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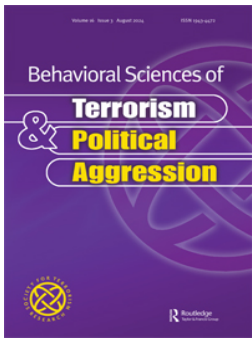
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The 2019 Christchurch terror attack: an assessment of proximal warning behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The Christchurch terror attack in March 2019 was a pivotal incident in the recent history of right-wing terrorism. Utilizing eight proximal warning behaviors from the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol (TRAP-18), this article provides a qualitative analysis of the attacker's behavior following the formation of his terrorist intent. Events and activities were coded against the eight warning behaviors and assigned a date where known, thereby creating a comprehensive chronology of events commencing from January 2017 up to the time of the attack. Five insights of theoretical and operational relevance when utilizing proximal warning factors emerge from the analysis: timing; the impact of security awareness; the interplay between factors; the effect of image management; and the social connectedness of lone actors. This study adds to the growing body of empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of the TRAP-18 as an instrument through which to analyze the behavior and mindset of lone actor terrorists. It provides further insights to inform the process of person of interest prioritization among counter-terrorism investigators and contributes to academic knowledge of threat assessment.

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Terrorism; threat assessment; threat management; lone actor; right-wing extremism

Introduction

Twenty-eight-year-old Brenton Harrison Tarrant's attack on 15 March 2019 on the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, was a pivotal incident in the recent history of right-wing terrorism. The scale and callousness of the attack, reinforced by its unedited accessibility to global audiences due to its partial livestreaming, have established it as one of the most significant terrorist attacks in recent years. It has been credited by some intelligence services as single-handedly bringing 'the right-wing extremist threat back into focus' (ASIO, 2019, p. 4), while Tarrant's influence on the global extreme right-wing environment has similarly been substantial, even directly

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motivating other terrorists who have sought to emulate his actions (Ben Am & Weimann, 2020).

Operationally, too, the attack and the groundwork which underpinned it have been noted for their thoroughness. The *Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain* (hereafter, the Commission) found that Tarrant's preparations were 'methodical, and his planning detailed and elaborate' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 232). It is on the operational level that this article will seek to gain insights into Tarrant's activities, examining his behavior *following* the formation of his terrorist intent and arrival in New Zealand in August 2017. For just over 18 months, Tarrant undertook a wide range of preparatory and logistical activities, articulated some of his plans and ideological views, and engaged and communicated, albeit in a limited capacity, with individuals in the real and virtual worlds. Much of this has been documented by the Commission's final report released in December 2020. While the report provides a detailed and thorough account of Tarrant's activities, it does not, due to limits imposed by its Terms of Reference, synthesize these details or subject them to the kind of theoretically informed analysis that can provide nuanced insights into his mindset and motivations, and in turn enhance understandings around terrorist risk and threat assessment in general. This reflects a broader trend in the literature on Tarrant and the Christchurch attack which have variously been examined through the lens of ideology (Moses, 2019; Ware, 2020), the role of the online environment and online communities (Macklin, 2019), their impact on the broader threat environment (Baele et al., 2023), and the extent to which they highlight deficiencies in the identification and management of terrorist persons of interest (Pennington, 2021).

This article will seek to address this operational level gap in the literature by examining Tarrant's activities and mindset through the lens of pre-incident indicators (Smith et al., 2006) or warning behaviors, with the latter defined as 'superordinate accelerating patterns that are dynamic and proximal to the event' (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 165). These warning behaviors, which may indicate accelerating risk for targeted violence, will be examined through the lens of the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol 18 (TRAP-18), an ideologically neutral structured professional judgement tool designed to assess the risk of terrorist violence posed by lone individuals. TRAP-18 functions as a triage and prioritization tool, providing guidance to users as to when a person of interest (POI) should be monitored and when they should be actively managed (Meloy, Roshdi, et al., 2015). In addition to its widespread use among counter-terrorism practitioners around the world and the growing body of empirical evidence supporting its efficacy as an instrument of early detection (Böckler et al., 2020), TRAP-18 has postdictive utility as a structured lens through which to analyze the behavior and mindset of lone actor terrorists (Böckler et al., 2015, 2017; Challacombe & Lucas, 2019; Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015).

Ultimately, this article aims to inform the broader debate surrounding threat assessment as it relates to terrorist violence in three ways. First, it will provide further efficacy to the TRAP-18 as an instrument of early detection among lone actor terrorists, while also providing new insights into the dynamics of various proximal warning behaviors. Second, it will contribute to an evidence base to assist counter-terrorism practitioners in identifying behaviours and mindsets among lone actor terrorists that have formed the intent to engage in violence, thereby helping them make the all-important distinction

between those sympathetic to violent extremism and those that have formed the intent to engage in it. Finally, it will contribute to the growing body of evidence that challenges some of the commonly-held views on lone actor terrorism, including assumptions that these individuals operate in an ideological or social vacuum, or that they are prone to truncated attack planning which can sometimes border on the impulsive (cf. Hamm & Spaaij, 2017).

The attacker

Brenton Harrison Tarrant was born in 1990 in the town of Grafton in New South Wales, Australia. While Tarrant would subsequently describe himself as an ‘ordinary white man’ who ‘had a regular childhood without any great issues’ (Tarrant, 2019, p. 5), it is fair to say that his upbringing was far from typical. The Commission found that his upbringing in Australia ‘was marked by a number of stressors’ (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 165). This included his parents’ separation, his mother’s subsequent involvement in an abusive relationship (in which Tarrant and his sister were also abused), the loss of the family home in a fire, and his father’s cancer diagnosis and suicide in 2010. Moreover, there is evidence that Tarrant was complicit in his father’s suicide plans and discovered the body (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 169). The death of his father would have significant implications for the development of Tarrant’s ideological views and operational planning. After receiving a sizeable inheritance upon his father’s passing, Tarrant was able to pursue his ideological convictions and finance his operational capability.

By his admission, Tarrant, from an early age, suffered from social anxiety and ‘found socializing with others stressful’ (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 166), with the result that he had few childhood friends. This pattern would continue into his adult life and have significant ramifications during the period in which he would prepare for his attack. According to the Commission, the restricted and superficial nature of his relationships created, ‘... limited opportunity for the hard edges of his political thinking to be softened by regular and lasting connections with people with different views’ (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 166). His lack of close or intimate relationships may even have been of concern to Tarrant, at one stage informing his sister that he thought he was autistic and possibly sociopathic (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 170). Indeed, he would subsequently explain that he felt ostracized by society and wanted to damage society as an act of revenge (High Court of New Zealand, 2020, p. 23).

Importantly, some of the views that would form the basis of his ideological beliefs as an adult seem to have surfaced early in life. For instance, whilst still at school, he began expressing racist, including anti-Semitic, views which on two occasions led to the intervention of his high school’s Anti-Racism Contact Officer. Tarrant informed the Commission that, ‘he began to think politically’ as early as the age of 12, during which his primary concerns were about immigration, particularly by Muslims into Western countries. It is interesting to note that the formation of these views coincides with the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington DC. These views likely developed further due to his online activity, with his mother observing that he began using the imageboard website 4chan as early as the age of 14 (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 168). Over the years, he would continue to utilize other online and social media platforms to develop and articulate his extremist views, including during online chats while

playing video games and through the Facebook pages of Australian far-right groups such as the United Patriots Front and the True Blue Crew. Moreover, his extensive international travel between 2014 and 2017, made possible by his father's inheritance, is likely to have deepened his ideological views, with his mother observing that the more he travelled, the more racist he became. This view was echoed by his sister, who observed that following his return to Australia in mid-2016 for a short time amid his international travel, he was a 'changed person [who] spoke regularly of politics, religion, culture, history and past wars ...' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 178). It was during this international travel that Tarrant likely formed his terrorist intent, putting his plan in motion as early as January 2017.

By the time Tarrant arrived in New Zealand in August 2017, his ideological views were fully developed, he had formed an intention to engage in an act of terrorism (although there is some question as to whether he initially intended to conduct his attack in New Zealand), and was financially independent. Over the next 18 months, he would carefully and methodically build his capability, develop his operational knowledge and skills, and physically and mentally prepare for his attack, all without coming to the attention of New Zealand's counter-terrorism authorities. On the morning of 15 March 2019, a date he had established as his 'go plan' more than two months previously, Tarrant, armed with six firearms and several incendiary devices, travelled the 360 kilometers from his home in Dunedin to the Al Noor Mosque. At 1:40 PM, he began firing on worshippers and over the next five minutes would shoot and kill 44 people, all the while livestreaming the attack via a GoPro camera mounted on his helmet. He then travelled a further six kilometers to the Linwood Islamic Centre where he shot and killed a further seven people. While on his way to his third intended target, the Ashburton Mosque approximately 90 kilometers away, he was intercepted and arrested by police, 19 min after firing his first shot (New Zealand Police, n.d.). In addition to the 51 people killed, 40 others sustained gunshot injuries, thus making it the deadliest terrorist attack conducted by a right-wing extremist since that of Tarrant's self-professed role model, Anders Breivik, eight years earlier (Tarrant, 2019, p. 18).

Methodology

A behavior-based assessment tool, the TRAP-18 was designed by J. Reid Meloy (2017) as an ideologically neutral means of assessing the risk of terrorist violence among lone actor, community-based subjects (as opposed to those held in correctional settings) to assist investigators in the prioritization of cases or persons of interest. An investigative template, it is comprised of eight proximal warning behaviors (which suggest a need for intensive and active risk management) and 10 distal characteristics (which call for active monitoring).¹ These warning behaviors, which capture both behavioral and psychological patterns, may be indicative of change and accelerating risk and can therefore be important markers for mobilization to violence. It has been noted that these warning behaviors are dynamic, rather than static, and should be viewed not as discrete variables, but as patterns for analysis (Meloy & Gill, 2016, p. 39). There is also a growing body of evidence that the clustering of these proximal characteristics can be effective in distinguishing attackers from non-attackers, despite the presence of concerning behaviors among the latter cohort (Guldimann & Meloy, 2020, pp. 6–7).

The eight proximal warning behaviors outlined in [Table 1](#) formed the basis of the coding process, with Tarrant's behaviors and pre-attack events being identified in the data being coded against the eight warning behaviors and entered into a database. These characteristics were also assigned a date where known, as were other events and activities not captured by the coding of the proximal factors (e.g. some of Tarrant's movements, communications and interaction with others), thereby creating a comprehensive chronology of events commencing from January 2017 up to the time of the attack. In this way, an additional layer of analysis became possible through the establishment of context and the identification of dynamics that might not have been evident through the examination of discrete events alone. The temporality of data is also an important consideration in establishing a behavioral baseline, important for some TRAP-18 warning behaviors. The coding was initially performed by the first author and subsequently reviewed by the two following authors. There were no disagreements in the events and behaviors assigned to the TRAP-18 warning behaviours.

In utilizing these proximate characteristics as a template to assess Tarrant's mindset and behavior during the critical period following the formation of his terrorist intent, this article is based on the qualitative analysis of multiple data sources. The most important of these was the Commission report, particularly volume two. A highly detailed report, it represents the total knowledge of Tarrant held by New Zealand's police, Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS), and all government departments, along with other foreign intelligence services where applicable. Importantly, it is also based on an interview with Tarrant conducted by the Commission in June 2020 after he pleaded guilty to all charges. This was complemented by other reports, including those prepared by New Zealand Police in support of the Coronial inquiry and court documents such as sentencing remarks. Tarrant's 74-page manifesto, prepared less than two months before his attack, was also useful, particularly from the perspective of gaining insights into his

Table 1. TRAP-18 proximal warning behaviors.

Warning Behavior	Description
Pathway	Research, planning, preparation for an attack <i>Example:</i> Hostile reconnaissance and procurement activities such as the acquisition of firearms or explosives
Fixation	Increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person/cause <i>Example:</i> Expression of increasingly strident opinion leading to a deterioration in close personal relationships
Identification	Psychological desire to be a 'pseudocommando' <i>Example:</i> Acquisition of military paraphernalia and preoccupation with firearms
Novel Aggression	Violence unrelated to intended target <i>Example:</i> An act of violence in the lead up to an attack to test one's resolve and ability to act violently
Energy Burst	Increase in frequency or variety of activities related to the targeted violence <i>Example:</i> An acceleration and intensification of operational activity in the lead up to an attack
Leakage	Communication of intent to a third party <i>Example:</i> Intentional or unintentional communication via social media posts indicating an intent to carry out an attack
Last Resort	Increasing desperation or 'need to act' <i>Example:</i> An ideologically-driven time and action imperative which dictates that there are no remaining alternatives other than violence
Directly Communicated Threat	Communication of direct threat to target or law enforcement <i>Example:</i> An oral or written threat made directly to a target expressing a wish or intent to cause them harm

mindset and self-identity, despite the obvious need to approach some of its content with caution.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that as in all matters of this type, we are necessarily dealing with incomplete information. Tarrant is arguably particularly challenging in this regard given his meticulous attention to operational security and his fixation on optics, which meant an attempt to make visible only that information which conformed to the narrative and image he wished to present to the world. These challenges are compounded by a tendency among right-wing extremists to utilize humor and irony, a practice also employed by Tarrant, leading the Commission to observe that it was difficult differentiating between 'what is ironic and what is meant literally' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 192). Moreover, Tarrant left behind information intended to mislead investigators, in some cases going to extraordinary lengths in an attempt to make his deception complete.

Warning behaviors

Pathway

This warning behavior is predicated on the idea of the existence of a 'pathway to violence' with identifiable stages or markers. Within the context of the TRAP-18, this warning behavior focuses exclusively on the 'late stage markers', including research, planning, preparation and implementation of an attack (Meloy et al., 2019, p. 103) and is indicative that the person of interest has entered the operational space and intends on engaging in violence (Meloy, 2018, p. 2). It has been noted that these markers, by definition, negate notions of impulsivity and 'snapping' (Meloy & Gill, 2016, p. 44).

Following its extensive examination of Tarrant's activities, the Commission was satisfied that he had formed terrorist intent by January 2017, more than two years before his attack, despite not arriving in New Zealand until mid-August 2017. While Tarrant's 'pathway' activities between January and August 2017 were limited (restricted to basic research and preparatory activities such as emailing the Bruce Rifle Club to determine if it was still operating and booking his flight to New Zealand), it was upon his arrival in Dunedin one week after reaching New Zealand that he began to make the necessary preliminary operational preparations for his attack. The Commission would subsequently observe that from this time, Tarrant's 'primary focus in life was planning and preparing for his terrorist attack' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 167), a view echoed by his sentencing judge who observed, 'apart from some further travel in December 2018, your sole objective was the planning and execution of your long-conceived plan to attack the Muslim community' (High Court of New Zealand, 2020, p. 22).

For the next several months, Tarrant laid the logistical and administrative foundations upon which many of his subsequent activities would depend. Indeed, Tarrant was highly methodical, undertaking his preparations in a sequentially logical manner, so that his activities would support or facilitate those that would follow. In other words, he consistently worked toward a plan, so that there was little about his activities that could be construed as random or ill-considered. The recovery of several planning documents prepared by Tarrant not only provides an insight into his highly structured life and approach to attack planning but also reveals a disciplined commitment to adhering to the tasks and timeframes contained within them.

All completed within the first week of his arrival in Dunedin, Tarrant purchased the vehicle he would use during his attack, rented a flat in Dunedin from which he would base himself during the entirety of his stay in New Zealand, and made arrangements with his bank to facilitate access to his current and future funds. Other administrative activities centered on acquiring his firearms license, and included undertaking a Firearms Safety Course and undergoing an interview with a Dunedin-based firearms Vetting Officer as part of his application process. Perhaps in anticipation of acquiring his firearms licence, he set up, in mid-October 2017, an account with a New Zealand-based auction website, from which he would subsequently purchase and sell firearms magazines and other firearms-related equipment (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 192).

Almost immediately after being notified in late November 2017 of the approval of his firearms licence application, Tarrant engaged in a burst of activity centered on firearms and related paraphernalia. For instance, within a matter of a few days of acquiring his licence, he purchased his first firearm, while during the month of December alone procured seven firearms, thousands of rounds of ammunition, magazines with a 30-round capacity and a military-styled tactical vest, gloves and ballistic ceramic plates. During this time, he also engaged in a probationary shoot at the Bruce Rifle Club and made inquiries about joining another firearms club.

Over the next 12 months, Tarrant's 'pathway' activities continued to focus on the purchase of other firearms, ammunition, and building his proficiency and confidence in the use of the weapons he had acquired, engaging in 21 separate shoots at the Bruce Rifle Club in 2018 alone (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 206). It is almost certain that he undertook other preparatory activities during this time unknown to investigators, including research, which Tarrant seemed to engage in as a matter of course and for a range of purposes (e.g. New Zealand Police, 2020). Indeed, the Commission acknowledges that it was difficult to trace his internet activity due to his use of Tor browsers and encrypted emails, concluding that, 'we have no doubt that the individual's internet activity was considerably greater than we have been able to reconstruct' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 193 & 234). Similarly, there is evidence that he undertook in the privacy of his home other preparatory activities that could arouse suspicion, including practicing with large capacity magazines (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 374).

By early 2019, Tarrant entered the most intensive phase of his preparations as he clearly shifted into a heightened state of operational preparedness. In the space of just over two months, he engaged in the following:

- purchased the material for, and prepared four incendiary devices which were subsequently recovered in the rear of Tarrant's vehicle on the day of his attack (New Zealand Police, n.d., p. 44). Tarrant likely intended for these to be more sophisticated (possibly improvised explosive devices) as revealed in one of his planning documents dated 30 January, in which he reminds himself to 'tape power packs to fuel can, chuck in remaining acetone' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 223). However, subsequent analysis of these devices revealed that they were filled with petrol, with lighters and cans of accelerant duct-taped to the side (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 240);
- conducted physical reconnaissance on mosques and Islamic centers, including the two he would eventually attack. On a single day, 8 January 2019, he drove past the Ashburton mosque, Linwood Islamic Centre and the Al Noor Mosque, in the latter instance

utilizing a drone to record the building and its surroundings. It was based on this reconnaissance that Tarrant finally decided on his targets (Tarrant, 2019). This physical reconnaissance was supplemented by other intelligence collection efforts, including obtaining a walk-through video of the Al Noor mosque, which he downloaded from Facebook just four days before the attack.

- commenced his manifesto on 22 January 2019, and completed it sometime before 6 March; and,
- prepared the various communications and propaganda material he intended to disseminate to the world just before launching his attack. This seemed to be the focus of his activities in the days and hours before the attack (RRCI-V2, 2020, pp. 228–229) and is consistent with Tarrant's almost obsessive efforts to control how he and his actions would be viewed by the world.

Fixation

Defined as behavior indicative of an 'increasingly pathological preoccupation with a person or cause' (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 168), this warning behavior involves a fixation in which individuals 'spend much of their waking lives thinking about the object of their concern ... [so that it] drives out everything else ... with every moment taken up with their quest' (Mullen et al., 2009, pp. 34–35). The increasingly 'strident opinion' (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 167) which characterizes this behavior can manifest in several ways, including an increase in the frequency and intensity of disparaging comments toward those viewed as foes as dictated by ideology (Böckler et al., 2017) and an intensification of anger and ideological orientation prior to an attack (Meloy & Gill, 2016). Its all-consuming nature may in turn lead to social or occupational deterioration (Meloy et al., 2012). In fact, Tarrant's thinking and behavior in the years, months, and even days leading up to his attack strongly conform with one of the core cognitive-affective drivers associated with 'fixation', namely that of extreme overvalued belief (Meloy & Rahman, 2021). Broadly defined by Rahman (2018) as a belief shared by others in their culture or subculture and which is amplified, relished, and defended by the possessor of the belief, it is also often simplistic, binary, and difficult to disprove. It also, over time, becomes more dominant, refined and resistant to change and is accompanied by an intense emotional connection. Indeed, the affective dimension of extreme overvalued belief is significant and can manifest as positive and negative emotional states, including feelings of anger and humiliation on the one hand, and exhilaration and excitement on the other (Meloy & Rahman, 2021, p. 174).

As noted above, Tarrant began expressing anti-Semitic views whilst still in school and indicated that he became concerned about Muslim migration to the West as early as age 12. Thus, by the time he formed his terrorist intent, his extremist views were likely fully developed, leading his mother to observe that, by early 2017, they had become so extreme she was concerned for his mental health (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 179). In other words, by the time of his arrival in New Zealand, he was already strongly fixated on his cause and the task ahead. This preoccupation was undoubtedly facilitated by his unusual personal circumstances whilst living in New Zealand, characterized by social isolation, unemployment, and the virtual absence of interests outside those related to his

ideological pursuits and operational planning. Tarrant, therefore, had few of the typical day-to-day mental distractions that could compete with, or drive out, thoughts relating to his cause and the source of his grievances. His operational and ideological preoccupation was so overwhelming that they seemed to crowd out all other thoughts or concerns, even those of the most rudimentary, day-to-day kind. For instance, someone who saw the inside of his flat following the attacks described it as being so stark that it may as well have been a 'cell' in which not even the bed had any sheeting (Maley, 2019).

An insight into this mental preoccupation is provided by a minor event on 20 December 2018. On this date, Tarrant sent himself an email, noting, 'kill an armed invader and [receive] a medal, kill an unarmed invader and receive a life sentence, but the invaders threat remains the same' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 217). This is an idea that comes to Tarrant who seems keen to preserve it for later use, which indeed he does in his manifesto (Tarrant, 2019, p. 43). What makes it interesting is that Tarrant sent himself this email whilst in Poland, a sign that even while travelling and as distant from his operating environment as it is possible to be, the cause was never far from his mind. Even his surviving planning documents reveal an individual consumed by the details of his operation and conveying a precise and carefully orchestrated ideological message.

Tarrant's preoccupation with his cause was such that even during his preparations, he found it necessary to explore other expressions of his ideological convictions. For instance, between January 2017 and April 2018, he made 11 donations to far-right organizations and individuals throughout the world, a number the Commission concedes is likely an underestimation (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 196). Similarly, he sought to introduce his beliefs to those closest to him, his mother and sister, sending them books upon which some of his ideological views were based (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 193). All of this is despite Tarrant's efforts to maintain a low profile in the interests of operational security. This tension between operational security and the need to display his ideological colors sometimes bordered on the reckless, as demonstrated by his decision in October 2017 (the middle of his firearms licence application process) to set up a Trade Me account with the username 'Kiwi14words'² – the very account he would use to purchase magazines and other equipment for his firearms (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 192).

Tarrant's 'fixation' also likely led to a deterioration in his closest relationships and exacerbated his social isolation. He was indeed a loner most of his life, describing himself as a 'private and mostly introverted person' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 10), so that by the time he arrived in New Zealand his circle of 'friends' was restricted to two, and contact with these individuals was extremely limited (RRCI-V2, 2020, pp. 185–186). However, there are indications that his relationship with the few people in his life did begin to suffer due to his increasing 'fixation' with his ideological views and operational preparations. This was especially evident in the period leading up to his attack, as demonstrated by an incident in early January 2019 during a visit to New Zealand by his mother and her partner, who was of Indian ethnicity. During the visit, they left a café they had attended together because Tarrant refused to spend money in 'migrant cafes', informing his mother that he wanted his money going only to 'white New Zealanders'. Afterwards, they drove back to Tarrant's flat 'in silence' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 186). There is also evidence that Tarrant was unhappy with their decision to visit, seeing their arrival as an intrusion (O'Malley et al., 2019).

Finally, it may be useful to consider the role of global events in strengthening Tarrant's operational and ideological 'fixation' and resolve, along with the intensification of anger and hatred consistent with someone harboring revenge fantasies (Knoll, 2010). For instance, 2017 and 2018 were punctuated by numerous terrorist attacks conducted by both Islamists and right-wing extremists. This included two Islamist attacks in Tarrant's home country of Australia and high-profile attacks in London and Manchester. Prominent attacks by right-wing extremists occurred during this period in Canada, the US, the UK, and Italy. It is possible these attacks, of which Tarrant was almost certainly aware, served to reaffirm or renew his commitment, for reasons as diverse as further authenticating his ideological grievances, to providing inspiration or emotional energy, including that produced through feelings of shame. While the precise effect of these attacks on Tarrant can only be speculative, it is evident that at least some were of sufficient importance that he referred to them either within his manifesto or through inscriptions on some of the equipment he used during his attack.

Identification

This warning behavior indicates a psychological desire to be a 'pseudo-commando,' have a 'warrior mentality,' closely associate with weapons or other military or law enforcement paraphernalia, identify with previous attackers or assassins, or identify oneself as an agent to advance a particular cause or belief system (Meloy, Mohandie, et al., 2015, pp. 215–216). According to Meloy et al. (2012, p. 272), 'identification' warning behavior 'would likely enhance the narcissism of the subject through his attempts to be like those he admires (commandos, warriors, martyrs, previous assassins, etc.)' It differs from fixation on the basis that the latter relates to 'what one thinks about all the time (preoccupation) [while "identification" relates to] what one becomes (self-identity)' (Meloy et al., 2019, p. 103).

Tarrant displayed many, if not all, of the characteristics typical of this warning behavior. Tarrant acquired a range of military paraphernalia, including a military-styled tactical vest, gloves and helmet, and ballistic ceramic plates. While some of this was likely acquired due to its operational utility, it is also evident that some of these acquisitions served no purpose other than to nourish Tarrant's fantasy of being, and maintaining the appearance of, a soldier or modern-day warrior. For instance, in early 2018, he purchased a bayonet and scabbard, which he subsequently carried with him during his attack, the operational utility of which is questionable given that by this time he had already acquired at least seven firearms and thousands of rounds of ammunition. Similarly, Tarrant cared a great deal about what he termed 'optics', and there is some evidence that this extended to his physical appearance during the attack and the extent to which this cultivated his warrior mentality. For example, he felt the need to coordinate the clothing he would wear during the attack, reminding himself in a planning document prepared on 18 July 2018 to 'buy steel capped boots that match gear' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 216). These behaviors therefore likely fulfilled an important psychological, as distinct from operational, utility in the sense that they, '... are in the service of narcissistic inflation of the self, and typically compensate for a general sense of failure, vulnerability, and impotence' (Meloy, Mohandie, et al., 2015, p. 220).³ Indeed, images of Tarrant's equipment, which he released to the world just prior to the attack, reveal someone who took obvious pride in these things,

with one image, as if to emphasize his role as soldier, containing a set of dog tags depicting symbols of white supremacy. The attraction to all things military even led him to show so much interest in the military background of a member of the Bruce Rifle Club that the individual reported feeling 'uncomfortable' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 207). On the way to the attack, he even chose to play martial music in his vehicle, including *The British Grenadiers* (Doyle, 2019), a marching tune used by the militaries of various Commonwealth countries, and *Karadžić, Lead Your Serbs*, which was also employed as a marching song among nationalist Serb paramilitaries during the Bosnian war (BBC News, 2019).

Consistent with Dietz's (1986) definition of the pseudocommando, there is some evidence that Tarrant had a preoccupation with firearms. Preparations for the acquisition, actual purchase of, and modifications made to his firearms, along with developing proficiency in their use, was a significant focus for Tarrant, occupying much of his time and thinking. While it is true that this was driven, at least in part, by operational necessity, there are indications of an obsessiveness that went beyond operational expediency. For instance, the quantity of firearms Tarrant purchased seemed excessive for his operational purposes, acquiring a total of ten, eventually selling four and retaining six, all of which were in his possession on the day of the attack (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 200). There are other indications of a fascination, even pride, in his firearms as revealed by one episode in which he showed off one of his firearms to his mother during her visit to him in late December 2018. Despite her discomfort, Tarrant persuaded her to hold the firearm before photographing her with it (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 240).

Tarrant very much viewed himself and his actions through a martial lens, consistent with Meloy, Mohandie et al.'s (2015) definition of 'warrior mentality' as 'the psychopathological fantasy and behavior of being a soldier/warrior ... in the absence of actual participation in state sanctioned warfare ...' (p. 219; see also Hamm & Spaaij, 2017). This is most evident through Tarrant's manifesto, in which he considers himself a soldier engaged in an existential and legitimate war, at one stage describing his impending attack as 'a partisan action against a [sic] occupying force, and I am a lawful, uniformed combatant' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 14). In a section of his manifesto entitled, 'A soldiers [sic] fight', Tarrant informs his readers that 'the only thing you should expect is a true war and to die the death of a true soldier' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 42). These ideas are supplemented with the vocabulary of war, in which he regularly utilizes terms such as 'targets', 'enemies', 'war', 'army' and 'invaders'. Tarrant also assigns the term 'soldier' to his adversaries, at one point describing Turkish immigrants in Europe as 'ethnic soldiers' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 39). He echoed these views following the attack in his interviews with police and health assessors, in which he described his actions as occurring within the context of a war against 'invading' populations, again labelling himself a 'partisan' (High Court of New Zealand, 2020, p. 23). His repeated use in a variety of contexts of the term 'partisan' reflects a strong level of self-identification with the role, with its connotations of being a soldier, albeit an irregular one, opposed to a *foreign occupying force*.

In this war, Tarrant viewed himself as not just an agent of his cause, but in some ways the embodiment of it. For him, the problem of the ethnic, cultural and racial replacement of 'the European people', embodied in the idea of 'white genocide', is the result of weakness and indifference. 'Weak men [Tarrant observes] have created this situation and strong men are needed to fix it' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 30). The solution, therefore, lies in immediate action, to be undertaken by men, such as himself, who are prepared to

sacrifice themselves on the altar of preserving the white race. Those 'acting now, fighting now' are the 'vanguard of the vanguard' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 51) and in whom salvation, and the future of the white race, rests. Cause and individual are finally fused at the conclusion of his manifesto as he farewells his readers –

As for me, my time has come. I cannot guarantee my success. All I know is the certainty of my will and the necessity of my cause. Live or die, know I did it all for you; my friends, my family, my people, my culture, my RACE. (Tarrant, 2019, p. 73)

Just as he hoped to inspire others to follow in his footsteps, he too felt the historical burden of those that preceded him, whether dead soldiers lying in military cemeteries in France killed in twentieth-century conflicts or those involved in distant battles against the Ottoman Empire. He thus positioned himself as the latest in a long line of defenders of a cause, the significance of which was amplified, at least in his own mind, by its historical context.

As part of this sense of historical continuity, Tarrant also modelled himself and his actions on previous attackers with whom he had established ideological affinity. The most prominent and conspicuous of these was Anders Breivik, with Tarrant observing that while he read the writings of other right-wing terrorists, including Dylann Roof, he 'only really took true inspiration from ... Breivik' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 18). The Commission too observed that Tarrant 'was significantly influenced' by him (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 197), particularly at an operational level, basing many of his preparations on the details contained in the Oslo attacker's own manifesto. Indeed, his identification with Breivik was so strong that he even shared the Oslo attacker's fantasies, going so far as to travel to Poland to fabricate a meeting with the non-existent Knights Templar, a group that Breivik falsely claimed to have re-established.

Energy burst

This warning behavior involves an increase in the frequency or variety of activities related to the targeted violence in the hours, days or weeks before the attack, even where this activity is relatively minor or innocuous (Meloy et al., 2012, p. 265). Also described as an 'acceleration of activity' (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 170), the capacity to identify 'energy bursts' is dependent upon the ability to establish in the first instance a 'baseline of behavioral activity' (Meloy & Gill, 2016, p. 40). It has been noted 'energy burst' can include a 'psychiatric component', such as hypomania or mania (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 170).

As noted earlier, it was the view of the Commission that Tarrant formed the intent to engage in an attack in New Zealand as early as January 2017, so that by the time of his arrival in New Zealand seven months later, his activities centered on preparing for the attack. For the next 16 months, these preparatory activities were, with few exceptions, incapable of revealing his terrorist intent, thereby minimizing the likelihood of drawing the type of police attention that could potentially lead to a disruption of his plans. These centered on the legal acquisition of ammunition and firearms and the development of proficiency in their use (Tarrant's experience with them up to this point was very limited). These activities were supplemented by efforts to enhance his physical strength and capabilities, including muscle enhancers and attending a local gym three to four

times a week. While it is evident that during this 16-month period, Tarrant had formed terrorist intent and was taking very clear steps towards an attack, his activities related to his targeted violence were steady and focused rather than frenetic, a manifestation, perhaps, of his financial independence and confidence in his operational security arrangements.

This period contrasted with the two and a half months prior to his attack, during which a significant escalation and intensification of activity consistent with 'energy burst' became apparent. It is interesting to note that this escalation coincided with his return from what would be his final trip to Australia, during which he visited his sister, and the departure from New Zealand of his mother, who travelled to Dunedin to visit him. Within five days of his mother leaving, Tarrant's activities took on a pronounced operational tempo, a pace and focus he would maintain up to the time of his attack. Thus, in early January 2019, Tarrant commenced and completed his hostile reconnaissance, including of the Linwood Islamic Centre and the Al Noor Mosque, which in the latter case involved the use of a drone. He also finalized the purchase and preparation of all equipment that he was to use during the attack, including four incendiary devices, and marked and photographed his firearms and tactical gear, thereby making a definitive link between them and his terrorist intentions. He also began and completed his manifesto.

The two days immediately prior to the attack were dominated by a flurry of activity centered on how Tarrant intended to present himself, his views, and his actions to the world. At this stage of his preparations, the careful orchestration of his messaging seems to have dominated his thinking and actions as he engaged in a variety of activities, from changing his profile picture on Twitter, crafting the words that would form the basis of emails and social media posts he planned on releasing just before the attack, and uploading onto social media videos and images that reflected and expressed his ideological views. As indicated above, this preoccupation with how he and his actions would be perceived by the world, or at least members of his identity group, was particularly important to Tarrant who always seemed to have an eye on post-attack interpretations of his actions.

'Energy burst' may be the result of 'the offender's underestimation of the amount of final preparations necessary for his targeted violence, and therefore a need to accelerate his behavior to get them done before the planned time of the event' (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 170). While Tarrant seemed to have a detailed and accurate grasp of what needed to be done in the period leading up to the attack, as revealed by his surviving planning documents, it is likely that his intensification of activity did result, at least in part, from pressures stemming from financial miscalculations which required him to bring his plans forward. As early as February 2018, Tarrant prepared a budget plan, in which he calculated his anticipated expenditure over a period of 550 days, assessed by the Commission, and subsequently confirmed by Tarrant, to coincide with the Muslim festival, Eid al-Adha, in mid-August 2019 (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 215). By early 2019 he realized that he was running out of money and so needed to act sooner than planned. It appears that money became so tight that he felt the need, in his final planning document dated 30 January, to record potential expenditure for items valued at a mere \$10 and \$30. Thus, by late January 2019, Tarrant had established

15 March as his 'go plan', and perhaps as a reflection of the financial strain he was under, committed himself to act on this date, 'rain or shine' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 224).

Last resort

This warning behavior is characterized by a sense that the individual is forced into a position of 'last resort' in which there is 'no alternative other than violence' (Meloy et al., 2012, p. 265), thereby generating a time and action imperative (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, pp. 170–171). The individual thus feels trapped due to the narrowing of options and that action is required, regardless of the consequences. In most cases, the individual has formed the conclusion that they have no choice, and that while other options may be available, they are either denied or ignored (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 170).

A time and action imperative is central to Tarrant's worldview, as it is to all those that subscribe to the 'white genocide' narrative (Moses, 2019; Wilson, 2022). Rising levels of immigration and birth rates among non-whites have created a profound sense of urgency, in which time itself has become the enemy. As Tarrant observes in his manifesto, 'every day we become fewer in number' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 3) and that returning to 'replacement fertility levels' will take time, 'time we do not have due to the crisis of mass immigration ... we lack the time scale required to enact the civilizational paradigm shift we need to undertake to return to health and prosperity' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 4). Despairing at the betrayal of politicians and the indifference and idleness of white men, the only option available is immediate and violent action. 'The time for meekness [he observes] has long since passed, the time for a political solution has long since passed' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 19), emphasizing later in his manifesto that, 'THE BEST TIME FOR [an] ATTACK WAS YESTERDAY, THE SECOND BEST TIME IS NOW' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 57; capitalization in original). However, while Tarrant presents this as a responsibility that rests on the shoulders of all men of his race, he also places himself in a position of particular or unique accountability by virtue of his role as the vanguard and a role model. Informing his readers that among his reasons for conducting his attack is to 'show the effect of direct action, lighting a path forward for those that wish to follow' (Tarrant, 2019, p. 6), the importance of Tarrant's role carried with it a weight of duty that forced him into what he perceived to be a position of 'last resort'.

Among those that engage in targeted violence, 'last resort' behavior also contains within it 'final acts' or 'end of tether' behavior driven by a belief that their life is about to end (Meloy, 2018, p. 3). This can, in turn, generate additional internal pressures to act as the individual reaches a psychological 'point of no return', where each 'final act' locks the individual into a course of action, producing a sense of inevitability. Tarrant displayed some of these behaviors, gearing his preparations for an attack on 15 March and selling most of his personal possessions prior to this date (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 238). Additionally, certain logistical decisions were tied to this date, including organizing for the lease on his Dunedin flat to terminate on 1 April and not renewing the registration on his vehicle beyond 16 March (NZHerald, 2020). Collectively, these circumstances also likely produced a sense of operational urgency, if not desperation, consistent with 'last resort' behavior in which Tarrant felt the need to act, and finalize his preparations, before his 15 March deadline.

Proximal warning behaviors absent

While there is strong evidence for the presence of five proximal warning behaviors during the 18 months leading up to Tarrant's attack, evidence for the presence of the three remaining indicators (i.e. direct threat, novel aggression, and leakage) is less compelling, if not altogether absent. For instance, evidence of a 'direct threat' or 'leakage' is either unavailable or yet to be confirmed.⁴ This is likely due to Tarrant's limited social interactions and apparent adherence to operational security, although a recent study suggests the possibility that his operational security was less strict than previously thought (Wilson et al., 2024a, 2024b). While he uploaded his manifesto to file-sharing sites and even posted a Tweet containing a link to these files in the days and hours before the attack, these files and links were inaccessible to others until minutes before he fired his first shots, as was an email and 8chan post which signaled his intentions. Rather than constitute examples of 'leakage,' these activities were carefully planned and timed elements of Tarrant's communication strategy (more akin to what Hamm and Spaaij (2017) call 'broadcasting intent'), and not intended or unintended lapses in operational security driven by vulnerabilities associated with 'leakage,' including 'a narcissistic sense of impunity or various anxieties' (Meloy, 2018, p. 3) and other emotional states (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011, pp. 522–523).

While Tarrant was observed to have become increasingly angry, this in itself is not an example of novel aggression. This indicator requires an individual to have engaged in an act of violence to evaluate their capacity for violence. Acts of novel aggression are differentiated from more generalized criminal violence as it is the first instance of this behaviour ('novel') and is specifically committed for instrumental purposes (self-testing capacity for or 'trying out' violence) (Meloy et al., 2012). Moreover, while Tarrant did not engage in 'novel aggression' in a manner consistent with most definitions of this warning behavior, it has been observed that 'novel aggression' may manifest in the form of 'virtual violence,' which can in turn increase motivation through 'aggression immersion' (Meloy, Haber-meyer, et al., 2015). While the extent of Tarrant's engagement with violent video games during his attack preparations is not clear, there is ample evidence of an addiction to these games from an early age (Hosking, 2019; RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 168). Indeed, Tarrant's livestreaming of his attack via his GoPro camera is highly reminiscent of first-person shooter games. Moreover, it is possible that Tarrant's frequent practice shooting at the Bruce Rifle Club, usually while standing up and firing at high-speed rates and quickly changing magazines (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 207), may have served to inure him against the stresses and trauma of the impending attack by allowing him to 'practice violence' and establish reflexive or mechanical behaviors.

Discussion and conclusion

Whilst acknowledging both the limitations and benefits of idiographic studies (Barlow & Nock, 2009), Tarrant's activities during the approximately 18 months he prepared for his attack can provide some useful insights for assessing threats among individuals vulnerable to engaging in targeted violence. The first of these relates to the growing interest in understanding the timing of warning behaviors (Meloy et al., 2021). For instance, consistent with the time sequence analysis of Meloy et al. (2021), Tarrant's first warning

behavior was that of 'fixation', potentially maturing, at least on an ideological level, years before his actual attack. Moreover, while 'pathway' warning behavior is variously seen as one of the 'latter markers on the pathway to violence' (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 166), one of the 'final markers' (Meloy et al., 2012, p. 267) or a sign of 'impending action' (Brugh et al., 2023, p. 25), Tarrant's preparations indicate that these behaviors can occur over a period of years. This was likely facilitated by a range of factors, including Tarrant's strong financial position, which for the most part allowed him to undertake his preparations at a relatively leisurely pace, and his inexperience with firearms, which required him to develop knowledge of, and confidence in, their use.

A second Insight relevant to threat assessment is the degree of security awareness a person has developed. While the bulk of Tarrant's 'pathway' activities were conducted over a period of at least 18 months, he appears to have arranged these to reduce the likelihood of betraying his terrorist intent. Despite a range of 'pathway' activities, including the acquisition of firearms, ammunition and military paraphernalia, the first known overt act capable of revealing his terrorist intent did not occur until 17 months after arriving in New Zealand, when he conducted surveillance on his actual and potential targets. This was followed over the next two months by a flurry of other incriminating activity. It is interesting to note that Tarrant is not alone in this regard, with Breivik engaging in similar patterns of behavior in the lead-up to his attack (Meloy, Habermeyer, et al., 2015, p. 171). Seemingly aware of his vulnerability during this period, Tarrant also pared back on his social interactions, as demonstrated by his decision to stop attending his local gym, informing the Commission that he did so because he was 'trying to avoid anything that might draw attention to himself' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 211). This sense of vulnerability also led him to address relatively minor legal and administrative matters. For instance, on 9 January 2019, he renewed the registration on his vehicle (until 16 March) whilst also making inquiries with the New Zealand Transport Agency on 9 February about converting his Australian driver's licence to a New Zealand one. These might seem like particularly trivial matters for Tarrant to concern himself with whilst on the verge of conducting a major terrorist attack unless viewed through the lens of an individual conscious of his vulnerability during the final stages of his preparations. Ultimately, Tarrant's apparent security awareness can account for the absence of 'leakage' or direct threat, unusual for lone actor terrorists, in which this warning behavior is present for between 80 and 90% of cases (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017; Schuurman et al., 2018).

A further relevant insight emerges from considering the interplay between warning behaviors. Tarrant's activities demonstrate that certain warning behaviors may become less visible in response to the priority attached to others, thereby illustrating their dynamic, and even interconnected, nature. For instance, the intensification of Tarrant's 'pathway' activities was accompanied by a corresponding decline in overt displays associated with 'fixation' or 'identification'. Likely a product of an increased sense of vulnerability as he progressed toward his goal, by mid-2018 Tarrant toned down various expressions of his ideological views, left a far-right organization's Facebook group, deleted 134 Facebook friends (including those affiliated with the far-right) and ceased to make donations to far-right groups. Around this time, he also reproached his mother after she described him as a 'neo-Nazi' in Facebook Messenger, a label his mother claimed he did not previously find offensive (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 192). A change

in the intensification of Tarrant's overt expressions of support for his cause reflected an escalation in his operational preparations and a growing awareness of the risks and vulnerabilities this entailed. The inverse relationship between Tarrant's online and offline behavior within the context of 'energy burst' receives some support from the recent analysis of Kupper and Meloy (2023).

In addition to providing insight into his narcissism, Tarrant's efforts at image management suggest another dimension to 'last resort' warning behavior. Even though Tarrant displayed some of the more typical 'final act' behaviors associated with 'last resort,' he also demonstrated a preoccupation with self-image consistent with the idea that his life, in one form or another, was about to end. In addition to his efforts to leave behind a carefully choreographed ideological message, which he would feature as a key element, Tarrant also sought to control information or circumstances that could impact the purity or integrity of his legacy. For instance, on multiple occasions he reminds himself in his planning documents to examine his 'vids/pics/harddrives [sic]' and house 'to make sure all is clean and good optics'. In one of these documents, he even instructs himself to 'replace anything in [the] house that is broken, too shitty to be left for owners' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 216). The extent of Tarrant's efforts to control information post-attack was revealed in the minutes before he fired his first shots when he messaged his mother and sister detailing his plans and instructing them on how they should respond to media and police inquiries.

Finally, despite Tarrant's status as a 'lone actor' (RRCI-V2, 2020, p. 234), it is important to note his connection and engagement with a broader radical milieu. Consistent with a growing body of research that challenges the degree of isolation or autonomy typically associated with the lone actor terrorist (Schuurman et al., 2019; Spaaij, 2015), Tarrant, until mid-2018, remained connected in one form or another with a larger community of like-minded individuals and groups. While these links preceded the formation of his terrorist intent by a period of years, they continued well into his 'pathway' activities, suggesting a possible motivational utility, despite his apparent fixation with operational security, and his personality traits that encouraged social isolation and aloofness. Indeed, this isolation may even have fueled his need to feel attached to a community of like-minded individuals capable of providing reassurance and ideological sustenance while experiencing the inevitable pressures, and possible reservations, which come with plans to undertake a major terrorist attack. An insight into the importance of this 'community' was revealed in a post Tarrant made on 8chan minutes before launching his attack, which included a link to its livestream. Addressing it to the 'lads,' the post explains: 'It's been a long ride and despite all your rampant faggotry, fecklessness and degeneracy, you are all top blokes and the best bunch of cobbers [Australian colloquialism meaning "friend" or "mate"] a man could ask for' (New Zealand Police, n.d., p. 3). Thus, despite displaying many of the characteristics of the archetypal lone actor, Tarrant's behavior should offer some hope for threat assessors in the knowledge that these individuals rarely emerge from, or operate in, an ideological or social vacuum.

In conclusion, this case study serves as a reminder that persons of interest who display any TRAP-18 proximal warning behaviors should be actively risk managed, not just monitored. As Meloy et al. (2019, p. 107) observe,

The distal characteristics are metaphorically storm clouds on the distant horizon. We do not know whether they will evolve into an active weather event, and whether they will move towards us. Proximal warning behaviours mean the storm is in our backyard.

It is also worth noting that the presence of five proximal warning behaviors in Tarrant's case is the average number across all targeted attackers, whether ideologically driven or not (Meloy, 2024).

Notes

1. Distal characteristics are defined as being 'psychodynamically, psychobiologically, and psychosocially based, and define more chronic and distal aspects of the lone-actor terrorist' (Meloy & Gill, 2016, p. 39).
2. Fourteen words is a well-known white supremacist slogan – 'we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.'
3. A psychiatrist who assessed Tarrant following his attack described him as proudly seeing himself as a 'white European ethno-nationalist' who has an 'air of superiority and grandiosity which may reflect narcissistic traits' (High Court of New Zealand, 2020, p. 22).
4. Recent research indicates that Tarrant may have engaged in behavior akin to 'leakage' through a series of anonymous posts on 4chan that the researchers ascribe to Tarrant (Wilson et al., 2024a, 2024b). For instance, in March 2018, the author, in response to other users' call on them to do something about the spread of mosques in New Zealand, posted, 'I have a plan to stop it. Just hold on.' However, in the absence of access to the original posts and further details on the methodological approach utilized by the researchers, it cannot be stated with certainty that Tarrant was the author of these posts.

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