RSIS COMMENTARY

16 September 2025

The "Salad Bar" of Extremist Ideologies in Youth Radicalisation: A New Threat?

Kumar Ramakrishna

RSiS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Ponder the Improbable since 1996

RSIS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

RSIS COMMENTARY

www.rsis.edu.sg No. 191 – 16 September 2025

The "Salad Bar" of Extremist Ideologies in Youth Radicalisation: A New Threat?

By Kumar Ramakrishna

SYNOPSIS

The recent revelation of a 14-year-old Singaporean male radicalised through a "salad bar" of extremist ideologies, including incel ideology, was not a bolt from the blue. The same drivers underlying youth radicalisation in general – Needs, Narratives, and Networks – apply as well. The policy responses should thus be broadly similar, including strengthening families, promoting critical thinking and digital literacy, as well as better socialising of male youth into healthy norms of masculinity and healthy relations with the opposite sex.

COMMENTARY

Singaporeans awoke on 9 September to news of a 14-year-old male youth who had been self-radicalised online by what Singapore's Internal Security Department (ISD) called a "'salad bar' of extremist ideologies". The youth was reportedly not merely a "staunch supporter of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," but he "concurrently subscribed to anti-Semitic beliefs espoused in far-right extremist ideologies." Additionally, he identified himself as an "incel."

The term "incel" refers to involuntarily celibate individuals. The incel subculture consists of men who are aggrieved at being unable to find romantic or sexual partners. Incels often express frustration and resentment towards society, and, in particular, towards attractive but unavailable women and men perceived as more sexually successful. This was apparently the first case of self-radicalisation based on "a mix of different extremist ideologies", to be dealt with under Singapore's Internal Security Act (ISA).

The "Salad Bar" of Ideologies: Not Really New

While this may be the first case in Singapore, the phenomenon is not unknown to counterterrorism professionals. For several years now, analysts have warned of the rise of a so-called "mixed, unstable or unclear" (MUU) ideology – in essence, a "salad bar" ideology – where the ideological narrative driving certain terrorists defies finer categorisation, as it appears to draw arbitrarily and unsystematically upon diverse elements from multiple sources.

MUU radicalisation within Far Right Extremism (FRE) was evidenced, for instance, in August 2024, when an 18-year-old youth mounted a knife attack livestreamed on social media, in which he stabbed several people near a mosque in Turkey. His manifesto was reportedly a haphazard mix of FRE tropes drawn from militant accelerationist, neo-Nazi and other White supremacist ideas.

MUU radicalisation – as seen in the case of the 14-year-old Singaporean incel – can transcend ideological boundaries. A well-known case in the US involved Northern Virginia transit police officer Nicholas Young, who was a fervent supporter of both the Islamic State and the Nazis. At the same time, some white supremacists have used the term "white jihad" to describe their activities and appear to appropriate the "content, aesthetics, nomenclature, or action repertoires" that are generally associated with violent Islamist extremism.

Such bewildering ideological fluidity is becoming more widespread; evidence of this is supported by the fact that in 2021 and 2022, the majority of referrals to the UK authorities were classified as MUU. And in 2020, the United States' Senate Homeland Security Committee was warned of the rise of the "salad bar of ideology". Furthermore, in July 2024, a man was stabbed by a 14-year-old at the University of Sydney in Australia. The youth was described by the police as being driven by a "salad bar" of mixed ideologies.

Making Sense of MUU Radicalisation

A closer analysis of the Singaporean MUU radicalisation case is warranted. Applying the 3N (Narratives, Networks, and Needs) framework developed by Arie W. Kruglanski, Jocelyn J. Belanger, and Rohan Gunaratna can improve understanding.\

The Narrative

By Narrative, we mean a "violence-justifying ideology" that suggests to an individual that out-group violence is morally and religiously legitimated, and desirable. In the case of the Singaporean incel, he was reportedly exposed to voluminous extremist narratives online, including material glorifying mass killers. In addition, he imbibed "violent anti-Semitic beliefs" from the far right, "anti-Zionist" and "anti-Imperialist" content from the far left, violent Islamist ideas from ISIS and Al Qaeda online sources, and, as mentioned earlier, incel grievances.

Notably, it was reported that the youth's "understanding of far-right extremist and far-left extremist concepts" was "shallow" and he "supported seemingly conflicting

aspects of these ideologies." However, research indicates that a person becoming radicalised does not need a completely coherent understanding of extremist ideological concepts; a "cut-and-paste" approach suffices for a basic working understanding. In other words, the individual does not need to be an ideological expert. He just needs to feel personally satisfied that he has good enough reasons – however hazy and contradictory, as in MUU radicalisation – for engaging in extremist activity.

The Network

As Kruglanski *et al.* have argued, the social network serves as "conduits through which individuals get acquainted with, and embrace, the ideological narrative that the network espouses". In the Singaporean incel case, it is evident that the youth was highly exposed to such online networks.

In 2024, he reportedly started conversing online with foreign FRE personalities, was added to online chat groups which shared content supportive of FRE ideas and joined "pro-ISIS and jihadist communities online". The youth was also "in online contact with several foreign extremists, including an alleged Iraq-based ISIS supporter who had offered to help him plan an attack in Singapore," which, fortunately, the youth did not pursue.

As noted, the youth also engaged with incel subcultures online. Being immersed in such online extremist communities – essentially "echo chambers" – for "several hours a day", ensures that ideological narratives become more intense and reinforced, furthering the self-radicalisation process.

The Need

Ultimately, as Kruglanski *et al.* argue, the *Need for Significance* – "the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, to be respected" – is what drives much violent extremist behaviour, regardless of specific individual personal drivers and ideological factors. The Singaporean incel in this respect is a mere 14-year-old, which is highly significant from a psychological viewpoint.

As previously argued, youth are particularly susceptible to extremist manipulation because during the emotionally turbulent teenage years, the executive reasoning parts of their brains are less developed than the emotional centres. Thus, teenagers often appear impulsive, rash, and inclined to pursue simplistic, black-and-white answers to complex issues. In short, they are undergoing a "tumultuous biological, cognitive, social and emotional transition to adulthood".

It is very telling that in late 2023, the Singaporean youth reportedly "became more self-conscious about his appearance after coming across incel 'looksmaxxing' content" – an incel subculture providing dubious advice on how to "enhance one's physical appearance on social media". This clearly evinced his underlying need to matter, to be someone and to enjoy respect from the opposite sex.

Key Takeaways

There are four key takeaways from Singapore's first incel/salad bar ideology case.

First, it unfortunately affirms that youth radicalisation is indeed a real challenge in Singapore. As the July 2025 *Singapore Terrorism Threat Assessment Report* observed, half of the eight Singaporeans dealt with under the ISA since the 2024 report, till June 2025, involved youths aged 20 or below. The total number of youths dealt with under the ISA since 2015 until July 2025 was 17, with more than two-thirds (12) identified in the last five years. Finding ways to address this issue is therefore pressing.

Second, while this incel/salad bar ideology case may seem novel, it is important to keep things in perspective. This youth, in many respects, is not that different from other young Singaporeans who have self-radicalised into Islamist or Far Right extremism in recent years. Applying the 3N framework to the other cases will almost certainly show that, regardless of the extremist ideology or mix of ideologies they radicalised into, the basic drivers – Need for significance, exposure to Narratives, and immersion in extremist Networks – were broadly similar across the board.

Third, based on the above analysis, there is arguably little need to reinvent the wheel beyond minor adjustments. The stock remedy for tackling youth radicalisation – even including the salad bar/MUU variety – remains essentially the same: building emotional, psychological and intellectual resilience against all forms of violent extremism. As previously argued, the range of measures includes, fundamentally, strong socio-economic support for stable families that youths need to develop emotionally and psychologically, along with access to education that promotes critical thinking, digital literacy, and the inclusive and prosocial values essential for living in a globalised, secular, multicultural Singapore.

Lastly, the incel case also suggests that facilitating the participation of teenage males in trusted peer networks with positive role models who can informally socialise them into healthy norms of masculinity – including even relating healthily to the opposite sex – is worth considering. In a digital age characterised by easy access to a range of online extremisms, a light but structured approach may well be more important than we realise.

Kumar Ramakrishna is Professor of National Security Studies, Provost's Chair in National Security Studies, and Dean of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.