communities for survival and welfare. As the communities decline, an “emotional vacuum” is left, which is often filled by imagined communities. This highlights the importance of camaraderie in joining communities, whether imagined or not. This also suggests that the camaraderie holds an emotional component that extends beyond merely sharing common values and beliefs. Thus, an imagined extremist community is, in part, a community that an individual seeks out to fill an emotional void and to gain a camaraderie, essentially filling the need for social relations or a sense of belonging.

This yearning for community is evidenced by the actors’ consistent attempts to join different organisations that they believed would support their viewpoints. For instance, Breivik was associated with Freemasonry and the Norwegian far-right Progress Party (FrP), but these were ultimately unsuccessful attempts at joining an organisation about which he had only limited knowledge: The Freemasons indicated that Breivik either lacked knowledge about, misunderstood, or was ignorant of the essence of Freemasonry. Similarly, his involvement in FrP was misguided as he eventually lost interest, perceiving the party to be too liberal and not aligned with his views. Breivik also claimed to be part of the fictitious group Knights Templar, but the court proceedings found no evidence of direct contact with any organised group.

Similarly, Tarrant was not subject to any external command, but he did actively seek out various milieus and organisations. He is believed to have been inspired by terror attacks across numerous countries including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Sweden as indicated by specific references in his manifesto. Between 2012 and 2018, Tarrant travelled extensively in Europe and Asia, visiting significant sites of conflicts dating from the Ottoman Empire through Christianity. It was reported that during those travel periods, he was in contact with two branches of the Identarian Movement, a European White supremacy intellectual movement, and that he donated substantial sums to these groups.

Manshaus was also unsuccessful in becoming a member of an organisation. He tried to join the Nordic Resistance Movement but was rejected due to a lack of sufficient knowledge about the organisation. He briefly became part of a Laestadian community, a conservative Lutheran revival movement, and the community pastors described him as genuinely interested and attentive. However, according to his school peers and mother, he later linked his Christian faith to White supremacism, describing it as the “psychological warfare against my people.”

Cultural Factors

Another key aspect of Anderson’s argument is the construction of reality, particularly through the concept of “memory and forgetting.” To illuminate how the imagined extremist community is formed, it is necessary to examine the process of its construction, including its genesis and content. This section explores the role of cultural cognition in attracting individuals away from the reality of mainstream society and towards the constructed reality of the imagined extremist community. Subsequently, the following section on Political Factors delves into the specific content of the constructed reality, particularly the extremist ideology that attracts the individual to the imagined extremist community.

Lone actors gravitating toward imagined extremist communities can be explained by decreased cultural cognition. Cultural norms and behaviours within a society are established through social interactions or conversation. Baumeister and Masicampo proposed that conscious thought is a product of culture by viewing culture as a cognitive process. In practical terms, if an individual does not interact and talk with others, that individual cannot correct any misconceptions about society. An important point made by Baumeister and Masicampo is that the cognitive process occurs in pursuit of shared goals and values; that is, how goals are obtained, discussed, and misconceptions are corrected. There is an inherent notion that more participation results in better abilities for tackling obstacles in pursuit of goals. This is attributed to the noncognitive mind's exposure to a wider range of scenarios, which equips it with better problem-solving skills for addressing various obstacles. This suggests that if an individual does not engage socially with others in the mainstream society, they may struggle to interact with that society in a manner appropriate to its dominant culture. Pinker supported Baumeister and Masicampo's argument, conceptualising it as the "cognitive niche" of human evolution. This is more descriptive of the mechanisms of the cognitive process in the way that it describes the social interactions. Pinker defined it as "reasoning about the causal structure of the world, cooperating with other individuals, and sharing that knowledge and negotiating those agreements via language" and maintained that this "adaptation" coevolved with general evolution to upbringing by both parents, "longer childhoods and lifespans, complex sexuality, and the accumulation of local knowledge and social conventions in distinct cultures." In this way, Pinker described culture akin to an intellectual evolution.

Individuals who interact less with mainstream society will fall outside of society's cultural equilibrium, and if this happens, they can become more susceptible to unconventional rationalisation of information and actions. This could be described as a trigger for cognitive opening. In the above cases, the actors reportedly often became increasingly withdrawn from mainstream society while also seeking out religious and political groups they thought would reinforce their beliefs. This pattern is supported by previous research, such as that by Crandall, Eshleman, and O'Brien who show that "people closely adhere to social and cultural norms when expressing prejudice (e.g., extremism), evaluating scenarios of discrimination, and reacting to hostile jokes." For instance, Breivik increasingly turned to gaming and online forums when he was unemployed. Similarly, Manshaus and Tarrant also gravitated toward online forums, and Tarrant was described as having changed his personality and becoming a "recluse."⁶⁵ All three sought real-life communities including political parties, the Freemasons, and various fascist groups, indicating that the communities they sought could either be in-person or online. However, it is important to clarify that in the case of lone actors, these communities do not command certain actions from the actors, as might be the case with group-based actors who are, by definition, subject to an external chain of command.

The actors mostly pursued communities they believed would support and reinforce their own ideas. It is noteworthy that both Breivik and Manshaus unsuccessfully attempted to reach out to various communities. This suggests that there is a process in which the individual progressively withdraws from mainstream society and seeks a sense of belonging elsewhere, beyond mainstream norms. However, this is not necessarily a linear process where they first withdraw and then seek out a group. Due to the development of this pattern over several years

and the requirement for accurate recording of such information, few details exist to demonstrate the exact progression. For instance, Breivik had already joined FrP by 2007. However, his engagement with mainstream society between that time and when he later applied to join the Freemasons remains unclear.

Connections can be drawn to echo chambers and isolationism, but the focus here is to examine how the individual engages with society. Isolationism, when understood as an extreme form of antisocial behaviour, implies a complete withdrawal from society. However, this can be misleading if the individual simply shifts their interactions from mainstream society to alternative communities. Echo chambers are also insufficient in explaining the cultural factors because they explain the mechanisms at play after the individual starts to retreat from mainstream society. Echo chambers likely have an effect that intensifies the distance from mainstream society, but they do not explain the initial withdrawal.

Online platforms play a central role in attracting individuals to imagined extremist communities. By consuming content and engaging in virtual environments, individuals can be subject to significant social influences. As Kupper et al. argued, “Seemingly, the real-world social factors for group belonging and social manipulation in an analogue terror group have been replaced by social media and the viral manifestos in the digital groups.”⁶⁶ Online platforms allow individuals to be influenced without engaging in direct conversation with others, creating a one-sided exchange of ideas where individuals can read and consume content produced by others.⁶⁷ The Black Lives Matter movement serves as a poignant example of how emotional connections made online can foster imagined communities. Schuschke and Brendesha explained that when grievances of Black oppression were shared on Black X, they gained traction because the shared experiences and communal bonds fostered emotional connections.⁶⁸ The shared sense of community was crucial in bringing together participants of the online movement, empowering them to unite in their efforts to fight against anti-Black oppression.

The continuous search for a sense of community and belonging makes online platforms appealing because they can offer support for the ideologies and broader beliefs with which individuals identify, thus providing a space that fosters the imagined extremist community to which the individual is attracted. It is important to note that lone actors do not receive orders from a group, and online platforms do not constitute a physical group. However, there might be a perception of encouragement to make an impact as part of a community. As such, virtual environments have a critical role in shaping the imagination that supports the imagined extremist community.

Political Factors

Anderson explained that imagined political communities are formed through a collective narrative that serves as a narrative of identity.⁶⁹ Members of an imagined community utilise figures, events, and the process of memory/forgetting to construct this identity and the narrative that supports it. These elements contribute to the constructed reality of the imagined extremist community. However, the narrative is beyond a mere collection of agreed-upon ideas; it also encompasses “cognitive, affective, and motivational properties” that shape the constructed reality.⁷⁰ The term “political factors” is used to capture this scope, and this section focuses on

how the narrative is created and the psychological dispositions that may be associated with right-wing ideologies.

The imagined extremist community is based on a loosely defined constructed reality shaped by far-right ideologies and scripts. These scripts include manifestos, online writings, broadcasts of attacks, and text left behind by perpetrators of violent extremism, and they define the boundaries of the imagined extremist community. Common themes in these scripts revolve around race, immigration, and religion. An important function of these scripts is that they invoke group bias as a driving motivational factor for partaking in the imagined extremist community and carrying out an attack.⁷¹ Some have likened these scripts to a Rosetta Stone or a cultural code “to claim in-group membership to a force that takes their virtual frustration to the physical world by conducting mass attacks.”⁷² Notably, right-wing lone actors are not mere imitators but are influenced by the wide range of factors associated with the imagined extremist community with which they identify. Manshaus cited Tarrant as his main inspiration, and Tarrant cited Breivik. However, there are other ideological (and operational) influences involved. These include the actions and scripts left behind by past perpetrators, as well as scripts by prominent far-right voices. For the purposes of the imagined extremist community, each of these events and scripts can be thought of as cultural artifacts in the constructed reality.⁷³ For instance, Ted Kaczynski and the Columbine manifestos gained widespread attention as early viral manifestos, and Breivik’s manifesto became known as the first “do-it-yourself-guide” for lone actors.⁷⁴

Beyond manifestos, Ware highlighted the significant role of other far-right works in the self-education of extremists.⁷⁵ There are several examples of attackers who have implored their followers to read various works including *Might is Right* and *Siege*, but also the *Turner Diaries* and *Mein Kampf*. Mapping out these cultural artifacts is an important task, as they collectively shape the constructed reality of the imagined extremist community. Ware explored the role of iconography in scripts that shape the narrative worldview of the actors.⁷⁶ Using Breivik and the Knights Templar as an example, Ware demonstrated how the scripts “rewrite” history with a spillover effect into current affairs, justifying the actors’ ideologies and motivations. Research also suggests that those who leave behind a script seek to gain outward support, invite new members to the imagined extremist community, and counter narratives from the mainstream after the attack.⁷⁷

Mannheim argued that there are overarching belief systems reflecting a wider societal consensus, and there are sets of attitudes, values, and beliefs that earn varying support across different social groups.⁷⁸ Different values result in different modes of action, causing members of mainstream society to discourage particular attitudes, values, and beliefs that deviate from the mainstream and label them as divergent.⁷⁹ Consequently, ideology is instrumental in labelling individuals as divergent. Simultaneously, the attention to an actor’s divergence can have the opposite effect where those who believe in a “particular” ideology will want to strengthen it by encouraging others to join in.⁸⁰ It follows that the outsider, a would-be terrorist, will want to redeem themselves by joining or potentially creating a community where they fit in and can exert their position in society. Indication of this behaviour is observed in the actors’ pursuit of organisations. Among the case studies, Manshaus is perhaps the best example because he continuously sought out organisations despite his lack of understanding of their activities.

Breivik making up “Knights Templar” is another indication of this behaviour. The community and belonging are central to this mechanism.

The significance attributed to the ideology is also evident in the distinction between radicalism and terrorism. Radicals commit “illegal and/or violent socio-political actions to support one’s group,” but terrorists are “the subset of radicals who use violence against civilian targets.”⁸¹ The transition into terrorism and the targeting of civilians underscore the heightened significance of ideology. In essence, it is the actor’s willingness to commit what the actor perceives as a necessary evil that places the ideology at the forefront of their actions. This is because targeting civilians goes beyond merely supporting one’s own group as civilians, which by definition cannot be juxtaposed with the actor’s group. Terrorists reject the notion that they are civilians. Instead, they deem civilians guilty by association or consider them to be “complicitous civilians,” thereby justifying them as symbolic targets.⁸² For instance, as discussed, Breivik defined former Prime Minister Brundtland and the earlier policies of the Labour Party as his primary targets, and the victims of his attacks were an extension of his targets due to their association with the Party. Similarly, Manshaus and Tarrant sought symbolic targets for the perceived threat of Muslims within places of worship. None of the victims can be singled out as having created the threat that the actors perceived.

A community plays a crucial role in perpetuating the ideologies because it offers enticing incentives for them to flourish. Literature on group allegiance demonstrates that these incentives can encompass aspects including identity, economic benefits, and general payoffs.⁸³ Moreover, a community can provide practical resources including guidance on how to become a terrorist, tutorials for acquiring weapons, and instructions for executing an attack.⁸⁴ This is further supported by the fundamental goal of self-preservation as individuals are inclined to join a group that offers incentives they believe will support their ideology.⁸⁵ This derives from research on group-based actors but remains true for lone actors who pursue imagined extremist communities. The imagined extremist community can provide ideological inspiration through groupism facilitated by online materials and guides that serve as practical resources for planning and executing attacks; this is observed among actors who use online guides to make bombs, as seen with Breivik, or draw inspiration from each other, like Manshaus, who idolised Tarrant and aspired to livestream his own attack.⁸⁶ As aptly expressed by the right-wing extremist James Mason, “The online community can be so tight-knit that it resembles a real-life connection for all practical purposes.”⁸⁷

Like terrorism is defined by ideological motives, the imagined extremist community is a result of them. Individuals like Breivik, Tarrant, and Manshaus identify as right-wing actors who subscribe to ideologies that are associated with conservative values. It has been suggested that relational motives align with conservative traits characterised by a tendency to prioritise tradition, conformity, social order, and adherence to rules and norms.⁸⁸ Jost et al. also noted that right-wing ideologies serve certain psychological dispositions including higher scores in the need for cognitive closure, death anxiety, and affinity for social order. According to Jost et al., experimental literature has also hypothesised that there is a relationship between higher death awareness and what might be considered “typical” conservative traits such as greater patriotism, outgroup hostility, endorsement of one’s own religion, traditional gender norms,

stereotyping, and a preference for aggressive responses to individuals and groups perceived as a threat to their cultural world view.⁸⁹ The actors in these cases, to varying degrees, demonstrate certain traits such as strong political motives, noticeable aggression toward those opposing their vision, and an interest in religious communities, as seen with Breivik and Manshaus.⁹⁰ These characteristics suggest that actors who ascribe to right-wing ideologies may be more inclined to join communities. Indeed, the elevated scores of conservative traits reflect a greater interest in understanding the world in which they live and their place in it by giving it meaning and then sharing this with others.

The value individuals who align with right-wing ideologies place on belonging is further demonstrated by the relationship between social isolation and the pursuit of extremist ideologies and communities. For Breivik, Tarrant, and Manshaus, their engagement with communities was primarily online, which may suggest social isolation. At the same time, it underscores their desire to find a sense of belonging. Although this might seem like a paradox, social isolation can indeed fuel the desire to seek out an extremist ideology and community.⁹¹ It is curious that after having served 11 years in prison, Breivik proclaimed that he was a member of the group Blood and Honour and presented his nationalist ideology as part of what the group believed.⁹² This was the first time his lawyer had heard of this, despite Breivik's claim that he had been a member since 2009. In accordance with the earlier discussion on social isolation, this is not reflective of extreme antisocial behaviour. Rather, it demonstrates that social isolation cannot be overstated with an extreme or literal understanding. Indeed, although they appear to be socially isolated from mainstream society, they seek to compensate for this by pursuing extremist ideologies and communities as an alternative.

In the face of these dispositions, it is well established that extremist ideologies serve to reduce societal uncertainty.⁹³ Adhering to extremist ideology allows the individual to gain a sense of certainty despite their divergence from mainstream society. Correspondingly, the socialisation process for entry into the group is initiated with the individual's ideology.⁹⁴ Indeed, it has been suggested that extremism has been the result of the individual wanting "social conformity with like-minded individuals," as opposed to an individual intending to transition into extreme views or behaviours.⁹⁵ It has also been theorised that intent is exacerbated through echo chambers.⁹⁶ In his most recent court appearance, Breivik expressed that this was true in his case.⁹⁷ He also stated that he did not intend to become extreme and that his actions were "regrettable." He further blamed those actions on the extremism he was subjected to and declined to take "personal" responsibility. Research further suggests that individuals who explore ideas that diverge from mainstream society experience increased connectivity with others and limited diversity in ideas.⁹⁸ Instead, they might express the ideas of the groups to which they feel they belong and not their own ideas. One might consider the sanctifying of earlier terrorists for this. This shows that imagined extremist communities are not limited to a group association; it is just as much an intellectual association.

Discussion

Despite planning and executing their attacks alone, Breivik, Tarrant, and Manshaus did not undergo radicalisation in isolation. Instead, a combination of factors drew them towards an imagined extremist community as a pathway toward radicalisation. This encompasses common psychological attributes, a perception of mainstream society as a significant threat, limited social engagement with conventional societal groups, and a unified ideology that diverges from mainstream norms. This model proves especially insightful when analysing right-wing extremists akin to Breivik and individuals who align with his imagined extremist community. This is primarily due to the apparent vulnerability that those endorsing right-wing ideologies have to this pathway.

Obaidi et al.'s research suggests that factors that explain pathways to radicalism can be grouped into three broad research traditions.⁹⁹ The first research tradition is mainly concerned with external and personal factors including political, cultural, economic, and demographic variables, also referred to as the root cause model.¹⁰⁰ The second research tradition focuses on group dynamics as developed around collective action literature, drawing on social psychology models and theories such as social identity, groupism, and situationism.¹⁰¹ Finally, the third research tradition emphasises individual differences including clinical and nonclinical personality traits, mindset, cognitive dispositions, or ideological belief systems as the psychological basis for violent extremism.¹⁰² Each of these research traditions offers robust models of causation for radicalisation. However, they offer little interaction with each other.¹⁰³ Although existing literature advocates for multilevel analysis that combines societal, social, and individual levels of analysis, the interaction between the levels in the radicalisation process remains unclear.¹⁰⁴ Schumann et al. suggested that it is the case because the levels of analysis are treated as singular risk factors that add up to an overall risk of radicalisation. By adapting Anderson's "imagined political community" to the imagined extremist communities, these distinct research traditions merge into a single integrated model of violent extremism.

The radicalisation of lone and group-based actors is more comparable through the introduction of imagined extremist communities. Existing theories on the group dynamics of organised groups can be more widely utilised in the study of lone actors by accepting imagined extremist communities as a corresponding alternative to organised groups; this underscores a paradox in the existing research that reflects scholars' tendencies to heavily contrast lone actors and group-based radicalisation. The presence of social influences in established concepts alone indicates that these actors are more similar than what is currently acknowledged in the literature. Although the impact of social influences is undisputed, it has not received the attention it merits. As illustrated in this article, several concepts traditionally associated with the radicalisation of group-based actors can apply to the study of lone actors. The similarity in affinity for specific communities and their role in the radicalisation of both types of actors suggest a substantial foundation for comparing predictors. Consequently, incorporating a broader range of predictors could enhance our ability to predict lone-actor radicalisation.

Minimising the perceived divide between lone and group-based actors is crucial due to concerns about potential jury biases.¹⁰⁵ During a trial, if these actors are perceived as distinct

entities, they could be subjected to different treatment within the justice system. In particular, dated and misguided perceptions could lead to lone actors being regarded as less sophisticated compared to group-based actors, and as a result, their threats may not be taken as seriously as they should be. If lone actors are perceived as less of a threat than group-oriented actors, the lone actor is more likely to be considered an outlier. Consequently, this perception increases the support for harsher treatment of the actors and counter-terrorism policies prioritising the safety of the ingroup over outgroup harm.¹⁰⁶ It seems that there is a disproportionate focus on the accountability of lone actors compared to group-based actors both within and outside the justice system. This focus tends to undermine the perceived sophistication of lone actors' attacks, despite that they have demonstrated the capability to execute attacks with equal or greater severity than group-based actors.¹⁰⁷ A further concern is the tendency to assign more moral accountability to group-based actors through emphasis on their political motivations or affiliations.¹⁰⁸ This unequal attribution of responsibility and seriousness can skew the understanding and responses to these different forms of terrorism. This is a concerning trend, particularly in the context of rising support for nationalistic parties often characterised by anti-immigration stances.¹⁰⁹ By challenging the misconceptions surrounding these actors, biases held by the justice system and the proliferation of harmful narratives in the media can be reduced, which could lead to more effective policy-making and legal proceedings, as well as a decrease in prejudices held by the general public against the actor.

In future research, steps should be taken to explore the reach of this imagined extremist community. Bright et al. illustrated that social network analysis of lone-actor terrorists can effectively elucidate the role that social connections play in influencing their actions.¹¹⁰ Further in-depth analysis of the extremist scripts would be a valuable source from which to draw. Bright et al. have also distinguished between ideological and operational influences. Identifying and reviewing types of influences based on scripts using this distinction could provide rich data. One potential objective could be to use this information to delineate the boundaries of this perceived extremist community. This could involve defining the primary and secondary individuals and scripts that reinforce the constructed reality and identify the community's members. As touched upon in this article, the examination of online activity could also provide a valuable data source. For instance, analysing the temporal changes in themes emerging from online posting could prove insightful. This research direction could further be applied to understanding the copycat effect and various forms of imitation across a plethora of extremist movements, offering valuable insights into the shared social influences among extremists.

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