RSIS COMMENTARY

22 January 2026

# Violence for Violence's Sake: The Rise of Nihilistic Violent Extremism

*Yasmine Wong*

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

RSiS 30

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

RSIS COMMENTARY

www.rsis.edu.sg No. 012 – 22 January 2026



# Violence for Violence's Sake: The Rise of Nihilistic Violent Extremism

*By Yasmine Wong*

## SYNOPSIS

*The 7 November Jakarta School bombing and the case of the 14-year-old Singaporean boy who was subjected to a Restriction Order under the city-state's Internal Security Act highlight the rise of malicious online subcultures. Nihilistic violent extremism poses challenges to current counter-extremism efforts.*

## COMMENTARY

"14 Words. For Agartha." and "Brenton Tarrant. Welcome to Hell." were inscribed on the weapon (later found to be a toy gun) of the perpetrator of a school mosque bombing at Jakarta's State Senior High School 72 on 7 November.

"14 words" is a reference to the white supremacist slogan "we must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children", while "Agartha" pertains to a mythological kingdom mentioned in far-right, Neo-Nazi meme circles.

The latter inscription references Brenton Tarrant, the perpetrator of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings.

While these phrases suggest an ideological link with the far-right, Indonesia's National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) disclosed that the perpetrator, a male student, was exposed to "memetic violence" and was "more into imitating ideas or behaviours that are happening" rather than being driven by ideology. He also engaged with the True Crime Community, part of the wider phenomenon of nihilistic violent extremism.

Nihilistic violent extremists – where nihilism involves rejecting all religious or moral principles and believing that life is meaningless – are driven by anger and hatred towards the world. The rise of nihilistic violent extremism indicates shifting patterns in the global extremism landscape.

**What is the True Crime Community?**

The True Crime Community (TCC) broadly refers to true-crime fans. It also refers to a specific group in online forums who share an obsession with and celebrate notorious mass killers. Its members produce "dark memes, make jokes about tragedy; the bloodier the content, the better it is received", thereby normalising violence.

The TCC has inspired fans to carry out violent attacks as "either an expression of their own grievances, to pay tribute to their favourite killers, or to garner notoriety". The TCC is increasingly being flagged in counter-terrorism circles and literature, with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue identifying seven school shooters and nine attempted attacks linked to it.

Adherents of TCC focus on "researching and replicating" the "mannerisms, attire and cultural references" of school shooters, often overlooking their motivations. Initial images released by local news outlets showed the perpetrator of the Jakarta school bombing wearing a shirt with the term "Natural Selection", in the same style as the one worn by Columbine High School shooter Eric Harris. The toy gun found at the scene also bore the names of six mass shooters.

**Youth in Crisis: The Rise of Nihilistic Violence**

The case should be understood within the larger context of the rise of nihilistic violence online – with the TCC being one of the most prolific online subcultures associated with nihilistic violence. Nihilistic groups utilise memes (memetic violence) to recruit and radicalise young people online to commit acts of violence.

According to a report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, unlike other extremist ideologies, nihilistic extremism lacks an ideological motivation. It seeks to "promulgate a misanthropic (hatred of humanity) worldview, glorify violence, and seek to fulfil their participants' desire for notoriety", in other words, the pursuit of violence for violence's sake.

Rather than an ideology, these groups focus on aesthetics or aesthetic violence as a substitute, aiming to replicate violent attacks stylistically, promoting violence and galvanising the community through "memes, images, clips of music or even colour schemes".

Nihilistic violent extremists often weaponise "acts of sexual extortion, animal abuse, and self-harm to express their rejection of moral and social norms". Among the more prominent groups, the 764 network has seen 50 related arrests worldwide for crimes involving sextortion, child sexual abuse material, or plots to carry out acts of targeted

mass violence. Recently, Canada became the first country to list 764 as a terrorist organisation.

The acceptance of nihilism more generally among young people can be observed through the current digital culture, with the popularity of memes and content highlighted by "feelings of hopelessness, despair, and existentialism". This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the isolation and existential fears it brought.

Faced with an inescapable sense of hopelessness, young people become disillusioned with traditional norms, values, and sources of information, adopting more radical, antisocial approaches in pursuit of social change. This creates the cognitive foundation of distrust of the status quo, encouraging a turn towards conspiratorial thinking and online personalities with extreme viewpoints (especially those that lay the blame on women and minorities).

A 2021 study found that 56 per cent of young people think humanity is doomed, with climate anxiety and the failures of national governments contributing to this overall pessimism. Alongside this, the rise of a "loneliness epidemic" among young people is affecting developed countries globally, reflecting the paradox that Gen-Zs (digital natives) are "hyperconnected in the virtual world but socially disconnected".

In Singapore, this phenomenon has also been reported, with a 2024 survey finding that young people aged 21 to 34 experience the highest levels of social isolation and loneliness.

This rise in hyper-individualism is enabled by social media and a shift in priorities from social connections to a highly personalised experience. This collective experience of defeatism and isolation serves as a vulnerability for nihilistic extremism to take root and exploit.

In fact, nihilistic groups are known to specifically target young people, many of whom go online in search of community. They are groomed and manipulated into harmful behaviours for "winning clout" in the gamified system promoted by nihilistic online networks.

**The Changing Face of Global Extremism**

The evolving nature of global extremism is already reflected in local contexts. In Singapore, the 14-year-old boy subjected to a Restriction Order under the Internal Security Act (ISA) was also radicalised by a salad bar of extremist ideologies. While it is unclear whether he was explicitly part of the TCC, his engagement with extremist ideologies happened through his consumption of true crime content, which overlaps with far right narratives and communities. The rise of nihilistic violent extremism can be understood alongside this rise of salad bar extremism, where personal grievances are drawing young people to a mixture of ideologies that resonate with their own experiences.

Amid the rise of nihilistic extremism, the traditional boundaries between non-ideological killings and acts of terrorism – usually differentiated by political motivations – are increasingly obscured. This undoubtedly presents challenges to preventing nihilistic violent extremism, signalling a need to move away from prescriptions "based on ideologies or entity lists" towards an enforcement model that is "more adaptable" and "behaviour-based".

Existing counter-terrorism frameworks lack the agility to deal with threats of mass violence that are not ideologically motivated. For instance, Plymouth shooter Jake Davidson had previously been referred to Prevent, the UK's counter-terrorism programme, but was not considered a terror threat because of the "absence of ideological motivation".

Like misogynistic violent extremism, the threat of nihilistic violent extremism should be addressed early. However, monitoring behaviours instead of group-based, ideologically motivated terrorism will significantly expand the scope, posing problems for "prioritisation and resourcing" and burdening risk management processes.

Leaked sections of a report published by Policy Exchange recommended that the UK government shift its counter extremism strategy from "ideologies" to "behaviours of concern". These include issues such as misogyny, conspiracism, fascination with gore, etc. However, the Home Office's position remains focused on extremist ideologies to avoid "risking diluting attention" with wider issues.

The two regional cases highlight the resonance of nihilistic subcultures in Singapore, pointing to a reality where the violent extremism landscape is becoming increasingly chaotic. The challenge remains in adapting current counter-extremism efforts, and crucially, expanding the scope of counter-extremism work.

---

*Yasmine Wong is an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.*

---

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