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Beyond the salad bar: Nihilistic violent extremism and the quest for significance in Southeast Asia

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Scholars have noted the prevalence of 'salad bar extremism,' a pattern where individuals construct violent worldviews by piecing together disjointed ideological fragments. So far, nearly all recorded instances and their subsequent analyses originate in Western contexts, prompting doubts about whether this trend is exclusive to the West. We challenge that assumption using data from Southeast Asia. Specifically, we examine Singapore's initial three youth cases documented in 2025 and 2026, alongside recent events in Indonesia and the Philippines. By utilizing the 3N framework developed by Kruglanski and colleagues, we show that these Asian cases mirror Western examples: young people adopt a mix of Islamist, far-right, far-left, and incel ideologies while engaging deeply with online True Crime Community networks, often after experiencing romantic rejection or bullying. We suggest a 'violence-first' sequence consisting of three phases: first, a sense of lost importance generates a desire to matter; second, nihilistic digital spaces frame violence as the means to regain that significance; and third, various ideological elements are selected to justify the violence to which the youth is already attracted. Thus, the eclectic ideology serves as a justification rather than a starting point. Consequently, salad bar extremism should be viewed not as a uniquely Western issue, but as a globalized form of nihilistic violent radicalization. Accordingly, prevention efforts must pivot upstream, focusing on strengthening youth resilience rather than merely disputing specific ideologies.

Keywords: "salad bar" extremism, accelerationist, composite violent extremism, far left, far right, Islamist, narratives, needs, networks, nihilistic violent extremism, true crime community

1. INTRODUCTION

Is so-called "salad bar extremism" – where individuals "amalgamate" disparate ideas, grievances, and "ideological fragments" into their worldviews (Gartenstein-Ross & Plant, 2023) – an essentially Western phenomenon? Thus far the bulk of the illuminating analyses of the phenomenon have come from a predominantly Western viewpoint. This short commentary examines if the evolving "salad bar" digital radicalization threat in Southeast Asia is of perhaps a different timbre.

2. THE EVOLVING SOUTHEAST ASIAN EXTREMISM THREATSCAPE SINCE 9/11

In Southeast Asia, since the September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda attacks in the United States, and particularly following the mass-casualty nightclub bombings by the Southeast Asian Al Qaeda affiliate, Jemaah Islamiyah, on October 12, 2002, the predominant transnational terrorist threat has been Islamist (Internal Security Department, 2025a; Ramakrishna, 2025). That said, while neo-Nazi ideas have circulated in Southeast Asia throughout the 20th century (Mustaffa, 2021), since late 2020, regional analysts have noted the emergence of "self-radicalized" youth animated by far-right extremist (FRE) notions of the Great Replacement Theory – alleging that White populations in the West are gradually being replaced by non-Whites via immigration and the superior fertility rates of the latter (Ramakrishna, 2024b). Additionally, White supremacist Great Replacement tropes have been adapted to a Southeast Asian context. For instance, TikTok-based Austronesian supremacists in maritime Southeast Asia have adapted "Western FRE narratives" like the Great Replacement Theory to "demonise local Rohingya refugees and other perceived non-indigenous communities," promoting violence to protect the demographic and political paramountcy of indigenous populations (Hasbi et al., 2025). In Singapore, one 18-year-old self-radicalized ethnic Chinese teen regarded East Asians – Chinese, Korean, and Japanese – as "superior ethnicities" and considered himself – not a White but rather an "East Asian supremacist." Adapting "the Great Replacement Theory" to a Singaporean context, he believed "that violence was necessary to prevent the Chinese majority in Singapore from being displaced by" a supposedly "rapidly growing Malay population" (Jacob, 2025).

3. "SALAD BAR EXTREMISM": THREE RECENT SINGAPOREAN CASES

Against the evolving regional threatscape just described, between September 2025 and July 2026, Singapore encountered its first three cases of youth radicalization into a "salad bar of ideologies." These cases demonstrate the presence, but not prevalence, of salad bar ideologies in Singapore. While a more comprehensive region-wide analysis is not possible for reasons of space, interrogating these three Singaporean cases more closely may shed some preliminary light on the question posed at the start of this commentary: is salad bar extremism in Southeast Asia – as seen in the Singapore examples for which some data are publicly available – fundamentally different from cases seen in the West? First, a brief overview of the three Singaporean cases:

3.1. Case X

In September 2025, Singapore's Internal Security Department reported the first case of online radicalization into a "'salad bar' of extremist ideologies," a 14-year-old male youth – we can call him Case X (Internal Security Department, 2025b, para. 3). He was a staunch supporter of both the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Al Qaeda. He concurrently subscribed to "far-right extremist ideologies," which exposed him to violent anti-Semitic ideas and "true crime content" (to be discussed below). Additionally, he espoused "aspects of far-left extremism," supporting socialism and communism, and eschewing capitalism, which he considered a "Jewish ideology." Moreover, the youth self-identified as an "incel" – violently resentful towards attractive but unavailable women and men perceived as more sexually successful (Koh, 2025).

3.2. Case Y

In the second case – Case Y – reported in June 2026, a 19-year-old student was reportedly self-radicalized online by what the Singaporean authorities now termed Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE) (Internal Security Department, 2026a). On the one hand, he subscribed to pro-Hamas, anti-LGBTQ, anti-Western, and Islamist accelerationist beliefs. He supported "Hamas and their violent actions, including their killing of civilians, which he viewed as a form of jihad." Additionally, he made online posts inciting violence against the LGBTQ community. While his anti-Western and anti-LGBTQ ideas were influenced by violent Islamist

material online, he also espoused "violent incel ideologies." Hence, he had "fantasised about committing violence against certain groups of people in school," including "couples in relationships." Like Case X, Case Y had also been exposed to true crime content online (Anthony, 2026).

3.3. Case Z

Case Z – reported in July 2026 – involved a 14-year-old, the third CoVE case in Singapore since September 2025 (Internal Security Department, 2026b). He had been immersed in first-person shooter games on the online gaming platform Roblox, including games recreating the 1999 Columbine High School incident. He had been exposed to violent gore, mass shooting, and true crime content as well. He had planned to "conduct a mass-casualty attack against non-Muslim teachers and schoolmates at his school." He eventually chose "a kitchen knife and penknife" for stabbing attacks after "repeated online viewings of ISIS execution and stabbing tutorial videos." Inspired by FRE terrorists like the 2019 Christchurch attacker Tarrant and other mass shooters, he had planned to livestream the attack. Notably, Case Z was influenced by the fact that "several mass shooters had been victims of bullying," and their violence represented "retaliation against those who had wronged them" (Internal Security Department, 2026b, paras. 16, 19–20).

4. ANALYSIS

The 3N (*Narratives, Networks, and Needs*) framework developed by Kruglanski et al. (2019) may be helpful to compare the psychosocial profiles of the three Singapore cases with how scholars have described Western cases of salad bar radicalization.

4.1. The Narrative

By this we mean a "violence-justifying ideology" that suggests that out-group violence is morally and religiously legitimated and desirable (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p. 3). Salad bar ideologies appropriate symbols from various ideological sources without committing to the broader doctrines (Horgan & Shayler, 2026; Perliger, 2026; Rousseau & Veissière, 2026). Despite that, the literature suggests that Western salad bar ideologies are often rooted in extreme far-right narratives (Baele, 2026; Horgan & Shayler, 2026; Perliger, 2026). In all three cases, exposure to online extremist narratives was clearly a factor in their radicalization. However, far-right narratives did not appear to be the default base in Southeast Asia.

Case X seems to be the closest representation of a Western salad bar ideology. He was exposed to diverse extremist narratives. One genre was "true crime content." The True Crime Community (TCC) is a "broad term used to refer to an online community of superfans of true crime, mass shooters, serial killers and school shooters" (Chernov Hwang, 2026, p. 75). Violent TCC members, idolizing mass shooters, attempt to carry out similar attacks in "memetic fashion" (Chernov Hwang, 2026, p. 75). Case X also imbibed "violent anti-Semitic beliefs" from FRE content; far-left content that was "anti-Zionist" and "anti-imperialist"; violent Islamist ideas from ISIS and Al Qaeda sources; and as mentioned, incel grievances (Koh, 2025). Notably, authorities assessed that the youth's "understanding of far-right extremist and far-left extremist concepts" was "shallow" and he "supported seemingly conflicting aspects of these ideologies" (Internal Security Department, 2025b, para. 9, footnote 9).

Following the October 2023 Hamas assault on Israel, Case Y was exposed to a "proliferation of pro-Hamas narratives online," as well as "social media posts" by a "niche online Islamist extremist group which subscribed to violent accelerationist ideas" (Anthony, 2026). This Islamist accelerationist narrative – hailing the victorious Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) offensive against the Assad regime in late 2024 as well as the October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel – called for generating "chaos" through "violence to establish a future with Islam as the leading global civilisation" (Anthony, 2026). For Case Y, Islamist radical ideology appears to be his basis of radicalization. He appropriated TCC content, as well as "violent incel ideology" inspired by school shooter Elliot Rodger. He also subscribed to the "black pill" narrative which posits that some men are "doomed to fail in romantic pursuits

and will never find a partner" (Anthony, 2026).

Case Z was also deeply immersed in online extremist narratives. Influenced by online ISIS content, he supported the group's killing of non-Muslims and LGBTQ individuals. His exposure to FRE content, "including anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi narratives," eventually led him to support "Adolf Hitler's killing of Jews" as he held the latter responsible for "mistreating Palestinians in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict." He was influenced by the U.S. neo-Nazi network Atomwaffen Division's accelerationist ideas too. Additionally, Case Z embraced the narrative of White supremacy, regarding himself "more 'White'" and "fair-skinned." Finally, as noted he consumed violent gore and mass shooting content and ideas on TCC sites (Internal Security Department, 2026b, para. 18).

Overall, in all three cases of salad bar extremism in Singapore, there was clear symbolic appropriation from different ideological sources without doctrinal commitment. However, unlike Western salad bar extremists, FRE did not appear to be the default base of extremism. The cases highlighted in this commentary consider Islamist narratives to be the base of their extremist beliefs while adopting FRE and TCC symbols and language to justify violence.

4.2. The Network

The network serves as "conduits through which individuals get acquainted with, and embrace, the ideological narrative that the network espouses" (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p. 51). Western examples of salad bar radicalization often emphasize the incel/manosphere (Baele, 2026; Horgan & Shayler, 2026; McCauley, 2026; Perliger, 2026; Rousseau & Veissière, 2026) and the TCC/mass-shooter fandom (Baele, 2026; Rousseau & Veissière, 2026). These communities are common between the Western and Southeast Asian salad bar extremists. However, regional analysts assess that the presence of more nihilistic communities like 764 (Rousseau & Veissière, 2026) has not been confirmed in Southeast Asia (Basha & Mok, 2026; Mustaffa, 2026).

Case X was very much exposed to such online networks. He was not just active in online chat groups supportive of FRE, TCC, and incel ideas, he joined "pro-ISIS and jihadist communities online" as well. One online contact, an alleged Iraq-based ISIS supporter, offered to "help him plan an attack in Singapore," which, fortunately, Case X did not pursue. Case X went as far as to pledge allegiance to the ISIS network and saw it as his duty "to garner support for its cause" (Koh, 2025).

Likewise, Case Y joined several "online religious discussion groups" (Anthony, 2026), where he was exposed to violent Islamist anti-Western and anti-LGBTQ content. His immersion in the aforementioned niche Islamist accelerationist network's private chat group in early 2025 deepened his radicalization. As part of his pledge of allegiance to this group, he took pictures of two popular tourist spots in Singapore, uploading them on his social media account as part of an e-publication authored by group members. Finally, Case Y's active engagement with violent incel and TCC forums influenced him to both self-identify as an incel, and to make "online posts threatening to kill or rape women," dehumanizing the latter as "foid," meaning "female humanoid" (Anthony, 2026).

Case Z likewise joined ISIS online communities. Consequently, he began supporting the group's killing of non-Muslims and was "willing to attack non-Muslims if instructed by ISIS" (Internal Security Department, 2026b, para. 17). At the same time, his immersion in TCC-linked online gaming forums enabled him to chance upon ISIS supporter Omar Mateen's 2016 mass shooting in a Florida gay nightclub. Case Z not only "admired Mateen's high kill count during the attack," notably, he "idolised Mateen as he related with the latter's experience of being bullied" (Internal Security Department, 2026b, para. 17) – a key point which we shall discuss next.

Overall, salad bar extremists in Singapore and the West appeared to be in similar incel/manosphere and TCC/mass shooter communities. However, they are not confirmed to be in more niche communities such as the 764 sexual exploitation network. Additionally, ISIS networks appeared to be dominant in all three

cases in Singapore, but Islamist networks were not highlighted in Western salad bar cases.

4.3. The Need

Ultimately, the *need for significance* – "the fundamental desire to matter, to be someone, have respect" (Kruglanski et al., 2019, p. 42) – is what drives much violent extremist behavior, regardless of personal and ideological factors. This basic need can arguably be gleaned in all three cases. The need for belonging and status seems to be a common theme across Western and Singapore salad bar cases. Both Western and Singapore salad bar extremists have also reported some levels of humiliation, through bullying or the inability to experience sexual pleasure (Perliger, 2026; Rousseau & Veissière, 2026).

In late 2023 Case X reportedly "became more self-conscious about his appearance" and came across incel "looksmaxxing" content – an incel subculture providing dubious advice on how to enhance one's physical appearance on social media (Farrell, 2024; Koh, 2025). This hinted at his underlying need to matter, to enjoy the adulation of the opposite sex; his resentment at being unsuccessful in this regard; and his ensuing susceptibility to incel appeals. Similarly, Case Y was "unhappy about his inability to pursue romantic relationships" (Anthony, 2026). Like Case X, he subscribed to "looksmaxxing" content in an effort to improve his physical appearance (Anthony, 2026).

As for Case Z, he claimed to be a victim of school bullying. Hence, he identified with several mass shooters who had themselves been victims of bullying and resonated with their acts of violence as a form of retaliation against those who had wronged them. Thus, while playing online violent games, he "imagined his bullies as the in-game non-player characters (NPCs) and victims depicted within the videos, and himself as the perpetrator of the violent acts" (Internal Security Department, 2026b, para. 16). It was also why he could relate with the 2016 Florida nightclub shooter Omar Mateen, as the latter had himself been a victim of bullying. In short, in all three Singaporean cases, the desire to matter, to restore lost significance was clearly a driver in their respective radicalization trajectories (Internal Security Department, 2026b, paras. 16–17).

5. ASSESSMENT

What do the three Singaporean "salad bar" cases suggest by way of a preliminary assessment? First and foremost, to answer the key question set out at the start of this commentary, there appears to be nothing specially "Singaporean" about the three cases. While the specific grievances and violent networks in Southeast Asia might differ, the radicalizing platforms and mechanisms into "salad bar extremism" seem broadly similar to what has been observed in the West and elsewhere (Deliso, 2023; Kidwai, 2024).

Four key points can perhaps be further underscored:

First, youth everywhere are particularly susceptible to extremist manipulation, because during the emotionally turbulent teenage years, the executive reasoning parts of their brains are less developed than the emotional centers. Thus, teenagers often come across as impulsive, rash, and prone to pursuing simplistic, black-and-white answers to complex issues. In short, they are in a "tumultuous biological, cognitive, social and emotional transition to adulthood" (Goh, 2011).

Second, being immersed in online extremist networks of any ideological stripe – in essence "echo chambers" (Atari et al., 2022; Bélanger et al., 2026) – for several hours a day, ensures that *group polarization* (Sunstein, 2009) toward radicalized mindsets is more likely to occur – whether in Singapore or elsewhere.

Third, research indicates that a radicalizing youth need not develop a completely coherent understanding of extremist ideological concepts; a cut-and-paste approach suffices for a basic working understanding. The youth simply needs to feel personally satisfied that he has good enough reasons – however hazy and internally contradictory, as in "salad bar" radicalization – for engaging in extremist violence (Ramakrishna, 2024a).

Fourth, and finally, this is probably the crucial point: as former FBI Director Christopher Wray explained at a U.S. Senate hearing in September 2020, while a "salad bar of ideologies" comprises "a little bit of this, a little bit of that," what the radicalized youth are "*really about is the violence* [emphasis added]" (as cited in Horgan & Shayler, 2026, p. 2). In short, what the "salad bar" phenomenon may be masking is the deeper current of Nihilistic Violent Extremism (NVE) of which TCC – very apparent in the three Singaporean cases – is a key element (Chernov Hwang, 2026). NVE violence lacks an ideological motivation (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025) and is essentially driven by personal issues (Ware, 2026).

In sum, the precise mix of ideological fragments in the Singaporean cases did not actually motivate the violence. It merely legitimized – however idiosyncratically – the violence the youth already felt like engaging in, driven by their deep need for restoring a perceived lost significance. The latter was a result of perceived personal affronts: bullying and lack of romantic/sexual success. In other words, it was not quite "violence for its own sake" (Cassam, 2026, p. 1), but rather violence to restore a perceived loss of significance.

The NVE phenomenon has certainly been apparent in the wider Southeast Asian region. For instance, in November 2025, an Indonesian youth attempted to bomb his high school in Jakarta. On his toy gun he had inscribed a slew of FRE concepts and names such as "Brenton Tarrant. Welcome to Hell." The Indonesian police however found that the youth had been influenced by TCC more so than FRE ideas per se. He was an example of "memetic radicalisation" (Atha, 2026). Notably, his classmates alleged he had been a victim of bullying (Tito, 2025).

Subsequently, in June 2026, two youths aged 14 and 15 were involved in a school shooting allegedly from the 764 network. Also, part of the online NVE community, the 764 network typically employs sexual blackmail to manipulate youth to perpetrate violent acts (Chernov Hwang, 2026). Nevertheless, claims of the involvement of the 764 network in Southeast Asian cases have been disputed (Basha & Mok, 2026; Mustaffa, 2026). The 14-year-old had allegedly been playing the "violent sandbox game Gorebox and had posted gun-shooting content online shortly before the attack" (Cepeda, 2026). Again, it was reported that a grudge over school bullying may have been a factor in the incident (Rivera, 2026).

All this is to assert that so-called "salad bar extremism" is not solely a Western phenomenon, as seen in the three cases in Singapore. These Singaporean cases highlight that there appears to be some resemblance to Western salad bar extremism. Youths have been radicalized through online platforms and were influenced by a confluence of incoherent ideologies. In some ways, there seems to be nothing uniquely Singaporean/Southeast Asian about salad bar extremism in the region. Going forward, holistic, upstream strategies for dealing with youth radicalization into the phenomenon – revolving around building multi-dimensional youth resilience against violent extremism (Hussin & Mohamed, 2026) – especially including the nihilistic variety, would appear to be increasingly apt.

6. DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No empirical data was analyzed for this manuscript

7. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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