Confluence of Conflicts and Virtual Connections: The Rising Tide of Youth Radicalisation in the Digital Age

By Noor Huda Ismail

SYNOPSIS

Next month will mark one year since the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, an event that has heightened online youth radicalisation from online extremist narratives. The concept of "identity fusion" is useful in understanding this phenomenon, and the use of AI and gaming can potentially help in counter radicalisation efforts.

COMMENTARY

Next month marks the one-year anniversary of the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel – a significant event that reverberated globally and triggered an uptick in youth radicalisation, particularly online. The Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report 2024 reveals that this conflict directly contributed to the radicalisation of two Singaporean youths – a 14-year-old and a 33-year-old.

These incidents can be explained by a psychological phenomenon called "identity fusion", where individuals feel an intense sense of oneness with a group to the point where their personal and social identities merge. This feeling of unity makes them willing to make extreme sacrifices for their group as their identity becomes inseparable from the group's fate.

While identity fusion is not limited to Islamist extremism – it manifests in football fans reacting violently after a crucial loss or animal rights activists responding to trophy hunting – it has found a fertile ground among youths who feel connected to the Palestinian cause.

It is essential to recognise that the Hamas-Israel war is a long-standing issue, with roots tracing back to the establishment of Israel in 1948. This deep historical context adds layers to the narrative, making it particularly compelling for youths who perceive a sense of injustice and shared suffering.

Southeast Asian policymakers must proactively address this challenge to prevent further radicalisation among young people. This involves understanding the mechanism of identity fusion in online radicalisation and embracing technology as a tool for effective intervention. By doing so, policymakers can create strategies that resonate with young people and counter extremist narratives.

Mechanism of Identity Fusion in Online Radicalisation

The process of identity fusion is particularly potent in the digital age, where social media and online platforms amplify the perception of shared suffering and injustice. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to distressing content, such as videos, images, or narratives depicting the suffering of their "in-group" (like Palestinians in the Hamas-Israel war), they begin to internalise these experiences as if they are their own. This mechanism creates a powerful emotional bond that transcends geographical boundaries, drawing them closer to the cause, making young people feel an urge to "do something real" to defend what they perceive as their oppressed community.

Two primary pathways facilitate this fusion – the perception of shared experience and a sense of kinship. Individuals can bond over "sacred values", which are beliefs and principles they view as non-negotiable. These emotional connections transcend geographical boundaries and intensify their commitment to defending what they perceive as their oppressed community.

For instance, many young people in Southeast Asia have been exposed to content that frames the Hamas-Israel war as a stark battle between oppressors and the oppressed. This framing, coupled with constant exposure to violent imagery and emotionally charged narratives, makes them feel a personal connection to the conflict, leading to a sense of urgency to act in defence of their "brothers and sisters".

AI in Radicalisation

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a powerful tool for extremist groups, enabling them to automate propaganda dissemination, personalise recruitment messages, and enhance the spread of radical ideologies. Extremists can use AI-driven algorithms to identify vulnerable individuals based on their online behaviour, interests, and social media interactions. By analysing data from platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, extremists can tailor their messaging to appeal to specific demographics, making their outreach more effective.

Moreover, AI-generated deepfake videos and synthetic content can create realistic but false narratives, further blurring the line between reality and propaganda. These sophisticated tactics make it easier for extremist groups to manipulate individuals, reinforce identity fusion, and lure them into echo chambers.

AI in Counter Radicalisation

Conversely, AI can also be a powerful ally in the fight against online radicalisation. Machine learning algorithms can detect patterns of radical behaviour, monitor extremist content, and identify individuals at risk of being radicalised. Social media platforms use AI to flag and remove extremist content, though this approach is often criticised for its limitations, such as false positives and the adaptability of extremists to evade detection.

More innovative AI applications involve creating counter narrative content that challenges extremist ideologies. AI chatbots, for instance, can engage with individuals at risk of radicalisation, offering support, factual information, or alternative perspectives in real-time. Another example is the potential use of AI-powered "counter bots" on social media platforms that engage with radicalised individuals, subtly exposing them to counter extremist narratives without appearing confrontational.

Gaming as a Tool for Radicalisation and Counter Narratives

Terrorist organisations are increasingly leveraging digital gaming as a recruitment and radicalisation tool. These groups often create bespoke games or modify popular titles like Minecraft and The Sims to depict violent events, which normalise and desensitise players to real-world violence. Techniques such as "radicalisation meters" in online forums, further exacerbate the issue by visually indicating users' levels of radicalisation and fostering echo chambers.

In response, game designers, educators, and counter extremism practitioners are exploring the potential of games to promote critical thinking, empathy, and positive social engagement. For example, the game "Salaam", developed by Lual Mayen, a South Sudanese refugee, is designed to simulate the experience of fleeing conflict, helping players develop empathy for refugees. Such games can counter extremist narratives by providing alternative perspectives and promoting understanding among players. Similarly, Indonesia's PeaceGen has launched frosh.id, a gamified web application and online measurement game designed to equip newly registered university students with essential skills such as critical thinking, empathy, and collaboration.

Games with cooperative and pro-social mechanics can foster positive relationships and build community resilience against extremism. When players work together toward shared goals, they are less likely to be drawn into radical echo chambers and more inclined to develop a sense of empathy and inclusivity.

Additionally, AI-enabled games can provide interactive experiences that challenge players' beliefs, encourage empathy, and promote critical thinking. These experiences can weaken the influence of identity fusion, helping individuals see beyond the narrow ideologies of extremist groups.

Conclusion

Identity fusion is central to the process of online radicalisation where shared "sacred values" create unbreakable bonds with extremist groups. Both gaming and AI have

the potential to either amplify this process or counteract it. By understanding these dynamics, policymakers, educators, and tech companies can leverage these tools to promote resilience, empathy, and critical thinking among youths.

AI can help identify at-risk individuals, while gaming platforms can create immersive experiences that challenge extremist ideologies. By addressing how identity fusion and "sacred values" drive radicalisation, especially in the context of conflicts like the Hamas-Israel war, we can develop comprehensive strategies that counter youth radicalisation and shift the narrative toward peace.

In a world increasingly shaped by digital interactions, it is vital for stakeholders to collaborate and devise innovative solutions to combat the rising tide of youth radicalisation. This requires a concerted effort to understand the psychological mechanisms at play and harness technology's potential for positive engagement. By prioritising resilience and empathy, we can create a more inclusive society that effectively counters extremist narratives and fosters peace among diverse communities.

Noor Huda Ismail is a Visiting Fellow at RSIS and a strategic communication consultant for Southeast Asia with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). He also runs the award-winning interactive community website www.ruangobrol.id.