NABS+ Network Plus for Analytical Behavioural Science in Security and Defence

Identifying Pathways to Engagement with The Com: A Study of Open-source Data

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The decentralised online ecosystem referred to as The Com includes violent online communities such as 764 and No Lives Matter. Participants encourage and commit a wide range of harms, blurring the boundaries between organised crime, child sexual abuse, cyber offending, and violent extremism. Perpetrators are often children or young adults and frequently target vulnerable individuals, namely other children and those experiencing mental ill health. In some cases, victims are coerced into harming others themselves.

This brief summarises the results of an exploratory analysis of open-source data examining whether particular combinations of (risk) factors are consistently associated with four different harmful behaviours linked to engagement with The Com.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- When interpreting the results, it is crucial to remember that the analysis points to potentially meaningful patterns of co-occurring factors but does not establish causal pathways.
- For the 29 cases analysed in this study:
  - **Offline violence** was consistently associated with evidence of ideological commitment, alongside broader patterns suggesting a pre-existing propensity for violence
  - Engaging in **(s)extortion** was consistently related to psychosocial vulnerability, alongside a need for social reward and peer validation
  - **Cyber offending,** including doxxing, hacking, or swatting, was consistently linked to neurodiversity, alongside a need for gaining status, attention, or recognition
  - Taking a **leadership role** was consistently associated with prior engagement in transgressive or violent behaviour, alongside status seeking and evidence of social disconnection

DATA & METHOD

A subsection of the Nihilistic Oriented Violent Extremist Life-course (NOVEL) database – funded and compiled based on open-source data by the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE) at the University of Nebraska at Omaha – was used for this analysis. Twenty-nine individuals charged or convicted of crimes associated with their engagement with The Com, globally, were included. All were male, most were from the US, and the average age was 21 years.

The pre-registered analysis included **eleven (risk) factors:**

1. Early adversity
2. Neurodevelopmental conditions
3. Mental ill health
4. Violence fascination
5. Previous violence
6. Early transgressive behaviour
7. Social isolation
8. Status-driven motivation
9. Belonging-driven motivation
10. Ideology-driven motivation
11. and Notoriety-driven motivation.

Four (outcome) engagement behaviours were considered:

1. Offline violence
2. Cyber-offending
3. Leadership
4. (S)extortion.

More details about the data collection process, variable definitions, and demographic characteristics of individuals included in the analysis are available on *this dashboard*.

ANALYSIS & KEY FINDINGS

Rather than identifying single correlates or predictors of the outcomes, we conducted pairwise configurational analysis to examine which combinations of two factors were reliably associated with an outcome (i.e., high consistency) and discriminated between cases that did and did not display that outcome (i.e., high proportional reduction in inconsistency (PRI)).

Highly reliable configurations (i.e., consistency above .65) were visualised using a heatmap (Figure 1). Darker cells represent higher PRI values. Numbers within cells indicate the number of cases who engaged in the respective outcome behaviour and for whom this combination of two factors was observed; the number in brackets reflects the number of cases in the whole sample – regardless the outcome behaviour – for which the combination of factors was recorded.

Figure 1: Heatmap of Meaningful Pairwise Configurations

Note: The top 10 factor combinations with consistency scores > .65 are displayed.

When interpreting the results, it is crucial to remember that the analysis points to potentially meaningful patterns of co-occurring factors but does not establish causal pathways. Additionally, the findings do not represent distinct 'types' of people. Most of the individuals included in the analysis demonstrated multiple of the harmful behaviours. Thus, the results are best understood as **patterns of recurring (risk) factor combinations and outcome behaviours**. Focussing on such patterns rather than offender 'types' is important because there are multiple routes into The Com, and similar outcomes can emerge through different combinations of factors (i.e., dynamics of multi- and equifinality).

OFFLINE VIOLENCE

Offline violence was most consistently linked to factor combinations that all included **ideological motivation.** The fact that ideological motivation featured centrally distinguished this outcome behaviour from the three others. Additionally, those who committed offline violence demonstrated an established capacity for violence (i.e., previous violence, early rule-breaking) and an interest in violent material (e.g., extreme gore) or violent individuals (e.g., idolising mass casualty attackers).

CYBER OFFENDING

There were fewer repeated patterns of (risk) factors for this outcome. The most consistent combinations of factors involved **neurodiversity** alongside motivations linked to status or notoriety, and early rule-breaking behaviour. Crucially, the finding does not suggest that neurodiversity causes cyber offending. Instead, some features of neurodiversity, such as a special interest in technology, for example, or social communication differences, may make someone more vulnerable to harmful online communities where these skills and interests receive peer validation.

(S)EXTORTION

The most consistent combinations of factors linked to (s)extortion involved n**eurodiversity, mental ill health, early adversity, social isolation,** and status-seeking. This result highlights that (s)extortion may emerge where psychosocial vulnerabilities make individuals susceptible to the social dynamics (i.e., peer validation and gaining a sense of importance) of The Com ecosystem.

LEADERSHIP

Leadership roles were most consistently linked to combinations of (risk) factors involving **previous violence**, fascination with violence, status-seeking, social isolation, and early rule-breaking behaviour. Overall, it can be concluded that individuals who are already drawn to violence and transgression might create or lead communities within The Com to form social connections and gain influence or recognition.

More detailed results, including all assessed factor combinations for each outcome, are presented in *this dashboard*.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on our analysis, we recommend the following:

- Interventions to address the threat of The Com need to be bespoke, tailoring responses to different vulnerabilities and behavioural patterns.
- Interventions should focus on the social rewards these communities provide, putting in place prosocial, long-term alternatives offline and online.
- Ideology may be important for some. Interventions taking place outside of P/CVE systems should not overlook the influence of ideology, particularly where demonstrative offline violence is a concern.
- Fascination with violence appeared cross-cutting as a meaningful (risk) factor, suggesting that evidence of repeated engagement with violent material or glorification of attackers could be an important opportunity for early intervention.
- Neurodiversity and mental ill health appeared in meaningful factor combinations across engagement outcomes, but are not causes of offending. Instead, they may shape how some people experience and engage with the world, potentially increasing susceptibility to harmful online influence and reinforcement mechanisms that characterise The Com.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

This brief was produced from the NABS+ project 'Identifying Pathways to Engagement with The Com'. The project investigates engagement with violent online communities such as 764, CVLT, and No Lives Matter (The Com). You can find all the outputs from this project at: *www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/identifying-paths-of-engagement-with-the-com/*

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