



# Spotting the Signs: Recognizing and Responding to Subcultures of Nihilistic Violence

**Content warning:** This resource contains graphic descriptions of self-harm, sexual content, abuse, cruelty to animals and child exploitation.

**Reader's note:** Many of the behaviors described below are not causally linked to criminality or acts of violence but should be considered within a broader risk assessment. The conversations included as examples have been modified to protect the identities and privacy of the individuals involved.

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# OVERVIEW

Recent, seemingly disconnected acts of violence – including school shootings in the US, stabbing sprees in Sweden, and attacks in nearly a dozen other countries – have been linked to online communities centered around nihilistic worldviews (the rejection of all religious, moral and social values, often accompanied by a belief that life is meaningless). Although these subcultures can produce outcomes similar to ideologically-motivated extremism<sup>1</sup>, their goals, worldviews and motivations<sup>2</sup> differ from classic ideological movements. This presents distinct challenges for prevention and safeguarding.

Rooted in ISD research and casework, this guide summarizes the characteristics and behaviors that may indicate participation in a subculture of nihilistic violence<sup>3</sup>, along with events or conditions that could mobilize an individual to violence<sup>4</sup>. It also provides practical considerations for parents, teachers and frontline practitioners.

# WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT?



## INDICATORS

Signs that someone might be part of a subculture of nihilistic violence. Such signs are concerning, but not necessarily confirmation that the person has engaged in criminal wrongdoing or is a risk to themselves or others.



## ACCELERANTS

High-risk traits or conditions that are often displayed by participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence but are not necessarily indicative of their involvement. Those who display accelerants, particularly in conjunction with indicators, may present a considerable risk to themselves or others.



## TRIGGERS

Adverse events or conditions that could be destabilizing to a member of a subculture of nihilistic violence, increasing the risk of imminent harm to themselves or others. Such events may precipitate emergency intervention as they increase the risk of harm for those already steeped in violent online communities and carry the risk of dramatically accelerating mobilization to violence.



## INTERVENTION CHALLENGES

Narratives, conditions and concerns prevalent amongst participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence that make them more reluctant to seek or accept help. Lack of trust in authority figures, fear of arrest or involuntary treatment, and proximity to criminal elements reduce the likelihood of honesty or cooperation from participants in these communities.



# INDICATORS

The following indicator traits may be exhibited by participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence. Such signs are concerning, but not necessarily confirmation that the person has engaged in criminal wrongdoing or is a risk to themselves or others. Additionally, indicator traits do not mean that an individual is necessarily planning to carry out acts of targeted or mass violence; they are only used to establish a subject's likely participation within these groups.

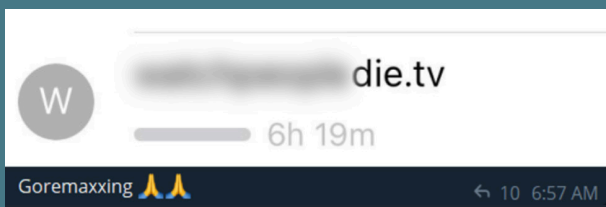
## INDICATOR 1

### EXTREME INTEREST IN GORE

Members of subcultures of nihilistic violence often display a fascination with online 'gore content', which typically takes the form of pictures/videos portraying either real or simulated injury, trauma, torture or death. This fascination may manifest as:

- Spending large amounts of time collecting, sharing, and/or creating gore compilations
- Frequent use of sites, groups or forums dedicated to sharing gore content
- Demonstrating familiarity with gore, such as soliciting content from other users or requesting particular videos that may have been taken down from other platforms

**Figure 1** Link to a gore website posted in a Telegram chat associated with a subculture of nihilistic violence.



## INDICATOR 2

### EXTREME ANTISOCIAL BEHAVIOUR OR INTERESTS

Extreme antisocial behavior such as sexual violence, extortion, assault or torture - and the discussion of such behaviors - are key components of subcultures of nihilistic violence, particularly those associated with the 764 network. Those who participate in subcultures of nihilistic violence may display an organic or independent interest in such behavior. What distinguishes these communities is the performative sharing of extreme content for the purposes of group acceptance. This includes:

- Requesting or producing self-harm images
- Creating video or visual content depicting self-harm, animal abuse or other extreme behaviors
- Discussion of, or interest in, harming animals
- Discussion of detailed fantasies about hurting themselves or others
- Fantasizing about perpetrating or being a victim of extreme sexual violence<sup>5</sup>, often involving severe bodily injury
- Thrill or power-seeking criminal behavior such as extortion or swatting
- One-sided rivalries or intense hatred of others for no clear reason, such as wanting to kill a classmate for being 'annoying'

### INDICATOR 3

## DESIRE FOR RECOGNITION OR NOTORIETY

Ideologically motivated extremists are motivated by their desire for social or political change; by contrast, subcultures of nihilistic violence are often driven by a need for recognition or notoriety. While in the most extreme cases participants in these communities carry out acts of violence to gain that recognition or notoriety, most do not escalate to that level; instead, they seek acceptance by sharing content or discussing violence.

An individual's position within the internal hierarchy of these groups is directly tied to their creation or sharing of such content. This incentive structure can make individuals more susceptible to being goaded into acts of violence on behalf of the group. Associated behaviors include:

- Creating videos or imagery of criminal or violent activity, particularly as stylized 'edits'
- Discussing desire and intent to carry out acts of violence, whether publicly or in private online spaces

**Figure 1** Post advertising the requirements to join No Lives Matter, an offshoot from 764.



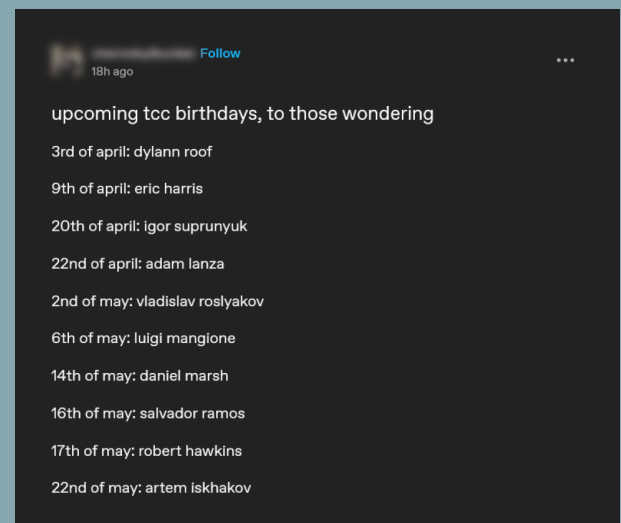
### INDICATOR 4

## OBSESSION WITH MASS KILLERS

Those engaged within subcultures of nihilistic violence, particularly the True Crime Community (TCC), often display an obsession with the biographical details, lifestyle, behaviors or activities of mass killers that goes far beyond academic interest or morbid curiosity. This behavior may manifest as infatuation, idolization or even rivalry. Some habits include:

- Creating fan art, compiling fan videos or media, or dressing as past attackers or mass killers
- Imitating attackers' favorite music, movies, video games or other cultural touchstones
- Attempting to visit or contact a mass killer or their family
- Obsessing over case details, plotting, tactics, timelines, kill counts or other practical aspects of the attack
- Memorializing and venerating attackers by honoring birthdays, anniversaries, date of death, or milestones in their prison sentence

**Figure 2** Tumblr post listing upcoming birthdays of mass killers popular among TCC fans.

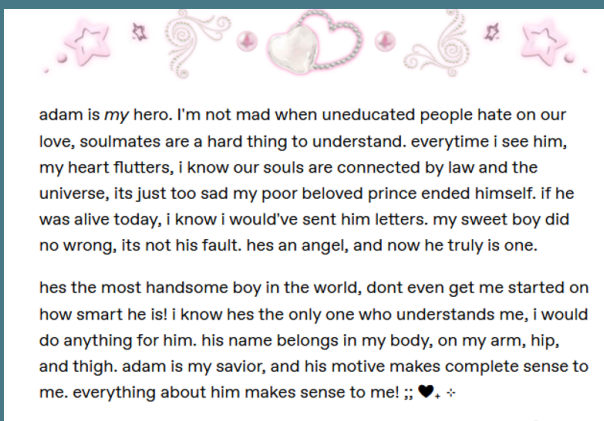


## INDICATOR 5

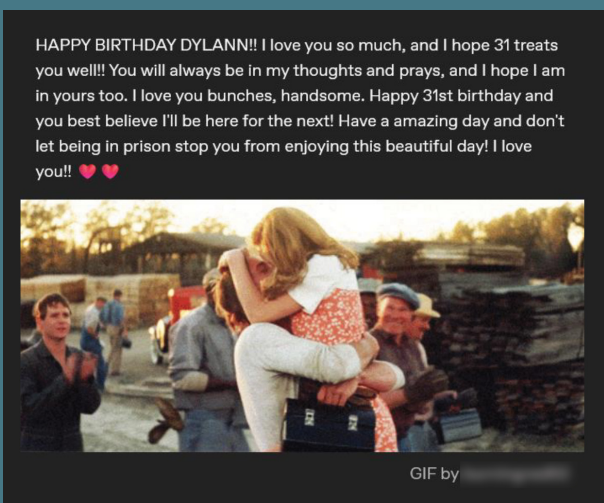
### PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH MASS KILLERS

Participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence (particularly TCC) may discuss feelings for, or imagined relationships with, mass killers that border on delusional – often referred to as a parasocial relationship. This often mirrors traditional fandoms in which devotees obsess over musicians or actors. Some TCC fans truly believe they are in a relationship with, or are even a reincarnation of, their favorite mass killer.

**Figure 3** Tumblr post about an imagined relationship with Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook shooter.



**Figure 4** A birthday post from a TCC fan on Tumblr for Dylann Roof, the White supremacist mass killer responsible for the Charleston church shooting.



Examples of this behavior include:

- Speaking about dead attackers in the present tense or in the second person (you/your) as if addressing them directly
- Displaying signs of dissociative identity disorder (DID)<sup>6</sup> or experiencing hallucinations
- Naming so-called “alters” or “headmates”<sup>7</sup> after mass killers or claiming to hear their voices. Some commonly used alternatives to DID include referring to oneself as a system, plural or multi
- Claiming to communicate with mass killers in dreams or visions
- Believing that they are in a relationship with a mass killer<sup>8</sup>
- Use of character.ai or other AI chatbots to simulate conversation or relationships with specific mass killers

# ACCELERANTS

Accelerants are traits or conditions that are often displayed by participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence but are not necessarily indicative of their involvement. Those who display accelerants, particularly in conjunction with other indicators, may present a considerable risk to themselves or others. Some accelerants, including involvement with violent extremist groups, are of clear concern on their own. Others, such as loneliness and isolation, do not represent significant risk factors independently but should be considered as part of a broader assessment.



## ACCELERANT 1

### INVOLVEMENT WITH VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS OR IDEOLOGIES

Subcultures of nihilistic violence overlap significantly with neo-Nazi and accelerationist spaces online. Participants often join these groups out of a shared interest in violence and/or aesthetics rather than a shared ideology or worldview. Engaging in online extremist spaces is a cause for concern in itself but may also heighten the risk of nihilistic violence as part of a broader 'hybridization' across diverse harmful online communities. Displaying an interest in extremist killers or using racist language may be an attempt to 'fit in' with an online group or simply an expression of antisocial behavior; it does not necessarily indicate that an individual has adopted an extremist worldview.

Examples of this include:

- Sharing or promoting specific extremist group literature, symbols, tactics or social media pages
- Demonstrating in-depth knowledge of an extremist ideology by using in-group language, referencing esoteric extremist narratives, or being familiar with specific group leaders or philosophers
- Engaging in extended online debates or discussions about seemingly obscure ideological or philosophical points





## ACCELERANT 2

### MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES OR CRISES

Those who participate in subcultures of nihilistic violence often suffer from—or present themselves as suffering from—mental health issues. Discussions of substance abuse, eating disorders, and self-harm are common in these communities. Separately, groups such as the [764 network](#) often target communities associated with these mental health disorders, viewing them as vulnerable victims. It is important to note, however, that mental health issues alone are not a risk factor for involvement in nihilistic violence.

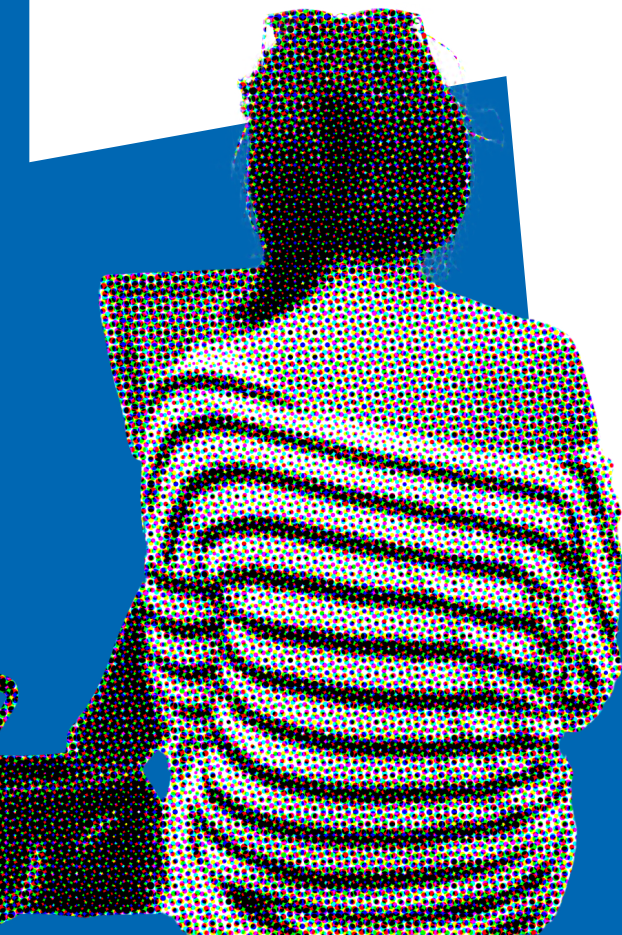
Some mental health issues or risks include:

- Substance abuse:** Consumption of potentially dangerous amounts or mixtures of caffeine, alcohol, prescription medication, over-the-counter medications, inhalants, tobacco, or illegal drugs. TCC participants seem to have a particular affinity for recreational use of diphenhydramine (sold under the brand name Benadryl), a common antihistamine.
- Self-harm behaviors:** Cutting is the most common form of self-injury among participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence, though some may also engage in other compulsive methods that are easier to conceal, such as punching or hitting themselves, banging their heads against objects, asphyxiation, inflicting burns, or applying ice directly to the skin for extended periods of time.
- Disordered eating and extreme dieting:** Online eating disorder communities, sometimes broadly referred to a “pro-ana,” may promote extreme fasting, induced vomiting, abuse of stimulants or diet pills, or request that people respond cruelly to pictures of their body to help them stay motivated. There is substantial overlap between such communities and those that similarly promote self-harm.
- Derealization, dissociation or psychotic states:** They may describe auditory, visual or sensory hallucinations, paranoia, a sense that they might not be fully alive, difficulty telling what is real, describing being in a ‘liminal space,’ and agitation at feeling ‘trapped’ or ‘stuck’ in an unreal state.
- Lack of sleep:** They may report prolonged insomnia, being unwilling or unable to sleep due to feeling unsafe or experiencing nightmares, increasing caffeine or stimulant dependence, constant irritability and exhaustion, or maintaining an irregular or erratic sleep schedule.
- Loneliness and isolation:** Discussion of social or dating problems, peer rejection, lack of in-person connection, agoraphobic tendencies, an unwillingness to see friends and family, inability to drive or use public transit, and not working or attending school outside of their home.

# TRIGGERS

Triggers are destabilizing events or conditions that may increase the risk an individual poses to themselves or others. These circumstances alone cannot predict or determine a risk of violence; however, they may serve to mobilize individuals who already display other indicators, traits or conditions. Some triggers could include, but are not limited to:

- **Social rejections or break-ups:** Extreme anger, feelings of humiliation, a desire for revenge, hopelessness or self-loathing in the aftermath of a break-up or rejection
- **Recent suicide attempts:** Mentions of recent hospitalizations, severe injuries, calls to crisis lines or other signs that an individual has recently been in crisis and may be at risk of escalating their behaviors
- **Fights with friends or family:** Fear that they will be alone, inability to forgive or be forgiven, attempts to run away from home, inability to physically distance themselves from the person or situation, or expressing extreme and irrational anger toward loved ones without hope of resolution
- **Fear of being institutionalized:** Expressions of concern that others may have discovered their harmful or dangerous behaviors, beliefs that they have been reported to a school or the police, previous negative encounters with hospitals or law enforcement, feelings of being trapped or cornered, and an extreme aversion to speaking with counselors may all be cause for concern
- **Fear of impending failure or crisis:** Failing grades that may prevent grade level advancement or graduation, dropping out of school, not getting accepted into college, being forced by family into an academic program they do not believe they can handle, feeling untalented and useless, upcoming birthdays or anniversaries that represent missed milestones, feelings of shame or embarrassment about a lack of life accomplishments, or a fear that failures are going to be exposed to friends or family
- **Sudden life changes:** Eviction, repossession of vehicles or property, loss of income, moving to a new area, loss of a loved one, loss of benefits or healthcare, being fired or let go, or expulsion from school
- **Social, legal or financial stress:** Fear they could be the subject of a law enforcement investigation, involvement in a prolonged online feud, being targeted by threats or harassment within one's peer group, experiencing a divorce or custody dispute, ongoing legal proceedings or appeals—or facing debt, legal or medical bills, or facing other crises that can create an unsustainably stressful environment



# INTERVENTION CHALLENGES

Intervention challenges consist of narratives, conditions and concerns prevalent amongst participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence that make them more reluctant to seek or accept help. Lack of trust in authority figures, fear of arrest or involuntary treatment, and proximity to criminal elements reduce the likelihood of honesty or cooperation from participants in these communities.

Some intervention challenges include:

- **Participants in TCC discuss fears of being referred to intervention and “deradicalization” programs, as well as concerns that they may have been referred without their knowledge.** Additionally, users discuss lying to their therapists, parents, law enforcement and other professionals who might be able to help them.

My therapist doesn't know anything about my true mental state

Ah i actually have an appointment with mine today

It's fun to lie to mine. I know that they couldn't help me if they knew the truth

**Figure 5** TCC fans discussing psychiatric care on Telegram.  
*Reader's note: This conversation has been modified to protect the identities and privacy of the individuals involved.*

- **Many of those in nihilistic violent spaces exhibit paranoid thoughts about being stalked, surveilled or investigated by law enforcement.** Users in TCC chats express fears about being surveilled after having seen police cars nearby or getting calls from unknown numbers, regardless of any criminal wrongdoing. These fears are often exacerbated by cases in which TCCers knew the perpetrators of recent attacks or arrests and are scared that this association could



## A SHORT CASE STUDY<sup>9</sup>

In 2024, a 14-year-old that we will refer to as Child A was killed by a police officer after bringing a pellet gun and incendiary devices to their middle school, an incident ISD analysts assess as a “suicide-by-cop.” Child A identified himself in online posts as a ‘Columbiner’ who had dabbled in TCC, and who wrote on their blog prior to their death that they felt “addicted to Columbine,” and feared how it was affecting them. They also posted online that they believed they had no safe way to seek help, and that they were worried that attempting to speak with a counselor or therapist about this obsession would result in arrest or admittance to a psychiatric unit.

Child A's fears were not unique. Many in TCC and other nihilistic violent spaces discuss wanting to seek help for mental health issues, but fear that professionals would not understand their relationship to such online communities and would brand them terrorists. Consequently, participants in nihilistic online spaces are less likely to seek help or be honest with parents, teachers, counselors, doctors, social workers, law enforcement, or any other adults or institutions about their need for help.



result in them being treated as a suspect or accomplice. This effect is especially pronounced when a participant in a nihilistic subculture may be both a perpetrator and a victim of the communities they are active in, leaving them unwilling to seek help for extortion, report threats of violence, or attempt to distance themselves from the groups. This is distinct from the gangstalking fears exhibited by [Targeted Individuals](#).

- **Participants in nihilistic subcultures are often afraid to seek help even for unrelated issues.** Some have discussed unwillingness to get help with eating disorders, substance abuse, domestic abuse, bullying, falling behind in school, poverty, unemployment, loss of a loved one and other situations that may benefit from professional intervention. Many participants fear seeking help could somehow result in their online activities being discovered.

Whatever you're facing, there are resources that can support you

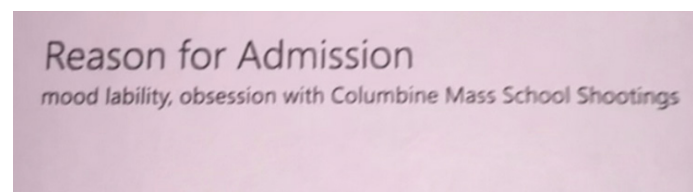
You're stronger than these thoughts twin

Absolutely, I'm just scared and too lazy to reach out

**Figure 6** Discussion in a TCC Telegram channel about assistance. *Reader's note: This conversation has been modified to protect the identities and privacy of the individuals involved.*

- **Participants who have previously been involuntarily committed to inpatient institutions are particularly fearful about the prospect of going back.** Some claim to have experienced abuse or traumatic incidents while within such institutions; others simply found them unhelpful and miserable places to be. Fears of being forcibly sent back to such institutions may cause such individuals to react with increased dishonesty or hostility to attempts at intervention.
- **While nihilistic subcultures encourage dangerous behaviors and exacerbate mental health issues, many participants see these communities as their support systems and are reluctant to leave them.** TCC chats and blogs feature interactions between users venting about problems in their life, trying to

talk each other out of suicide or other drastic actions, checking in on people they have not heard from in a while, and even making small talk about their pets or classes. Users frequently lament that such communities are the only place they feel valued and heard. While they would like to be more 'normal,' they do not want to go back to feeling alone. While the considerable volume of violent and antisocial content in these spaces has an obvious harmful effect on the wellbeing of participants, each person's relationship with the community is different. Some may be far more resistant to cutting contact with violent nihilistic subcultures than others, particularly if they lack a comparable offline support system.



THEY DIDNT HAVE TO PUT ALLAT??????

#andre kriegman #zero day #andre keuck #cal gabriel  
#calvin gabriel #tcc tumblr #teeceeece #zero day 2003  
#tcc dylan #tcc eric

**Figure 7** TCC fan sharing an intake form on Tumblr that references obsession with Columbine.



# CONCLUSION

To confront the emerging threat posed by subcultures of nihilistic violence, prevention and enforcement frameworks must evolve to detect and mitigate radicalization and mobilization pathways to reflect the unique challenges posed by this community. Practitioners and policymakers should remain alert to a combination of indicators, accelerants, and triggers that often precede or accompany involvement in these spaces.

Indicators such as an obsessive interest in gore, fascination with mass killers, or performative displays of cruelty may not in themselves suggest imminent violence but can signal immersion in communities that normalize harm and desensitize individuals to suffering. Accelerants—including mental health crises, loneliness, or exposure to extremist ideologies—can heighten risk. Finally, triggers such as sudden personal upheaval, suicide attempts or humiliation can act as catalysts for individuals to mobilize toward violence.

Equally important are the challenges presented when attempting interventions. Individuals in nihilistic violence subcultures often fear punishment or involuntary treatment if they disclose their activities. Many express distrust of law enforcement and other authorities and rely on their online communities as their support systems, even when those spaces reinforce self-harm or violent ideation. These dynamics underscore the need for empathetic, informed engagement strategies.

The indicators, accelerants and triggers listed above represent the latest research into these constantly evolving communities and should form the basis but not the totality of a detection and prevention framework.

# RESOURCES

## US RESOURCES

### NATIONAL CENTER FOR MISSING AND EXPLOITED CHILDREN (NCMEC)

NCMEC is a non-profit organization which works to prevent the exploitation and victimization of children through providing a variety of services.

### TAKEITDOWN

TakeItDown is a free service provided by NCMEC which facilitates the removal of non-consensual intimate imagery from participating online platforms. Victims submit images to be added to TakeItDown's hash-sharing database, preventing further victimization.

### CYBERTIPLINE

The CyberTipline is NCMEC's central hub for reporting both online and offline child exploitation. NCMEC can provide direct support to victims who report through the CyberTipline, as well as connecting them with law enforcement resources.

### FBI INTERNET CRIME COMPLAINT CENTER (IC3)

Formerly known as the Internet Fraud Complaint Center, the IC3 is the FBI's central hub for reporting any "cyber-enabled crime", including hacking and online extortion. IC3 provides an online portal for victims and associated individuals to report online crimes to the bureau.

### NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR EATING DISORDERS (NEDA)

NEDA is a non-profit organization that supports individuals and families affected by eating disorders through education, resources, interventions, and research.

### 988 LIFELINE

The 988 Lifeline is a national network of crisis centers who provide free and confidential emotional support to individuals struggling with suicidal thoughts, behaviours, or crises.

### CRISIS TEXT LINE

Crisis Text Line is an organization that provides free, text-based mental health support and crisis intervention.

## UK RESOURCES

### CHILD EXPLOITATION AND ONLINE PROTECTION COMMAND (CEOP)

Part of the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA), CEOP provides a reporting centre for child sexual exploitation and abuse, as well as educational resources for children, parents and professionals.

### NSPCC

### (NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN)

A leading UK child protection charity offering helplines, counselling and advocacy.

### CHILDLINE

A free, confidential helpline and online service provided by the NSPCC for children and young people up to the age of 19.

### INTERNET WATCH FOUNDATION (IWF)

A UK charity working to remove CSAM and criminal content online. The IWF provides a public reporting hotline where illegal imagery can be flagged for rapid removal.

### REVENGE PORN HELPLINE

A confidential support service for adults (18+) who have experienced non-consensual sharing of intimate images offering legal advice, emotional support and help in removing content online.

### PAPYRUS UK

A national charity dedicated to the prevention of youth suicide.

### BEAT

The UK's leading charity supporting people with eating disorders.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This is not to be confused with safe and consensual roleplay scenarios between adults, which does not indicate involvement in subcultures of nihilistic violence.
- 2 In many cases, TCC fans or members of other subcultures of nihilistic violence are not diagnosed with DID but will create a personal fiction in which they either believe or communicate to others that they are suffering from the disorder.
- 3 Terminology for participants in subcultures of nihilistic violence varies. The US Department of Justice refers to them as “Nihilistic Violent Extremists (NVEs),” however ISD researchers have raised concerns with the term and its definition (for more information see [“Setting the Record Straight on Nihilistic Violence”](#)). UK authorities have used the term “violence fascinated individuals.”
- 4 For more information on these distinctions, see [“Terror without Ideology? The Rise of Nihilistic Violence”](#)
- 5 This is not to be confused with safe and consensual roleplay scenarios between adults, which does not indicate involvement in subcultures of nihilistic violence.
- 6 In many cases, TCC fans or members of other subcultures of nihilistic violence are not diagnosed with DID but will create a personal fiction in which they either believe or communicate to others that they are suffering from the disorder.
- 7 There are many names used for different types of extreme identification or alternate personalities. Most common are alter or headmate, but some may refer to themselves as “fictives” or “factives” referring to identifies based on fictional or real people. Within TCC context, these are not clinical terms.
- 8 In fandom spaces, fans may engage in ‘yumeshipping’: this involves emotionally, although not literally, “real” relationships with a fictional character or celebrity. Although this behavior is unusual and perhaps unhealthy, it is not always delusional. Most yumeshippers are aware that they are engaging in deep roleplay and fantasy scenarios and not reality.
- 9 This Case Study is of a real example which has been covered in the media; however, we have anonymised out of concerns for Child A’s privacy and that of their family.



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