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Bond Benton

Montclair State University, bentonb@mail.montclair.edu

Daniela Peterka-Benton

peterkabentd@mail.montclair.edu

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# Hating in plain sight: The hatejacking of brands by extremist groups

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Bond Benton  and  
Daniela Peterka-Benton

Montclair State University, USA

## Abstract

The adoption of brands as an identity marker for hate groups has been extensively noted for decades. The use of specific brands, often covertly, allows hate groups to have identity markers without the social stigma ascribed to historical hate symbols. With high-profile events such as the ‘Unite the Right’ march in Charlottesville, hate groups have utilized media coverage to increase their visibility and, by extension, the brands that they have co-opted. Such unwanted associations for organizations are defined by this research as a hatejack, whereby an extremist group publicly presents linkage to a brand, typically to claim legitimacy by the association. The covert, hide-and-seek nature of the hatejack also allows extremist groups to identify with each other without public or legal scrutiny. The dangers of a hatejack have been exacerbated by two-way symmetrical models of public relations that focus on online and social media. Popular press books such as *Brand Hijack* seem to suggest that organizations would do well to cede ownership of their identity and allow the construction of brands by external publics. This emphasis, however, has allowed for hate groups to more readily adopt brands and publicly proclaim a connection to the organization that does not exist. This research examines cases of hatejacks in which brands become unwitting instruments of extremist groups and seeks to identify emerging and consistent themes across cases that merit further investigation by researchers and actions by practitioners.

## Keywords

Branding, hate groups, public relations

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## Corresponding author:

Bond Benton, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ 07043, USA.  
Email: bentonb@montclair.edu

In the 2006 bestselling book *Brand Hijack*, Alex Wipperfurth (2006) argues, ‘marketing managers aren’t in charge anymore. Consumers are . . . let’s call it brand hijacking’ (p. 6). In the book, Wipperfurth makes the case that the traditional symmetrical and asymmetrical models of communication influence organizations employ are antiquated and outdated. Instead, he argues for a new approach to communication, branding, and public relations. Instead of messaging publics in an attempt to foster awareness, attitudes, and actions, Wipperfurth contends that ownership of brands now falls squarely under the control of those who consume them. He states,

The consumer is in charge. That’s quite an adjustment . . . So brace yourself for the punchline. She no longer acts alone. Brands are not being hijacked by individuals. (They) are all hijacked by groups. (Wipperfurth, 2006: 131)

The optimistic tone of this new view of marketing, public relations, and strategic communication is emphasized throughout the text. The future, it would seem, awaits those communicators with the boldness to recognize that it is the communication of others that will define them. There is, inherently, an appeal to this somewhat utopian idea of a future in which the public *is* the relations. The Internet has allowed for publics to post, chop, meme, remix, and reinterpret the meaning of the communication they consume. Rather than fighting it, champions of brand hijacking welcome it. The story of a brand, they say, can only be meaningful for consumers if they create and share that story. Consumer ownership of an organization’s communication will lead to idyllic levels of devotion fostered by ‘insightful, passionate, and creative people helping optimize and endorse breakthrough products and services- sometimes without the companies’ buy-in’ (Wipperfurth, 2006: 6).

While this perspective is new, bold, and seductive, the risk implicit in this approach was barely charted in the halcyon early days of social media. A glaring but unasked question as the ownership of brands was abdicated to consumers is this – what happens when bad people hijack good brands?

## **Brands as hate identity markers**

The adoption of brands as identity markers for far right and hate groups has been extensively noted for decades. Clothes especially are used in a variety of ways to fulfill a need for the person wearing them. Clothes provide protection from the elements, cover up skin where the wearer deems necessary, make the wearer feel pretty or they can conceal imperfections, and they can make a statement. Clothes, like brands, offer symbolic meanings and group people together, potentially even signifying membership in a subcultural movement. This signification of membership was noted by Dodd and Kinnally (2015), who state that such ‘group affiliation also appears within the envelope of validation because it is a determination of belonging as well as the extent to which belonging to the group helps establish a sense of distinctiveness between the group and “others”’ (p. 4).

Looking at the extreme right, no group has used identity markers more overtly than skinheads. Skinheads, a name derived from their cropped hairstyle, appeared in the United Kingdom at the end of the 1960s and congregated in several subgroups, of which,

however, not all were racist. By the 1970s, skinheads more aggressively engaged in street fights with other youth subcultures such as the mods as well as biker gangs, but also as members of soccer hooligan groups across stadiums in the United Kingdom. The 1980s saw another turn toward increased political involvement by some skinhead groups toward a more concrete racist agenda. It was also at that time that skinheads developed a very distinct look including shaved heads, bomber jackets, cropped jeans, suspenders, and black boots (Pollard, 2016). It must be noted, however, that skinheads, while sharing a common style, are not a homogenous group when it comes to their political viewpoint. While some groups continue to follow a racist or white supremacist agenda, the skinhead scene might also include organized antifascists, anarchists, and autonomous groups (Mohr, 2009). Particularly relevant, nonetheless, one would know the agenda of a group of individuals displaying the typical style of skinheads as identification displays function nondiscursively (Dodd and Kinnally, 2015).

From the 1980s to the early 2000s, skinheads were easily identifiable and their style became an entry point for like-minded individuals to connect to this particular group. Membership in the group was very overt, meaning that individuals who may have shared the same ideology but didn't like or couldn't engage in fully committed membership remained outside of the skinhead movement. Commercialization of the far-right ideology at that time was limited to primitively produced items, such as stickers, T-shirts, pins, and patches, which were often sold out of the back of cars or on tables during right-wing concerts and events (Miller-Idriss, 2017). It must also be noted that the sale of items with a clear neo-Nazi agenda had to be done in secret in many countries like Germany and Austria, due to strict Prohibition Laws that limited or prohibited the display of Nazi symbols such as the swastika, the SS logo, and the like.

While the skinhead look may have been too intense for some sympathizers, the early 2000s brought a reprise for them, when 'far right youth gravitated away from the singular, hard-edged skinhead style in favor of sophisticated, fashionable, and highly profitable commercial brands that deploy coded far right extremist symbols' (Miller-Idriss, 2017: 3). This allowed a broader array of individuals, including those who identify with overtly neo-Nazi groups, to show their allegiance to that ideology via a secret handshake that is not easily identified by the general public. Some of these brands were created solely to serve the right-wing market by playing endless games of hide-and-seek to cloak neo-Nazi messages and codes in seemingly normal clothing items. In 2002, the German Agentur fuer Soziale Perspektiven published a brochure entitled 'Versteckspiel' ('a game of hide and seek') containing roughly 100 symbols, codes, and brands utilized by the far right as identification markers. In their latest issue, their database has been extended to include additional symbols and codes used by those groups (Agentur für Soziale Perspektiven, 2017).

Some brands were founded in the 1990s solely to service the extreme right market. For example, Thor Steinar offers high-quality and fashionably designed items with coded references to the right scene. Over the years, the brand has extended its market globally and is now also worn by unsuspecting customers (the brand is openly available on amazon.com, for example), while still being ostracized as a Nazi brand in the German market. To this day, Thor Steinar cannot be worn in the German parliament and is also banned in many German schools and one university (Miller-Idriss, 2017; Radke, 2008).

Other seemingly innocuous brands, however, are also often connected to the far right. In many cases, they do not overtly serve this particular market but are simply co-opted or hijacked because their logo or product represents a coded symbol for these groups. Such branded identity markers serve functions of pleasure, arousal, and, perhaps most important for extremist groups, *validation* (Dodd and Kinnally, 2015). The symbol serves as both a code and an emotional connection to others allowing for perceived power through a sense of ownership (Tindall and Hutchins, 2016). This article will focus on brands that became unwittingly associated with right-wing extremists.

## Dialogic public relations and branding

The concept of a 'brand' that is cultivated by an organization and manifested in public perceptions of the organization emerged from advertising and marketing models (Theunissen, 2014). This perspective holds that the decisions an organization makes and communicates to constituencies frames how publics identify with and conceive of a brand. This model discounts the extent to which publics author and share their own views of an organization. While books like Wipperfurth's *Brand Hijack* gave popular voice to the notion of constituent-created meaning when understanding brands, the concept of public authorship of the text of a brand is hardly new or novel. As Theunissen (2014) notes,

... (the) dialogue paradigm needs to re-evaluate the creation, role and management of corporate identity ... (practitioners) must consider the possibility that corporate identity can no longer be meticulously managed in the way it was when the concept was first introduced into public relations theory thirty or forty years ago. (pp. 613–614)

Particularly important to note is that this linkage between dialogue and publicly defined identity is no longer a question of intentionality. In Dijk's widely cited work on critical social media history, he notes that rejection of dialogic practices is now functionally a dialogic act (Van Dijk, 2013). Whether or not an organization actively engages in dialogue, the inertia of public dialogue will define public meaning of the organization (Chewning, 2015). With this loss of control, dialogue and two-way symmetry now carry risks that are often ignored.

Models of public relations practice suggesting public ownership of organizational messages have been gaining traction for decades. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) work has largely defined theory and practice in public relations since its introduction. The concept of two-way symmetrical communication suggested in *Managing Public Relations* holds that public perceptions should be part of a dialogic relationship with practitioners and that the values and beliefs of publics should be instrumental in shaping the identity of an organization. The legitimacy given to a two-way symmetrical view of public relations has further been accelerated by the advent and increasing ubiquity of Internet-based communication. Public relations has had to evolve from static, one-way messaging to dialogic public engagement (Sommerfeldt and Yang, 2018).

Kent and Taylor's (1998) work is a widely cited and highly prescient investigation into the Internet-based future of public relations, calling the medium a 'convivial tool'

that would drive ‘dialogic communication between an organization and its publics’ (p. 326). While Kent and Hunt’s work focused on the early use of websites as public relations platforms, ‘the interactive and interpersonal environment of social media provides an optimal opportunity for organizations to create meaningful dialogue’ (Men et al., 2018: 95). Social media, in particular, is an organic space where the control of the meaning of messages is dispersed to the degree that ‘organizations no longer have sole control over messages and are subjected to a multiplicity of voices’ (Sanderson et al., 2016: 32). Complicating this further is the tendency of organizations to assume fixed meanings will frame communication in a space that rejects the notion of forced definitions (Smith and Gallicano, 2015). As such ‘a public relations campaign enacted on social media can spiral out of control as audiences intervene in public relations narratives and shift them in undesirable directions’ (Sanderson et al., 2016: 35). Despite the dangers of such shifts, ‘little attention has been paid to examine the potential negative consequences of dialogic communication . . . dialogue may be used for malfeasant purposes’ (Sommerfeldt and Yang, 2018: 62). As noted in the book *Brandjack*, even benign organizations risk having bad actors co-opt their messaging for a range of ill purposes (Langley, 2014). Dialogue necessitated by modern public relations and the increasingly public ownership of messages (particularly in the online space) puts organizations in a position where malicious intent can *become* the identity of the organization. Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) explain these dangers by stating,

. . . dialogue can expose differences as well as similarities; it may in fact not lead to agreement but rather to disagreement. Thus, it may not resolve conflict within the relationship, and the subsequent change in an organization-stakeholder relationship may not benefit the organization. (p. 11)

## Method

As this research seeks to provide definition and explanation of hatejacks experienced by organizations, a case study approach was particularly appropriate. Case analysis is frequently used in a range of social science fields. While this methodology limits generalizability as it is based on specific instances, recurrence of phenomena across multiple cases has been shown to have explanatory power. Noor (2008) argues that case study as a methodology should be utilized ‘when dealing with a process or complex-real-life activities’ (p. 1602). Anderson (1993) further points out that case studies are to be utilized not to study an organization in its entirety but, instead, to allow the researcher to focus on a particular issue, feature, or unit of analysis. In this research, that analysis focused on the hatejacks experienced by certain brands. Yin (1994), as an early proponent of case study research, distinguishes three different types of case study designs, including exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory designs. For this project it appeared to be most useful to utilize the descriptive case study approach since it allows description of how each hatejack began, how it continued, and what type of resolution (if any) was found.

Case selection and content was based on identification of the frequency with which specific brands were identified with hate groups’ public presentation of the brand. The

criteria for case selection was not intended to be exhaustive, but, rather, it focused on identifying representative instances in which extremist groups used a brand extensively enough that media coverage relationally noted both the brand and the hate group(s). For example, each instance identified received coverage on a web platform with at least 10 million unique views per month (Top International Websites and Rankings| Quantcast, n.d.).

The analysis of cases is based on analytical induction with the researcher identifying emergent themes in specific instances that are consistent across multiple cases (Reyes, 2018). The utilization of multiple cases to identify recurring experiences when organizations face similar phenomena is identified as a strength of the case study approach and is supported by analytical induction to identify such recurrences (Noor, 2008). Emergent themes in the studied hatejacks were placed in categories reflecting commonalities identified across multiple cases.

Coombs' (2007) typology of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provides an additional layer of analysis, specifically the identification of clusters of crisis type. Coombs' (2007)<sup>3</sup> approach operationally defines crisis as 'any threat to the organizational reputation' (p. 16). As a hatejack invites attribution from stakeholders about the perceived culpability of an organization, public perceptions of culpability constitute a crisis in Coombs' framework. The nature of reputational threat, according to Coombs, can be placed into one of three distinct clusters of crises. The Victim Cluster is comprised of instances where an organization is the victim of a crisis. They are not responsible for the negative event, and stakeholders are aware that organizational actions were in no way connected to the outcome. The Accidental Cluster includes instances of organizational actions preceding a negative event that were unintentional though not entirely random or unpredictable. Such instances place an organization at moderate reputational risk. The Intentional Cluster, however, involves negative events where an organization intentionally engaged in inappropriate action that directly caused the negative event. Through a combination of analytical induction to identify emerging case themes and categorization of cases into SCCT clusters, a more cohesive and explanatory heuristic of hatejacks and their public implications can emerge.

Finally, the emergent analytical categories and identification of crisis cluster placement provide an opportunity to consider ways in which hatejacks extend and/or challenge existing perspectives on engagement and dialogic public relations. Morehouse and Saffer (2018) contend, in the main, 'that little evolution has taken place in dialogue research in the past 20 years' (p. 13) with scholars and practitioners primarily focusing on excellence theory and murky linkages between two-way symmetrical models and dialogic principles that assume implicit and explicit benefits of dialogue and engagement (McAllister-Spooner, 2009). Hatejacks are a divergence from these approaches in that they utilize the space of dialogue and public authorship of brands to *compromise* both the dialogue and public authorship. What is unique about hatejacks is that the ambiguity of dialogue becomes the source of dialogue subversion. As such, the subversive quality of the hatejack cases analyzed will be considered drawing upon the themes and clusters emerging from this analysis.

## Hatejack case summaries

### *Fred Perry*

The brand Fred Perry and, in particular, its distinct striped-collar polo shirts with a Wimbledon-inspired laurel insignia have become a staple outfit among the alt-right in the United States. The Proud Boys, specifically, utilize the gold-striped collar black polo shirt as a type of uniform for public group outings (Beery, 2017). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (Proud Boys, n.d.), the Proud Boys were established in 2016 during the U.S. presidential campaign by VICE Media co-founder Gavin McInnes. While the group refers to itself as guardians to protect and promote Western values, members of the group have appeared alongside hate groups and have participated in extremist events such as the 'Unite The Right' rally in Charlottesville, which was co-organized by the Proud Boy and known extremist Jason Kessler (he was expelled from the group after the deadly incident in Charlottesville). McInnes frames the group as a fraternal organization of so-called 'Western chauvinists' while simultaneously engaging in his own racist, homophobic, and anti-Islamic rhetoric, often donning the very distinct black Fred Perry Polo.

While the association of Fred Perry with right-wing extremists appears novel to American audiences, the label has been worn by fascist and antifascist groups in Europe for over 50 years. Fred Perry, a tennis player and Wimbledon winner, introduced his famous polo shirt in 1952 at Wimbledon and it became an immediate success (Jackson, 2009). During the 1960s Perry-branded clothing was picked up by young, working-class hard mods, which later became known as skinheads, to imitate the sleek, clean, and sharp look of the English upper class at an affordable price. Fred Perry polo shirts, tight-fitting jeans and worker boots became the uniform of working-class, white English youth. Racist and fascist ideology among these groups appeared in the late 1960s, when working class adults started to blame black and Southeast Asian immigrants for 'taking their jobs'. In 1968 MP, Enoch Powell delivered a speech warning Britons about minorities planning to oppress the British in league with a politically correct government. The skinheads as a neo-Nazi movement started to develop and gain strength, remaining faithful to their fashion roots and continuous use of Fred Perry as a brand (Beery, 2017).

Zoe Beery (2017) emailed McInnes inquiring about the Proud Boys' choice to wear Fred Perry polos given the association with racist movements. While McInnes clearly distances himself from any association with the neo-Nazi movement, he does admit that he 'wants to align his group with the working-class toughness of the late '60s hard mods' (Beery, 2017). Clearly, he enjoys the image of leading a rebellious movement against the mainstream, but given the history and usage of Fred Perry as a brand and the Proud Boys' ideological basis, the choice to utilize the brand as the group's designated battle uniform is suspect.

### *Lonsdale*

Lonsdale is a British sports clothing company established in 1960 focused on boxing equipment and apparel. The company's boxing roots go back to the year 1891 during



which the Fifth Earl of Lonsdale organized the first boxing match with gloves. When the first store opened, it became an instant hit with the support of well-known British boxers. Soon after, international boxing sensations such as Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Robinson were seen wearing Lonsdale apparel as well (Lonsdale: History, n.d.). In the 1990s, European skinheads discovered the brand in a way the company could have never foreseen. Several countries throughout Europe restrict or forbid insignia and symbols of the Nazi Party. As such, skinheads (or anyone else in this milieu) are not allowed to wear clothing items displaying the swastika and other National Socialist symbols. This, however, started an ongoing hide-and-seek game of finding ways to circumvent those laws by ‘manipulating codes so they are difficult to interpret, and developing codes that are deliberately ambivalent’ (Miller-Idriss, 2017: 156). Lonsdale was chosen, simply because the logo’s name under a half-zipped up jacket can be abbreviated to ‘NSDA’, which resembles the abbreviation of the National Socialist German Workers Party or NSDAP, a letter combination that is sanctioned as a symbol throughout Europe. The company distanced itself from its neo-Nazi clientele as early as 1999 and took active steps to combat the association with these groups (Agentur für Soziale Perspektiven, 2017). Hegemann (2014) describes how the company’s antihate campaigns have led to a 75 percent decrease in revenue in Saxony, an area known as a stronghold of the right-wing movement (Gensing, 2018) and a Germany-wide decrease of 35 percent. While this revenue loss was significant, the company was very happy with the development as it signified a cutting of ties with right-wing extremist customers. While Lonsdale today has become a widely popular sports clothing brand in the United States, countries throughout Europe still associate Lonsdale with the extreme right, making a complete brand recovery difficult (Rogers, 2014).

### *New Balance*

One day after Donald Trump’s election in 2016, Wall Street journalist Sara Germano tweeted about a conversation with New Balance’s vice president of public affairs, Matthew LeBretton, expressing support for the President-elect’s opposition to the Trans-Pacific trade agreement. LeBretton was quoted as saying ‘. . . the Obama administration turned a deaf ear to us, and, frankly, with president-elect Trump, we feel things are going to move in the right direction’ (Germano, 2016).

Without much investigation into the context in which the statement was made, Twitter erupted over the perceived pro-Trump stance by the company, leading its customers to renounce the brand in words and actions. Pictures of old New Balance sneakers being disposed of in front of brand stores, in trash cans, or being set on fire appearing in social media reflected the frustration of many of the company’s customers (Bhasin, 2016). At the same time as enraged customers burnt their New Balance sneakers to a crisp, Andrew Anglin, founder of the American neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer*, took a different stance. On 12 November 2016, Anglin posted a story on *The Daily Stormer* website entitled ‘Your Uniform: New Balance Just Became the Official Shoes of White People’ claiming that ‘New Balance is making a gesture to support white people and to support U.S. manufacturing. We need to support that . . .’ (Anglin, 2016). Anglin (2016) goes on to encourage his readers to buy New Balance shoes as a type of uniform, so ‘we will be

able to recognize one another by our sportswear'. Predictably, social media erupted over the brand's suggested status as a neo-Nazi outfitter. New Balance responded by issuing an official statement denouncing bigotry and hate trying to distance itself from Anglin and his agenda (Mettler, 2016).

While the association of New Balance with white supremacist groups appeared novel in late 2016, for European audiences, this was not the first time the brand was linked to the extreme right. Esculapio (2018) identifies a style change among German skinheads in the early 1990s, exchanging bomber jackets and jackboots for more mainstreamed clothing items. *Rolling Stone* published a 2014 article on the rise of the Nazi hipster or 'nipster', which described how New Balance sneakers were chosen because of the symbolism of the letter 'N' as an abbreviation for Nazi, Nationalist, or National Socialist (Miller-Idriss, 2017; Rogers, 2014). Egenberger (n.d.) writes about right-wing clothing on the website *Gut Gegen Rechte Gewalt* ('Courage Against Right Violence'), a project of the German magazine *Stern*, listing New Balance as a brand utilized by neo-Nazis. Context suggests the appropriation of New Balance was deliberate and extends well beyond the most recent U.S. presidential election.

### *Papa John's*

In May of 2018, Papa John's founder, John Schnatter, used the N-word on a corporate conference call. He stated 'Colonel Sanders called blacks n-----s' before complaining that Sanders never faced public backlash (Kirsch, 2018). The reaction from the company was swift and immediate, and Schnatter was forced to resign mere hours after the revelation (Harten, 2018). The backlash was enormous with numerous other institutions cutting off any association with Schnatter, including his removal from the University of Louisville board of trustees (Watkins, 2018). Schnatter's slur was not the first instance of the CEO's use of divisive language, with statements made against NFL players kneeling during the national anthem in protest against police violence. Coupled with his donations to the campaign of Donald Trump (Taylor, 2018), Schnatter was publicly seen by some constituencies as endorsing extreme positions and demonizing certain groups.

With far-ranging criticism coming from a broad group of publics, one group not only defended but celebrated statements made by Schnatter. That group was the far-right extremists. The far-right website *The Daily Stormer* decided to name Papa John's the 'official pizza' of the alt-right, posting pictures of the company's products with pepperonis laid in the shape of swastikas (Maza, 2017). Twitter provocateur Jack Posobiec celebrated the endorsement between Papa John's and extremists by serving the company's pizza at his wedding rehearsal dinner. He 'tweeted a picture of Papa John's pizza with the caption "Rehearsal dinner with Papa John's!" which received more than 420 retweets and 2,600 likes' (Downer, 2018). Despite the company's statements disavowing support from far-right extremists, the rationale for such endorsements is to offer extremists the 'illusion of having mainstream allies who share their vision of an all-white world' (Maza, 2017). 'This is great', wrote columnist Adrian Sol at *The Daily Stormer* in support of Schnatter and his stance against what the hate website refers to as the 'Negro Football League' (O'Brien, 2017).

While it is impossible to decouple the statements of the company's CEO and the meme-like sharing of Papa John's 'official' status among the far right, the perception of a racist company permeated media including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and major television networks. The extent of the backlash against the company led Luke Darby to write 'their best bet now is to corner the slim segment of the population who has no strong feelings either way about Nazism' (Darby, 2017). Subsequent defensive responses from Papa John's have included an attempt to emphasize franchisee ownership over its previous corporate face and strategic philanthropy aimed at reversing negative perceptions which include extended Yelp reviews decrying the company as racist. The lingering effects of the words of the CEO and the statements of support from the far right have significantly damaged the viability of the brand (Whitten, 2018).

### *Tiki Torches*

Tiki Torches have long been associated with a Polynesian kitsch aesthetic that one would find at a tropically ornamented restaurant or backyard luau-themed barbecue. The company that produces Tiki Torches, Wisconsin-based Lamplight Farms, has emphasized the fun- and family-themed dimensions of its generally innocuous branded items that provide evening light and discourage mosquitos. The brand, however, was instantly associated with the far right after 'images streamed out of Charlottesville, VA . . . showing white nationalists protesting the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee (with) the product illuminating the faces twisted into sneers of hate' (Schonbrun, 2018). Arguably the most iconic image emerging from the Charlottesville protest, where neo-Nazis killed counter protester Heather Hayer, was of Peter Cytanovic, a 20-year-old student at the University of Nevada, shouting 'JEWS WILL NOT REPLACE US!' His face contorted in rage, Cytanovic's angry visage and the hundreds of protesters behind him were ominously lit by the glow of Tiki Torches (Simon, 2017). A search for 'Charlottesville' and 'Unite the Right' (the name far-right organizers gave to the deadly rally) calls up hundreds of similar images of angry, polo-shirt-clad white men carrying Tiki Torches and shouting all manner of incendiary, hateful chants.

The association between the Tiki brand and the alt-right was picked up almost immediately in the media. On Twitter, user Ben Verlander posted,

Hey @HomeDepot, can I get a refund on my tiki torches if I bring them back in?? Suddenly they don't look as good in the yard. (Schonbrun, 2018)

Similar sentiment was picked up by Senator Orin Hatch who posted,

Their tiki torches may be fueled by citronella but their ideas are fueled by hate, & have no place in civil society. (Murphy, 2017b)

Joan Donovan, who studies hate groups and white supremacists for the Data & Society Institute, argues 'Tiki Torches were probably just a matter of convenience' (Schonbrun, 2018) as they were an easily available way to affect images associated with Nazi and

KKK rallies. Unfortunately, brands like Tiki Torches, however unwittingly and accidentally, became an extension of far-right messaging.

### Wendy's

Wendy's has earned praise for edgy, provocative, and frequently hilarious use of social media. While difficult to quantify, engagement with younger publics through social media has helped the brand pass Burger King to become the number three restaurant chain in the United States. An element of Wendy's social media success has been their willingness to give their team free rein (Cheng, 2018). That free rein had unfortunate consequences in January of 2017. When a Twitter user asked Wendy's a seemingly inconsequential question 'got any memes?' Wendy's social media team immediately replied by posting an image of Pepe the Frog wearing a red wig to approximate the brand's signature logo (Plante, 2017). Pepe the Frog is a cartoon image associated with the far right and has been noted as a symbol of concern by the Anti-Defamation League (Pepe the Frog, n.d.).

The coded nature of the Pepe image works with the far right's emphasis on using banal symbols in their messaging, with an 'it was just a joke' defense implicit in the ridiculousness of the objects and images they utilize. The image's lack of overt connection to extremism likely explains the decision to use it in the company's feed. While Wendy's likely was not aware of the association, members of the far right celebrated the opportunity to claim supposed legitimization from an iconic American brand. Writing on the hate website *The Daily Stormer*, Andrew Anglin summarized the adulation of the far right at the use of the meme by writing, 'this was a frog whistle, straight up. And we need to embrace (Wendy's) for it' (Anglin, 2017).

As news of the association gained traction in numerous media outlets (Maza, 2017), Wendy's quickly deleted the tweet and responded by stating 'our community manager was unaware of the recent evolution of the Pepe meme's meaning, and this tweet was promptly deleted' (Ohlheiser, 2017). Despite Wendy's prompt action, media discussion of the tweet continued prompting some to question 'Did Wendy's Become the Accidental Neo-Nazi Happy Meal?' (Kestenbaum, 2017).

### Detroit Red Wings

Far-right extremists have intermingled with sports fandom for decades. The emphasis on strength and masculinity and the clearly defined colors and logos of teams have been ripe for exploitation by hate groups. While less pronounced in the United States than in Europe, the use of sports teams and their associated imagery by extremists has occurred in the United States as well. During the Charlottesville protest, among all the explicitly far-right iconography was 'an incongruous symbol: the logo of the Detroit Red Wings' (Mather, 2018). The Red Wings logo, a winged automobile wheel that celebrates the city's history of manufacturing, was co-opted by the Detroit *Right* Wings. The spokes on the wheel of the logo were replaced by Nazi SS symbols, but the visual identity of the original logo is preserved and difficult to distinguish from the logo of the hate group (Crosbie, 2017). This repurposing of nonracist imagery to sow confusion and deniability is a common tactic of hate groups in the current climate (Romano, 2016).

As visuals of the Charlottesville protest were widely presented in the mass media and shared over social networks, the presence of the logo was quickly identified by viewers (Murphy, 2017a). As people began to comment on the logo's presence at the rally, the Red Wings organization felt the need to reply by stating publicly that 'the Detroit Red Wings vehemently disagree with and are not associated in any way with the event taking place in Charlottesville . . . we are exploring every possible legal action' (Nielson, 2017). Perhaps the most frightening dimension of this incident is the fact that the 'Detroit Right Wings' are a tiny group of extremists based out of Michigan. Research on the group suggests that they have, at best, a small digital footprint with limited social media presence (Mather, 2018). The ability of extremist groups with limited membership and influence to create the illusion of association with a brand makes a hatejack particularly difficult to predict or combat.

### **Emergent themes, crisis clusters, implications for engagement**

An analytical induction approach was applied to these case investigations. Emerging themes were identified in all cases and include varying degrees of rejection of the co-opting hate group by the targeted organization, claims of association (both overt and covert) by the hate group toward the brand, and the tendency for social media and consequential events to magnify the perceived association between brand and the coopting extremists.

In every reviewed case, there was rejection of the hate group(s) by hatejacked brands. These included strategic silence (Harlow, 2017) where organizations sought to delegitimize hate groups by not responding them. Both Fred Perry and Lonsdale, for example, made limited initial statements in response to appropriation of their brand by hate groups. There were also instances of repeated, overt statements of rejection that occurred in five of the seven cases reviewed. Representative examples of this response strategy include the Detroit Red Wings threatening legal action against those appropriating their logo and Wendy's immediate deleting of the misinterpreted tweet and issuing an apology. Hate groups also made claims of association overtly and/or covertly in each reviewed hatejack instance. In three of the seven cases reviewed, extremist made spurious claims of support from the organization they co-opted, with hate sites such as *The Daily Stormer* designating Papa John's, Wendy's, and New Balance as 'official' brands of their cause. In the other cases, hate groups' continued public presentation of the brand reinforced perceived connections and created opportunities for negative media impressions. A representative example of this covert suggestion of endorsement can be seen in how extremists continue to wear Fred Perry clothing as a 'uniform' without overtly claiming endorsement from the brand. Finally, significant events tended to accelerate the hatejack in four of the seven instances, suggesting that events generating media coverage and potential cultural schisms appear to serve a magnifying function, with the Charlottesville protests and the contentious 2016 U.S. election identified as intercessory events in the cases investigated. For purposes of clarity, key descriptive items emerging from these hatejacks are noted in Figure 1.

<b>Organizational Rejection of Hate Group</b>	<b>Limited Statement of Rejection or Strategic Silence</b>	<b>Overt Statement of Rejection</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All instances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fred Perry</li> <li>Lonsdale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New Balance</li> <li>Papa John's</li> <li>Wendy's</li> <li>Tiki Torches</li> <li>Detroit Red Wings</li> </ul>
<b>Hate Group Claims of Association to Brand</b>	<b>Covert or Suggested</b>	<b>Overt Statement of Affiliation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All instances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fred Perry</li> <li>Lonsdale</li> <li>Tiki Torches</li> <li>Detroit Red Wings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New Balance</li> <li>Papa John's</li> <li>Wendy's</li> </ul>
<b>Magnification of Hatejack</b>	<b>Through Social Media</b>	<b>Through Specific External Event and Social Media</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All instances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All instances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New Balance</li> <li>Papa John's</li> <li>Tiki Torches</li> <li>Detroit Red Wings</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.** Emergent themes in hatejacks.

Exploration of these cases and emerging themes allows for placement of these instances into SCCT clusters. The perceived culpability of groups based on this analysis suggests the following placements (Figure 2).

In four of the seven cases, the organization targeted had no direct or indirect connection to the hatejack. In two others, the connection appears to have been accidental through a potentially misinterpreted political statement (New Balance) and the posting of social media content that was inadvertently linked to extremist symbols (Wendy's). Papa John's was an instance of intentionality, which only came about through repeated provocative statements by the CEO that formed a perceived association with extremist messaging (Darby, 2017; Kirsch, 2018; O'Brien, 2017).

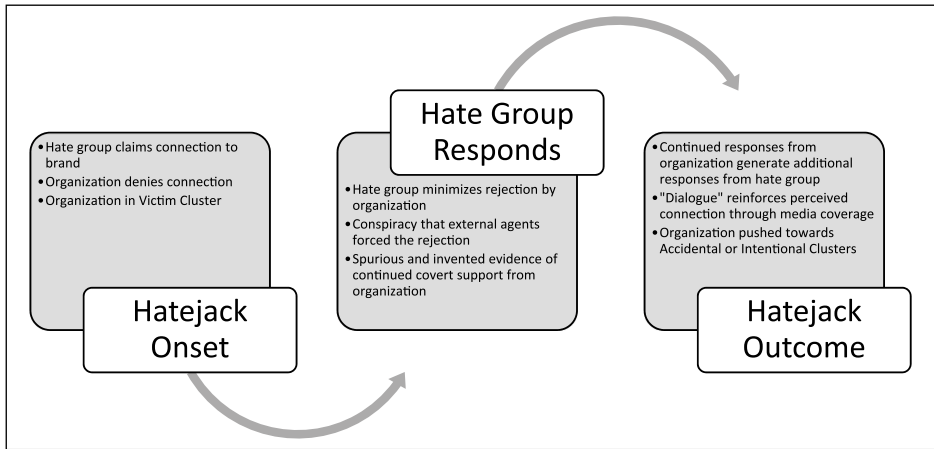
In hatejacks where an organization has no culpability for the actions of co-opting extremists, Coombs' (2007) work suggests only 'very weak attributions of crisis responsibility . . . the organization is viewed as a victim of the event' (p. 167). After all, Tiki Torches didn't embrace extremists in their branding, and judging them for the actions of neo-Nazis in Charlottesville would appear supremely unfair. Hatejacks, however, appear to function differently than traditional crises. The tendency to believe that no reasonable stakeholder would view their organization as being connected to a hate group represents a compelling temptation. The organization did not overtly endorse any of these extremist groups and should, therefore, not have to rationalize their disconnection to those groups. Unlike other sorts of crises, the intent from the

<b>Victim cluster:</b> In these types, the organization is also a victim.
(Weak attributions of responsibility = Mild reputational threat)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fred Perry</li> <li>• Lonsdale</li> <li>• Tiki Torches</li> <li>• Detroit Red Wings</li> </ul>
<b>Accidental cluster:</b> In these types, the organizational actions were unintentional.
(Minimal attributions of responsibility = Moderate reputational threat)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New Balance</li> <li>• Wendy's</li> </ul>
<b>Intentional cluster:</b> In these types, the organization knowingly took inappropriate action.
(Strong attributions of responsibility = Severe reputational threat)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Papa John's</li> </ul>

**Figure 2.** Crisis cluster placement.

hate group frequently is the suggestion of endorsement and to force the organization into the Intentional Cluster. Cumulatively, this begs consideration of the implications of hatejacks for engagement and dialogue.

In hate group statements that received media coverage, three of the organizations analyzed (Papa John's, Wendy's, and New Balance) were overtly constructed as supporters of hate groups. In each hatejack instance, however, perceptions of culpability proved jarring for the organization and elicited defensive responses. As Fred Perry's chairman John Flynn states 'it is a shame that we have to even answer the question' (Woolf, 2017). This research would suggest, however, that such feelings of shock are misplaced given that online communication serves as a magnifier for hatejacks and that 'social media are discursive spaces, but they are not inherently dialogic' (Ciszek and Logan, 2018: 123). Rather than viewing the perspectives of publics about organizations and brands emerging from social media in dialogic terms, social media should also be understood as a space that invites dissensus and discord. Ganesh and Zoller (2012) argue that a position on 'dialogue' must account for potential co-optation and that 'dialogue as cooptation assumes that what appears to be collaboration is better understood as a tactic of power' (p. 74). Co-optation in the case of hatejacks is a tactic of legitimizing power for hate groups seeking to have their views more broadly normalized. Writing about terrorism, Heath and Waymer (2014) argue visibility represents a form of social capital. Marginalized groups may engage in a subversive act that 'seeks an audience and works to make itself, its cause, and its identity public' (Heath and Waymer, 2014: 232). As hatejacks are novel and sensational, outsized media coverage can result from such instances. Thus, despite fervent disavowals from the targeted organization, issuing rejoinders can have the unintended effect of cementing a perceived connection – especially when hate groups are fully willing to lie and embellish perceived endorsements (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Hatejacks and crisis cluster movement.

## Conclusion

Cumulatively, these hatejacks offer a number of potentially relevant lessons that could prove instructive for organizations looking to minimize the risk associated with such co-optations. These include establishing more social media training for practitioners that takes into account the dangers posed by extremist groups, improved online monitoring of hate group activity, and swift, decisive responses at the onset of a hatejack. The scope of this research, however, was primarily definitional rather than prescriptive, with cases serving as an empirical foundation for operationalizing the concept of a hatejack. The effectiveness of various public relations response strategies and the placement of hatejacks in a socio-cultural context both beg additional investigation. As public relations has a generic function of interdiscursivity (Lung, 2015) between message and cultural space, future research into the context that allows for the extremist co-optation of organizational messages is merited.

More broadly, though, the phenomena of the hatejack should further give pause to the notion that public relations in the current context should uncritically be based on dialogue and public ownership of organizational discourse. The ‘term “dialogue” has become ubiquitous in public relations writing and scholarship, and even more so in the light of the ever-evolving Internet and its social media application’ (Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012: 5). The danger, as this investigation proposes, is the vulnerability of a purely symmetrical/dialogic approach to public relations where the views of publics define the identity of organizations communicating with those members of publics (Heath et al., 2006). Organizations should certainly use the vast opportunities presented in the current media landscape, but there is potential folly in assuming that abdication of control is the foundation of engagement (Watkins, 2017). As Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) note ‘... stakeholders may not always be ethical and it would be realistic for an organization to refuse engagement in such instances’ (p. 12). In the case of hatejacks, it appears the ‘tyranny, seduction, and pandering’ (Stoker and Tusinski, 2006: 162)



of uncritically dialogic public relations can create an opportunity where best intentions can be turned into the most vile outcomes.


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### ORCID iD

Bond Benton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6255-2466>

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### Author biographies

Bond Benton is an Associate Professor of Public Relations at Montclair State University. His doctorate was from the University of Vienna with his dissertation focusing on the influence of culture on meaning. A particular focus of Dr Benton's research is the interaction of media, branding, and cross-cultural communication as it relates to the values and decisions of constituencies. Dr Benton's essays and research articles have appeared in journals and anthologies including *The Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media*, *Public Relations Tactics*, *Cases in Public Relations Strategy*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *The Journal of Applied Security Studies*, and *Studies in Communication Sciences*. His first book, *The Challenge of Working for Americans: Perspectives of an International Workforce*, was released in 2014.

Daniela Peterka-Benton is an Associate Professor of Justice Studies at Montclair State University. Her doctorate was in Sociology with a specialization in Criminology from the University of Vienna. Her research interests center around transnational crimes such as human trafficking, human smuggling, arms trafficking, and right-wing terrorism and extremism. Dr Peterka-Benton has published numerous articles in journals including *International Migration Review*, *The Journal of the Institute of Justice & International Studies*, and *The Journal of Applied Security Research*. Prior to her focusing on a full-time academic career, Daniela Peterka-Benton worked for the U.S. State Department's Office of Diplomatic Security at the U.S. Embassy in Vienna, Austria.