



Violence Fixated Individuals

Online Ecosystems, Psychological Pathways to Violence and Linguistic Warning Signals

Dr Julia Ebner

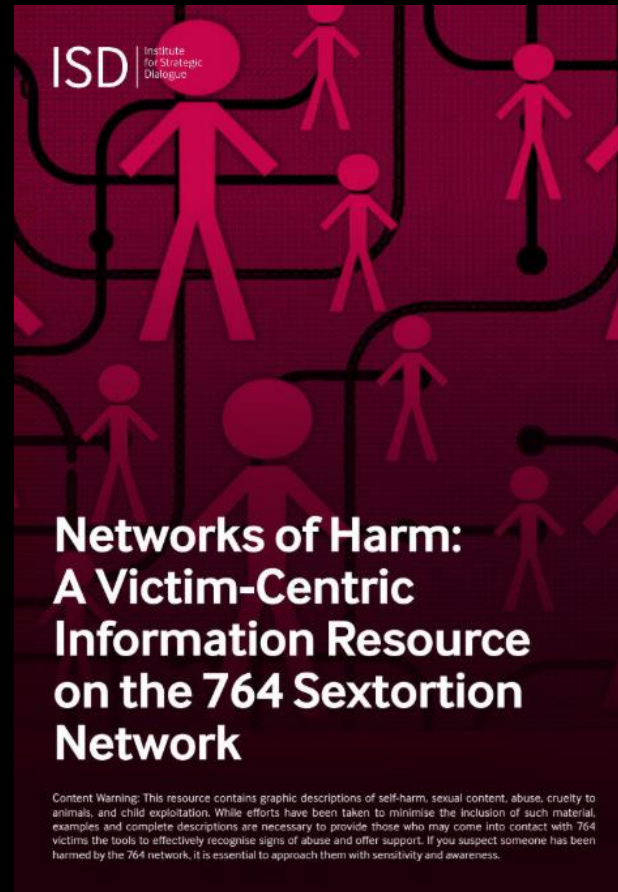
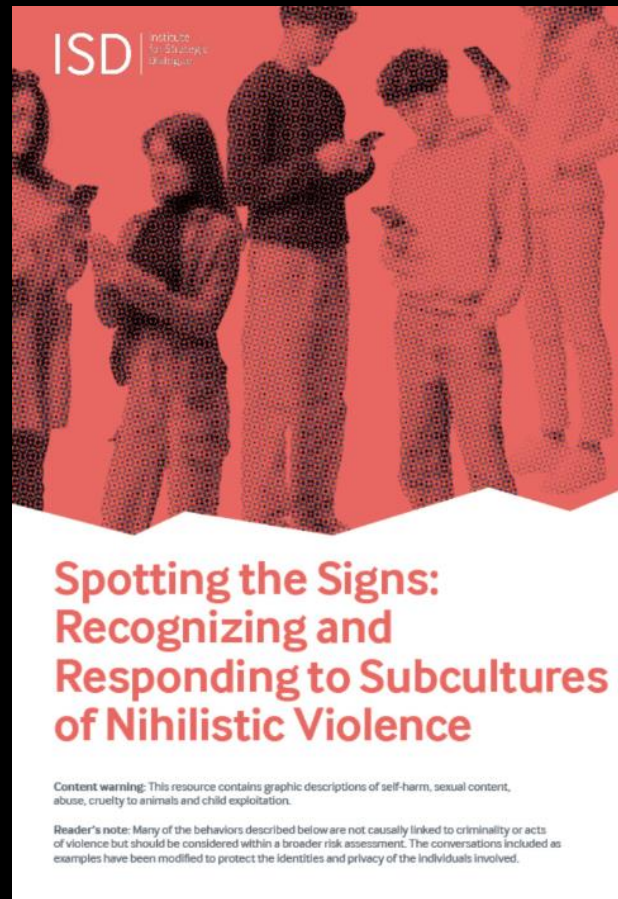
Leader of the Violent Extremism Lab, Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, University of Oxford

Postdoctoral Researcher at the Calleva Centre (Magdalen College), University of Oxford

Co-Executive Director at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue

15 September 2026, Southport Inquiry Seminar

The Emerging Threat of Violence Fixated Individuals and Movements



Gamified Terrorism and Competition for "Higher Scores"

Graded score

Kills: 51/20 (49 injured) *Second deadliest mass shooting in the civilized (non-American/warzone) world.*

Accuracy: 10/20 *Could've killed far more mudslimes; pussied out due to a thrown card machine.*

Style: 40/20 *Plays Remove Kebab, baits media, fucks with Candace Owens, and a million other memes; the first post-ironic shooter.*

Butthurt: 20/20 *NZ peacefags horrified, as are Mudslimes the world over. **TABLES TURNED MUTHAFUCKAS!!!1!!***

Bonus: 20/20 *Overall excellence in style, planning, copycats, and butthurt.*

Total score: 141/100 (S++)

"Breivheart"

Ausfags are even better at mass shooting than Burgers, proving shitpost supremacy once and for all.

The Halle attacker
created an
"Achievements" list, like
in a video game

Halle, October 2019



<i>2 Kikes 1 Shekel</i> Kill 2 jews with a grenade.	<i>Why not both?</i> Kill a muslim and a jew.
<i>The fire rises.</i> Burn down a synagogue.	<i>Crusty Kebab</i> Burn down a mosque.
<i>Cultural Appropriation</i> Stab a muslim.	<i>Midnight Genocide</i> Kill 3 niggers between 11pm and 1 am.
<i>If I only had one bullet...</i> Kill a traitor.	<i>Blue-screened</i> Kill a ZOG-bot.
<i>Life collectivized</i> Kill a communist.	<i>Crossed out</i> Kill a christian.
<i>This is my BOOM-STICK!</i> Kill someone with a Slam-Bang.	<i>The Eternal Anglo</i> Kill someone with a Luty.
<i>You only live once.</i>	<i>Boomers Pride</i>

“DIY Terrorism” and Copycat Attacks



Halle-Attentäter nutzte 3-D-Drucker für Waffenproduktion



Ideological and tactical inspiration

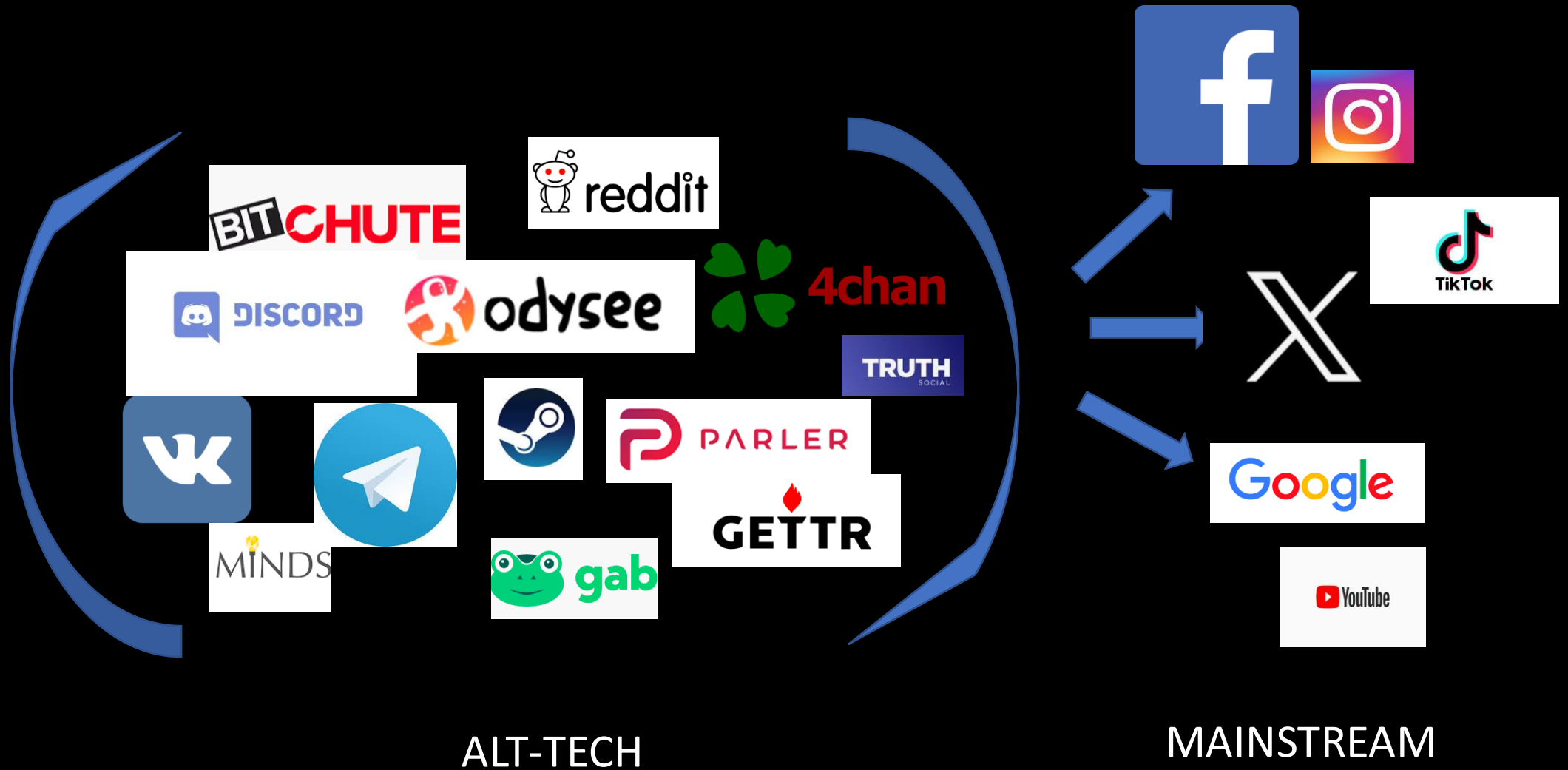


Far-right extremist who had Christchurch terror attack manifesto was collecting bomb components

Security guard with DIY terrorism guides jailed

Far-right extremist downloaded bomb-making terror manual

How Extremist Propaganda Spreads Online



Youth-Centred Online Content Across the Radicalisation Spectrum

ISIS “Call of Jihad” Propaganda



Far-right Extremist Propaganda



Alt-Salafi Propaganda using Pepe the Frog



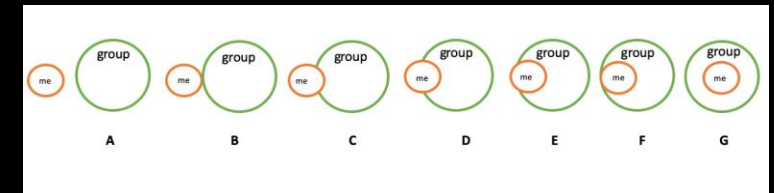
Active Club Networks, 2023



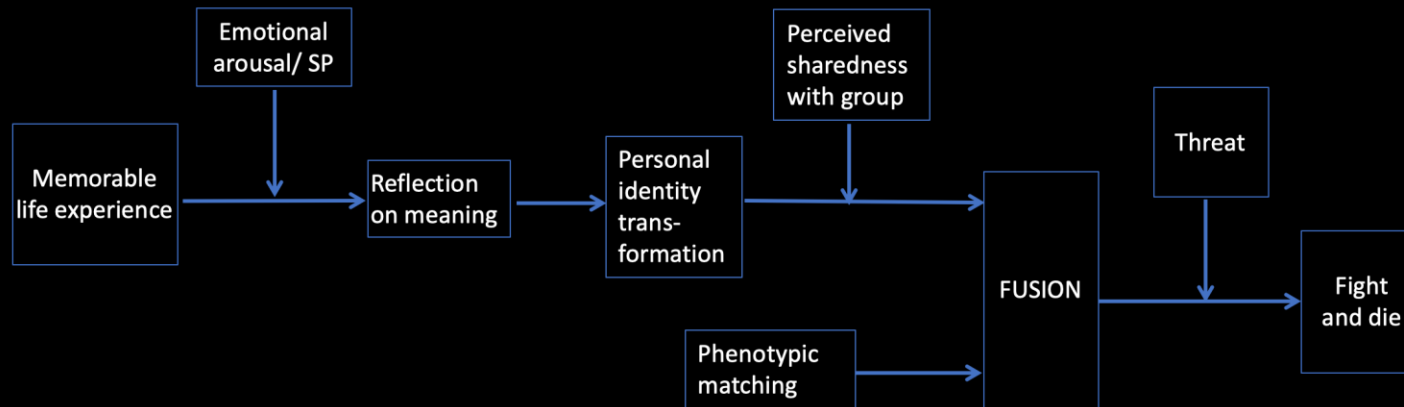
Patriotic Alternative's Call of Duty Competition

Evolutionary and Cognitive Anthropological Research

Identity fusion



Source: Jiménez, Gómez, Buhrmester, Vázquez



The fusion-plus-threat model (Harvey Whitehouse, 2018)

Behavioral and Brain Sciences
cambridge.org/bbs

Dying for the group: Towards a general theory of extreme self-sacrifice

Harvey Whitehouse

School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, Oxford OX2 6PE, United Kingdom.
harvey.whitehouse@anthro.ox.ac.uk <http://www.harveywhitehouse.com>
<https://www.icea.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-harvey-whitehouse>

Target Article

Cite this article: Whitehouse H. (2018) Dying for the group: Towards a general theory of extreme self-sacrifice. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 41, e192: 1–62. doi:10.1017/S0140525X18000249

Target Article Accepted: 30 January 2018
Target Article Manuscript Online: 7 February 2018
Commentaries Accepted: 16 May, 10 June, and 26 June 2018

Key words:
Identity fusion; imagistic practices; memory; rites of terror; self-sacrifice; suicide terrorism; warfare

What is Open Peer Commentary? What follows on these pages is known as a Treatment, in which a significant and controversial Target Article is published along with Commentaries (p. 12) and an Author's Response (p. 44). See [bbsonline.org](https://www.bbsonline.org) for more information.

Abstract

Whether upheld as heroic or reviled as terrorism, people have been willing to lay down their lives for the sake of their groups throughout history. Why? Previous theories of extreme self-sacrifice have highlighted a range of seemingly disparate factors, such as collective identity, outgroup hostility, and kin psychology. In this paper, I attempt to integrate many of these factors into a single overarching theory based on several decades of collaborative research with a range of special populations, from tribes in Papua New Guinea to Libyan insurgents and from Muslim fundamentalists in Indonesia to Brazilian football hooligans. These studies suggest that extreme self-sacrifice is motivated by identity fusion, a visceral sense of oneness with the group, resulting from intense collective experiences (e.g., painful rituals or the horrors of frontline combat) or from perceptions of shared biology. In ancient foraging societies, fusion would have enabled warlike bands to stand united despite strong temptations to scatter and flee. The fusion mechanism has often been exploited in cultural rituals, not only by tribal societies but also in specialized cells embedded in armies, cults, and terrorist organizations. With the rise of social complexity and the spread of states and empires, fusion has also been extended to much larger groups, including doctrinal religions, ethnicities, and ideological movements. Explaining extreme self-sacrifice is not only a scientific priority but also a practical challenge as we seek a collective response to suicide, terrorism, and other extreme expressions of outgroup hostility that continue to bedevil humanity today.

Identity Fusion and Extreme Violence

Revolutionary Battalions (Libya)



Religious Fundamentalists (Indonesia)



Football Hooligans (UK & Brazil)



Herder-Farmer Conflicts (Cameroon)



Brothers in arms: Libyan revolutionaries bond like family

Harvey Whitehouse¹, Brian McQuinn², Michael Buhrmester², and William B. Swann Jr.²

¹Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom OX2 6PN; and ²Department of Psychology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX 78712

Edited by Susan T. Fiske, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, and approved October 9, 2014 (received for review August 24, 2014)

What motivates ordinary civilians to sacrifice their lives for revolutionary causes? We surveyed 179 Libyan revolutionaries during the 2011 conflict in Libya. These civilians-turned-fighters rejected Gaddafi's *jamahiriyya* (state of the masses) and formed highly cohesive fighting units typical of intense conflicts. Fighters reported high levels of "identity fusion"—visceral, family-like bonds between fighters and their battalions. Fusion of revolutionaries with their local battalions and their own families were extremely high, especially relative to Libyans who favored the revolution but did not join battalions. Additionally, frontline combatants were as strongly bonded to their battalion as they were to their own families, but battalion members who provided logistical support were more fused with their families than battalions. Together, these findings help illuminate the social bonds that seem to motivate combatants to risk their lives for the group during wartime.

revolutionary war | intergroup conflict | group identity | self-sacrifice | identity fusion

During the revolutionary war in Libya in 2011, thousands of civilians formed small revolutionary battalions to overthrow the Gaddafi-led regime. Although most fighters were not kin, in such conflicts combatants characteristically express feelings of brotherhood for each other (1). In some cases, these feelings are strong enough to compel them to sacrifice their lives for one another. Such willingness to self-sacrifice for genetic strangers has puzzled scientists since Darwin. By embedding ourselves in a battalion during the revolution, we were able to explore this phenomenon empirically.

Participants were either frontline combatants (high exposure to risk and suffering) or logistical supporters (lower exposure) who completed a brief questionnaire. Items were inspired by recent evidence suggesting that some members of groups develop a visceral, family-like sense of unity or "identity fusion" with their group (2, 3). Evidence suggests that fusion with a group (e.g., one's country) is a key proximal cause of personally costly, progroup behavior or "parochial altruism." For instance, fused individuals are particularly apt to say they will fight and die for their country (4, 5). In hypothetical scenarios based on the classic "trolley dilemma," fused persons endorse driving in front of a speeding train to save the lives of fellow group members (5–7). These findings suggest that identity fusion may predispose civilians to enact extreme sacrifices in naturally occurring set-

To develop the questionnaire for Libyan revolutionaries, the first and second authors first carried out focus groups as part of a larger fieldwork endeavor in Misrata, Libya. The first and second authors were primarily based in Misrata, Libya, and one local contact, a bilingual battalion member, assisted with the administration of the survey and recruitment of battalion member participants.

Participants were 179 male, Libyan nationals (M = 28.03 y, SD 4.68 y, range 20–48 y) from four different battalions registered with the Misrata Military Council. Respondents self-identified as primarily frontline fighters (defined as those who served on the frontline with an assault rifle, $n = 42$) or battalion nonfighters (i.e., logistical supporters, such as workers who serviced vehicles or drove ambulances; $n = 137$).

Participants then completed the pictorial fusion scale (2) in reference to four different groups (own family, own battalion, other revolutionary battalions in Libya, and ordinary Libyans who supported the revolution but were not a part of a combat battalion). Each participant chose which of five pictorial representations best represented their relationship to the group (Fig. 1A). Choosing the option showing the "self" circle completely enveloped by the "group" circle merited classification as fused with the group. Participants who chose any of the other options (indicating partial or no overlap between the "self" and "group") were considered not fused with the group (see ref. 2 for scale and coding details).

Nearly all participants indicated that they were fused with their own family (99%), own battalions (97%), and other battalions (96%). The near-ceiling levels of fusion with own family, battalion, and other battalions are remarkable. Dozens of studies in more than 10 countries (8) have shown that in peacetime populations exhibit rates of fusion with their nation ranging from 6% [fusion with Europe (4)] to 41% [fusion with Spain (2)].

Significance

The human propensity to sacrifice one's life for genetic strangers has puzzled scientists since Darwin. Here, we sought answers to this puzzle by embedding ourselves within groups of individuals prepared to die for one another—Libyan revolutionary battalion members who fought against Gaddafi's regime in 2011. We found striking evidence of extraordinarily tight, familial-like bonds among those who put themselves directly in harm's way (i.e., frontline combatants). In fact, for

- ❖ Survey of 179 fighters in Misrata, Libya (2011)
- ❖ Measured fusion with fellow fighters (and other groups)
- ❖ Sample included fighters and logistics personnel

frontiers | Frontiers in Psychiatry

TYPE Systematic Review
PUBLISHED 04 December 2025
DOI 10.3389/fpsy.2025.1758986

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Clare Sarah Allsley,
University of Salford, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY
Marvin W. Aikin,
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, United States
Emily Conner,
Australian National University, Australia

*CORRESPONDENCE
Kolbrun Kristinsdottir
E-mail: k.kristinsdottir@gmail.uk

RECEIVED 29 September 2025
REVISED 13 November 2025
ACCEPTED 19 November 2025
PUBLISHED 04 December 2025

CITATION
Kristinsdottir K, Freeston M, Underwood A
and Ebner J (2025) Pathological fixation on
shared beliefs: a review and bibliometric
analysis of extreme, overvalued
and delusion-like beliefs.
Front. Psychiatry 16:1758986.
doi: 10.3389/fpsy.2025.1758986

COPYRIGHT
© 2025 Kristinsdottir, Freeston, Underwood
and Ebner. This is an open-access article
distributed under the terms of the Creative
Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The
use, distribution or reproduction in other
forums is permitted, provided the original
author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are
credited and that the original publication in
this journal is cited, in accordance with
accepted academic practice. No use,
distribution or reproduction is permitted
which does not comply with these terms.

Pathological fixation on shared beliefs: a review and bibliometric analysis of extreme, overvalued and delusion-like beliefs

Kolbrun Kristinsdottir^{1*}, Mark Freeston^{1,2}, Alan Underwood^{1,3}
and Julia Ebner⁴

¹Centre for Psychiatry and Mental Health, Wolfson Institute of Population Health, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, London, United Kingdom, ²The Education and Training Directorate, Twickenham and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London, United Kingdom, ³Stalking Threat Assessment Centre (STAC), North London NHS Foundation Trust, London, United Kingdom, ⁴Calvea Centre of Evolution and Human Sciences, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

Introduction: As researchers, practitioners, and policymakers highlight the changing landscape of security concerns, the growing domestic terrorist threat of radicalised lone actors cannot be overlooked. Extreme, overvalued and delusion-like beliefs are one piece of the puzzle, as adherence to shared extreme beliefs and conspiracy theories has become increasingly concerning in recent years. While interest and awareness has grown, there is a notable lack of consistency in conceptualisation and terminology across disciplines. A bibliometric analysis helped highlight existing focus areas across disciplines, current gaps and opportunities for future research.

Methodology: The Web of Science Core Collection was searched to identify publications on extreme overvalued beliefs, overvalued ideas, delusion-like beliefs, extreme beliefs, extremist beliefs, radical beliefs and strongly held ideas from January 2005 to September 2025. Trends in publications, dates and contributing countries were explored, and all results were uploaded to VOSviewer. A map based on bibliographic data focused on a keyword co-occurrence analysis was then generated and analysed separately for each concept in the search, and then combined to explore research focus in medicine and social sciences.

Results: The majority of publications were from the United States, followed by England, Australia and Canada. There was a gradual increase in publications from 2005, a spike in 2015 and a notably increased focus since 2020. Co-occurring keywords with the strongest links were different for the concepts searched, but overlapped significantly between overvalued and delusion-like beliefs and on extreme beliefs and radical beliefs. The focus was also different in psychiatry, psychology, neuroscience and medicine compared to social science disciplines (law, sociology, philosophy, anthropology and criminology).

Discussion: This bibliometric review presents current knowledge, limitations, gaps, and recommendations for future studies on extreme, overvalued, and delusion-like beliefs. The review highlighted significant blurring of concepts

frontiers | Frontiers in Psychology

TYPE Review
PUBLISHED 05 March 2025
DOI 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1556919

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Hang Choon (Civeli) Chan,
University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

REVIEWED BY
Nathan Brooks,
New Zealand Police, New Zealand
Caitlin Ciermow,
University of London, United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Kolbrun Kristindóttir
✉ k.h.kristindottir@gmail.co.uk

RECEIVED 07 January 2025
ACCEPTED 18 February 2025
PUBLISHED 05 March 2025

CITATION
Kristindóttir K, Ebner J and
Whitehouse H (2025) Extreme overvalued
beliefs and identities: revisiting the drivers of
violent extremism.
Front. Psychol. 16:1556919.
doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1556919

COPYRIGHT
© 2025 Kristindóttir, Ebner and Whitehouse.
This is an open-access article distributed
under the terms of the [Creative Commons
Attribution License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use,
distribution or reproduction in other forums is
permitted, provided the original author(s) and
the copyright owner(s) are credited and that
the original publication in this journal is cited,
in accordance with accepted academic
practice. No use, distribution or reproduction
is permitted which does not comply with
these terms.

Extreme overvalued beliefs and identities: revisiting the drivers of violent extremism

Kolbrun Kristindóttir^{1,2*}, Julia Ebner^{2,3} and Harvey Whitehouse^{2,3}

¹Centre of Psychiatry and Mental Health, Wolfson Institute of Population Health, Queen Mary University of London, Charterhouse Square, London, United Kingdom, ²Centre for the Study of Social Change, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom, ³Calvinia Centre of Evolution and Human Sciences, University of Oxford, Magdalen College, Oxford, United Kingdom

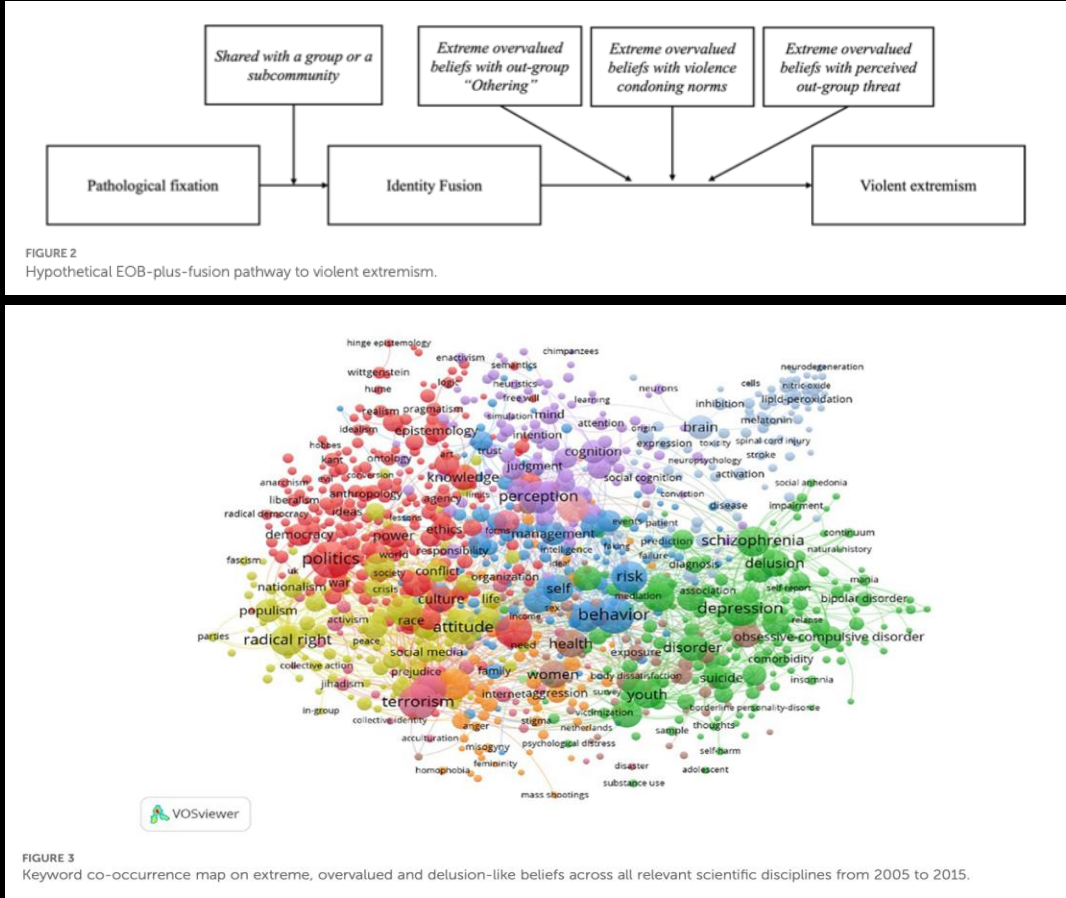
Recent efforts to understand violent extremism have appealed to the concept of extreme overvalued beliefs as a way of explaining fixation and extremist commitments. Extreme overvalued beliefs refer to an ego-syntonic fixation that grows more intense, absolute and emotional over time and is shared with a sub-community. However, while extreme overvalued beliefs precede many targeted attacks, most people who hold them do not resort to violence. Previous research has highlighted four 'ingredients' associated with an increased risk of violent extremism, only three of which are captured in studies linking extreme overvalued beliefs to violence: perceived outgroup threat, demonization of the outgroup, and endorsement of violence. We argue that the fourth element—missing from the literature on extreme overvalued beliefs—is identity fusion, a visceral sense of oneness with the group in which personal and group identities become functionally equivalent. The goal of this paper is to improve current understanding of the circumstances where individuals with extreme overvalued beliefs turn into potential attackers. We show that when certain types of extreme overvalued beliefs are combined with identity fusion it can lead to violent self-sacrifice. Drawing on evidence from psychiatry, evolutionary anthropology, behavioural psychology and computational linguistics, along with a forensic analysis of three high-profile case studies of lone-actor grievance-fuelled violence, we explore the interplay of these risk factors and propose a more encompassing construct for explaining violent extremism. We call this hybrid framework *Extreme Overvalued Beliefs and Identities* (EOBI), synthesising the findings of interdisciplinary research on pathological fixation and identity fusion.

KEYWORDS

identity fusion, fixation, extreme overvalued beliefs, violent extremism, lone-actor violence, threat assessment, terrorism

Introduction

Acts of extreme violence and self-sacrifice in the name of shared beliefs or ideologies have long perplexed clinicians, scholars, and the public alike. These acts can seem random and bewildering to observers but, in the mind of the perpetrator, are meticulously planned and justified. Building on decades of research in psychiatry, the concept of *extreme overvalued beliefs* (EOBs) has been introduced to strengthen the professional toolkit when assessing at-risk fixated individuals who might engage in targeted violence or acts of violent extremism



Is There a Language of Terrorists?

Research Aim:

- Establishing a novel method of assessing the risk that online users will engage in acts of violent extremism based on linguistic markers detectable in terrorist manifestos
- Drawing on existing research and evidence from the fields of cognitive anthropology, social psychology, and communication studies

Contributions:

- Filling academic gaps related to the study of online radicalisation and the online-offline extremism nexus
- Providing valuable insights for policymakers, social media companies, and frontline practitioners seeking to understand, prevent, and combat online radicalisation



Operational Leakage ↔ Psychological Signals

Article

Online Signals of Extremist Mobilization

Olivia Brown¹ , Laura G. E. Smith¹, Brittany I. Davidson¹, Daniel Racek², and Adam Joinson¹

Abstract
Psychological theories of mobilization tend to focus on explaining people's motivations for action, rather than mobilization ("activation") processes. To investigate the online behaviors associated with mobilization, we compared the online communications data of 26 people who subsequently mobilized to right-wing extremist action and 48 people who held similar extremist views but did not mobilize ($N = 119,473$ social media posts). In a three-part analysis, involving content analysis (Part 1), topic modeling (Part 2), and machine learning (Part 3), we showed that communicating ideological or hateful content was not related to mobilization, but rather mobilization was positively related to talking about violent action, operational planning, and logistics. Our findings imply that to explain mobilization to extremist action, rather than the motivations for action, theories of collective action should extend beyond how individuals express grievances and anger, to how they equip themselves with the "know-how" and capability to act.

Keywords
collective action, extremism, intergroup processes, violence

Received February 19, 2024; revision accepted June 10, 2024

The social psychology and terrorism literatures have historically diverged in their definitions and conceptualizations of extremist action. The social psychology literature provides a broad definition, encapsulating extremist action within the wider boundary of collective action, and as involving mili-

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin
2026, Vol. 52(1) 70–89
© The Author(s) 2024

 Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/01461672241266866
journals.sagepub.com/home/pspb

 Sage

SN Social Sciences (2026) 6:71
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-026-01360-5>



ORIGINAL ARTICLE



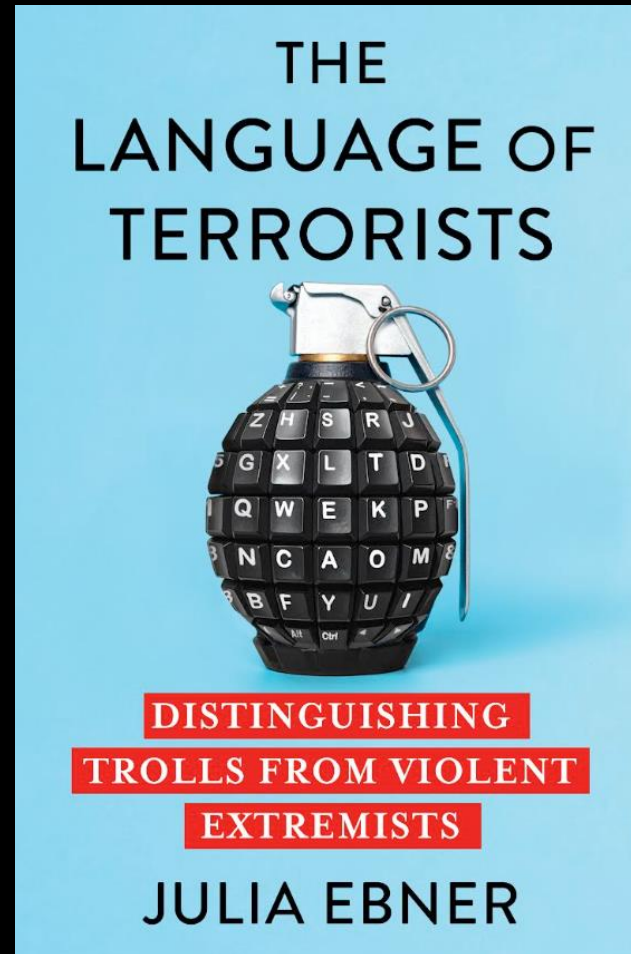
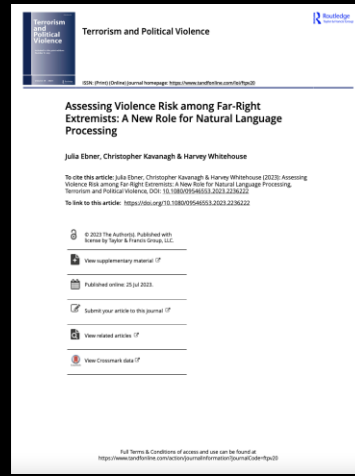
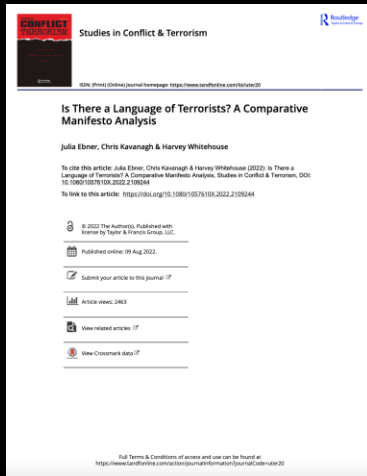
Linguistic markers in the writings of violent offenders, high-risk individuals, and online users

Lisa Kaati¹ , Nazar Akrami², Karie A. Gibson³, Sarah W. Craun³

Received: 29 July 2025 / Accepted: 7 February 2026 / Published online: 13 February 2026
© The Author(s) 2026

Abstract
This study investigates whether warning signs of targeted violence can be identified in written communication by analyzing linguistic markers across three groups: violent offenders, high-risk persons of concern (POCs), and a diverse online population. We focus on linguistic markers for five warning signs: *anger*, *grievance*, *leakage* (intent to do harm), *identification* (taking the role of a previous attacker, violent ideology, or warrior persona), and *operational details* (planning and preparation of an attack). Using a unique dataset of writings from 115 individuals (80 violent offenders and 35 POCs) and communication from 14 online communities, we have assessed the prevalence of these markers. Our results show that all five warning signs were significantly more common among violent offenders and POCs than in the online population. In a comparison between the violent offenders and

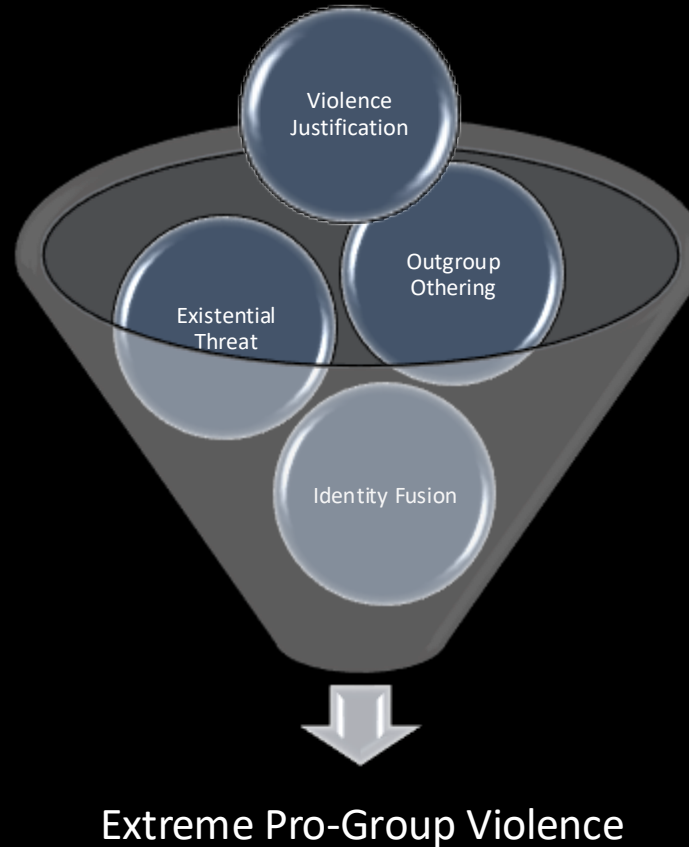
Early Threat Detection and Terrorism Prevention



USING LANGUAGE AS A WINDOW INTO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF VIOLENT SELF-SACRIFICE

- We analysed the manifestos and chat logs of convicted terrorists and violent extremists
- We compared them to control groups
- We found statistically significant psycholinguistic patterns

THE DEADLY COCKTAIL OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM



Implications

- How can we incorporate this into existing risk assessment frameworks?
- Can we improve early warning systems?
- What can be done to prevent or counter each of the psychological ingredients of violent extremism?

Part 1: Terrorist Manifesto Analysis

Research Aim: To distill predictors of terrorist actions based on texts that were published shortly before the respective authors committed acts of political violence as compared to political manifestos that were not followed by violent action.

Methods:

- Qualitative Text Analysis
- Quantitative NLP Analysis

Manifesto Coding:

- Violent self-sacrificial manifestos
- Ideologically extreme (non-violent) manifestos
- Moderate (non-violent) manifestos

Table 1. Manifesto overview.

Author	Description	Total sentences	Coding category
Anders Behring Breivik	Manifesto of the Norway attacks, 2011	75,674 (adjusted: 53,526)	Violent self-sacrificial
Elliot Rodger	Manifesto of the Isla Vista killings, 2014	6,844	Violent self-sacrificial
Dylann Roof	Manifesto of the Charleston shooting, 2015	149	Violent self-sacrificial
Brenton Tarrant	Manifesto of the Christchurch mosque attacks, 2019	847	Violent self-sacrificial
Stephan Baillet	Manifesto of the Halle synagogue shooting, 2019	159	Violent self-sacrificial
John Earnest	Manifesto of the Poway synagogue attack, 2019	295	Violent self-sacrificial
Patrik Crusius	Manifesto of the El Paso attack, 2019	157	Violent self-sacrificial
Adolf Hitler	Mein Kampf, 1925	11,036	Violent self-sacrificial
Sayyid Qutb	Milestones, 1964	2,563	Violent self-sacrificial
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels	Manifesto of the Communist Party, 1848	3,651	Ideologically extreme
Yusuf al-Qaradawi	The Lawful and Prohibited in Islam, 1960	8,197	Ideologically extreme
Fjordman	Defeating Eurabia, 2008	6,192	Ideologically extreme
Simone de Beauvoir	The Second Sex, 1949	13,052	Moderate
Martin Luther King Jr.	I Have a Dream, 1963	75	Moderate
Greta Thunberg	Our House is on Fire, 2019	63	Moderate

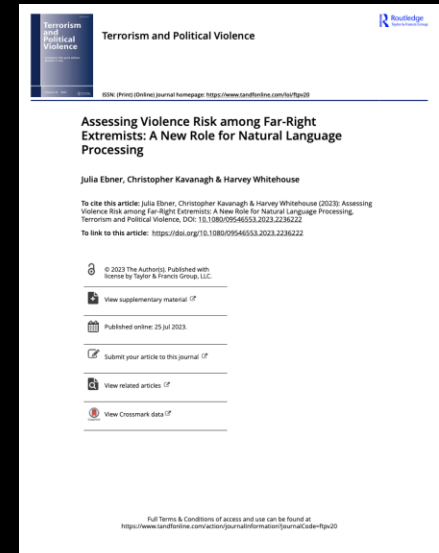
Part 2: Online Group Analysis

Research Aim:

Based on the newly developed language threat detection rubric, this part of the project quantitatively and qualitatively examines to what degree online groups (extremist and non-extremist) show trademarks of violent terrorist manifestos that are not found in non-violent texts.

Data was collected from four types of online platforms:

- 1.) the Iron March website, which was a violence-endorsing white supremacist discussion forum that was closed down due to its links to terrorist organisations such as Atomwaffen Division and National Action,
- 2.) the online gaming chat application Discord, which has hosted a variety of ideologically extreme alt-right and conspiracy theory groups, ranging from violent to non-violent,
- 3.) the religious discussion platforms Third Hour and IslamicBoard.com, which are both marked by a shared moderate ideology but are not endorsing violence,
- 4.) the football fan forum FootballForums.net, which is a non-ideological hobby community that hosts both non-violent football fans and hooligans who have resorted to violence.



Different Ideology, Shared Psychology

Different ideology, same psychology: Evidence for shared psychological pathways to violence across three extremist movements

Leonardo S. Goodall^{1*}, Julia Ebner^{1,2}, Mohsen Mosleh³, Harvey Whitehouse^{1,2}

¹Calleva Research Centre, University of Oxford.

²Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, University of Oxford.

³Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford.

*leonardo.goodall[at]pm.me.

Abstract

Violent extremist movements differ dramatically in ideology, target audiences, and rhetorical style, yet converging evidence suggests that they may share underlying psychological processes of radicalisation towards violent outcomes. Testing this hypothesis at scale has been limited by the difficulty of simultaneously measuring ideological content and psychological processes across multiple movements. Here, we analyse 742,264 messages from 42 Telegram channels spanning three ideologically distinct extremist movements: 764 (a youth-targeting sextortion network), Terrorgram (accelerationist neo-Nazi channels), and white supremacist channels. Topic modelling reveals that the three movements discuss fundamentally different subjects, with distinct vocabulary and thematic profiles. In sharp contrast, annotation of the Deadly Cocktail Model's four psychological process indicators (identity fusion, outgroup othering, existential threat perception, and violence-condoning norms) reveals that all four are present across every movement, co-occur within messages far more than expected by chance, and follow an identical rank ordering. Temporal analyses reveal parallel dynamics and directed dependencies between these processes across movements, too. In a fragmented and fast-evolving ideological landscape, where ideological affiliation alone is an increasingly weak predictor of violence, we argue that process-based indicators, grounded in psychological theory and operationalised computationally, offer a more generalisable framework for understanding and detecting radicalisation across ideological boundaries.

1 Introduction

Policymakers, media narratives, and parts of the public discourse have often portrayed violent extremism as primarily motivated and spread via processes of ideological indoctrination. According to this logic, prevention and intervention programmes frequently focus on combatting ideology

rather than tackling underlying psychological processes. However, evidence is growing that commitments to violence are motivated by a recurrent set of psychological processes across ideologically diverse movements and networks [1–4].

Studies focusing on groups as far removed as jihadists, conspiracy theorists, and neo-Nazis are driven by the same “deadly cocktail” of psychological ingredients: extreme pro-group bonding resulting in identity fusion, perceptions of outgroup

Thematic Overlap Across Categories

Shared and unique theme categories (excluding Other)



Results of a Comparative Telegram Analysis

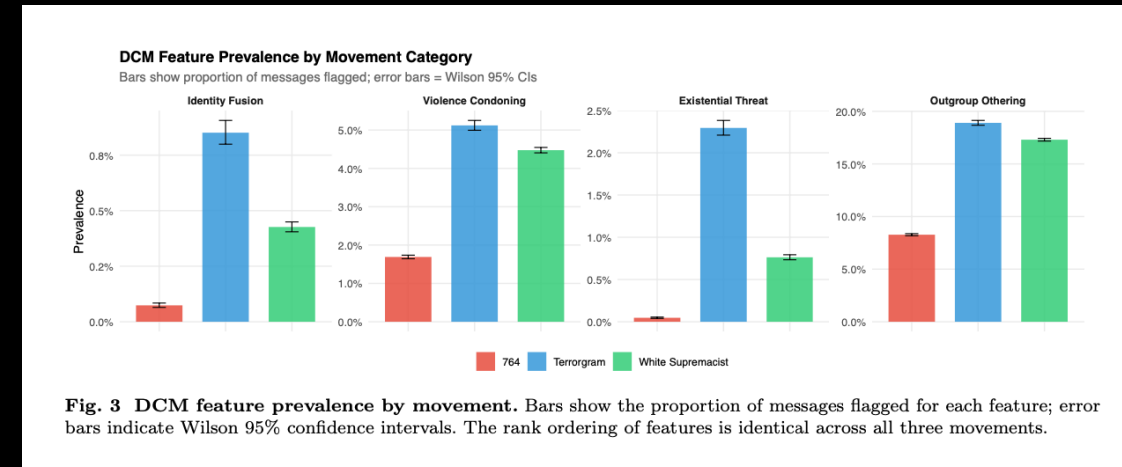
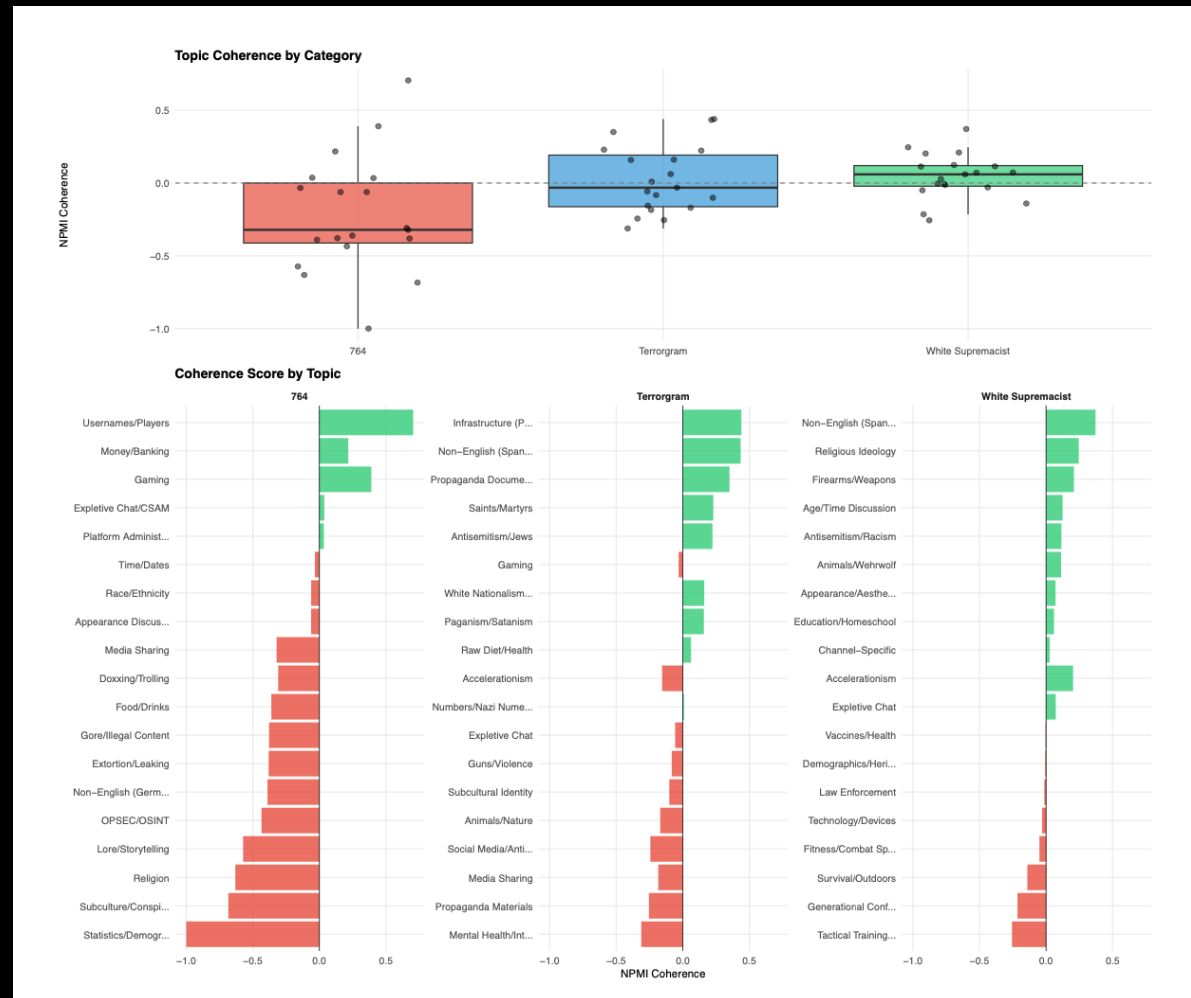


Fig. 3 DCM feature prevalence by movement. Bars show the proportion of messages flagged for each feature; error bars indicate Wilson 95% confidence intervals. The rank ordering of features is identical across all three movements.

Conclusions and Implications

Our NLP analysis shows that the differences in the identity fusion variables in violent versus non-violent manifestos are indeed statistically significant. Based on these findings, our study presents a new language-based threat detection approach that can complement and enhance existing frameworks used by law enforcement agencies to prevent terrorism and other forms of extreme violence.

Current Challenges for Intelligence and Security Services

Traditional threat detection is based on a range of factors, including possession of weapons, membership of listed terrorist groups and explicit calls to violence or credible threats against concrete targets. But new technological, organisational and cultural trends have rendered these indicators less helpful:

- ❖ Improvised self-made weapons, including 3D-printed weapons
- ❖ The emergence of post-organisational online structures of violent extremist networks
- ❖ The use of satire, trolling and gamified communication by extremist online subcultures

Advantages of the Threat Detection Framework

Key variables not influenced by ideological or cultural factors
→ The framework can therefore be applied in different demographic, economic, cultural and religious contexts.

Relevant variables are revealed subconsciously in speech
→ Hence they reach beyond strategically chosen words of escalation or de-escalation and are a more reliable predictor than explicit threats to violence.