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VIOLENCE-FOCUSED ONLINE COMMUNITIES

BRIEF 1/2025

RADIA is an independent knowledge centre located at the University of Helsinki, dedicated to supporting the prevention of violent radicalisation and extremism in Finland. It aims to promote evidence-based decision-making and evaluation of practices, as well as to support the development of expertise, professional training, and networking.

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Purpose of the brief

In recent months, several security authorities, including Europol[1] and the Finnish National Bureau of Investigation[2], have warned about online communities that incite and manipulate children and young people to commit acts of violence against themselves and others. This phenomenon has been referred to by the names of the networks and groups involved (such as The Com Network, 764, No Lives Matter, etc.), or by the terms nihilistic violent extremism or nihilistic violence. In this brief, we have opted for the term *violence-focused online communities.*

Violence-focused online communities present various challenges to researchers, policymakers and practitioners, as they are a constantly evolving phenomenon that takes many forms and combines different influences. This brief examines what is known about this phenomenon as of autumn 2025. Although the roots of these communities lie firmly in various online subcultures, they are a relatively recent phenomenon that has taken its current form during the 2020s, leaving many questions still unanswered. However, several reports from different sources have already been published on the topic, giving an early picture of the communities' main features, how and why people become involved in them, and the kinds of activities that take place within them.

> *In violence-focused online communities, violent acts are glorified for the sake of violence and chaos itself, without a clear objective. Members are encouraged to harm other people, animals, or themselves.*

Overview

In recent years, there have been increasing observations of online communities that glorify violence and its perpetrators, as well as incite and manipulate other children and young people into committing violent acts against people, animals, and themselves. These communities are characterised by the rejection of social norms, an anti-human and anti-societal worldview, and a desire to create chaos and destruction in a society they do not consider worth saving.[3]

The landscape of violence-focused online communities can be seen as an online ecosystem consisting of numerous competing and sometimes collaborating groups. Examples of such groups include 764, No Lives Matter, and Maniac Murder Cult. Based on current knowledge, these groups operate in closed channels on social media platforms, mostly Discord and Telegram.[4] Recruitment is primarily conducted on gaming platforms favored by children

and young people.[5] These groups and many others belong to a wider network known as The Com, but violence-focused online communities also exist outside of this network.[6]

A main factor driving the activities of these networks is their internal hierarchy and the quest for status within it. In these groups, an individual's status and influence are determined by the violent acts they have committed or have encouraged others to commit. All actions must be documented for other group members through videos, images, or livestreams.[7]

Another key element is extortion. The individuals involved in these groups are purposefully and systematically looking to recruit children and young people who are in a vulnerable position. Those recruited are lured in different ways to join these groups and then pressured into committing violence, causing destruction, producing sexual material, or creating self-harm footage. If they do not comply, they are threatened with various forms of humiliation and revenge. This makes it difficult to leave the groups.[8]

> *In these groups, an individual's status and influence are determined by the violent acts they have committed or have encouraged others to commit.*

According to the current information, most of the perpetrators and victims involved in these groups are minors, some of whom are under 10 years old.[9] Some adults are also involved, but investigations indicate that they typically joined the groups as minors. It is challenging to draw a clear distinction between the perpetrators and victims, as most perpetrators have themselves been victims first or have committed acts under pressure.[10]

Currently, it is difficult to reliably assess the scale of the phenomenon. The best available public source comes from Public Safety Canada's researcher Marc-André Argentino, who has compiled arrest data related to these communities. According to his information, by September 2025, arrests have been made in at least 29 countries (including Finland and other Nordic countries), with over 2,700 victims involved in these cases.[11]

> *Currently, it is difficult to reliably assess how big and prevalent violence-focused communities are. However, arrests have already been made in at least 29 countries.*

Although groups like 764 and No Lives Matter are relatively new, online subcultures focused on violence and self-harm have existed for a long time. These groups are therefore not a completely new phenomenon, but part of a longer continuum of marginal online subcultures.[12] Furthermore, social media platforms popular among young people, such as YouTube, have for years hosted online challenges that encourage reckless, violent, or self-harming behavior, as well as the sharing of such acts.[13]

What makes these groups and violence-focused subcultures in general particularly noteworthy in today's context is both their visibility on social media and the extensive use of social media by increasingly younger children. Children and young people are now much more likely to encounter videos containing violence or exploitation on the social media platforms they use, even without actively seeking out such content or joining sites or groups that specialise on such content.[14] Nowadays, it is technologically much easier to produce and share images, videos, and livestreams, and the necessary technology is readily available to children through smartphones. Traumatising and desensitising violent content is much more widely accessible than just within the channels of the violence-focused online communities discussed in this brief. The mainstreaming of violent content may, in part, increase the risk of becoming involved in these communities.

Background

Violence-focused online communities combine elements and influences from numerous online subcultures and phenomena. The following section examines these influences and how they manifest in the activities of violence-focused online communities.

Key influences

One significant source of influence are the imageboard forums.[15] Since the early 2000s, sites like 4chan have served as platforms where users anonymously share content that would not be considered acceptable in any other context: glorification of violence, extremist rhetoric, and racist and sexist humor. On these platforms, a sense of community sometimes appears to be built around who can shock others the most with their content.[16]

Forums like 4chan have helped birth numerous internet subcultures where aesthetics related to nihilism and violence are central. Among the most notable are Incel communities and True Crime communities that idolise mass shooters. In these communities, individuals share experiences of grievances, reinforce each other's thoughts, encourage and promote violence among members, and celebrate former mass shooters as "saints".[17] The Incel community is characterised by a narrative of "waking up to reality", in which members believe that social hierarchies and women's preferences for high-status men doom "inferior" men to a life of sexual deprivation. The "black pill" rhetoric takes this type of fatalism even further, nihilistically presenting the world as completely hopeless and permanently unfair.[18] Such thought patterns can lead individuals to view either giving up or resorting to violent revenge as their only options.

ON TERMINOLOGY

The phenomenon discussed in this brief does not yet have a widely established term. In many official statements and reports, it is referred to by the names of the networks and groups involved in it. The reports issued by the Finnish Police and Europol talk about 'The Com.' The media has also used terms such as 'online cults' and 'sadistic online extortion'.

In the United States and Canada, this phenomenon has been termed "nihilistic violent extremism". This choice has been strongly influenced by Public Safety Canada's Marc-André Argentino, whose reports have been the most significant public sources of information on the topic to date. According to Argentino, nihilistic violent extremists are individuals who actively support, idolise, encourage others, or participate in serious acts of violence, without any discernible objective beyond the violence and chaos itself. The term thus denotes a particular worldview underpinning both the violent actions and their glorification. It is described as nihilistic because the actions appear to lack a clear purpose, focusing instead on the unrestrained glorification of violence, incitement to violence, and misanthropy.

In the United States, the term "nihilistic violent extremism" was adopted by the Department of Justice and the FBI in April 2025 as a new way to classify terrorism. However, they use the term in a broader sense than Argentino's original definition suggests, applying it widely to acts of violence with unclear or mixed motives. Some have claimed that the term was adopted to replace the term "anti-government extremism", which became politically problematic with Trump's presidency. For this reason, it is important to note that in the United States, acts and arrests labeled as nihilistic violent extremism may not necessarily fall under what is called violence-focused online communities in this brief.

In this brief, the term "violence-focused online communities" is used, because it describes and contextualises the phenomenon better. While the rhetoric, memes, or quotes written by the groups may contain influences from extremist ideologies, symbols, and aesthetics, a closer examination reveals that ideology and societal goals play at most a secondary role in their activities. They may be utilised primarily to justify and legitimise their actions. Instead of ideology, these communities are much more about violence. Given their origins, it is also more fitting to view these communities primarily as part of the ecosystem of online subcultures rather than as a distinct form of extremism.

Forums like 4chan have helped birth numerous internet subcultures where aesthetics related to nihilism and violence are central.

The far-right accelerationist subculture also influenced the emergence of violence-focused online communities. It regards the current multicultural society as irreparable, and sees violence, chaos, and the aggravation of internal tensions as necessary to accelerate collapse and establish white supremacy. Their ideology is guided by Siege, a book compiled from the writings of American neo-Nazi James Mason from the 1980s, which emphasises the genetic and cultural superiority of white people and encourages actions that destabilise society. Accelerationism is particularly represented by the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division and other groups inspired by the Siege culture.[19]

Another key influence, according to Argentino, is the violent satanist cult Order of Nine Angles (O9A, ONA).[20] O9A, which emerged in Britain in the 1970s, advocates replacing Western Judeo-Christian values with fascism, social darwinism, and satanism in a new world order ruled by the Aryan race.[21] Influences of O9A and accelerationism to violence-focused online communities are evident in their aesthetics, justifications for violence, and in the forms of violence and harm the followers are encouraged to use to destabilise the social order.[22]

The far-right accelerationist subculture, which views the current multicultural society as irreparable, has also influenced the emergence of violence-focused online communities.
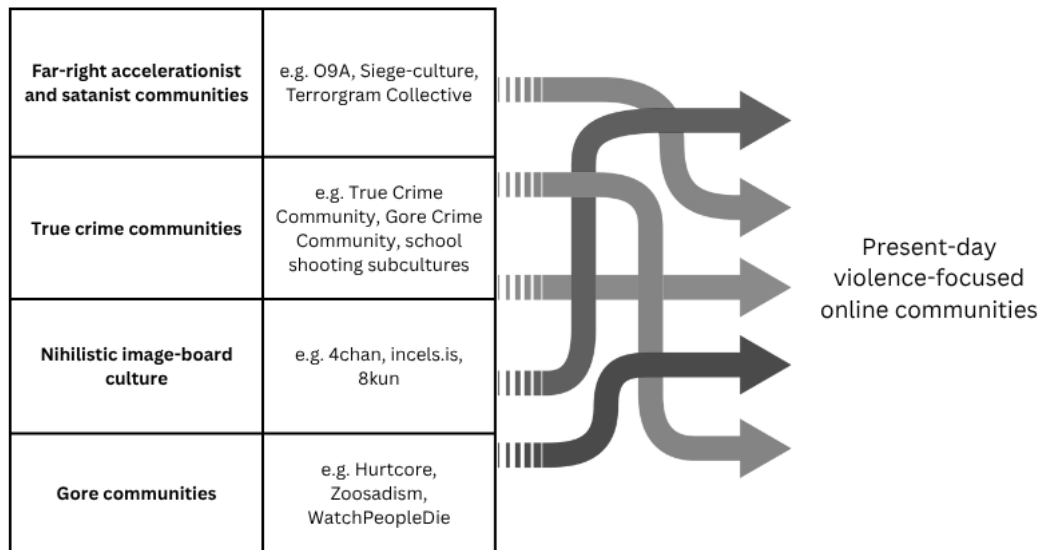
Violence-focused online communities have also drawn influence from dark web communities such as hurtcore and zoosadism, which focus on extreme violent abuse of children or animals. Within these circles, individuals document their own acts of violence against humans or animals and share the material with the community. As in other violence-focused online communities, such content functions as a form of social currency.[23]

The most radical, violence-glorifying fringes of the mentioned subcultures can themselves already be considered violence-focused online communities. However, the groups that are the focus of this brief emerged when these subcultures began to merge.

Hybridisation in the 2020s

According to current understanding, significant changes occurred within the sphere of violent online communities in the late 2010s and early 2020s - primarily during the pandemic years. During this period, various violent online communities began to hybridise, giving rise to groups and networks shaped by multiple influences.[24]

Picture 1: The influences of violence-focused online communities

Far-right accelerationist and satanist communities	e.g. O9A, Siege-culture, Terrorgram Collective
True crime communities	e.g. True Crime Community, Gore Crime Community, school shooting subcultures
Nihilistic image-board culture	e.g. 4chan, incels.is, 8kun
Gore communities	e.g. Hurtcore, Zoosadism, WatchPeopleDie

Present-day violence-focused online communities

Adapted from an image by Marc-André Argentino[25]

According to Marc-André Argentino, one significant factor contributing to this hybridisation was the rapid growth and expansion of Discord's user base in the early 2020s. Whereas Discord had previously been used mainly by gaming communities, during the pandemic, it increasingly attracted various fan and hobby communities as well. Argentino also notes that the deplatforming [26] of extremist influencers from social media platforms following the Capitol Hill attack, due to the violent content they spread, played a role in this shift, as some users moved their activities to platforms such as Discord.[27] All of this created fertile conditions for the mixing of different subcultures and worldviews.

> *During the pandemic years, various violent online communities began to hybridise, giving rise to groups and networks shaped by multiple influences.*

Groups such as The Com, 764, and No Lives Matter can be seen as products of this blending. They form the core of the phenomenon referred to in this brief as violence-focused online communities. Elements from many long-standing

online subcultures can be identified within them, yet at the same time, they represent a new kind of phenomenon – one that both researchers and practitioners are only beginning to address.

The Com and related groups

Among violence-focused online communities, attention has centered on The Com Network and its affiliated groups. Previously, The Com Network (also known as The Com or The Community) was primarily recognised as a network involved in cybercrime.[28] It has never been a unified or clearly defined community, let alone an organisation. Instead, Argentino has described it as "a memeplex of digital networks overlapping with gaming subculture".[29] Toward the 2020s, however, The Com began to hybridise and expand.[30]

In practice, The Com consists of numerous subgroups active on Discord and Telegram, among which there is competition for the title of the most extreme and radical group. Several groups have been linked to The Com, including 764, No Lives Matter, and Maniac Murder Cult, which are discussed in this brief.[31] According to currently available open-source information, the network is largely administered by minors, often between the ages of 11 and 17, and the victims of its activities are typically of the same age group.[32] A more detailed picture of the network's methods and participants is emerging through ongoing investigations and arrests.

> *The network is largely administered by minors, often between the ages of 11 and 17, and the victims of its activities are typically the same age group.*

Although discussions of violence-focused online communities today mostly focus on The Com, it is important to note that the phenomenon is not limited to it. Similar groups also operate outside of The Com.

Cyber Com, Sextortion Com, and Offline Com

At present, The Com can be understood as consisting of three pillars: 1) the original, cybercrime-focused Cyber Com, 2) extortion-focused Sextortion Com, which uses various methods to encourage self-harm and sexual violence, and 3) Offline Com, which commits and incites acts of physical violence.[33]

These pillars are not separate but overlap in many ways. For example, an individual primarily active in Cyber Com who does not personally engage in sextortion may still assist members of Sextortion Com in intimidating their victims – for instance, by threatening to make a false emergency call about the victim as a form of harassment (swatting), or by publishing the victim's private information without consent (doxxing) if the victim refuses to provide requested material.[34] According to researcher Barbara Molas, participants in

The Com world often progress from minor crimes, such as shoplifting and theft, to assault, robbery, weapons possession, and even homicide.[35]

Even though not organised in the traditional sense, subgroups associated with The Com typically display a clear social hierarchy. Within The Com, crimes function as a form of capital that determines each member's social status. Status and influence are earned based on the types of crimes and violent acts an individual has committed or incited others to commit. Further advancement within the group's hierarchy is linked to the creation of increasingly extreme and violent content. Acts of violence are typically recorded, and the videos are shared within the group.[36]

It is also noteworthy that, according to those who have followed their internal communication, it is often highly visual. Discussions largely take place through the sharing of memes, videos, and images.

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Group membership is often signaled by adding the group's name to one's username. The composition and hierarchy of individual groups are presented as 'rosters' – image-based member lists that include usernames and reflect each member's status within the group's hierarchy.[37]

Advancement within the group hierarchy may, for example, grant access to more restricted subgroups or in admin rights. In many groups, producing violent content is a requirement for entry. This has helped maintain operational security within the network by ensuring that authorities, journalists, and researchers remain excluded from more private groups.[38]

764

Currently, the best known and most influential subgroup within The Com Network is 764. Founded in 2021, 764 specialises in sextortion and glorification of violence. Since then, it has spawned numerous offshoots that mimic its activities.[39] It is known that individuals from Finland have also been involved in the group's activities. According to reports, a German member of 764 manipulated a Finnish teenager into pressuring an American teenager to commit suicide.[40]

Typical 764 activities involve targeting victims on platforms popular among young people, luring them to join closed Discord or Telegram groups via invitation links. Trust is often built by pretending romantic interest, offering friendship, or providing peer support. Vulnerable individuals are sought, for example, in online communities related to depression.[41] Once a young person clicks on the invite link, 764 obtains their IP address, which becomes a tool for threats and extortion.[42] The process usually begins with the victim being persuaded to send photos or videos of self-harm (e.g., cut signs or burn marks), framed as proof of love or loyalty to the group. This material is then

used to coerce increasingly disturbing content. As the demands escalate, victims are pressured to perpetrate and record acts of self-harm, harm to others, or animals.[43]

Content obtained from an individual is compiled into a material bank ('lorebook'), which is shared within the network as entertainment. Victims are kept silent through threats, such as sending the material to their family or friends (doxxing). Other intimidation tactics include the previously mentioned swatting. 764's extortion progresses systematically, based on manuals written by members, such as 'Sextortion Handbook', which describes extortion techniques.[44]

More recently, 764 has begun engaging in actions more typical of Offline Com and producing manuals that instruct on how to carry out murders and terrorist attacks.[45]

No Lives Matter (NLM)

No Lives Matter (NLM), a group that is linked to Offline Com and split off from 764 in 2024, specialises in acts of violence carried out offline. These acts often target randomly selected individuals who are perceived as easy victims. NLM's texts and visual materials show clear influences from far-right accelerationism – although it remains questionable how deeply this ideology and its associated goals have been adopted beyond a general desire to sow chaos and destruction. Access to the No Lives Matter group requires proof of personal commitment. Filming a video of killing an animal is reportedly the minimum requirement. This is intended to desensitise participants to violence and prepare them for killing humans.[46]

Written manuals have also been produced under the No Lives Matter's name, such as 'Manhunt Guide' and 'NLM Kill Guide', which encourage members to commit violence and provide tactical instructions. These manuals are distributed via platforms like Telegram.[47]

Maniac Murder Cult

The Ukraine-based Maniac Murder Cult (MMC, known in Russian as MKY) has served as both an inspiration and a collaborator within The Com Network, particularly to No Lives Matter. Activated in 2017, MKY encourages its members to commit and record violent crimes such as murders, assaults, and terrorist acts. Acts of violence function like a game: committing different types of crimes earns individuals a certain number of 'murder points.' By autumn 2025, MKY has claimed responsibility for over 50 murders and 150 other offline crimes. [48]

MKY's ideology – heavily inspired by the Order of Nine Angles – blends elements of National Socialism, satanism, nihilism, and misanthropy. This worldview, along with practical guidance for committing crimes, is disseminated through MKY's self-published manuals (e.g., Haters Handbook).

Collaboration with The Com groups has helped the primarily Russian-language MKY to expand the global reach of its ideology.[49]

Pathways to Involvement: Vulnerabilities and Tactics

Just like the recruiters themselves, those recruited into The Com are often very young – typically between the ages of 8 and 17.[50] Encountering extremist content on platforms that are familiar and popular among children and young people makes them particularly vulnerable to it.[51] Individuals involved in The Com seek potential victims on gaming platforms like Roblox and Minecraft. The Com-related content and invitation links can also be found relatively easily on TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest.[52]

As with school shooter and Incel subcultures, participation in violence-focused online communities has been linked to a mix of personal problems, a desire for peer acceptance, and a drive to shock a broader audience through extreme actions.[53] Children and young people with difficult life experiences or vulnerabilities – such as eating disorders, or feelings of loneliness or discrimination – may be especially at risk when invited into a community that appears to offer belonging.[54] 764, for example, seems to recognise this and targets its recruitment efforts particularly toward isolated youth who may be in need of professional help.[55]

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According to Argentino's estimate, approximately 66 percent of young people in The Com are boys and 34 percent are girls. While girls were previously primarily victims, physical violence committed by girls – and their participation in recruiting others to join – appears to have become more common in The Com.[56]

Some online communities are specifically targeted at girls and replicate familiar internet aesthetics that appeal to a young female audience (e.g., Cutecore). Within these communities, the normalisation and glorification of self-harm increase the risk of imitative self-destructive behavior. Young people who already struggle with mental health or substance use issues, eating disorders, or depression, are especially vulnerable to worsening distress and social pressure to display their distress publicly. The severity and visibility of mental health disorders can become a form of symbolic capital that determines an individual's status within a community. This creates a distorted hierarchy

in which acceptance and admiration are based on self-harming behavior and the deliberate deterioration of one's psychological well-being.[57]

A characteristic feature of groups linked to The Com is that many of the young people involved are both victims and perpetrators. Instead of seeking help from a trusted adult or the authorities, victims may start protecting themselves by becoming perpetrators. In doing so, they may no longer be required to produce self-harming content for the group. What keeps many involved is the shame over what they have already done, uncertainty about the consequences of seeking help, or fear of losing the social connections they have formed within the community.[58]

> *Instead of seeking help from a trusted adult or the authorities, victims may start protecting themselves by becoming perpetrators. In doing so, they may no longer be required to produce self-harming content for the group.*

When considering the appeal of these activities and the pathways into them, it is important to recognise that many of the themes and topics present in such groups are also widely present in the broader online culture and attitudes of children and young people. Feelings of hopelessness, lack of perspective, and existential meaninglessness are increasingly visible in youth humor and meme culture. For example, Doomer memes, which deal with existential anxiety, are popular among young people. This trend is likely fueled by global instability. Alarmist discourse from adults and the media, combined with young people's own anxiety about the climate crisis, inequality, and political instability, contributes to a nihilistic sense that hope is lost and nothing ultimately matters.[59] For instance, according to a global survey by Hickman and colleagues, 56 percent of young people believe humanity is doomed.[60] This sentiment is further reinforced by ongoing conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and Gaza, which continuously generate violent content for online circulation.[61]

The hybridisation and expansion of violence-focused online communities also occurred during a time when violent gore content became significantly more prevalent on social media platforms frequented by children and young people. Research shows that gore content is especially harmful to young people when it is presented as exciting or trendy, and when it appears within familiar and pleasant online environments, such as online gaming spaces.[62] In groups linked to The Com, where violent content is both normalised and considered entertaining, such material is therefore likely to have a stronger impact on young people than when encountered in more critical or detached contexts.

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Since the consumption of violent gore content is common among young people in both the 764 and, for example, the Incel communities, questions arise about its connection to violent radicalisation. While research on causal relationships remains limited, some indications have been identified. For example, in a study by Nicklin and colleagues, it was found that some consumers of violent content do not become desensitised to it but instead develop a taste for it.[63] In an interview study by Fisher and Bradley, the researchers explored what makes gore content appealing to its viewers. Participants described watching it as a way to escape everyday life, release frustration and feed their nihilistic mindset.[64]

In another study, Rousseau and colleagues examined clients of mental health services who had been referred due to concerns about radicalisation. Some of the clients were minors, and approximately half did not appear to hold a coherent ideological worldview. Instead, their worldviews were often dystopian, reinforced by the consumption of violent content produced by school shooters and terrorists. Rather than causing anxiety, the enjoyment of violent content and the act of frightening other young people with it gave them a sense of agency and functioned as an empowering experience. This was especially evident among clients who had experienced bullying. [65]

Based on these studies, it can be concluded that the consumption of violent content is not merely passive entertainment. For some young people, it may serve as a way to cope with anxiety, reinforce a sense of agency, and find meaning in life. At the same time, it may lay the groundwork for an identity and social relationships built around the glorification of violence.

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Social media companies are aware that violent content is being shared, and recruitment activities are taking place on their platforms. They attempt to limit such content through various moderation strategies, but due to the vast volume of material posted online, real-time monitoring remains insufficient despite regulation and moderation efforts. Detecting harmful content may also be challenging, as violence can be satirical, fictional, or symbolic. Users also deliberately try to circumvent moderation by using coded language, memes, and private groups. Furthermore, the groups and key users have developed strategies to ensure continuity even when accounts or groups are shut down. The level of commitment to content moderation also varies between platforms.[66]

Relationship to Violent Extremism

When it comes to researching, countering, and preventing violence-focused online communities, a fundamental question is how, and to what extent, existing frameworks, criminal law provisions, and analytical models are applicable. At the time of the publication of this brief, discussion about these questions is still ongoing.

It has been quite common to conceptualise violence-focused online communities as a form of violent extremism. This is reflected in the fact that, particularly in Canada and the United States, they have been referred to as nihilistic violent extremism (see On Terminology box). This framing is likely influenced in part by the fact that the indiscriminate acts of violence associated with Offline Com often outwardly resemble terrorist attacks. In some cases, perpetrators have also faced terrorism charges.[67]

But how appropriate is it to treat violence-focused online communities as a form of violent extremism? The short answer is that there are credible arguments in its favor, but at the same time, it is crucial to recognise that these communities differ significantly from what has traditionally been understood as violent extremism.

> *The indiscriminate acts of violence associated with Offline Com often outwardly resemble terrorist attacks. The perpetrators have also faced terrorism charges.*

One key practical reason for linking violence-focused online communities to violent extremism is the implementation of *preventive* measures. In many countries, efforts have been made to prevent children and young people from drifting into such communities and to support those already involved in disengaging. In this context, attention and expectations have focused on interventions and models developed for the prevention of violent extremism, which currently offer the most immediate pathway for advancing prevention and victim support.

Many violence-focused online communities are also undeniably influenced by violent extremism, particularly by far-right accelerationism and satanism. These communities have also drawn the attention of extremism and terrorism researchers, because their aesthetics, ideologies, and attitudes include elements familiar from extremist movements. Moreover, they often express admiration for terrorist attacks and their perpetrators, as well as unrestrained glorification and pursuit of destruction and chaos.

To what extent violence-focused online communities can truly be considered accelerationist is another matter. The influences are not equally evident across all subgroups. Even when they are, it often seems to be more about fascination with aesthetics than about deep engagement with or commitment to the ideological views of accelerationism.

The glorification of violence and the violent behavior seen in these online communities has, in fact, already been examined in the context of violent extremism. One example is the discussion around violence linked to the Incel subculture and the related attacks, which, after initial hesitation and debate, have increasingly been framed as part of violent extremism and its prevention.[68]

> *It often seems to be more about fascination with aesthetics than about deep engagement with or commitment to the ideological views of accelerationism.*

From the perspective of violent extremism, violence-focused online communities can be seen as part of a broader trend of hybridisation within violent extremism. In this context, hybridisation refers to the increasingly mixed and often contradictory influences found in the worldviews of individuals who plan or carry out acts of violence. These influences may come from various ideological directions, and the boundary between different forms and subcultures of violence appears increasingly blurred.[69]

What about the differences? The first key distinction concerns the role of *political and religious views and goals*. Violent extremism is typically defined by its political or religious motivation.

For example, Finland's National Action Plan for the Prevention and Combating of Violent Radicalisation and Violent Extremism defines violent extremism as "the ideologically inspired use, threat, encouragement or support of violence. Violent extremism may be associated with any ideology that justifies violence. It often involves an attempt to evoke feelings of fear and insecurity."[70] It is not clear whether ideological views play a significant enough role in violence-focused online communities to justify classifying them as extremists.

Secondly, it is important to recognise that although some acts of violence linked to violence-focused online communities resemble terrorist attacks, these communities are also associated with other forms of criminal behaviour, such as extortion, sexual exploitation, and various forms of harassment. This significantly affects how individuals become involved, what participation entails, and what disengagement means or requires. The key question is whether current prevention and intervention practices provide sufficient tools to address this phenomenon.

> *Do current prevention and intervention practices provide sufficient tools to address this phenomenon?*

Further research and reflection are needed to determine whether the process of joining violence-focused online communities can accurately be described as *radicalisation*. Current evidence suggests that a significant

portion of those who end up in these groups are vulnerable children and young people, whose involvement often result from coercion and manipulation. It is well known that radicalisation into violent extremism is a complex, multi-stage process influenced by numerous factors,[71] and grooming and coercion can also occur during the radicalisation process. However, current knowledge indicates that the backgrounds and pathways into violence-focused online communities differ significantly from traditional descriptions of radicalisation. Another notable difference is that individuals involved in these communities tend to be considerably young on average.

> *Can the process of joining violence-focused online communities be accurately described as radicalisation?*

Within the framework of violent extremism, there is a risk that the phenomenon will be viewed as something distinctly new and exceptional – especially when compared to other forms of activity typically classified as violent extremism. As previously noted, violence-focused online communities are part of a broader continuum in the evolution of online subcultures. They reflect and make use of common modes of interaction among children and young people, existing social hierarchies, and a fascination with the forbidden or dangerous.

Recognising the Signs and Finding Support

Leaving violence-focused online communities is often made difficult by pressuring and threats, which is why disengaging without support can be very challenging. Children and young people who have already become involved should be helped to break away. Their families also need support.

Bringing up things that have happened online is often challenging for a child or young person. For this reason, parents and professionals working with children and youth are encouraged to watch for behaviours and other warning signs that may indicate participation in violence-focused online communities. The information package compiled by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police provides advice on how to recognise signs of participation in violence-focused online communities and where to turn if concerns arise.

Additional reading

Canadian researcher Marc-André Argentino, who works at Public Safety Canada, has produced the most substantial body of work to date on violence-focused online communities. His blog From the Depths features numerous texts exploring different aspects of the phenomenon, including screenshots that illustrate the visual material shared in these communities. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue's report Terror without ideology also provides a concise introduction and reflections on the relationship between the communities and terrorism.

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