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Weapon Inscriptions in Mass Shootings: A Structured Illustrative Case Series for Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management

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Weapon inscriptions in mass shootings—words, symbols, or markings on firearms, ammunition, or related materials—have received limited systematic attention in the threat assessment literature. This study examines these inscriptions as communicative artifacts that may reflect how an individual understands their identity, grievances, and intended targets. Drawing on a structured illustrative case series, the study categorized inscriptions into functional groups, including identity expression, ideological messaging, references to past attackers or conflicts, and hostile or dehumanizing language toward perceived enemies. Rather than treating these markings as direct evidence of motive or intent, the study situates them within a broader behavioral threat assessment and management framework, where meaning is interpreted in context alongside other observable warning behaviors. Findings suggest that weapon inscriptions can provide additional insight into an individual's mindset and trajectory when systematically documented and analyzed. These insights are important for practitioners and policymakers because they offer a more structured, practical way to interpret concerning signals and support earlier, more informed intervention efforts to prevent targeted violence.

Public Significance Statement

This study shows that writing or symbols found on weapons in mass violence incidents can provide insight into how an individual understands their identity, grievances, and intended targets. Although these markings do not establish intent on their own, they can help threat assessment professionals better assess risk when interpreted alongside other behaviors. This is important because it provides practitioners and policymakers with a more structured way to interpret concerning signals and support earlier intervention efforts.

Keywords: behavioral threat assessment, warning behaviors, lineage claims, weapon personalization, identity signaling

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In recent years, several high-profile mass attacks have involved firearms engraved or marked with words, numbers, symbols, or images. In the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand; the 2022 Tops supermarket shooting in Buffalo, New York; the 2023 Dollar General shooting in Jacksonville, Florida; the 2023 Covenant School shooting in Nashville, Tennessee; and the 2025

Church of the Annunciation and Catholic school shooting in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the offenders' weapons displayed markings that appeared to communicate ideology, grievances, lineage, or identity. Recent U.S. incidents also suggest that offender messaging may appear not only on firearm receivers and magazines but also on ammunition and shell casings, increasing the likelihood that such markings are photographed, documented, and circulated after an incident (Clayton, 2025; Hollingsworth & Brook, 2025; Kelly & Farokhmanesh, 2025). From a threat assessment perspective, these markings can be seen as symbolic communications embedded within physical artifacts. Behavioral threat assessment and management (BTAM) highlights the importance of observable behaviors and communications when assessing progress toward targeted violence (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021; U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Weapon inscriptions may therefore represent a form of material communication that complements digital postings, manifestos, and interpersonal statements.

At the same time, firearm personalization is common among lawful gun owners and often reflects cultural, aesthetic, commemorative, or recreational practices rather than violent intent (Stroud, 2016; Yamane, 2017, 2022). A weapon may be engraved to honor military service, mark a retirement, commemorate a hunt, or showcase craftsmanship and ownership traditions. In contrast, the regular personalization of individual cartridges or shell casings by legal owners has been studied much less in the published literature. Current open-source reports suggest that message-bearing ammunition may be an emerging communication tactic used by offenders in some attacks, but the overall prevalence of similar noncriminal practices remains unclear (Clayton, 2025). This uncertainty underscores an important BTAM concern: Symbolic markings should not be automatically dismissed nor regarded as inherently threatening without supporting contextual evidence.

Semiotic theory offers a valuable perspective on why these artifacts may be significant. Barthes (1972/1977) and Eco (1976) argued that signs can carry layered meanings that become understandable within larger cultural and ideological frameworks. When applied to BTAM, this suggests that inscriptions on firearms, magazines, or ammunition may act as semiotic artifacts: physical modifications that convey meaning to

oneself, intended targets, or actual and imagined audiences. Belk's (1988) concept of the "extended self" is also relevant, as possessions can help shape and reflect identity. In some cases of targeted violence, a weapon seems to transcend being just a tool; it becomes a meaning-rich object through which grievance, mission, persona, and affiliation are expressed.

In the present study, the inscription content is categorized into several practical groups. Some markings convey identity, such as naming a weapon or inscribing a chosen persona. Others express ideology through slogans, symbols, or numerology. Still, some reference lineage by citing previous attackers, historical battles, or mythologized episodes of conflict, thereby placing the offender within a perceived violent tradition. A final group identifies enemies or target groups through dehumanizing, insulting, or threatening language. These categories serve as useful tools for documentation and interpretation, not as direct evidence of motive or intent. The main question is not whether an inscription is inherently benign or threatening but under what verified conditions it becomes meaningful for analysis.

BTAM models focus on dynamic behavioral indicators rather than static profiles (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021; U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, 2019). Three warning behaviors are especially relevant when considering inscriptions: fixation, identification, and leakage. Fixation refers to an increasingly perseverative preoccupation with a person or cause, often accompanied by narrowing of focus, rumination, and deterioration in functioning (Reid Meloy et al., 2012). Identification involves an increasing alignment of self-concept with a violent role or persona, such as a warrior, avenger, pseudocommando, or mission-driven actor (Meloy et al., 2015; Reid Meloy et al., 2012). Leakage refers to communicating to a third party about violent intent, fantasy, or planning, whether directly or indirectly (Reid Meloy et al., 2012). These three warning behaviors are highlighted because inscriptions are communicative artifacts that most likely relate to preoccupation content, role adoption, and audience messaging when analyzed alongside other evidence from the case.

Weapon inscriptions, however, are generally not enough on their own to establish fixation, identification, or leakage. A phrase or symbol on a firearm does not meet the threshold for a BTAM

warning behavior unless it appears within a broader, verified pattern of conduct, communication, stressors, and preparation. In pathway-to-violence frameworks, targeted attacks are seen as the result of a series of cognitive and behavioral steps rather than a spontaneous act (Calhoun & Weston, 2003; Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021). Individuals may go through stages such as grievance formation, ideation, research and planning, preparation, and execution. In that process, inscriptions may appear during preparation as tangible signs of grievance narratives, violent self-concepts, or perceived missions. They are therefore best understood as potentially relevant artifacts within a larger pattern of evidence, not as standalone risk factors.

This connection to pathway and role development also clarifies why pseudocommando theory is relevant. Drawing on Dietz (1986), Knoll (2010a, 2010b) described pseudocommando offenders as individuals who may cast themselves as warriors engaged in a personal war. Preparation in such cases can take on a ritualized quality, with attention to attire, tactical presentation, weapon staging, and narrative self-dramatization. Within that frame, inscriptions may contribute to symbolic self-stylization by transforming a weapon into a prop within an offender's revenge script or mission narrative. Labels such as "Hellfire," battle references, or lists of prior attackers may thus function less as decorative choices than as narrative devices that reinforce a violent role identity when supported by other behaviors and communications.

In extremist environments, inscriptions often draw from a shared symbolic repertoire circulating within online communities and transnational subcultures. Research on online radicalization indicates that symbols, memes, numerology, and coded phrases can condense complex belief systems into brief markers that are easily understood within in-group communities (Gill et al., 2017; Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Munn, 2019). Similarly, Langman's work on role-model influence and fame seeking among mass killers demonstrates that offenders may use references to prior attackers, slogans, dates, or symbolic language as insider signals of identification, admiration, or perceived lineage (Langman, 2018). Swastikas, "14," "88," "Remove Kebab," and antisemitic slogans may therefore serve as condensed ideological signals rather than standalone words or images (Anti-Defamation

League, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Similarly, lineage references can symbolically connect an offender to previous attackers or to violent mythologies.

Mass attacks may also exhibit emulative or copycat behavior, in which later offenders imitate recognizable scripts, aesthetics, and references from earlier perpetrators. Some research has noted short-term clustering following highly publicized attacks, while other studies suggest that extensive media exposure can aid in the spread of tactics and symbolic meanings (Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Towers et al., 2015). Beyond behavioral imitation, there may also be symbolic imitation, where offenders adopt inscription styles, offender lists, numerology, or visual motifs to align themselves with a perceived canon of attackers (Ilardi et al., 2024; Macklin, 2019). These dynamics may also have a performative aspect. Some scholars argue that mass violence increasingly includes staged, audience-centered elements, especially when offenders seek notoriety, symbolic impact, or recognition through media coverage (Lankford, 2016; Surette, 2015). In such cases, inscriptions can serve as parts of a communicative performance rather than merely private markings.

Accordingly, this article uses a structured case series to demonstrate how weapon inscriptions can be seen as semiotic artifacts within BTAM practice. The goals are practical and straightforward: to show how inscriptions may connect with concepts like fixation, identification, and leakage when viewed in context; to illustrate how five recent attacks demonstrate different inscription functions, including identity expression, ideological signaling, lineage claims, and hybrid forms; and to provide practical advice for documentation, analysis, and sharing information. The article does not assess prevalence, test hypotheses, or make causal claims. Instead, it offers a clear demonstration of how practitioners can document and interpret this type of symbolic evidence as part of a broader understanding of the case.

Method

This article presents a structured illustrative case series to show how semiotic concepts can be combined with BTAM principles in practice. The focus is on clearly describing how cases were chosen, how inscriptions were confirmed, and how interpretations were developed. This procedural clarity is crucial because the article is not a

comparative case study and does not aim to estimate prevalence, test cross-case frequencies, or make broad generalizations. Instead, the cases were intentionally selected as information-rich examples that highlight different inscription patterns and their possible importance for threat assessment.

Five incidents of mass violence from 2019 to 2025 were selected based on three criteria: documented engravings or markings on firearms, magazines, ammunition, or related parts; enough open-source documentation to verify some of the markings; and inscription content that plausibly connected to practice-relevant BTAM constructs such as ideological signaling, identity expression, lineage references, or target-referent language. The cases included the Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand, the Tops supermarket shooting in Buffalo, the Dollar General shooting in Jacksonville, the Covenant School shooting in Nashville, and the Church of the Annunciation and Catholic school shooting in Minneapolis. These cases are not meant to represent all inscription-related attacks but were chosen because they demonstrate notably clear examples of symbolic variation across incidents.

Data were collected from publicly accessible sources, including law enforcement statements and public summaries, government reports, reputable news coverage, hate-symbol and extremism reference databases, and peer-reviewed scholarship used for conceptual framing (e.g., [Metropolitan Nashville Police Department, 2023](#); [New York State Office of the Attorney General, 2022](#); [U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, 2019](#)). Whenever possible, inscriptions were verified through primary visual evidence such as official photographs, released still images, or archived captures from publicly posted videos. When primary visual evidence was unavailable, inscriptions were included in the descriptive record only when they were explicitly described in an official public source or confirmed by at least two independent, reputable sources. This method does not eliminate errors, but it decreases reliance on unverified or sensational accounts.

The analytical framework combined deductively informed and inductively refined coding. Initial coding categories were guided by research on extremist symbolism, pseudocommando identity, and communicative artifacts in targeted violence; during analysis, these categories were refined as recurring inscription patterns appeared across the selected cases ([Knoll, 2010a, 2010b](#);

[Krippendorff, 2018](#); [Lombard et al., 2002](#)). The process unfolded in three steps. First, a descriptive inventory was created for each case, recording visible wording, symbols, numeric content, physical placement, and notable stylistic features. Second, inscriptions were grouped into broad thematic categories, such as personal identity and power, ideological signaling, lineage and imitation, and target-referent language. Third, these themes were interpreted in context using available information on preattack communications, stressors, grievances, online activity, and BTAM warning behaviors, with particular attention to fixation, identification, and leakage. Inscriptions were never regarded as sufficient evidence of warning behaviors; instead, they were evaluated as potentially relevant artifacts within a larger behavioral ecology. The [Appendix](#) provides the descriptive inscription inventory used in this process. All coding and interpretation were conducted by a single author, which enhances consistency of the analytic voice but limits reliability testing, an issue addressed again in the Limitations and Directions for Future Research section.

Case Illustrations

2019 Christchurch Mosque Attacks in New Zealand

On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant carried out coordinated attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and injuring dozens. He livestreamed part of the attack and released a manifesto espousing White supremacist, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant beliefs ([Macklin, 2019](#)). Recovered firearms and magazines displayed extensive white lettering. Documented inscriptions included the name of previous attacker (Alexandre Bissonnette), extremist slogans, numerology such as “14” and “Remove Kebab,” and historical battle references, including “Vienna 1683” and “Acre 1189,” which evoked mythologized European conflicts with Islamic forces ([Global News, 2019](#); [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2019](#)).

These themes recurred throughout Tarrant’s manifesto and online postings, indicating a strong connection between digital messages and physical artifacts ([Ilardi et al., 2024](#); [Macklin, 2019](#)). In semiotic terms, the markings served as ideological signals, lineage claims, and performance cues

aimed at the audience. Since the markings were visible during the livestream and in postincident images, they carried a clear communicative purpose that went beyond private interpretation.

2022 Tops Supermarket Shooting in Buffalo, New York

On May 14, 2022, Payton Gendron killed 10 people and injured three others in a racially motivated attack at a Tops supermarket in Buffalo, New York, targeting Black victims. He livestreamed part of the attack and left a lengthy manifesto endorsing white supremacist beliefs and the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory ([New York State Office of the Attorney General, 2022](#); [Shapiro & Powers, 2022](#)). Open-source images and official reports identified anti-Black slurs, references to prior attackers including Brenton Tarrant and Dylann Roof, and other white supremacist slogans and numerological references on his AR-15-style rifle ([New York State Office of the Attorney General, 2022](#); [Shapiro & Powers, 2022](#)).

The attack’s visual presentation, including first-person livestreaming and white-lettered inscriptions on the weapon, also showed notable similarities to the Christchurch attack ([New York State Office of the Attorney General, 2022](#)). Overall, these features align with emulative patterns and indicate that the inscriptions were part of a broader ideological and performative plan rather than isolated symbolic choices.

2023 Dollar General Shooting in Jacksonville, Florida

On August 26, 2023, an attacker killed three Black individuals at a Dollar General store in Jacksonville, Florida, before dying by suicide. Authorities characterized the incident as racially motivated and cited the offender’s writings as part of the evidence for that conclusion ([Associated Press, 2023](#); [The Washington Post, 2023](#)). Law enforcement photos showed an AR-15-style rifle marked with multiple white-painted swastikas, and reports also described additional white symbols or lettering on the weapon, although these were not as clearly documented in open-source images as the swastikas themselves ([Fox News, 2023](#); [The Washington Post, 2023](#); [Time, 2023](#)).

Although visually simpler than the densely inscribed Christchurch and Buffalo weapons, the

markings in Jacksonville were high-salience ideological indicators. The swastika is a highly conventionalized symbol associated with Nazi and neo-Nazi ideology, and its prominent placement on the rifle served as a clear ideological statement ([Anti-Defamation League, n.d.-c](#); [Levin & Reitzel, 2018](#)). Because the offender’s writings were not immediately made public in the early aftermath, the weapon markings gained increased interpretive importance as some of the most visible symbolic evidence available at the time ([Anti-Defamation League, 2024](#)).

2023 Covenant School Shooting in Nashville, Tennessee

On March 27, 2023, a 28-year-old shooter opened fire at the Covenant School, a private Christian elementary school in Nashville, Tennessee, killing three children and three adults before being shot and killed by police. Investigators recovered multiple firearms, a handwritten journal, and digital materials ([Metropolitan Nashville Police Department, 2023](#)). Open-source images and reports described a rifle labeled with red tape reading “Hellfire,” a firearm inscribed with the name “Aiden,” and a firearm with a skull sticker ([Fox17 Staff, 2023](#); [Metropolitan Nashville Police Department, 2023](#)).

Unlike the overt extremist iconography documented in Christchurch, Buffalo, Jacksonville, and Minneapolis, these markings seem more personal and identity-focused than overtly ideological. Viewed through the lens of pseudocommando presentation and the extended self, they align more with self-stylization, persona-building, and violent role development than with explicit movement-related signaling ([Belk, 1988](#); [Knoll, 2010b](#)). Their interpretive value, therefore, lies less in ideological decoding and more in how they might reflect the offender’s developing violent self-image when considered alongside journals and other preparatory materials.

2025 Church of the Annunciation and Catholic School Shooting in Minneapolis, Minnesota

On August 27, 2025, Robin M. Westman carried out a mass shooting at the Church of the Annunciation and its associated Catholic school in Minneapolis, Minnesota, resulting in the deaths of two children and injuries to several

others before he took his own life. Investigators found an AR-15-style rifle, a shotgun, and a 9-mm pistol, with white-lettered inscriptions visible on the weapons and magazines in archived stills from preattack videos ([Archived Pre-Attack Video Stills, 2026](#); [Star Tribune, 2025](#); [The Washington Post, 2025](#)). The inscriptions included names of previous attackers such as Brenton Tarrant, Anders Breivik, Robert Bowers, Adam Lanza, and Payton Gendron, along with phrases like “6 million wasn’t enough,” “Israel Must Fall,” and “Kill Donald Trump” ([Archived Pre-Attack Video Stills, 2026](#)).

Preattack videos showed Westman posing with the weapons and displaying their inscriptions to the camera, suggesting that the markings were not merely private but part of an audience-focused presentation ([Star Tribune, 2025](#); [The Washington Post, 2025](#)). Analyzing the case reveals a hybrid inscription profile that combines antisemitic and white supremacist signals, references to school-shooter genealogy, and politically motivated grievance language. The presence of these themes together is significant because it suggests that the inscription’s content may represent layered grievance structures without implying a single, coherent ideological program.

Cross-Case Findings

Across the five cases, inscriptions clustered around several recurring themes that are directly relevant to BTAM interpretation.

Personal Identity and Power

In Nashville, labels like “Hellfire,” the name “Aiden,” and skull imagery seem to have reinforced an individualistic, violent persona rather than an overt ideological message. This pattern aligns with [Knoll’s \(2010b\)](#) pseudocommando framework and [Belk’s \(1988\)](#) idea of possessions as extensions of identity.

Ideological Signaling

In Christchurch, Buffalo, Jacksonville, and Minneapolis, however, inscriptions used more conventional extremist shorthand, including swastikas, anti-Muslim slogans, antisemitic phrases, racial slurs, and white supremacist numerology. In these cases, the markings simplified ideology into easily recognizable visual signs that could be quickly interpreted by in-group audiences and

investigators alike ([Anti-Defamation League, n.d.-a, n.d.-b](#); [Levin & Reitzel, 2018](#)).

Lineage Claims and Target-Referent Language

References to previous attackers, including Tarrant, Roof, Bissonnette, Breivik, Bowers, Lanza, and Gendron, indicate attempts to place the offender within a perceived lineage of violence. Such references may represent aspirational modeling, identity fusion, or efforts to inherit or expand upon the missions of earlier attackers when combined with other emulative behaviors ([Knoll, 2010a](#); [Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021](#)). Target-referent phrases, such as racist, antisemitic, anti-Muslim, or politically violent language, seem to specify enemies, clarify grievance themes, and highlight symbolic target categories. For BTAM purposes, these markings may assist practitioners in understanding the logic of target selection and grievance framing, although they do not, on their own, establish imminence or capability.

Alignment With Manifestos and Other Communications

In Christchurch and Buffalo, inscription content closely follows themes from manifestos and online materials. In Minneapolis, inscriptions appeared in preattack videos and matched online content praising previous mass killers and expressing grievance themes ([Archived Pre-Attack Video Stills, 2026](#); [Star Tribune, 2025](#)). In Jacksonville, the weapon markings gained greater interpretive significance early on because public access to offender writings lagged behind the release of the photographs. In Nashville, the inscriptions were more aligned with individualized self-stylization rather than a clear extremist worldview. Overall, these cases suggest that inscriptions are most informative when they can be triangulated with a broader communication stream rather than interpreted in isolation.

Fixation

In several instances, inscriptions aligned with persistent preoccupations already seen in other materials, including extremist narratives, grievance themes, and references to repeat offenders ([Ilardi et al., 2024](#); [New York State Office of the Attorney General, 2022](#); [Star Tribune, 2025](#)).

However, fixation in BTAM does not equate to strong beliefs or offensive symbolism; it reflects perseverative rumination, narrowed focus, and often functional decline (Reid Meloy et al., 2012). Open-source records seldom capture functioning with enough accuracy to enable confident conclusions. Therefore, inscriptions should only be considered potentially related to fixation when independent evidence indicates ongoing preoccupation and increasing constriction.

Identification

Christchurch, Buffalo, and Minneapolis most clearly indicated identification processes because inscriptions were embedded within broader patterns of offender emulation, lineage referencing, and audience-facing performance. In BTAM terms, this is relevant when the individual appears to align the self with a violent role, mission, or a predecessor template (Meloy et al., 2015; Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021). Nashville showed a different pattern: The inscriptions were more individualized and identity-focused, suggesting violent self-stylization without clear evidence of identification with a broader movement or offender lineage.

Leakage

Inscriptions alone rarely constitute leakage because they are usually visible only during or after an attack. They become more significant to leakage when they are made accessible to others through videos, livestreams, manifestos, photographs, or other preattack communications (Reid Meloy et al., 2012). This pattern was particularly clear in Christchurch, Buffalo, and Minneapolis, where inscriptions were part of wider communication streams directed at a broader audience. In these cases, inscriptions are best seen as amplifying symbolic leakage rather than independently creating it.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations constrain the interpretation of the present findings. First, the analysis is epistemically limited because the personal meaning of a specific inscription is not always recoverable, especially when offenders die during the attack and when journals or digital records do not

clearly explain why particular words or symbols were chosen. Consistent with BTAM practice, inscriptions and other externalized communications are therefore best treated as observable indicators of signaling and preoccupation rather than as definitive proof of motive or intent (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021). The article accordingly uses cautious, probabilistic language throughout.

Second, all data were obtained from open-source materials. Official investigative files, forensic reports, and comprehensive photographic inventories may include inscriptions or contextual information that were never made public. This is especially significant in recent cases, where the descriptive record may continue to develop over time. The intentional selection of five information-rich cases further limits the ability to generalize. The case set was created to demonstrate analytic possibilities, not to estimate how often inscriptions occur in mass attacks or how common similar markings are among nonoffending firearm owners.

Third, benign firearm personalization remains an important but undermeasured category for comparison. Without more accurate baseline estimates of how often gun owners modify firearms, magazines, or ammunition for commemorative, aesthetic, recreational, or subcultural reasons, practitioners risk overinterpreting ambiguous markings. Benign personalization of cartridges and shell casings is especially underdocumented, which limits meaningful comparisons between offender messaging and practices of nonoffending owners. The concern is especially critical for idiosyncratic inscriptions that lack clear ideological content. Additionally, all coding and interpretation were done by a single author. While this approach supported consistency in analysis, it also prevented interrater reliability testing and leaves open the possibility that another coder might classify some inscriptions differently (Hallgren, 2012; Krippendorff, 2018; Lombard et al., 2002).

Future research should therefore go beyond simple open-source analysis. Key next steps include creating larger inscription data sets from investigative and forensic records, estimating baseline rates of harmless personalization, developing and testing standardized coding manuals, exploring when inscriptions appear in relation to other warning behaviors and preparation activities, and assessing whether semiotic-focused BTAM training enhances practitioners' ability to differentiate concerning artifact-level communication

from normal personalization. More work is also necessary on how online subcultures, extremist ecosystems, and media amplification influence the circulation and adoption of symbolic repertoires over time (Gill et al., 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2020; Munn, 2019; Towers et al., 2015).

Implications for BTAM Training, Practice, and Policy

For practitioners focused on case management rather than theory, the practical takeaway is simple: treat inscriptions as observable data points that can refine, but should not dictate, case formulation. When inscriptions are found, practitioners should document them carefully, ask meaning-focused questions where lawful and appropriate, and assess whether the markings align with online posts, direct threats, leaks, stressors, weapon acquisition, grievance development, and other relevant case information. The analytic goal is not to declare that a symbol proves terrorism or that a phrase proves intent. Instead, it is to determine whether the artifact meaningfully enhances hypotheses about identity, ideology, grievance, or preparation within a comprehensive information framework.

Proper documentation practices are important because inscriptions can be lost, misread, or lose context if not recorded systematically. Taking high-quality photos from multiple angles, noting placement and stylistic details, preserving metadata, and explicitly stating whether an inscribed weapon was shown in preattack media can all boost evidentiary and analytical value. Using structured templates that categorize markings into identity, ideological, lineage, and target-referent categories may also enhance consistency among investigators, threat assessment teams, and during later case reviews (ASIS International & Society for Human Resource Management, 2011; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021; U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, 2019).

Inscriptions can also be incorporated into existing threat assessment processes without adding a new checklist item or independent risk factor. They may clarify grievance narratives, highlight symbolism, support aspirational modeling, and assist in developing a violent self-concept when corroborating evidence exists. They can also help prioritize cases when they co-occur with more

serious concern behaviors, such as manifestos, leaks, explicit references to targets, accelerated preparations, or major life stressors. At the system level, controlled-access repositories or coded analytic databases maintained by fusion centers, school safety centers, or regional BTAM networks could help identify recurring symbols, slogans, and offender-referencing patterns across jurisdictions. To reduce ethical risks and prevent unintended amplification, such systems should focus on coded features and analytic descriptors rather than sharing raw offender media.

The policy and legal implications are similarly complex. Inscriptions referencing protected groups or extremist ideologies can serve as evidence of bias or motive in some investigative and sentencing contexts (Levin & Reitzel, 2018). At the same time, expressive conduct in the United States is often constitutionally protected, meaning agencies must differentiate between protected speech and behavior that suggests preparation for violence. Policies that consider inscriptions as part of a broader behavioral pattern rather than as definitive proof of dangerousness are more likely to stay proportional, transparent, and legally defensible. Recognizing both the evidentiary value and the interpretive limits of symbolic artifacts is therefore crucial for maintaining trust and analytical accuracy.

Conclusion

Weapon inscriptions in mass shootings often serve more than just aesthetic purposes. In some cases, they act as communicative artifacts through which offenders convey identity, ideology, grievance, lineage, and aspirational ideals. When thoroughly documented and analyzed within a BTAM-informed framework, these markings can help practitioners understand how physical artifacts interact with digital and interpersonal communication as part of a pathway toward violence (Meloy & Hoffmann, 2021; U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center, 2019).

Inscriptions are inherently ambiguous, and many forms of weapon personalization are harmless. Automatically treating symbolic content as threatening without supporting behavioral evidence increases the chances of false positives, ethical overreach, and legal mistakes. The argument here is intentionally cautious: Inscriptions should be interpreted proportionally, cross-verified whenever

possible, and understood within the broader behavioral and psychosocial context rather than being viewed as inherently threatening.

Understanding the symbolic aspect of offender behavior broadens the evidentiary perspective available to threat assessment professionals and emphasizes how material artifacts can act as extensions of communicative intent within larger grievance narratives and identity-building processes. Semiotic awareness is not a standalone diagnostic tool and should not become a separate checklist item. It is better viewed as an interpretive approach that can enhance case formulation, support more accurate hypotheses, and improve information sharing when indicators converge.

These conclusions are presented as practice-focused inferences derived from a deliberately chosen set of open-source cases. They should not be seen as prevalence estimates or causal claims about the effectiveness of prevention. Nevertheless, the current analysis indicates that inscriptions deserve careful attention in BTAM practice because they may show how some offenders use weapons, magazines, and ammunition not only as tools of violence but also as a medium for symbolic communication.

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Appendix

Weapon Inscription Inventory, Coding Categories, and Evidence Basis

The following shows the weapon inscription inventory by case, thematic code, and evidence basis.

Case	Inscription (as recorded)	Theme code	Evidence basis
Christchurch (2019)	“Alexandre Bissonnette” (name of prior attacker)	Lineage	Photo (open-source)
Christchurch (2019)	“14”	Ideology	Photo (open-source)
Christchurch (2019)	“Remove Kebab”	Ideology	Photo (open-source)
Christchurch (2019)	“Vienna 1683”	Ideology/lineage	Photo (open-source)
Christchurch (2019)	“Acre 1189”	Ideology/lineage	Photo (open-source)
Buffalo (2022)	Anti-Black racial slurs (not reproduced)	Target-referent	Official + photo
Buffalo (2022)	“Brenton Tarrant” (prior attacker reference)	Lineage	Official + photo
Buffalo (2022)	“Dylann Roof” (prior attacker reference)	Lineage	Official + photo
Buffalo (2022)	White supremacist slogans/numerology (reported; not exhaustively itemized in open sources)	Ideology	Official + photo
Jacksonville (2023)	Multiple swastikas painted in white	Ideology	Photo (law enforcement images)
Jacksonville (2023)	Other white symbols/lettering (reported; not exhaustively itemized in open sources)	Ideology	Two-source corroboration
Nashville (2023)	Red tape labeled “Hellfire”	Identity	Two-source corroboration
Nashville (2023)	Name “Aiden”	Identity	Two-source corroboration
Nashville (2023)	Skull sticker	Identity	Two-source corroboration
Minneapolis (2025)	Names of prior attackers: Brenton Tarrant, Anders Breivik, Robert Bowers, Adam Lanza, and Payton Gendron	Lineage	Archived stills + news corroboration
Minneapolis (2025)	“6 million wasn’t enough”	Ideology	Archived stills
Minneapolis (2025)	“Israel Must Fall”	Ideology/target-referent	Archived stills
Minneapolis (2025)	“Kill Donald Trump”	Target-referent	Archived stills
Minneapolis (2025)	Additional statements visible in stills (not reproduced)	Mixed	Archived stills

Note. Entries reflect inscriptions included in the descriptive record under the verification rules described in the Method section; the inventory is not exhaustive and does not reproduce certain slurs or additional text not clearly legible in open-source materials.

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