

The rise of nihilistic violent extremism in the digital age

Abstract:

Nihilistic violent extremism represents a qualitatively distinct threat vector, emerging from the convergence of individual, subcultural and technological factors. Unlike classical terrorism, which instrumentalises violence in the service of a political project, this phenomenon is fuelled by misanthropy as a primary motivation, by ideological hybridisation and fluidity, by the participatory and memetic logic of online communities, by progressive desensitisation to harm, by algorithmic amplification, and by a contagion effect that feeds the cycle. Ideology-centred analytical frameworks are insufficient to grasp a form of violence driven by subcultural belonging, fandom and digital performativity. Some policy responses adapted to this new reality are proposed.

Keywords: Nihilistic violent extremism, misanthropy, performative violence, radicalisation, fandom, contagion

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A new face for extremist violence

For decades, terrorism studies have rested on a premise that was rarely questioned: political violence is an instrument in the service of an end. An attack communicates, intimidates, mobilises and bargains; the violent act acquires meaning in relation to a programme, a cause or a utopia that aspires to transform the existing order. On this assumption both the academic taxonomies of extremism and most prevention policies have been built, trusting that a cause can be delegitimised, countered with alternative narratives, or interrupted at the stage of ideological indoctrination.

A recent wave of attacks, however, is testing that framework. In the United States, the country hardest hit by the phenomenon, investigators have been baffled by the absence of any recognisable agenda behind a series of shootings, bombings and foiled plots. Their authors did not fit the usual categories, yet their manifestos display an unmistakable contempt for humanity and a desire to see civilisation collapse¹.

Authorities and a growing body of literature have begun to label these acts as nihilistic violent extremism. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, for instance, defines it as violent acts that lack ideological motivation and are driven by a misanthropic worldview². The actors involved are individuals on the margins who encourage, promote, glorify or carry out extreme acts motivated by an attraction to violence and chaos as ends in themselves³.

This article argues that nihilistic violent extremism is not merely a variant of the known forms of terrorism, but a qualitatively distinct threat vector emerging from the convergence of individual, subcultural and technological factors. To understand it, the analytical focus must shift away from ideology —the axis on which almost the entire discipline has been built— towards the dynamics of belonging, identity and performativity that operate in contemporary digital environments. To that end, six factors are examined whose convergence makes the phenomenon possible.

The proliferation of labels —nihilistic violence, nihilistic and apocalyptic extremism,

¹ WHORISKEY, Peter, “*Killers without a cause: The rise in nihilistic violent extremism*”, The Washington Post, 8 February 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/02/08/nihilistic-violence-emerges/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

² Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “*Terror without ideology? The rise of nihilistic violence — an ISD investigation*”, ISD, 2 February 2026, <https://www.isdglobal.org/digital-dispatch/terror-without-ideology-the-rise-of-nihilistic-violence-an-isd-investigation/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

³ Institute for Economics and Peace, “*The Nihilistic Violent Extremist Ecosystem: A Global Threat*”, Vision of Humanity, 2026, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/the-nihilistic-violent-extremist-ecosystem-a-global-threat/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

online sadistic exploitation, participatory memetic violence, or violence-centred online communities— reflects an open debate about its ambiguous nature and its relationship to violent extremism⁴. This is no mere terminological accident: it expresses the difficulty of fitting a fluid reality into the customary categories. Some authors have warned, for example, that treating nihilistic violence as a simple subcategory of violent extremism risks obscuring its specificities, beginning with the marginal role that ideology plays within it⁵. This work seeks to offer an analytical framework that orders the factors at play and shows why their convergence demands a rethinking of the conceptual and preventive tools in current use. The value of this approach lies less in quantifying a phenomenon that remains hard to measure —given its decentralised nature and the fragmentation of the available data— than in identifying the mechanisms that make it possible and the reasons why it defies the dominant models.

Misanthropy as the primary motivation

The first distinctive feature of this extremism is that its motivation does not stem from a doctrine but from a generalised hatred of humanity. A review of the manifestos and digital traces of its protagonists reveals a deeply rooted misanthropy that becomes the underlying motive and the ultimate justification for violence⁶. That hatred is not directed at a particular group on the basis of its race, religion or political affiliation —although it often incorporates such hatreds— but at society as a whole and at the very fact of existence.

The Madison (Wisconsin) shooting of December 2024 is illustrative. The perpetrator, a fifteen-year-old girl, left a manifesto titled “War Against Humanity” in which she described the human race as “filth”⁷. Tellingly, the target of her attack —a predominantly white Christian school— did not fit the supremacist reading that some media outlets initially offered: what stood out to investigators was the broader desire to attack society at large. This shift from the particular enemy to the universal enemy is

⁴ SIVIGNON, Pierre, “*Escape The Void: Responding to Youth-Led Nihilistic Violence*”, GNET, 2 February 2026, <https://gnet-research.org/2026/02/02/escape-the-void-responding-to-youth-led-nihilistic-violence/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ SMITH, Peter; CADENHEAD, Cat and BROEKAERT, Clara, “*True Crime Community: Understanding the Depths of Digital Fandom and Performative Violence*”, CTC Sentinel, 19:2, February 2026, pp. 17-26, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/true-crime-community-understanding-the-depths-of-digital-fandom-and-performative-violence/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

⁷ WHORISKEY, Peter, *op. cit.*

precisely what distinguishes nihilistic misanthropy from ideologically structured hatred.

Such misanthropy rarely appears in a pure state. It tends to intertwine with considerable psychological distress: studies of the perpetrators of attacks on schools in the United States indicate that more than seventy per cent had experienced some form of childhood trauma, and the profiles examined recurrently feature suicidal ideation, low self-esteem and a sense of social exclusion⁸. Hatred of society and hatred of oneself merge, so that violence is oriented simultaneously outward and toward self-destruction. The point, therefore, is not to diagnose individual pathologies but to recognise that the primary motivation of these actors lies in an affective and existential register rather than a programmatic one.



MisanthropistCEL

Figure 1: Capture of the manifesto titled The New Crusade. Sons of Tarrant, released by the perpetrators of the armed attack on the Islamic Center of San Diego, California (May 2026).

To this affective substrate is added a component of personal grievance that should not be mistaken for a political programme. Analysis of manifestos, diaries and digital traces shows that attackers experience deep frustration and see themselves as victims of unfair treatment: allusions to unstable family environments, experiences of bullying and a socially isolated life lived as a sentence recur throughout⁹. Violence then operates as an inversion of powerlessness: the person who felt invisible and despised reimagines themselves as the agent of a collective punishment. This reading connects the

⁸ SMITH, P.; CADENHEAD, C. and BROEKAERT, C., *op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

phenomenon to a broader diagnosis of the crisis of meaning in the digital age, in which erratic, seemingly purposeless violence becomes the last available language for expressing a world perceived as hollow or beyond redemption¹⁰. Misanthropy, in short, is not a reasoned conclusion but the crystallisation of a malaise that finds in universal hatred a totalising and, paradoxically, comforting explanation.

Ideological hybridisation and fluidity

The second factor is the fluidity with which these actors adopt fragments of disparate extremist traditions without adhering to any of them. The literature has coined various labels for this phenomenon —“mixed, unclear and unstable” ideologies, “salad-bar extremism”, “fringe fluidity” or “composite violent extremism”— all pointing to the same reality: perpetrators who combine elements of white supremacism, accelerationism, misogyny, Satanism or radical environmentalism in personal constructions that appear incoherent to the outside observer¹¹.

The data suggest that this fluidity is not anecdotal. The number of radicalised young people in the United States with no formal ties to recognised extremist groups has risen markedly over the past decade, signalling a shift away from hierarchical structures towards diffuse configurations in which online communities play a central role¹².

It cannot be overlooked, however, that an emphasis on “ideological incoherence” may function as a distraction that renders perfectly identifiable historical hatreds —white supremacism in particular— invisible behind an apparently neutral label¹³. Ideological fluidity should not eclipse the clearly defined components of hatred that are indeed present. The decisive point is that, in these actors, ideological fragments work more as an aesthetic and symbolic repertoire than as a programme for action.

Participatory and memetic logic

The third factor moves the analysis from the individual to the community. Contemporary

¹⁰ PEDEN, Max, “*Nihilistic and Apocalyptic Violent Extremism: Symbolic Rupture and the Crisis of Meaning in the Digital Age*”, VOX-Pol, 15 October 2025, <https://voxpath.eu/nihilistic-apocalyptic-violent-extremism/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

¹¹ MELEAGROU-HITCHENS, Alexander and AYAD, Moustafa, “*The Age of Incoherence? Understanding Mixed and Unclear Ideology Extremism*”, Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, 2023, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/age-incoherence> (accessed 17/06/2026).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ MEIER, Anna, “*‘Salad Bar Extremism’ as White Distraction: The (In)coherence of a Category*”, Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), 24 August 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/08/24/salad-bar-extremism-as-white-distraction-the-incoherence-of-a-category/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

nihilistic violence is organised around online subcultures that operate as genuine fandoms of violence, in which the perpetrators of mass killings are researched, aestheticised, imitated and absorbed into a shared mythos. The concept of participatory memetic violence helps capture this shift: a form of violence that constitutes a symbolic statement of affiliation with, or participation in, groups that value transgressive action, whether as an end in itself or for its perceived social and cultural significance, in the absence of any clear strategic, political or ideological goal¹⁴.

The most revealing feature of this logic is that violent acts refer —explicitly or implicitly— to earlier acts through manifestos that cite notorious criminals, messages posted in community spaces, and the deliberate imitation of gestures, symbols, clothing and inscriptions on weapons. These signals are generally not aimed at an external audience but inward, toward the community itself: they are fully intelligible only to those immersed in it who know the collective mythos¹⁵. Violence thus becomes a deeply performative act in which recognition by peers is constitutive of the act itself.

This dynamic recalls the one observed in far-right extremism, where a “wiki effect” operates by which each attacker contributes to the collective product of the movement; the perpetrator of the Buffalo attack copied numerous passages from the Christchurch manifesto and acknowledged its author as the one who “started everything”¹⁶. The difference is that, in the nihilistic case, the collective product is not a movement with a political horizon but the community’s own mythos, which expands with each new violent contribution. The veneration of criminals is nothing new: the fandoms surrounding the Columbine perpetrators in the late 1990s, or the admiring letters certain serial killers received, prefigured in the analogue world a dynamic that digital platforms have amplified and accelerated¹⁷.

¹⁴ ONDRAK, Joe and VITELLI, Laura, “Participatory Memetic Violence: Legend, Ostension, and Ideologically Diffuse Violence”, GNET, 18 December 2025, <https://gnet-research.org/2025/12/18/participatory-memetic-violence-legend-ostension-and-ideologically-diffuse-violence/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

¹⁵ SMITH, P.; CADENHEAD, C. and BROEKAERT, C., *op. cit.*

¹⁶ AMARASINGAM, Amarnath; ARGENTINO, Marc-André and MACKLIN, Graham, “The Buffalo Attack: The Cumulative Momentum of Far-Right Terror”, CTC Sentinel, 15:7, 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-buffalo-attack-the-cumulative-momentum-of-far-right-terror/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

¹⁷ INFORM, “Cultic Fandoms: Columbine and Ted Kaczynski”, GNET, 9 August 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/08/09/cultic-fandoms-columbine-and-ted-kaczynski/> (accessed 17/06/2026).



Figure 2: Illustration included in the manifesto titled Niggercell Manifesto (November 2024), acknowledging the inspiration of “Saint Tarrant” —a reference to Brenton Tarrant, perpetrator of the attack on two mosques in Christchurch (New Zealand), which killed 51 people— and of “Saint Gendron” —a reference to Payton Gendron, perpetrator of the attack on a supermarket in Buffalo (New York), which killed ten Black victims.

The notion of ostension —the staging of a thing in itself, the point at which an idea, a phrase or a story ceases to be told and is instead enacted— helps explain how narratives collectively elaborated online can spill over into violent participation offline¹⁸. The attacker does not execute a plan dictated by an organisation but actualises a mythos in which they voluntarily inscribe themselves, adding their own chapter to a legend under construction. This framework explains why nihilistic violence proves so resistant to the classic categories: there is no command or hierarchy to dismantle, only a shared narrative that each participant can embody, and whose force lies precisely in its diffuse, open and cumulative character.

Desensitisation and the aestheticisation of harm

The fourth factor operates on the psychological and affective plane. Repeated exposure to gore content —recordings of attacks, images of victims, material from communities devoted to explicit violence— produces a progressive desensitisation that erodes the emotional response to others’ suffering. Psychological research supports this mechanism: sustained exposure to violence is associated with lower empathy and

¹⁸ ONDRAK, J. and VITELLI, L., *op. cit.*

reduced emotional reactivity to real-life violence¹⁹. Studies show that even brief exposure can diminish helping behaviour toward those in need, making desensitisation a key mechanism in the erosion of empathy and prosocial behaviour²⁰.

In nihilistic-violence subcultures this effect is aggravated by the aestheticisation of harm. Content documenting atrocities is edited with filters and music, turning it into entertainment and tribute material; the accessibility of AI-assisted editing tools has amplified this production, enabling variants that evade hash-based moderation systems²¹. The consequence is twofold: on the one hand, what would initially provoke moral revulsion is normalised through repeated exposure; on the other, violence is clothed in a visual appeal that turns it into an object of consumption and emulation. Aestheticisation is not incidental but part of the radicalisation mechanism itself.

Algorithmic amplification

The fifth factor concerns the technical infrastructure that sustains the phenomenon. Platform recommendation systems can steer users toward increasingly graphic and transgressive material. What begins as a mere interest in historic cases or notorious incidents may evolve, for a minority of users, into sustained engagement with perpetrator-centred narratives and highly visual depictions of violence²². The radicalisation pathways described in these subcultures move users from relatively conventional content toward subcultures saturated with gore, so that outbound linking to known hosts of such material constitutes a warning signal.

The empirical evidence on the algorithmic amplification of extremist content is far from conclusive. A landmark study analysing three platforms found that YouTube's recommendation system did promote extreme and fringe content, whereas those of Reddit and Gab did not²³. Other work, however, has found null results or shown that only a fraction of the pathways toward radical content can be attributed to recommendations, as against the weight of the user's own choices and the communities

¹⁹ MRUG, Sylvie; MADAN, Anjana; COOK, Edwin W. and WRIGHT, Rex A., "Emotional and Physiological Desensitization to Real-Life and Movie Violence", *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 44:5, 2015, pp. 1,092-1,108.

²⁰ BUSHMAN, Brad J. and ANDERSON, Craig A., "Comfortably Numb: Desensitizing Effects of Violent Media on Helping Others", *Psychological Science*, 20:3, 2009, pp. 273-277.

²¹ SMITH, P.; CADENHEAD, C. and BROEKAERT, C., *op. cit.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ WHITTAKER, Joe; LOONEY, Seán; REED, Alastair and VOTTA, Fabio, "Recommender systems and the amplification of extremist content", *Internet Policy Review*, 10:2, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.14763/2021.2.1565> (accessed 17/06/2026).

to which they belong²⁴. The reason is that algorithms operate neither as a sole nor a determining cause; they do, however, act as a facilitating factor that lowers the friction of access, normalises fringe content and connects like-minded users. Their role is better understood in interaction with the other factors than as an isolated mechanism.

Contagion and feedback loops

The sixth and final factor closes the circle: each attack generates new material that feeds the cycle. Nihilistic-violence subcultures prove dangerously self-sustaining, since every community-linked attack triggers a fresh wave of content and engagement which, in turn, nourishes the legend and spurs on those seeking to participate in, imitate and expand it²⁵. The result is a recursive cycle that produces genuine chains of perpetrators, in which one incident inspires many others.

This effect is borne out by research on the contagion of mass shootings. Such indiscriminate killings are temporally contagious: each one raises the probability of further events over a period of around thirteen days, prompting on average between 0.2 and 0.3 additional attacks²⁶. Although the evidence is not unanimous²⁷, the clustering pattern and the documentation of cases of explicit emulation are robust enough to support the view that contagion is a real mechanism, especially when media coverage and the circulation of information online amplify the perpetrator's notoriety.

Practical implications follow from this. Research on the pursuit of fame among mass killers has underpinned proposals such as refraining from broadcasting their name or image while reporting everything else, so as to deny them the attention they crave²⁸. In the nihilistic context, where recognition by the community is the principal incentive, strategies aimed at interrupting the notoriety loop —by limiting the circulation of perpetrator-produced material— acquire particular relevance.

Perpetrators and platforms

²⁴ HOSSEINMARDI, Homa et al., "Examining the consumption of radical content on YouTube", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118:32, 2021.

²⁵ SMITH, P.; CADENHEAD, C. and BROEKAERT, C., *op. cit.*

²⁶ TOWERS, Sherry; GOMEZ-LIEVANO, Andrés; KHAN, Maryam; MUBAYI, Anuj and CASTILLO-CHAVEZ, Carlos, "Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings", PLoS ONE, 10:7, 2015, e0117259.

²⁷ LANKFORD, Adam and TOMEK, Sara, "Mass Killings in the United States from 2006 to 2013: Social Contagion or Random Clusters?", Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 48:4, 2018, pp. 459-467.

²⁸ LANKFORD, Adam and MADFIS, Eric, "Don't Name Them, Don't Show Them, But Report Everything Else: A Pragmatic Proposal for Denying Mass Killers the Attention They Seek", American Behavioral Scientist, 62:2, 2018, pp. 260-279.

This analysis would be incomplete without considering the profile of those who ultimately move from online participation to violence, and the technical environment that hosts them. Despite their ideological heterogeneity, perpetrators share a set of recurring traits that confirm the non-programmatic character of the phenomenon: an entrenched misanthropy that serves as the ultimate justification, signs of deteriorating mental health, personal grievances and a sense of exclusion, together with intense engagement with graphic violent content²⁹. What binds these actors is not a shared doctrine but an attraction to the collective mythos and a search for the recognition that life off-screen denies them.

The average age of participants in these spaces is strikingly low, with a significant presence of adolescents and even pre-adolescents, placing the phenomenon at the intersection of child protection and the prevention of extremism. Analysing the wave of violent extremism involving minors, Ware³⁰ observes that applying an ideological lens to understand why children and young people become involved in violent extremism is inadequate for countering the current trend, and argues for shifting preventive efforts away from the identification of doctrinal affiliations and toward the personal drivers of violence and the underlying vulnerabilities.

This circumstance heightens the responsibility of platforms and qualifies any reading that reduces the problem to the free choice of informed adults. The environments where this violence flourishes are characterised by a layered structure in which the boundaries between conventional consumption, perpetrator-glorifying fandom and the explicit advocacy of violence are porous, so that low-friction pathways lead from casual interest to the emulation of cultural practices and, for a minority, to radicalisation.

These communities' behaviour toward moderation reveals a notable capacity for adaptation. Their members resort to altered spellings, coded emojis and lexicons, the blurring of images and the reproduction of material on gaming platforms in order to evade automated filters, using techniques similar to those employed by the supporters of terrorist organisations. The implication for prevention is clear: moderation based solely on keywords is insufficient, and what is required is sustained, context-sensitive monitoring capable of interpreting language deliberately designed to escape detection.

²⁹ SMITH, P.; CADENHEAD, C. and BROEKAERT, C., *op. cit.*

³⁰ WARE, Jacob, *Combating Youth Radicalization* (New York: The Soufan Center, May 2026), <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/combating-youth-radicalization/> (accessed 17/06/2026).

The most visible and prolific layer, far from being the most dangerous operationally, paradoxically constitutes the most accessible point of intervention, precisely because of its public exposure.

The six factors examined do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another: misanthropy supplies the motivation; ideological fluidity, the symbolic repertoire; participatory logic, the framework of communal meaning; desensitisation, the affective disposition; algorithmic amplification, the infrastructure of access; and contagion, the engine of reproduction. It is their convergence that constitutes the phenomenon as a specific threat vector.

The dominant analytical frameworks in radicalisation studies assume that extremism is an ideological construct that can be debated, defused or replaced through discursive intervention. But a phenomenon whose primary motivation is misanthropy, whose bond is fandom and whose grammar is digital performativity escapes that logic. A cause cannot be delegitimised when there is no cause to delegitimise; counter-narratives lose their efficacy against actors who seek neither to persuade nor to be persuaded, but to belong and to be recognised.

This difficulty has an operational correlate. The definition of nihilistic violent extremism used by some public actors is too broad to be useful, to the point of encompassing both white supremacism and jihadist terrorism, which share a hatred of society but pursue a political or religious end. Differentiating nihilistic violence from ideologically structured forms is indispensable for identifying the risk factors, mobilisation pathways and intervention points specific to it.

Conclusions

Nihilistic violent extremism reveals a blind spot in terrorism studies: the existence of actors for whom violence is not a means in the service of a project but a symbolic language and a route to belonging. This performative turn—in which communication becomes ritual rather than strategy—challenges both theoretical frameworks and the practical tools of prevention.

The phenomenon can only be understood as a convergence. Isolating any one of the six factors—misanthropy, ideological fluidity, participatory logic, desensitisation, algorithmic amplification or contagion—yields a partial characterisation. It is their

interaction that produces a qualitatively new threat vector, especially dangerous for its capacity to sustain itself and for the disproportionate way it affects a very young population.

The inadequacy of ideology-centred frameworks has become a central concern within the field of prevention itself. Several lines of action follow. Conceptually, nihilistic violent extremism should be given a restricted definition that clearly distinguishes it from ideologically structured forms, without neglecting any components of hatred that may be present. Operationally, prevention should shift its emphasis away from ideological counter-narrative and toward interrupting the mechanisms of belonging, recognition and contagion: sustained, context-sensitive content moderation, attention to the pathways that lead from conventional consumption to graphic material, and the exploitation of leakage —the tendency of prospective attackers to communicate their intentions— as an opportunity for early intervention³¹. Finally, the transnational and networked nature of the phenomenon demands interdisciplinary and international collaboration combining discourse analysis, psychology, criminology and the study of digital media.

As political violence increasingly manifests in forms detached from coherent ideological projects, understanding nihilistic violent extremism ceases to be a marginal curiosity and becomes an analytical and preventive necessity of the first order. The challenge, ultimately, is to learn to think about a form of violence whose principal message, as one of its protagonists warned, is that there is no message³².

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³¹ SMITH, P.; CADENHEAD, C. and BROEKAERT, C., *op. cit.*

³² VOX-Pol, *op. cit.*