
BEYOND THE PATHWAY:

Applying a Cult Coercion Lens to Nihilistic
Violent Extremism

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Executive Summary	4
Introduction	7
The Pathway to Violence	9
Grievances	10
Violent Ideation	10
Research and Planning	11
Preparation	12
Probing and Breaching	13
What the Pathway Model Obscures	13
NVE as a High-Control Environment: The BITE Model Framework	13
Behavioral Control	15
Core Goal: Regulate Environment, Body, and Daily Life	15
Related Indicators	15
Mechanism in Cults	15
Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE	16
Summary	17
Core Goal: Cultivate Authority, Obedience, and Behavioral Conditioning	17
Related Indicators	17
Mechanism in Cults	17
Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE	18
Summary	20
Core Goal: Entrap and Limit Options for Disaffiliation	20
Related Indicators	20
Mechanism in Cults	20
Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE	21
Summary	21
Information Control	22
Core Goal: Distortion, Saturation, and Weaponization	22
Related Indicators:	22
Mechanism in Cults	22
Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE	24
Summary	24
Thought Control	25
Core Goal: Identity Reconstruction and Suppression of Independent Thought	25
Related Indicators:	25
Mechanism in Cults	25
Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE	26
Summary	28
Emotional Control	28
Core Goal: Supplant Positive Emotions	28
Related Indicators:	28
Mechanism in Cults	29

Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE	30
Summary	31
Integrating a Domain Approach with Lessons From the Traditional Pathway	32
Implications for Intervention and Prevention	35
References	38

Executive Summary

- Models like the traditional pathway-to-violence remain influential in extremism and threat assessment frameworks, but their stage-based assumptions are increasingly mismatched with the realities of nihilistic violent extremism (NVE).
 - Models are often treated as linear progressions in which individuals move sequentially from grievance to violence, yet NVE escalation rarely unfolds in a clear or sequential manner.
 - The BITE model offers a stronger, more actionable framework for crafting disruption and intervention strategies that pathway models cannot supply.
- NVE is instead characterized by overlapping and mutually reinforcing processes in which grievance, violent ideation, planning, identity formation, coercion, and mobilization frequently occur simultaneously. The result is a form of radicalization that is recursive, unstable, and difficult to interpret through stage-based frameworks alone.
 - The elements of the pathway remain familiar touchpoints for understanding engagement and escalation, yet they manifest across these domains in uneven and non-sequential ways.
 - NVE environments function as digitally mediated systems of coercion, conditioning, and identity restructuring.
 - Participants—many of them adolescents—are immersed in online spaces where violence, humiliation, exploitation, and notoriety become mechanisms of status, belonging, and social validation.
- Literature on high-control groups offers a framework better suited to capturing this simultaneity by accounting for cross-domain activation and providing routes for intervention that the pathway model alone cannot supply.
- The BITE model of coercive control, which assesses control across the domains of behavior, information, thought, and emotion, is a robust starting point for understanding the applicability of high-control models and interventions to NVE engagement.
- NVE achieves *behavior control* through persistent digital access, saturation of attention, coerced self-harm, and demands for proof of compliance.
 - Self-harm, livestreaming, sleep disruption, and constant engagement function as mechanisms of conditioning and social control.
 - Rewards and punishments are often indistinguishable, with suffering facilitating status and belonging as well as victimization.

- Victims may become perpetrators against others to resolve internal conflict and prevent external awareness.
- NVE environments maintain *information control* through saturation, distortion, and continuous exposure rather than outright restriction.
 - Participants are immersed in memes, manifestos, gore, exploitative media, and “lore” documenting harms and notoriety.
 - Compliance is reinforced through surveillance-like dynamics embedded into online interaction itself.
 - Blackmail material and coerced disclosures function similarly to cult confessional leverage.
 - Constant exposure narrows interpretive frameworks and normalizes escalating violence.
- NVE achieves *thought control* through symbolic affiliation, cognitive overload, and desensitization.
 - Online aliases, profile aesthetics, and self-harm markings become markers of belonging and psychological compliance.
 - Groomers cultivate siege mentalities in which victims believe they have no viable identity or support outside the network.
 - Adolescents’ developmental vulnerabilities—including identity instability, suggestibility, and need for validation—are actively exploited.
 - Repeated exposure to violent and exploitative content reshapes victims’ “map of reality” around harm, notoriety, and escalation.
- NVE achieves *emotional control* through compressing emotional range around alienation, fear, resentment, shame, and hostility.
 - Positive emotional attachments and offline supports are undermined.
 - Emotional desensitization and overstimulation suppress reflection and normalize cruelty.
 - Shame, exposure threats, and humiliation reinforce dependency and perceived entrapment.
 - Manipulation of emotional highs and lows creates cycles of coercion and compliance resembling those observed in cultic environments.
- Integrating pathway-to-violence concepts with high-control group literature provides a more actionable framework for assessment, prevention, intervention, and disengagement in NVE contexts.

- Durable intervention will likely require cross-domain responses that address not only violence risk, but also coercion, trauma, identity disruption, dependency, and the broader online ecosystems sustaining NVE participation.

Introduction

Terrorism and extremism researchers have long relied on models designed to explain both how people radicalize and why only a small fraction of individuals exposed to extremist milieus ultimately engage in violence. These models are often visualized as funnels, pyramids, or staircases, emphasizing a filtering process in which a large population of initial sympathizers narrows into a much smaller cohort of actors. In the context of today's predominant trends in mobilization to violence in extremist spaces, these models fall considerably short.

The original intent of these models was to describe overarching, shared processes in radicalization, but, in practice, such models are frequently treated as linear and sequential progressions that imply individuals must cross some threshold within one stage before advancing to the next.¹ In this approach, each phase of the model builds on the previous one, with forward movement reflecting increasing commitment and engagement, and any regression is attributed largely to external intervention. Additionally, each stage is associated with presumed corresponding behaviors that just simply no longer hold true in today's digital violence.

Nihilistic violent extremism (NVE) does not fit cleanly within these frameworks. NVE is a loosely networked, youth-driven online subculture that has three dominant streams of activity that, both separately and together, possess a strong capability to inculcate and implement egregious harms and externalized violence.

The first stream of NVE is the most recognized, and is often referred to by its behavioral framing, sadistic online extortion (a.k.a., SadEx or SOE), or by the heuristic of "764"—the first established group of this nature. Activity in this stream is heavily indexed on digitally facilitated sexual, emotional, and psychological harms against minors. These networks are characterized by coercive online relationships that focus on production of exploitative content as mechanisms of both control and status formation within the subculture.

The second stream pulls from an established digital ecosystem known as the True Crime Community (TCC), but most significantly from its subcommunity that fixates on school shooters. In this niche, albeit robust, digital ecosystem, individuals have mobilized to violence against schools while blending classic understandings of Columbine copycat and contagion effects with NVE network support and radicalization. Those same NVE communities have incorporated individual perpetrators into their own pantheon of Saints Culture style martyrdom, elevating and complicating an already nuanced threat landscape.

The third stream carries over the legacy of militant accelerationism and the Saints Culture through valorizing personal and mass violence as identity, spectacle, and desired outcome, rather than as a means to any coherent ideological end. In this stream, aesthetics, indicators, and authentic ideological uptake of militant accelerationism are most present with individuals in groups like No Lives Matter (NLM), Maniac Murder Cult (MMC or MKY), 1414, and other associated networks heavily indexing on the so-called "IRL" (in real life) activities. It is crucial to note that extortion behaviors and dynamics occur simultaneously in these networks and their offshoots.

¹ Yuzva Clement et al., "An Overview of Radicalization and Extremism Terminology and Theory"; Borum, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II"; Violence Prevention Training, "The Pathway to Violence – Violence Prevention Training"; McCauley and Moskalenko, "Understanding Political Radicalization"; Fair, "What Are the 4 Stages of Radicalization?"; Moghaddam, "The Staircase to Terrorism."

Ancillary digital communities overlap and intersect in varying degrees of centrality and prominence across all three streams. Those communities include networks premised on online gore, cyber crime, online trolling, and other similar digital-age threats that defy easy classification. This ecosystem is often referred to as “The Community” or Com by both researchers and participants alike. Throughout the report we refer to trends and dynamics across the streams collectively unless there are extreme outliers or deviations that necessitate specific treatment.

Demographically, most NVE participants are between the ages of 12 and 17. There are few agreed-upon predispositions to who may become involved in NVE activity and networks, even as perpetrators in this space often do share some familiar risk factors.² Factors such as familial affluence, education, geographic location, and even language fail to serve as consistent protective or mitigating factors in risk for NVE engagement. The one constant is that most individuals engaged with NVE are recruited, coerced, groomed, and radicalized through digitally mediated environments that operate without centralized leadership, fixed doctrine, or discrete stages of involvement. Screen time thus serves as the most reliable potential indicator of NVE involvement for both victims and perpetrators. In NVE, radicalization is less a progression than a saturation—a simultaneous restructuring of behavior, information, thought, and emotion that makes traditional stage-based interpretations of radicalization insufficient as either analytical and intervention tools. NVE’s complexity and fundamentally online nature as well as its demonstrated, global harms emphasize the need for an updated framework to accurately assess and design interventions for NVE dynamics.

This paper first examines the shortcomings of using the pathway to violence framework as a stage-based model of radicalization when assessing NVE. The core elements of this model retain explanatory relevance, but their expression in NVE contexts is entangled, recursive, and non-sequential in ways that complicate the pathway’s use as a guide for threat assessment and intervention. This paper then explores the BITE model of cult coercive control, which analyzes how cults manipulate and control members’ behavior, information, thought, and emotions (BITE), as a more structurally appropriate framework for analyzing how NVE environments exploit and reshape individuals across multiple domains simultaneously. After all, the group from which 764’s founder allegedly learned his tactical approach was named CVLT. Because readers may have less of a foundational knowledge of cult psychology and tactics, the key elements of the model’s application to cults are explained before examining NVE parallels.

The paper concludes by proposing that understanding the interplay of the pathway model and the BITE framework offers a more complete assessment picture of NVE radicalization than either provides alone. The pathway model remains valuable for identifying familiar markers of *what* is happening (grievance formation, violent ideation, research and planning, preparation, probing and breaching), but the BITE model better explains *how* and *why* those developments occur at inconsistent rates of uptake and expression. Understanding this intersection has direct implications for intervention, assessment, and the support of individuals and families affected by NVE involvement.

This report is meant to be the start of a conversation, not a definitive explanation of all dynamics at play within the NVE landscape. Considerable work remains to be done to fully examine how existing research on high-control groups and other coercive, exploitative environments can inform our understanding of NVE, its harms, and potential routes for prevention and intervention.³

²Cooter et al., “The Digital Crucible: Understanding and Preventing Youth Recruitment to Terror, Hate, and Cartel Organizations Online.”

³Newcombe et al., “Cults and Online Violent Extremism.”

The Pathway to Violence

The pathway model is particularly influential in threat assessment and counterterrorism. Contemporary pathway-to-violence frameworks derive substantially from U.S. Secret Service threat assessment research conducted in the 1990s on targeted violence and later adapted to jihadist and white supremacist terrorism.⁴ Visual depictions of the framework present distinct, non-overlapping stages that have contributed to an implication of linear, progressive radicalization with defined boundaries between phases. This model is intended to provide actionable guidance, including highlighting opportunities for intervention at different points along the pathway. Individuals at the grievance stage, for instance, may benefit from community-based interventions, mentorship, or exposure to alternative narratives that contextualize perceived injustices and humanize outgroups.⁵ Individuals engaged in planning or preparation require more intensive responses, including behavioral threat assessment, disruption strategies, or law enforcement involvement.⁶ Stages in between are presumed to need responses escalating in proportion to their proximity to action, and the utility of this and similar models as assessment and intervention tools depends heavily on accurately identifying where an individual is situated along the pathway.⁷

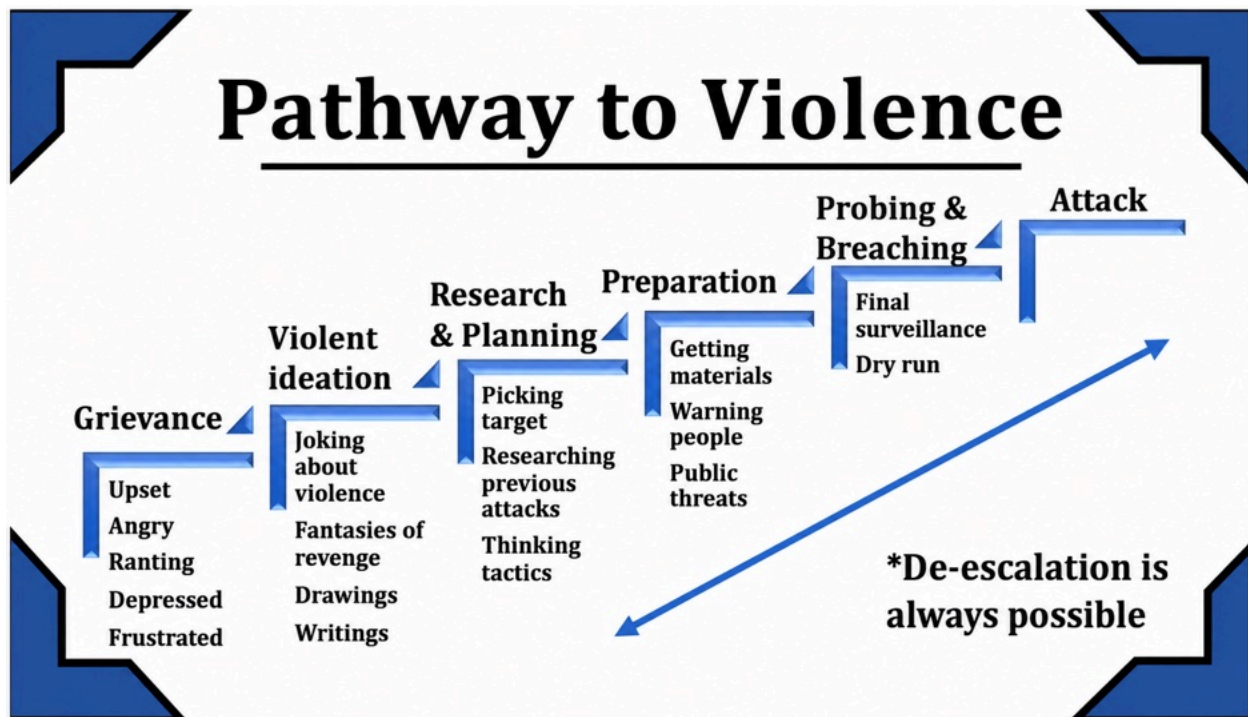


Image 1. A typical visual portrayal of the Pathway to Violence Model.

⁴ Jensen et al., "Radicalization to Violence"; Horgan, "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes."

⁵ Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*; United Nations Development Programme, "Journey to Extremism in Africa"; U.S. Secret Service, "Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence"; Clemmow et al., "Risk of What and Why? Disaggregating Pathways to Extremist Behaviours in Individuals Susceptible to Violent Extremism."

⁶ National Counterterrorism Center, "Mobilization Indicators Booklet"; U.S. Secret Service, "Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence."

⁷ It is worth noting that the pathway and variations of it have been used to help explain and intervene in other types of violence including both workplace and domestic violence, both of which also differ substantially in their progressions from NVE (White, "Workplace Targeted Violence"; Monckton Smith, "Intimate Partner Femicide").

NVE complicates these assumptions. While the core elements of the pathway remain relevant, they do not manifest as clean, progressive stages. Instead, the shifts individuals experience are entangled, overlapping, recursive, and mutually reinforcing. The sections below more closely examine how NVE challenges each traditional stage of the pathway model.

Grievances

NVE's divergence from the traditional pathway is most apparent at its earliest stages. The model assumes that radicalization begins with a relatively coherent, largely singular grievance, which is often detectable through visible signs of upset, anger, ranting, depression, or frustration. Adolescent NVE participants are collectively in a developmental period characterized by identity formation, social comparison, and heightened emotional volatility. Grievances in this population are often diffuse: friction with parents, a desire for greater autonomy, experiences of bullying, family disruption, or a general resentment toward school and society. These grievances can produce a range of negative outcomes, but they do not necessarily coalesce into the kind of shared, mobilizing grievances considered central in other forms of extremism. Youth-typical grievances contrast markedly, for example, with many documented Jihadist cases in which individuals come to interpret foreign policy, military interventions, or the suffering of co-religionists abroad as personal affronts, even without a direct personal connection to those events.⁸ It is the banality of NVE grievances that illustrates the baseline distinction NVE radicalization has from other forms of violent extremism.

In NVE, mobilizing grievances are frequently absent, underdeveloped, or articulated only after engagement with NVE spaces. Rather than being drawn to these environments by a preexisting grievance or ideology, most individuals in SadEx/SOE spaces are coerced into participation. Participants who do voluntarily seek out NVE entities are likely pursuing a subculture organized around transgression, and in some cases, the arcane, rather than a grievance-driven environment.⁹ Narratives can be found in NVE spaces that express grievance and include ideological elements—namely ideas connected to militant accelerationism or Great Replacement, but many individuals have their first exposure to these narratives only after engagement with NVE or an ancillary online community. This time-order inversion of grievance uptake is particularly evident in cases where individuals adopt ideological positions or grievances inconsistent with their own identities. ICDE has reviewed numerous cases of young, Black NVE participants, for example, who adopt white supremacist narratives after entering NVE networks, fitting with broader evidence of how individuals increasingly adopt the narratives and perspectives following any voluntary group association.¹⁰

Violent Ideation

Violent ideation, the second stage of the traditional pathway, is marked by joking about violence, fantasies of revenge, and violent drawings or writings. These behaviors—rather than following after engagement premised on a shared grievance—are effectively a prerequisite for entry into NVE. They are even prerequisite behaviors for participation in ancillary or feeder communities such as the mass shooter cults in the True Crime Community (TCC). Trolling, irony, and hyper-violent humor are pervasive in NVE spaces, facilitating desensitization, dehumanization, and, in some cases, a growing comfort with committing violence. Some individuals join NVE spaces because they are actively seeking out increasingly graphic, violent, or exploitative content, particularly those whose interest begins in adjacent

⁸ Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; Silber and Bhatt, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat."

⁹ Draws to fantasy, conspiracy, and secret knowledge can also be a contributing factor to cult involvement (Munro, "Cults, Conspiracies, and Fantasies of Knowledge.").

¹⁰ Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation"; McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, 2nd Edition*; Polletta and Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements."

online spaces such as gore communities, segments of the TCC or other digital milieus centered on sensationalized violence. Others are less agentic. They are victims coerced into these spaces after being targeted on platforms like Roblox, evaluated for their susceptibility to further desensitization and manipulation, then transitioned to more private spaces where grooming escalates.

In the traditional pathway, violent ideation is presumed to revolve around a particular target or set of targets believed to be responsible for a core grievance. In NVE, that ideation is much broader, aestheticized, cataclysmic, and oriented toward spectacle. Violence is valued not for its ability to ameliorate a specific grievance, but instead for its perceived intensity, notoriety, and ability to resonate with other NVE participants, especially in SadEx/SOE spaces. In the mass violence streams of NVE (IRL and TCC networks), references to past attackers are nearly obligatory in online engagement, represented by users' inclusion of past attackers' images in profile pictures and referencing them in usernames and bios. These references signal that an individual understands NVE's shared symbolic language of violence.

Research and Planning

Research and planning in the traditional pathway entail picking a target, studying previous attacks, and thinking through tactics. In mass violence streams of NVE, research is heavily embedded with ideation such that individuals often study past attacks as part of ongoing ideation and in-group identification rather than as practical preparation. Past perpetrators, especially those elevated to "Saint" status in the militant accelerationism and TCC, are analyzed as much for their symbolic and aesthetic elements as for any tactical insights. These individuals are lauded for their carnage, and while some would-be perpetrators emulate specific aspects of these attacks, including timing, weapons, and clothing, this mimicry is largely about performance, about signaling that they understand NVE's broader cultural script, rather than about discerning techniques for a tactically successful attack. These individuals are not typically researching when security might be most lax at a potential target site, but instead are researching how best to recreate visual and emotional indicators of past violence. They may note how past manifestos articulate a preferred weapon, but are truly studying how to write themselves into the collective canon.

Planning may also be diffuse and even haphazard in NVE. In the TCC stream, individuals are known to crowdsource plots and ideate collectively, complicating the ability to apply a discrete threat assessment to an individual participating in such a manner. Several individuals have considered multiple, and very different, targets before committing violence or being discovered by law enforcement. ICDE evaluated one individual in Michigan, for example, who deliberated between a hospital, school, supermarket, and various places of worship before ultimately being arrested ten months later for a plot to target LGBTQ venues that were not included in his lists of possibilities. Excerpts from two different entries, 14 days apart, in this individual's handwritten diary are instructive regarding the chaotic nature of his assessment. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation are included here as they appear in his entries:

"Same shit different day. New Target New Weapon. Idk what i'm going to do. My first option is too close to Home, and the 2nd and 3rd options are really really far away. We will see. I'll just have to figure it out, but I have 2 years left to plan. So all will be good. Too be continued... [...] For some time, I have Been casing possible targets. Hospitals, churches, schools, mosques, synagogues, supermarkets."

"3 choices either a mosque, theater, or school. Now if its mosque ill do the Attack and surrender. if its a theater the same out come, but if its a school then im going to have too kill myself after the Attack no way could i Live with Myself. and i Would Never Survive Prison, they Hate child anything in there Killers too not just Pedos, so maybe a

Highschool not a elementary school Just so the students are a little bit older 15 to 18 range.”

Individuals plotting an attack may also entertain a variety of tactics, some of which are fantastical and likely to fail. A plan need not be flawlessly executed to be considered an NVE success in the name of violence; the failure of the Columbine attackers' bombs to wreak additional harm did not diminish their legacy. Failed or even unused weapons during attacks are still included in qualitative assessments of a perpetrator's commitment to the cause of violence. Tactical innovation is not particularly encouraged in NVE spaces, but successful or particularly unique innovations may nonetheless be emulated by future attackers.

This broad, rather than concerted, consideration of targets and tactics reflects two interrelated features of NVE culture as much as it does any practical considerations. First, the absence of a coherent overarching grievance creates a plethora of possible targets not only across individuals but also for any given participant. Second, clout systems in SadEx/SOE streams reward scale and horror rather than nuanced plot details. Both factors align with and amplify accelerationist threads within NVE where success and degree of carnage matter more than the specific target.

Additionally, in SadEx/SOE streams of NVE, where individuals are the targets, research is heavily embedded with the excessive and graphic harms perpetrated by “known” individuals. The production and consumption of “lore books” that catalogue harms provides a parallel to ideological content indexing. Similar to the mass attacker stream, research in SadEx/SOE is done more so as a function of in-group identification and assimilation rather than as practical preparation for a single act or campaign of violence.

Preparation

The traditional pathway's preparation stage is marked by acquiring materials, warning people, and issuing public threats. Mass violence NVE perpetrators do acquire materials, and ICDE's case review suggests that firearm acquisition remains a clear indicator that an NVE-affiliated individual is likely readying to commit an attack. However, individuals may also acquire other referential items that function as aesthetic markers of NVE identity substantially earlier in their involvement. Participants frequently purchase skullmasks or clothing referencing past attackers during the ideation stage. This is particularly salient in individuals influenced by or engaged in TCC. Photos or other depictions of these items function as a shared lexicon of violence, and the act of acquisition itself can facilitate a feeling of group belonging and identification even in the absence of a coalescing plan. Behaviors that look like preparation and have long been considered a form of leakage are thus limited as a form of threat detection in NVE due to the performative nature of these posts.

NVE IRL and mass violence perpetrators do not typically issue advance warnings of an impending attack, though some NVE networks may issue advertisements or teasers in Telegram channels and Discord servers that reinforce the clout-driven IRL activity. There is not a political message that could just as easily be delivered through property destruction while avoiding casualties; their goal is the infliction of life-altering violence. They want to demonstrate their capacity to instill fear and terror for no other reason than that they can. Some individuals livestream attacks or release materials during or immediately before an attack while still withholding specific details to avoid the plot's disruption. Some leave notes apologizing to family members that are intended to be discovered after the fact, not before. For example, Annunciation school shooter Robin Westman left notes to parents, siblings, and friends alike, apologizing for the impact the shooting would have on their lives and telling them not to blame themselves. Westman noted to their parents:

“...You did not fail me, you gave me so much. [...] Please do not think you have failed as parents. I was corrupted by this world and I've learned to hate what life is. [...] I'm sorry.

Rather than signaling intent in a way that invites intervention, these behaviors reflect a consistent pattern of concealment and fatalism in which any communication is carefully timed to underscore the act rather than prevent it. Forewarning must also be distinguished from the swatting calls and bomb hoaxes in which some NVE groups engage, where the act of communication is itself the primary mechanism of harm, intended to cause fear, chaos, and potentially violence effected by a third party.

Probing and Breaching

The penultimate stage of radicalization to violence in the traditional pathway—probing and breaching—involves final surveillance and dry runs. These behaviors are atypical in mass shooter NVE contexts, in part because many perpetrators target familiar locations such as former schools, reducing the need for reconnaissance. When preparatory behaviors do occur, they may take unconventional forms such as selfies staged to recreate the look of a past attacker (e.g., a recent trend has been posing and other emulation of Samantha Rupnow) or engagement with online games that allow the player to assume the role of a real, past mass shooter. ICDE has analyzed how these “games” and their dissemination across all streams of NVE blur the line between rehearsal, identity construction, and social signaling. This is particularly salient in environments where other NVE participants with no emergent attack plots engage in identical behaviors.

What the Pathway Model Obscures

Intervention strategies keyed to a stage-based approach have limited applicability to NVE given its diffuse behavioral pattern. Efforts to counter or modify a grievance will be ineffective at stopping NVE radicalization when grievance is a symptom rather than a cause of NVE involvement. Identifying preparation is more difficult when materials that meaningfully signal belonging and ideation are acquired early in engagement, not just shortly before an attack. NVE radicalization is best understood as an experience producing simultaneous affective, cognitive, and behavioral restructuring through exposure and coercion. The elements of the pathway remain relevant for understanding engagement and escalation, yet they manifest across these domains in uneven and non-sequential ways. Literature on high-control groups offers a framework better suited to capturing this simultaneity by accounting for cross-domain activation and providing routes for intervention that the pathway model alone cannot supply.

NVE as a High-Control Environment: The BITE Model Framework

Some participants enter the various streams of NVE voluntarily, attracted by countercultural appeal, notoriety, or opportunities to achieve status. Others are drawn in through targeted engagement, grooming, and coercion. In both cases, pathways into deeper involvement more closely resemble dynamics that are observed in high-control groups than in more familiar forms of terrorist or violent extremist radicalization. A high-control framework is a particularly useful assessment mechanism because individuals who entered as victims have routinely later adopted the norms and behaviors of the group, including by becoming perpetrators themselves.

High-control environments are those that seek to coercively regulate physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and financial aspects of individuals' lives for the benefit of a small number of leaders. They often deploy esoteric or violent methods and aims, and individuals targeted for engagement are gradually desensitized to the extreme nature of these elements. High-control environments are most often associated with cults,¹¹ which constitute the bulk of the relevant literature and thus serve as the primary basis for comparison here.¹² While no two cults are identical, they share similar processes of escalating manipulation that increasingly subsume participants' time, identity, and resources, making disengagement progressively more difficult.

Among the models developed to describe these characteristics, the BITE model,¹³ which is organized around domains of Behavioral, Information, Thought, and Emotional control, is particularly useful as a starting point for examining how manipulation in NVE streams parallels cult manipulation. Crucially, cultic manipulation does not occur in discrete stages but through an ongoing, iterative, and mutually reinforcing process across all four domains simultaneously. Not every indicator of the BITE model applies to NVE, nor do they all apply to every cult.

The sections below analyze key indicators in each BITE domain that are relevant to NVE's multi-dimensional coercive structure. Indicators for the lengthier behavioral domain are clustered by the overarching, core goal they serve in the NVE context and may thus appear out of order compared to how they are listed in the BITE framework. Each section examines relevant indicators' mechanisms inside cult environments before analyzing how dynamics in NVE reflect, modify, or depart from those patterns. Because the model reflects how control operates cross-domain, the first section on Behavioral Control section provides the most thorough set of explanations and examples; subsequent sections reference these dynamics as needed and provide additional examples.

¹¹ "Cult" remains a contested term with sometimes unclear boundaries separating them from some mainstream practices and organizations. The use of the term in this paper is descriptive rather than diagnostic, and the examples discussed are entities that have been widely characterized as cults by subject-matter experts, researchers, journalists, and/or former members.

¹² Another high-control environment that is underexplored relative to its resonance with NVE, particularly the SadEx/SOE stream, is that experienced by child soldiers. This body of literature is relatively small and often targeted to highly specific populations, yet it may still provide important insights. As with cults, child soldiers are isolated from families and other supports, subject to coercion and other behavior modification, often brainwashed, and moved to violence. This literature may offer insights regarding certain parallels, including the apparently heightened sexual trauma and heightened risks for certain mental health issues after leaving the group for girls relative to boys (Betancourt et al., "Research Review"; Betancourt et al., "Sierra Leone's Child Soldiers."). This literature also details how girls may be up to 40% of child soldiers, yet receive fewer reintegration services and greater stigma than boys for their involvement because of social stereotypes about the masculinized nature of violence (Schauer and Elbert, "The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering"). Practitioners and communities helping youth and their families heal from NVE harms may benefit from existing lessons from this literature, including carefully assessing the extent of girls' exploitation and trauma.

This literature also indicates that variables surrounding involvement matter heavily for long-term changes. Aggression may prove to be a robust trait if fostered during key developmental periods, and children who had or believe they had some agency in joining may be more difficult to sustainably disengage, whereas coerced individuals may be more likely to exhibit PTSD (Hermenau et al., "Growing up in Armed Groups"; Derluyn et al., "Post-Traumatic Stress in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers"; Schauer and Elbert, "The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering"). Both of these patterns and attempts to address them may have clear corollaries to intervening in NVE exposure.

¹³ Freedom of Mind Resource Center, "BITE Model of Authoritarian Control."

HOW NVE MIRRORS CULT COERCION

APPLYING THE BITE MODEL TO NIHILISTIC VIOLENT EXTREMISM




















CORE MECHANISM	CULT ADAPTATION	NVE ADAPTATION
 CONTROL DAILY LIFE Regulate time, activities, and environment	 Isolation from outsiders, communal living, constant group activities, sleep and lifestyle control	 Digital panopticon, always-online expectations, livestream demands, proof of compliance
 CONDITION OBEDIENCE Use rewards and punishments to shape behavior	 Praise, status, or "spiritual" rewards for compliance, discipline, shame, or withdrawal for disloyalty	 Self-harm, humiliation, threats, and "challenges" for disobedience, rewards and punishments blur
 ENTRAP MEMBERS Increase fear of leaving through consequences	 Threats to family, loss of support network, or social and economic ruin if they leave	 Exposure threats, doxing, blackmail with harmful content, reputational destruction
 DISTORT INFORMATION Limit access to reality and promote false narratives	 Restrict outside media, promote propaganda and in-group narratives	 Information saturation with violent media, lore books, propaganda, and in-jokes, outside views dismissed
 RESHAPE IDENTITY Replace self-concept with group identity	 New names, symbols, uniforms, confessions, "us vs. them" identity formation	 Violent personas, "owned by" identities, cutsigns/bloodwalls, martyr and perpetrator glorification
 MANIPULATE EMOTION Exploit emotions to maintain control	 Guilt, shame, fear of damnation, love bombing, dependence on leader/group approval	 Fear of exposure, alienation, desensitization, emotional exhaustion, victimization as a path to status
 SAME COERCIVE MECHANISMS. DIFFERENT INFRASTRUCTURE. NVE ADAPTS CORE CULT DYNAMICS TO A DECENTRALIZED DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT.		

Image 2. A comparison of key mechanisms shared by cults and NVE.

Behavioral Control

Core Goal: Regulate Environment, Body, and Daily Life

Related Indicators

- Regulate individual's physical reality
- Major time spent with group indoctrination and rituals and/or self indoctrination including the internet
- Manipulation and deprivation of sleep

Mechanism in Cults

Most cults require adherents to spend increasing amounts of time physically engaged with the group and its activities. Many, like the Peoples Temple, have required people to give up their daily lives, relocate to a compound (like Jonestown) or other centralized setting, and submit to near-constant surveillance and physical control.¹⁴ Some individuals are manipulated into surrendering their possessions and severing or destroying relationships with family. The Family International (Children of God), for example, pressured members to give over large sums of money, sell their houses, and allow their children to be raised by other members, ostensibly to enable fuller spiritual investment undistracted by childrearing.¹⁵

¹⁴ Layton, *Seductive Poison*; "Jonestown & Peoples Temple – A Digital Archive."

¹⁵ Davis and Davis, *The Children of God*; Association, "The History of the Children of God Movement."

Beyond full physical relocation, cults like the Unification Church have required participants to spend time selling goods or engaging in proselytizing—activities often conducted in pairs or groups, with members expected to meet certain thresholds before returning to the group’s base.¹⁶ This social structure ensures physical accountability even when a member is outside the direct presence of leadership. These and similar demands structure daily life around the group’s priorities. Some cults, like Scientology, impose intense, tiered study programs paired with escalating financial costs for those seeking spiritual advancement.¹⁷ When these pressures are combined with sleep deprivation as in Aum Shinrikyo,¹⁸ members may lack the cognitive resources to think critically, enhancing susceptibility to indoctrination and compliance.

Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE

Traditional cults rely on enforced physical proximity to implement this level of behavioral control. NVE entities operate digitally and thus cannot control victims’ physical environments directly, yet their remote manipulation nonetheless achieves meaningful behavioral control through near-perpetual victim access. The fact that participants are predominantly in an age range where they are heavily online while still facing limited offline autonomy due to parental and social restrictions converts NVE’s digital access into a feature rather than a bug of their manipulation: victims’ online, rather than in-person, status becomes a desired state, not merely a necessary one. The fact that youth also experience an allure to explore near-unfettered autonomy in the digital realm compared to their domestic and societal conditions (e.g., structured activities in school) facilitates their participation in this process.

Physical control is most prevalent in the NVE stream related to SadEx/SOE, where victims are required to document the creation of fansigns, cutsigns, bloodwalls, and other demonstrations of compliance via livestream or video recording as evidence of their dedication. In one case reviewed by ICDE, for example, a victim reported to her groomers that she would miss a family event because her swimsuit would not adequately conceal a cutsign they had ordered her to carve into her thigh. Her groomers directed her to wear shorts and attend the event with her family, presumably to avoid inquiries about her absence that might lead to discovery of her victimization. In cases like this, the coerced cutting itself serves as a kind of manipulation of the victim’s physical, embodied reality which then has cascading impacts on both clothing and activity choices that groomers continue to manipulate as further controls on victims’ physical environments.

Digitally facilitated control is further evident in how NVE networks structure victims’ time and attention. Parents who have become aware of their child’s NVE involvement have reported noticing a marked increase in online engagement accompanied by withdrawal from family and offline peers. This increased time online is predominantly spent proving loyalty and demonstrating an understanding of NVE cultural scripts. Indoctrination to these scripts is often less externally structured relative to earlier extremist entities and more self-driven, partially due to accessibility of extremist materials online. This means that participants—whether initially self-directed or groomed into engagement—are expected to have a truncated learning curve and required to demonstrate almost an immediate understanding of scripts and references to known extortionists and their brands, mass violence perpetrators, their manifestos, and, in some groups, accelerationist or occult texts. In one case, ICDE observed an IRL stream NVE radicalizer attempt to make a young female who was engaged in extensive self-harm study and potentially emulate Samantha Rupnow in order to “put her activities to a good use.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Bromley, *“Moonies” in America*; Barker, *Making of a Moonie*.

¹⁷ Wright, *Going Clear*.

¹⁸ Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan*; Murakami, *Underground*.

¹⁹ The exact quote has been slightly altered here to protect operational aspects of ICDE’s work. Additional details are available upon request.

Under these pressures, individuals either quickly fail to meet required thresholds of demonstrated commitment and disengage, or they become increasingly drawn into the intensity and purported rewards of the environment. This dynamic produces a self-selecting and perpetually intensifying environment in which the threshold for demonstrating commitment continually escalates as individuals strive and compete to maintain status. This means that even a narrow or limited engagement with these spaces can be a sufficient vulnerability for some individuals to begin radicalizing to self harm and violence—an effect that offline cult engagement typically requires more sustained, in-person exposure to achieve.

NVE also employs sleep regulation, though adapted to the constraints of remote manipulation. Some victims are required to wake and post online at specific times to demonstrate engagement, resulting in interrupted sleep that is amplified by anxiety about fulfilling these time-sensitive demands. Other participants are challenged to demonstrate continuous engagement through uninterrupted livestreaming or chatting sessions lasting, in some cases, 24 hours or more. In this so-called "bedrotting," visible self-urination or defecation during the session is framed as an even deeper indicator of commitment while simultaneously generating additional visual material that manipulators can use for future debasement and coercion.

Summary

NVE achieves behavioral control not through physical isolation associated with many cults but instead through saturation of attention, compelled self-harm, and persistent demands for proof of commitment.²⁰ An amplifying dynamic of NVE behavioral control is the baseline shift in much of digital, youth culture where visibility and clout are increasingly the primary form of social currency. The result is a form of coercive control that is less visibly centralized yet highly durable. Manipulation is embedded in online engagement in ways that impact offline routines while remaining difficult for external observers, including caregivers, to detect until involvement is already well established.

Core Goal: Cultivate Authority, Obedience, and Behavioral Conditioning

Related Indicators

- Permission required for major decisions
- Rewards and punishments used to modify behaviors, both positive and negative
- Punish disobedience by beating, torture, burning, cutting, rape, or tattooing/branding
- Encourage and engage in corporal punishment
- Force individual to rape or be raped

Mechanism in Cults

Some cults require members to seek leader's permission for major life decisions such as marriage or having children. The goal is to remove autonomy from participants and concentrate it in the hands of a leader or small leadership group. This structure not only constrains choices with potentially permanent consequences but also persistently amplifies the hierarchy while reinforcing members' relative powerlessness within the structure. Over time, even minor decisions (such as clothing choices or the timing of meals) may become subject to consultation or approval, reinforcing dependence and learned helplessness.

Cults commonly use rewards and punishments to condition behavior. Love bombing, in which a newcomer is initially made to feel uniquely valued, followed by increasing demands to maintain that

²⁰ There is an argument to be made that forcing some victims to engage and obey in direct messages or other highly private spaces is the digital equivalent to physical isolation in some cases because of how it isolates victims from the main channels' town squares. The lack of ability to physically, rather than socially, reinforce these separation still remains a relevant distinction but may nonetheless speak to the success of behavioral and emotional conditioning in these cases.

attention and approval, has been used by cults including the International Churches of Christ. Members report being made to feel welcome and accepted before fairly quickly realizing that acceptance was conditional on escalating signs of commitment.²¹ This process incentivizes the target to remain in the group's favor, often resulting in greater time investment, additional financial contributions, and progressive alignment with group expectations. Over time, some members who do rise in the ranks are rewarded with a certain level of flexibility or enhanced status that gives them leeway to recruit and victimize others. Other "rewards" function more as negative reinforcement, in which conditions the cult itself has imposed including sleep deprivation, social isolation, physical strain, are selectively and temporarily eased to foster dependency. Some former members of OneTaste, for example, have reported being permitted a full night's sleep only after meeting nearly-impossible sales quotas, creating a cycle in which basic needs become contingent on performance.²²

Even minor infractions may result in physically taxing or demeaning punishments. Children in particular may be targeted as a means of controlling not just their behavior but also their parents' behavior, time, and attention. Punishment, especially for adults, escalates with the perceived severity of infractions: heightened sleep deprivation, food restriction, ostracization, physical beatings, and sexual abuse have all been documented across various cults. NXIVM members, for example, reported being forced to maintain muscle-straining positions for extended periods for failing to adhere to calorie restrictions,²³ while groups like the Ant Hill Kids have engaged in extreme acts including severing digits or limbs as a consequence for disloyalty.²⁴ Many cults also employ rape and sexual coercion as tools of manipulation and punishment, including frequently coercing women into relationships with leaders that are framed as opportunities for spiritual advancement. This framing often obscures the coercion until after a victim has departed from the group.²⁵ Male members have similarly been coerced into non-consensual encounters, sometimes as a mechanism for controlling them, sometimes as a way to destabilize and separate couples within the group.²⁶

Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE

Most NVE participants are youth and not positioned to make the kinds of consequential life decisions around marriage, employment, or housing that cults frequently manipulate. The decentralized, online nature of NVE further limits direct enforcement of other permission structures. Some NVE victims are nonetheless required to seek their groomer's permission before engaging in certain online or offline activities—a dynamic largely consigned to the SadEx/SOE stream of NVE. These activities may more closely resemble life decisions considered major or at least consequential in the youth age range of NVE participants.

For example, ICDE has observed multiple young women in NVE spaces state that they must receive permission before participating in specific online chats, in leisure activities with offline friends, or even enter into e-romances with others. This requirement normalizes external control over personal autonomy and establishes a pattern of deference that contributes to escalating self-harm. Permission-seeking is most visible following perceived infractions, such as failing to log on at a designated time or slow response times and is sometimes presented as an intermediary step following

²¹ The New Zealand Herald, "Sydney Student Shares Warning Signs after His Friend Joined a Religious Cult."

²² Huet, "The Dark Side of OneTaste, the Orgasmic Meditation Company - Bloomberg"; USAO, "Onetaste Founder Nicole Daedone Sentenced to Nine Years in Prison for Forced Labor Conspiracy."

²³ Grigoriadis, "Inside Nxivm, the 'Sex Cult' That Preached Empowerment - The New York Times"; Edmondson and Gasbarre, *Scarred*.

²⁴ Los Angeles Times, "Canadian Cult's Leader Sentenced in Maiming Case."

²⁵ Stein, *Terror, Love and Brainwashing*; Lalich and Tobias, *Take Back Your Life*.

²⁶ Beck, "The Healings of Jim Jones"; Lalich, *Bounded Choice*.

some more direct punishment. This allows the individual to attempt to regain full standing publicly—a process that enhances manipulation potential as the victim works to restore acceptance.²⁷

Rather than framing negative reinforcement as a reward (as some cults do), NVE often collapses the distinction between punishment and reward altogether. The same actions like cutting or other self-harm that are assigned as punishment for a perceived transgression can simultaneously raise the individual's status within the group, not through penance and restoration, but through debasement. Other punishments carry no such dual function and are purely coercive. For example, doxxing has been observed in cases where individuals fail to meet expectations or resist escalation. The ostensible goal in several of these cases that ICDE has observed has been "embarrassment," and it may be true that some individuals face family and social consequences from this kind of public exposure that at least partially disengage them from NVE activities. Others targeted by doxxing, however, are more likely to be radicalized into violent or otherwise harmful action by this shaming. Several notable cases exist where doxxed individuals have been coerced into suicide by NVE actors, an outcome that simultaneously elevates NVE's notoriety and signal potentially fatal consequences of noncompliance to remaining participants. In these cases, punishment is not merely disciplinary but constitutive of the system itself, functioning to entrench control, escalate harm, and reinforce a hierarchy in which suffering becomes both currency and proof of allegiance.

“NVE often collapses the distinction between punishment and reward altogether.”

Authority in NVE spaces is further reinforced through reward systems tightly linked to harm and transgression. Enhanced status may be conveyed through increased visibility, greater association with high-status members, or recognition for completing and documenting extreme acts. A particularly significant reward is the opportunity to become a perpetrator rather than remain solely a victim. In these cases, individuals attain agency and status within the group by conducting harms against others. Victimization is thus sometimes framed as a pathway to power, where individuals who have demonstrated sustained compliance and willingness to engage in self-harm, are encouraged or directed to recruit, manipulate, or harm others. ICDE has also observed some participants attempt to gain agency and status by becoming willing participants of harm, sometimes even as a means of showing others that such behavior is a normative activity and thus acting as a bridge between victim and perpetrator.

Corporal punishment remains a central mechanism of NVE control, though it is adapted to the constraints of remote interaction, becoming self-directed but externally enforced. Cutting is the most recognizable form, presented as a ritual of incorporation but functioning as an embodied punishment intended to scar and leave a permanent mark of involvement even if the individual disaffiliates. The practice of having victims carve their extorter's alias (and sometimes multiple aliases in shared victimization settings) represents an upper limit for this dynamic. Other forms of corporal punishment in NVE spaces include coerced self-slapping or choking on camera, sometimes hard enough to leave visible bruising, documenting the insertion of bladed tools (e.g., kitchen knives) into female genitalia,

²⁷ It also must be noted that many of these interactions may imply an eventual off-ramp to coercive escalation to a young victim, but true options for exit are rare once a victim has contributed material that can be used to doxx or otherwise blackmail them. Instead, escalating self-harm potentially including suicide remains likely. Another complicating variable to this permission seeking and broader extortive dynamic is how certain entities that present themselves as anti-Com or anti-extortion sometimes engage in NVE spaces or directly contact victims. These actors present themselves as a safe outlet and a potential bridge out of NVE, yet ICDE has observed numerous cases where anti-extortion spaces are co-opted or evolve into highly extortive practices. It remains unstudied and unclear how many of these apparent bridges are actually trolls designed to toy with and eventually deepen victim engagement. It is also currently unclear (and how many individuals) truly disaffiliate from NVE and the trajectories they take to do so.

and other sadistic innovations. Such actions serve both as immediate punishment for perceived infractions and as mechanisms for generating recorded material that can be reused for further coercion and audience desensitization.

“Authority in NVE spaces is further reinforced through reward systems tightly linked to harm and transgression.”

Sexual coercion is also pervasive as a form of behavioral control. Some NVE spaces explicitly frame sexual violence or producing and disseminating child sexual abuse material as a tool for disrupting social norms and accelerating broader societal breakdown. Some NVE actors have encouraged members to opportunistically commit rapes to gain clout, including in-person sexual assaults and digitally-based assaults. Sexual violence and manipulation are also used internally within the group, with perpetrators frequently coercing male participants into sexually assaulting animals or younger children and coercing female participants into sexualized self harm. These behaviors, too, are streamed or recorded and used to blackmail victims into escalating behaviors, meaning that these sexualized actions both serve as demonstrations of compliance and also ensure its likelihood.

Summary

NVE environments cultivate authority and compliance even in the absence of physical proximity, and, given how ingrained the internet is in daily life, especially for youth, these dynamics are likely to continue. Perpetrators establish control through manipulating status, access, and threats of exposure, while compliance is reinforced through a system in which rewards and punishments may be indistinguishable. Behavioral change is achieved through cycles of escalation, debasement, and coercion that bind individuals to the group. In this way, NVE adapts core mechanisms of cultic control into a decentralized model, where power is maintained through persistent surveillance, the strategic use of harm, and the continual reshaping of individual behavior toward increasingly extreme outcomes.

Core Goal: Entrap and Limit Options for Disaffiliation

Related Indicators

- Threaten harm to family and friends
- Instill dependency and obedience²⁸

Mechanism in Cults

Cults have employed a variety of threats to maintain compliance, and some have targeted adherents' family members and friends, weaponizing their safety to maintain control. Within the cult's confines, family and close associates may be threatened with physical or sexual abuse, extending the consequences of a member's perceived disobedience beyond the individual, expanding the locus of harm and raising the stakes of conformity. Some cults also credibly direct threats externally, targeting individuals who were never group members. Former Scientologists, for example, have reported that their loved ones faced harassment, surveillance, subpoenas, and other legal intervention as tools to pressure members back into compliance. Even children have reportedly been the target of some of these tactics, with threats to their safety being the primary message delivered to parents deviating from the cult's desires.²⁹

²⁸ While presented as its own indicator in the BITE model, this item is more of a desired outcome of all cross-domain indicators for both cults and NVE and thus is not discussed separately here.

²⁹ Tobin, "In Texas Lawsuit, Judge Orders Scientology and Its Leader to Stop Harassment"; Sweeney, "Row over Scientology Video."

Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE

NVE entities replicate this externalization of threat, but their threats center on exposure. This effect can be amplified in cases where perpetrators have access to victims' real-world identities and locations. In one SadEx/SOE case ICDE reviewed, for example, a minor victim told her groomers that she intended to report her experiences to law enforcement even if it resulted in legal consequences for herself. Her groomers falsely responded that her mother would be the one to face severe legal consequences, attempting to expand the site of harm beyond the compromised individual. The victim responded by expressing only mild reservations about this particular outcome, and the groomers quickly noted that the victim's mother would also learn about the sexualized behaviors the victim engaged in as part of this network. She then quickly complied. In this case, externalized threats were part of the perpetrators' repertoire even though the threat of familial and social exposure of the victim herself proved more salient and successfully compelled the victim to continue self-harming and self-debasing on camera. Other cases have included similar threats to extort or extend punishment to family members with mixed results.

“Across these threatening dynamics, dependency and obedience are maintained not only through direct coercion but through the systematic erosion of perceived alternatives.”

Beyond discouraging disaffiliation and promoting self-harm, threats can facilitate externally focused violent behavior. One example is when doxxing appears intended to goad an individual into committing a school shooting, in part because they are made to believe that being exposed as an NVE participant would cut off from other social possibilities. Experiencing doxxing may thus reframe violence as a viable or even inevitable response. Another possible example of how externalized threats may compel behavior is Solomon Henderson, who committed a shooting at his Tennessee school in 2025. Henderson claimed in his diary that his sister was starting to engage with NVE groups, saying “My sister has discord it's over. I have to commit the attack. she's 100% gonna get groomed.” It is unclear if this claim was true or whether it factored into his decision to kill his fellow students, but it is possible that his escalation to violence was at least informed by an effort to alleviate some threats surrounding her engagement.






Doxxing that results in no immediate behavioral change can still constitute a demonstration of perpetrators' reach and capability. Dozens of unsolicited pizza deliveries arriving at a victim's home, for example, send a clear message that perpetrators know where the individual and their family live and might weaponize that information at any time. These actions reinforce compliance through uncertainty and fear—a kind of digital panopticon effect. The dynamic surrounding doxxing and forms of exposure also highlights NVE's strategic use of “outing” as both a threat and a form of control.

Across these threatening dynamics, dependency and obedience are maintained not only through direct coercion but through the systematic erosion of perceived alternatives. Victims come to believe that disaffiliation would result in consequences not just for themselves but also for those they care about, while continued engagement appears to be the only viable means of managing or mitigating those threats.

Summary

NVE achieves entrapment and coercion not through physical isolation but through the manipulation of perceived social consequences and risk. Dependency and obedience are maintained through direct manipulation as well as erosion of perceived alternatives. By weaponizing exposure, doxxing, and threats to family and peers, perpetrators constrain victims' sense of available choices, making continued

compliance and escalation appear safer than disengagement for the targeted individuals and the people they care about.

<h2 style="text-align: center;">SAME BEHAVIOR, DIFFERENT MEANING IN NVE</h2> <p style="text-align: center; color: #008080;">Behaviors can look familiar but reflect different dynamics in a high-control digital environment.</p>		
BEHAVIOR	IN TRADITIONAL EXTREMISM	IN NVE
 Posting violent memes or imagery	Leakage or early warning sign	Baseline participation; normal part of being in the community
 Researching attackers	Operational planning or case fixation	Identity performance; part of "lore," admiration, or saint culture
 Acquiring symbols/ weapons	Preparation for an attack	May occur very early as belonging behavior and status signaling
 Engaging with violent jokes or dark humor	Warning sign or desensitization	Often prerequisite for entry; tests boundaries and builds trust
 Public posting of disturbing content	Potential leakage	Status signaling; seeking visibility, clout, or recognition


 **BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS REMAIN RELEVANT—BUT THEIR MEANING CHANGES.**

Image 3. Behaviors can signal different meanings in NVE relative to other kinds of extremism.

Information Control

Core Goal: Distortion, Saturation, and Weaponization

Related Indicators:

- Deception
 - Distort information to make it more acceptable
 - Systematically lie to the cult member
- Minimize or discourage access to non-cult sources of information
 - Keep members busy so they don't have time to think and investigate
 - Control through cell phone with texting, calls, internet tracking
- Encourage spying on other members
 - Ensure that individual behavior is monitored by group
 - Extensive use of cult-generated information and propaganda
- Unethical use of confession
 - Information about sins used to disrupt and/or dissolve identity boundaries

Mechanism in Cults

Cults frequently misrepresent information, especially to new members, including through routine minimization or reframing information regarding internal controversies or aspects of a leader's biography that might undermine perceptions of that leader's divine access and authority. This selective

presentation shapes how members interpret both the group and their own experiences within it. Information about arduous, costly, or debasing requirements of membership is similarly obscured. Complex or extreme ideas are introduced gradually, framed in accessible terms early on, with more extreme doctrines deferred until members are too psychologically and behaviorally embedded to withdraw. By the time members encounter ideas or practices they might once have rejected, they are typically conditioned to reinterpret them as necessary steps toward belonging, advancement, or salvation.

Cults also distort their portrayal of the outside world, framing critical voices—especially those concerned family members or friends—as not merely mistaken about the nature of the group, but as actively obstructing a member's progress or unique destiny. Former members of Love Has Won, for example, have described being encouraged to sever ties with family as part of “unplugging from the 3D matrix,” portraying the external world and those who dwell within it as corrupt, unenlightened, and dangerous.³⁰ The cult, in contrast, is positioned as the sole source of truth, safety, or transcendence.

These narratives are reinforced through restrictions on information access. Many cults limit or prohibit contact with outside media, monitoring or removing access to devices that would facilitate unsupervised communication. The control cults exert over members' time and behavior leaves them with little opportunity to circumvent these restrictions, leaving them reliant almost exclusively on internally produced materials—sermons, videos, various proto-philosophical writings—to inform both abstract ideas (such as the nature of truth, morality, or authority) and concrete issues (including political events or personal decisions).

To further enforce both behavioral and informational restrictions, cults often encourage spying or mutual surveillance. Members may be encouraged or required to report on one another's behavior, attitudes, or expressions of doubt, and those who make such reports are frequently rewarded. Members of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, for example, have described being fearful of speaking critically because information would circulate rapidly back to leadership and result in punishment.³¹ This dynamic fosters distrust and further reinforces dependence on information created and promoted by the cult.

Confessional practices deepen this control by transforming personal disclosure into a tool of manipulation. Individuals may be required to disclose perceived transgressions or personal histories under conditions of heightened emotional intensity. Former NXIVM members, for example, reported being forced to take compromising photographs or falsely confess to crimes during lengthy and aggressive sessions.³² Disclosures like this, whether true or invented under duress, can produce immediate feelings of shame and reinforce the cult's hierarchical authority while also blurring the mental boundaries between self and the group's collective identity. Cults retain recordings or other records of confessions as leverage, with the implied or explicit threat being that sensitive information will be shared with authorities, family members, or others, resulting in severe legal or reputational consequences, should the individual depart from the group. This leverage is amplified by the false information the cult has instilled about the outside world, frequently including false and exaggerated claims that the member's family will never accept them upon leaving the cult.

³⁰ Doherty, “Watch Our New Documentary About ‘Love Has Won’, a Group Former Members Call a Cult”; Moyer, “From ‘Mother God’ to Mummified Corpse.”

³¹ Ministry of Home Affairs, “21 Members of Unregistered Local Chapter of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony Arrested Under the Societies Act.”

³² Edmondson and Gasbarre, *Scarred*; Grigoriadis, “Inside Nxivm, the ‘Sex Cult’ That Preached Empowerment - The New York Times.”

Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE

NVE environments replicate these mechanisms of information control, but rely on distortion, saturation, and coercive reinforcement because they cannot outright restrict competing information. NVE social dynamics and digital infrastructure hasten acceptance of taboo ideas and practices by such orders of magnitude that it seemingly can happen instantaneously for users that make their way into NVE spaces online regardless of platform.

All three streams of NVE, but especially the IRL and TCC streams, are premised and built on accelerationist principles that the world is fundamentally corrupt, that society is failing, and that vulnerable, disaffected children have no support systems. Some hardened esoteric NVE entities take this portrayal a step further, injecting notions of dark gods or ritualized reincarnation to lure participants with the idea that self-harm and even suicide can serve as sacrifices that will lead to some better life. These are the most extreme factions within a larger digital ecosystem that has semi-organically embraced nihilistic views on society and purpose, limiting the need for manipulating information control by leadership.

NVE entities at least theoretically face greater risks than cults of participants seeking out alternate information because victims can use the same devices on which they access NVE spaces to search the internet for alternate worldviews. NVE networks thus rely on the quantity and accessibility of radicalizing materials to overwhelm victims' information uptake. SadEx/SOE networks built internal reliance on information that mimics cult leaders' propaganda by generating individual lore and corresponding lore books that document their harmful capabilities. Some IRL groups maintain required reading lists with past shooters' manifestos and other key extremist texts, requiring demonstrated familiarity of this material before admission to certain servers or spaces. Others, however, expand their victim pool by introducing these materials later (or not at all) and instead rely on information communicated through memes and other visual media for early indoctrination. Participants in all NVE spaces are expected to develop fluency with the identities, motives, and perceived successes of past mass violence actors and key figures within their respective stream.

NVE spaces rely on persistent visibility and peer presence to enforce informational and behavioral conformity. NVE activities occur in channels with multiple or numerous participants, meaning that the digital panopticon effect largely replaces spying as used by cults. Individuals need not report members who are failing to comply because compliance checks are automatic and take center stage through requirements to stream videos or otherwise prove acts of escalating self-harm or violence. This digitized information—proof of NVE engagement—can then be used as blackmail that deters the individual from seeking outside help or disengaging from the group in a parallel way to cult confessional materials. Over time, the existence of these materials incentivizes escalation as individuals must continually produce more extreme content to maintain status and avoid punishment.

Summary

NVE adapts cults' framework for information control into a model defined by information saturation and electronic compliance. These environments overwhelm individuals with curated narratives and require active participation in promoting and recreating those narratives. Surveillance is embedded in the nature of online interaction, ensuring that individuals remain both exposed and accountable to the group. The result is a self-reinforcing system in which information control is maintained through the continuous reshaping of perception, identity, and behavior in ways that are difficult to interrupt once established.

Thought Control

Core Goal: Identity Reconstruction and Suppression of Independent Thought

Related Indicators:

- Change person's name and identity
- Use of loaded language and clichés which constrict knowledge, stop critical thoughts and reduce complexities into platitudinous buzz words
- Hypnotic techniques are used to alter mental states, undermine critical thinking and even to age regress the member
- Teaching thought-stopping techniques which shut down reality testing by stopping negative thoughts and allowing only positive thoughts
 - Rejection of rational analysis, critical thinking, constructive criticism
 - Forbid critical questions about leader, doctrine, or policy allowed
- Instill new “map of reality”

Mechanism in Cults

Cults often require members to adopt new names and identities, ones that supposedly resonate with their “true” identities and a cult's goals. Others, like Twin Flames, have been accused of taking identity reconstitution to the extreme of artificially pressuring individuals into altering their gender identities. By stripping away a member's name, professional titles, familial history, and more, the cult severs the individual's connection to their pre-cult life, replacing it with a persona that exists only within the group's hierarchy. This process of identity subsumption is not merely symbolic; it contributes to the victim restructuring how they understand and devalue themselves through the group's framework. The result is a victim whose sense of self-worth is entirely dependent on their standing and acceptance within the cult. Cults sometimes pair their practice of de-identification with past life regressions, spiritual “audits,” or other rituals that supposedly help the members reveal their correct path and identify barriers to achieving it.³³

Though not included as a BITE model indicator, many cults also require visible, embodied changes where members alter their appearance to reflect the group rather than their individual identity or pre-cult life. These physical modifications can include hair styles and clothing choices but may also encompass physical markings including tattoos or brands that more permanently demonstrate belonging. These changes not only visually indicate affiliation, but can also make it more challenging for individuals to reintegrate back into the outside world.

As an individual's identity is eroded, their relationship to the outside world is also redefined. Separation from pre-cult life creates what some practitioners have termed a “siege mentality” regarding influences outside the cult.³⁴ All information and contact from cult outsiders becomes perceived as hostile, active threats to the members and their advancement in the cult. This triggers preemptive rejection of claims or relationships that might challenge the cult's precepts and effectively severs members' link to their normative social connections and support systems. Members are conditioned to allow themselves only positive perceptions about the cult while questioning or negative perceptions are framed as a spiritual failing or a sign of “corruption.”

In-group language regarding identity, success, and progression to some higher state of existence may reinforce this cognitive boundary. By conditioning members to respond to every doubt or problem with what amounts to group-sanctioned catchphrases, the cult constricts the member's ability to think

³³ Justia Law, “Wollersheim v. Church of Scientology (1989)”; Wright, *Going Clear*.

³⁴ Lalich, *Bounded Choice*.

critically. Language becomes a tool for narrowing thought and cognitive processing, ensuring that any information from the outside world is instantly translated through the group's binary logic and quickly rejected. Love Has Won, for example, used many such phrases for dismissing outside challenges, insisting concerned family members were driven by “ego” or “3D” (i.e., lower dimension) concerns, or were even driven by some cabal—a fundamentally antisemitic concept influenced in this case by Q-Anon precepts.³⁵

Some cults also use hypnotic techniques and guided imagery to alter mental states and undermine critical thinking. Repetitive chanting or meditation, which are sometimes conducted using mind-altering substances or under conditions of food and sleep restriction, can induce trance-like states that further limit critical thinking and heighten suggestibility, thereby enhancing dependency on the cult and its leadership.³⁶ Some cult leaders have further amplified these effects by weaponizing infantilization to mirror a psychological state of childhood vulnerability and make the leader's commands feel as vital and unquestionable as those of a parent to a toddler. One example is the Unification Church, whose members reported being required to refer to the leader and his wife as “True Father” and “True Mother,” viewed as the ultimate source of guidance, moral authority, emotional validation, and protection and fostering a more childlike psychological orientation. This can make obedience feel less like compliance and more like submission to trusted parental figures with loving but absolute authority.³⁷

These mechanisms culminate in a comprehensive restructuring of reality itself, resulting in what some practitioners call a new “map of reality.” This internal roadmap completely replaces the member's previous understanding of the world with a manufactured worldview, making the group's reality the only one the member is capable of navigating. For example, members of Heaven's Gate came to believe they needed to castrate and otherwise mutilate themselves to obtain an ideal state to be born again aboard an alien spaceship following Halley's Comet in 1997.³⁸ Successfully instilling a new map of reality and convincing members that even the most abusive or illogical group behaviors are necessary steps toward a higher purpose means that cults can then reduce the resources spent on ensuring members' compliance. This happens because members have sufficiently internalized the cult's rules and mechanisms to be self policing.

Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE

NVE environments adapt these thought control mechanisms to their decentralized, digital, and youth-driven contexts. It is yet another feature, not a bug, that perpetrators target youth—a demographic that often struggles with a sense of identity—and amplify that struggle. ICDE has observed an increasing trend of perpetrators targeting victims who are specifically struggling with gender identity, perhaps having even instilled those struggles in the first place, echoing how cults manipulate even fundamental individual characteristics to their own ends.

Online aliases and anonymous or feigned personas are common across the internet and, alone, are not indicative of thought control. However, in the IRL and TCC NVE streams, social media handles, profile pictures, bios, and other identity markers frequently reflect shared violent goals through overt and subtle references to mass killers and other violence. Similar dynamics are at play with the SadEx/SOE stream, as users will larp (pretend to be) “known” extortioners; participant profiles will frequently include phrases such as “owned by [group or groomer].” Such actions signal not only NVE affiliation but psychological compliance with NVE power structures. Groomers deploy these and other techniques to activate self-fulfilling prophecies, convincing victims they are permanently “owned” and without worth

³⁵ Sottile, *Blazing Eye Sees All*.

³⁶ Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*; Singer and Lifton, *Cults in Our Midst*.

³⁷ Cartwright and Kent, “Social Control in Alternative Religions”; Barker, *Making of a Moonie*.

³⁸ Achenbach and Fisher, “The Cult That Left as It Lived.”

outside NVE communities; they then believe they have nothing to gain from seeking help. Degrading behaviors, including self-harm, further erode self-confidence and individual identity. Cutting names or symbols connected to NVE so deeply as to permanently scar parallels cult practices of indelible physical markings, making involvement both visible and difficult to disavow.

NVE perpetrators' successful construction of a siege mentality does not revolve around victims' adoption of nuanced or abusive precepts that must be defended from outside information, but rather on victims' fear that their NVE activities will be discovered and result in negative consequences for them, their families, and their groomers. This dynamic reinforces the perception that the outside world is dangerous while the NVE network offers the only viable path for acceptance or even survival. As victims' behaviors escalate following threats to release evidence to family, friends, or law enforcement, they feel increasingly alienated from offline support systems and perversely incentivized to identify even more strongly with their abusers and invest in NVE activities.

NVE's thought control does not deploy catchphrases to dismiss external reservations, yet has a parallel process via the internalization of a shared language of harm and violence. Learning this language relies heavily on desensitization to gore, violence, and sexualized imagery, including child sexual abuse materials that are in part produced by victims themselves. Given the very young ages of most NVE participants, exposure to these materials almost certainly impairs their ability to process a range of information appropriately, blunting emotional responses, normalizing extreme behavior, and narrowing the interpretive frameworks through which new information is understood. Unlike some cults that artificially manufacture infantilization to facilitate coercion, NVE exploits existing vulnerabilities endemic to the developmental stage of its primary participants, including heightened suggestibility, identity uncertainty, and sensitivity to social validation.

Beyond taking advantage of elastic neural structures of these young victims, NVE perpetrators attempt to amplify victims' suggestibility by approximating certain hypnotic or brainwashing techniques to occupy victims' cognitive resources and limit critical thinking, particularly after repeated and prolonged exposure to these materials. The primary use of this technique is the pervasive use of videos and other visual media combining strobing effects, rapidly changing imagery, abrupt sounds, and text overlays in ways that simultaneously tax multiple cognitive systems.³⁹ Another method of hostile cognitive occupation is message-flooding: ICDE reviewed one case, for example, in which an individual threatening to disclose their victimization to their parents was inundated with hundreds of messages per hour for several hours. Beyond being a form of behavioral control where the victim felt compelled to constantly check her phone, these messages were intended to overwhelm her attention and make it difficult to consider the consequences of continued NVE engagement.

NVE groomers cannot physically enforce sleep or food deprivation as a way to enhance these thought control techniques, though they can encourage such deprivation through social pressure and required video proof. It is no coincidence that some NVE spaces draw victims from online communities focused on disordered eating and similar behaviors, amplifying and weaponizing existing harmful thought and behavior patterns.

Over time, combined thought control pressures fundamentally reshape victims' map of reality around NVE's core goal of violence and other harm. Harm is reframed as meaningful, escalation is interpreted as progress, and disengagement is perceived as both dangerous and psychologically untenable. What begins as exposure and participation evolves into a self-reinforcing cognitive framework in which alternative interpretations of reality are increasingly inaccessible.

³⁹ Corbetta and Shulman, "Control of Goal-Directed and Stimulus-Driven Attention in the Brain"; Theeuwes, "Top-down and Bottom-up Control of Visual Selection."

Summary

NVE exerts thought control through cognitive overload and the exploitation of adolescent vulnerabilities. Victims are overwhelmed with gore, manipulation, and escalating demands such that harm or externalized violence becomes the most coherent and consistently validated framework available to them. The result is not the adoption of a particular ideology but rather the internalization of a worldview in which harm and violence are the primary currency of identity, status, and belonging.

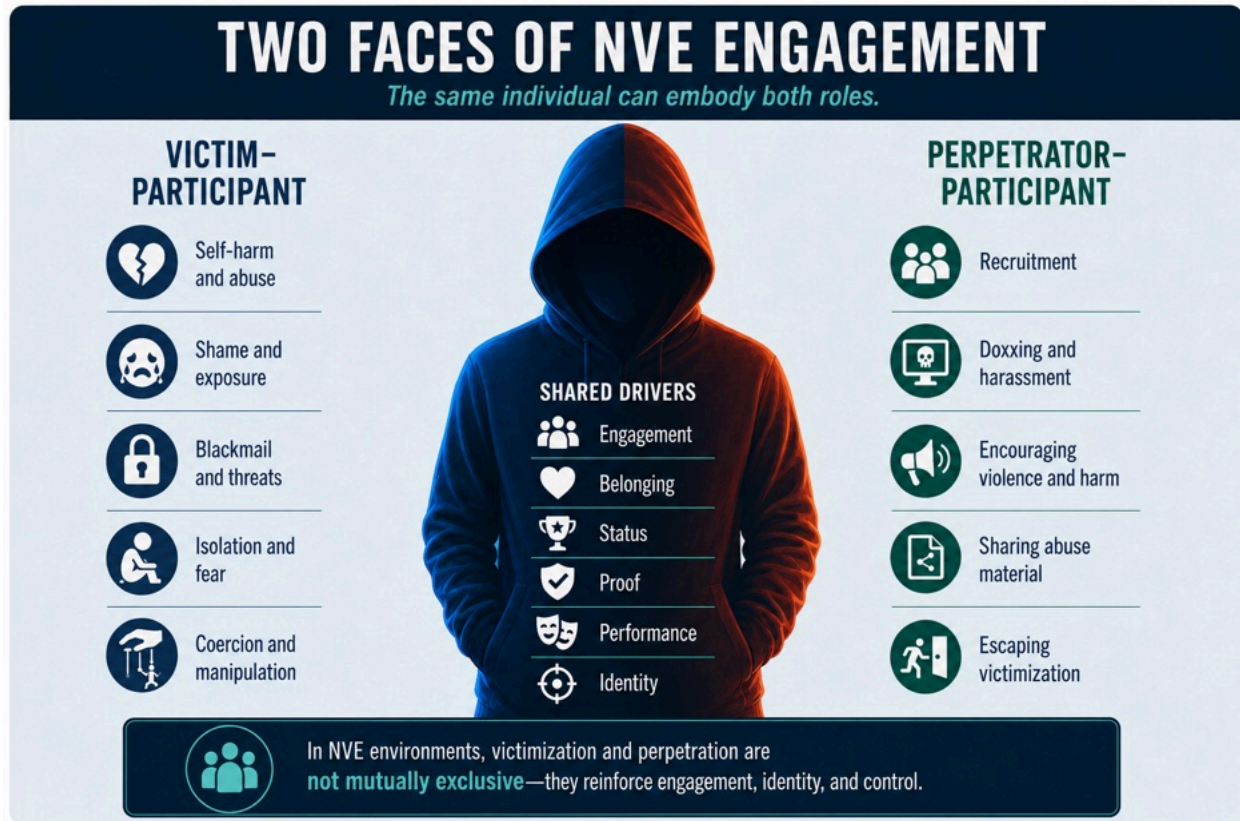


Image 4. NVE engagement can transform victimization into a pathway toward status, belonging, and harm against others, destabilizing traditional distinctions between victims and perpetrators.

Emotional Control

Core Goal: Supplant Positive Emotions

Related Indicators:

- Manipulate and narrow the range of feelings – some emotions and/or needs are deemed as evil, wrong or selfish
- Teach emotion-stopping techniques to block feelings of homesickness, anger, doubt
- Promote feelings of guilt or unworthiness
 - Identity guilt
 - Your past is suspect
 - Social guilt
- Instill fear, such as fear of other's disapproval
- Extremes of emotional highs and lows – love bombing and praise one moment and then declaring you are horrible sinner

- Ritualistic and sometimes public confession of sins
- Phobia indoctrination: inculcating irrational fears about leaving the group or questioning the leader's authority
 - No happiness or fulfillment possible outside of the group
 - Terrible consequences if you leave: hell, demon possession, incurable diseases, accidents, suicide, insanity, 10,000 reincarnations, etc.
 - Shunning of those who leave; fear of being rejected by friends and family
 - Threats of harm to ex-member and family

Mechanism in Cults

A continuation of de-individuation occurs at the level of emotional control in cult environments. Natural human desires for privacy, autonomy, dissent, or parental connection can be reframed as selfish or spiritually limiting. Children of God (The Family International), for example, discouraged biological parents from being the primary caregivers of their own children, insisting that this bond was a selfish interference with cult goals centered on polygamous relationships and the dissolution of traditional family units.⁴⁰ Emotions that would ordinarily anchor identity and relationships are reinterpreted as obstacles to belonging under these pressures.

Similar to techniques that interfere with critical thinking, cults employ emotion-stopping techniques to interrupt feelings that might contribute to departure. Emotions like anger, fear, or homesickness arising from cult involvement are chastised, suppressed, and negated through deception, shame, redirection, and conditioning. Members may be required to chant, pray, or engage in other practices meant to quiet internal dissent and prevent examination of feelings—not just thoughts—that might lead to disengagement.

Alongside suppressing dissenting emotions, cults actively foster destabilizing emotional states that reinforce the group's primacy. Feelings of unworthiness or guilt over not meeting the cult's expectations are fostered to help maintain dependency on the group while promising that greater devotion will yield relief. Fear of being expelled or falling short can be amplified to create competition among members, enhancing collective compliance and further conditioning emotional responses. Individuals who experienced trauma before joining the cult likely experience amplified emotional control impacts via mechanisms such as the "fawn" response, where individuals have been trauma-conditioned to comply with perceived threats in an effort to avoid worsening outcomes where the outcome is nonetheless enhanced susceptibility to manipulation.⁴¹

Several behavioral manipulations discussed above also have clear emotional impact. Cult leaders who love bomb then distance themselves from a new member are intentionally manipulating emotional highs and lows in a way that creates an emotional draw to the leader. Likewise, evidence of any foibles revealed during confessional sessions create emotional pressure to adapt and comply, not just behavioral incentives. Emotional transparency is often demanded and facilitated in a confessional environment, amplifying perceived or artificially constructed shame about the member's past associations and actions. This process also trains individuals to interpret emotional discomfort as evidence of personal failure rather than a response to coercion, further binding them to the group. Implicit or overt threats against friends and family create an emotional hostage situation with members thinking about leaving the cult being forced to weigh the potential harm to others against being forced to remain in what they are starting to understand is an abusive and harmful environment.

Cult leaders also inculcate members with the irrational fear that no happiness or fulfillment is possible outside the group, framing the outside world as a barrier to fulfilling some spiritual quest. These claims

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, "'The Family' and the Final Harvest."

⁴¹ Walker, *Complex PTSD*; Lalich, *Bounded Choice*.

are reinforced by vivid descriptions of promised terrible consequences for leaving, such as Aum Shinrikyo members who were taught that leaving the group meant forfeiting any chance of spiritual salvation and exposing oneself to catastrophic karma, demonic influence, and death, rather than salvation, during the apocalypse.⁴² These threats are not presented as possibilities, but as inevitabilities that fundamentally revolve around negative emotions like fear and shame.

As with other elements of control, these emotional dynamics can become both internalized and facilitated by other members. Cult members who themselves have been debased and abused may rise through the ranks and enforce the same treatment on others or newer members. NXIVM members, for example, have reported that they perpetuated cycles of abuse and recruited new targets as they themselves advanced within the organization as a form of reward for continued compliance.⁴³

Adapting These Mechanisms to NVE

NVE entities amplify negative emotions and produce a condensed affective range in which only destructive or adversarial feelings are validated. Fear, anger, alienation, and resentment are not framed as weaknesses when expressed in a group context, but instead as evidence of a hostile world. These emotions are refined and directed toward society as a whole and, in some cases, eventually molded toward violence against a specific target selected at least as much for symbolic potential as for any particular grievance. Narratives emphasizing societal collapse, betrayal, and exclusion supplant positive emotional connections to family and friends, limiting access to sources of resilience and support. Especially in IRL and TCC streams of NVE, this emotional manipulation may partly explain why many NVE entities incorporate occult ideas and practices that valorize hyper-individualism and hedonism while further eroding normative, pro-social practices and attachments.

Where cults identify and interrupt dissenting emotions, NVE environments drown them out through overstimulation and desensitization, particularly in SadEx/SOE spaces. NVE emotion-stopping techniques are, as with thought control, tied to visuals and actions meant both to distract and desensitize participants from normative feelings that might discourage violence and other harm. Constant engagement in NVE, escalating demands for demonstrating loyalty, and persistent memetic reinforcement of harm and violence leave little room for reflection. Repeated exposure to desensitizing materials reduces emotional reactivity, normalizes extreme content, and lowers psychological barriers to participation in harmful acts.

While not included as an indicator in the BITE model of cult coercion, animal torture and abuse is required in many NVE spaces, especially SadEx/SOE, and entails strong elements of emotional control. Committing or viewing various forms of violence against pets and other small animals can erode empathy, normalize harm, and destabilize an individual's sense of self, making escalating radicalization more likely. Manipulation of emotional highs and lows are also evident in NVE spaces, with rewards and temporary reprieves from harassment being granted after following through with self-harm or other coerced actions, only to be quickly followed by new and escalating demands.

Feelings of shame, unworthiness, and fear are prevalent across all three NVE streams, with constant pressures for victims to prove their belonging through demonstrated acts of self-harm, acts of property damage, or violence. NVE entities amplify the concept of identity guilt for some individuals who may face offline marginalization or oppression for their identities, helping explain why a young Black man like school shooter Solomon Henderson would seemingly embrace and evince white supremacist claims as part of his justification for violence. In such cases, it is not NVE's stance that the individual must constantly prove themselves worthy of inclusion in the group in light of some identity-based

⁴² Reader, *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan*.

⁴³ Ugwu, "Allison After NXIVM."

shortcoming, but rather that those shortcomings are real, immutable, and a valid impetus for destruction.

Emotional controls condition NVE participants to anticipate disapproval, exposure, or punishment from sources both inside and outside the group. Fear that online activities or constructed identities will be revealed to family, peers, or authorities creates a persistent sense of vulnerability that can be exploited to maintain compliance, in some cases rising to parallel some cult's phobia indoctrination. Examples include cases when some victims become convinced they face lengthy prison sentences or foster care placement for early NVE behaviors that are legal, if embarrassing. Complicating matters even further, many NVE participants claim to have a range of psychiatric, emotional, and general health disorders in conversation with each other; the extent to which these claims are real, performative, or even trolling is an unexamined empirical question whose answer may matter less than what the claims seem to imply about the general dissatisfaction and uncertainty of online youth.






Taken together, these emotional dynamics help explain how some individuals may transition from victimization to perpetration in NVE spaces. Exposure to these environments normalizes and rewards behaviors that would otherwise be unthinkable, while punishing hesitation or resistance. Over time, this can reshape perceptions of agency and responsibility, particularly in contexts of sustained emotional manipulation. In other words, when a person engages in self-harm and other actions that effectively dehumanize themselves, it becomes easier to dehumanize and harm others when doing so is presented as one of the few opportunities to attain high status and avoid further victimization.

Summary

Emotional control in NVE environments operates through intensification rather than restriction, narrowing the emotional landscape to those states that support and reinforce disaffection and violence. By amplifying negative affect, suppressing empathy through desensitization, and leveraging fear of exposure, NVE actors create a self-reinforcing emotional system that both sustains engagement and drives escalation. Unlike traditional cults, which often promise emotional relief through conformity, NVE spaces frequently weaponize emotional distress—transforming it into both a mechanism of control and a pathway toward increasingly harmful behavior.

CROSS-DOMAIN IMPACT OF KEY NVE ELEMENTS

A single coercive act impacts multiple domains simultaneously, creating deep, layered control.

COERCIVE ELEMENT	IMPACT ACROSS DOMAINS			
	BEHAVIORAL	INFORMATION	THOUGHT	EMOTIONAL
 Coerced self-harm	Proof of compliance	Blackmail material	Internalized worthlessness; identity degradation	Shame, fear, desensitization, emotional numbing
 Doxing threats	Compliance through fear	Exposure risk controls behavior	Hypervigilance; loss of agency	Anxiety, paranoia, isolation
 Livestream demands	Real-time obedience	Archived evidence	Normalization of surveillance	Humiliation, helplessness
 Lorebooks / violent media flooding	Desensitization & imitation	Distorted narratives	Reality distortion; nihilistic beliefs	Emotional numbing, desensitization
 Extortion	Escalating demands	Blackmail leverage	Learned helplessness; compliance	Fear, entrapment


 DOMAINS DON'T OPERATE IN ISOLATION—THEY REINFORCE EACH OTHER.

Image 5. These and other NVE elements implicate all four domains of coercive control, serving as one indicator that each domain needs appropriate assessment for effective prevention and intervention.

Integrating a Domain Approach with Lessons From the Traditional Pathway

NVE's deliberate and documented borrowing from cult manipulation, serial killer mythology, terrorist indoctrination, and other forms of manipulation underscores how the coercive mechanisms described in this paper are not emergent accidents of online culture but rather intentional adaptations of known, studied, and reproducible techniques. These techniques are meant to take the most effective forms of effective, perverse coercion and direct them toward vulnerable children. Some NVE entities have even reflected this aim by including some version of "cult" in their name or incorporating explicit references to cult dynamics in grooming manuals, further underscoring how a high-control framework is appropriate for understanding their processes. For example, the first group known to engage in the activities most commonly associated with SadEx/SOE NVE was named CVLT. The challenge for researchers and practitioners is how to take this information and use it to undermine NVE's exploitation and radicalization of children.

One reason the pathway model has been so helpful in identifying and intervening in other forms of extremism is because the stages have at least ostensibly been linked to observable behaviors. With NVE, behaviors—especially online behaviors—still matter and remain the easiest domain to assess because they are documented in posts, livestreams, and other materials shared within NVE networks. The difficulty is that these behaviors do not track with a stepwise or distinct-stage approach to intervention. Instead, harder to see domains of information, thought, and emotion control must be considered to appropriately assess an individual's proximity to violence. A detailed examination of each of the pathway's steps in the context of the BITE model further demonstrates this point.

In the traditional pathway model, grievance is the spark of radicalization; it is a coherent, shared injustice that drives group membership. The BITE framework helps show how grievances seemingly coalesce for many NVE participants only after group membership or engagement, and this may be most clear in streams with TCC influence. Across all three streams, informational control contributes to grievance formation after an individual joins an NVE space, and the external world is distorted into a hostile and corrupt entity. Thought control contributes to a new map of reality in which diffuse adolescent resentment is sometimes shaped into recognizable ideological form following NVE engagement. Emotional control amplifies this process with groomers validating anger, alienation, and resentment as the only honest responses to reality, while suppressing or drowning out any positive emotions that might offer a different interpretation of the world and its possibilities. Together, this means that relying on a shared, preexisting grievance as an early warning indicator will miss a significant proportion of NVE-involved individuals entirely. Likewise, identifying individuals with clearly articulated grievances as early-stage radicalization fundamentally mischaracterizes the extent of their exposure and participation.

Violent ideation undergoes a parallel transformation when viewed through the BITE lens. The pathway model treats it as a second stage of development that follows and is motivated by grievance. In NVE, violent ideation instead functions both as a pre-requisite and as a persistent domain-crossing requirement of belonging. This is particularly true in the IRL and TCC streams, though ideation on harms in SadEx/SOE plays a similar role. Behavioral control results in victims creating and propagating externalized representations of ideation as proof of their commitment to a shared cultural script that valorizes violence for its own sake. Informational control reinforces and amplifies ideation through saturating participants with lore books, manifestos, gore, child sexual abuse materials, and attacker or extorter iconography. Thought control encodes ideation as the primary symbolic language of the subculture, and emotional control strips away the psychological barriers that would ordinarily prevent the normalization and escalation of this shared fixation. This means that violent ideation in NVE is both harder to detect as a discrete risk factor and more durable once established because it is sustained by interlocking coercive pressures rather than by a single grievance. This also means that ideation alone and even degree of ideation may not be a reliable signal of proximity to violence.

The pathway model assumes that research and planning is a purposive stage—that an individual is selecting specific targets and tactics in preparation for a detailed attack. In mass violence streams of NVE, research and planning are both performative and preparatory. NVE's status economy, which rewards symbolism, scale, and spectacle over specificity, is more important in target selection for executed attacks than any objective operational logic. Behaviorally, participants are expected to study and signal understanding of past attackers. This focus contributes to an information environment where outside interpretations and perspectives are increasingly devalued and excluded. Participants' thoughts become more aligned with the perpetrators and their violence as they use research in particular to internalize NVE's shared language of violence. In a similar way, SadEx/SOE stream victims become more aligned with their own groomers through social pressures and NVE's reward structure. In both cases, this alignment shapes an individual's self-concept and simultaneously facilitates emotional muting and desensitization.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that even performative engagement in NVE is not benign because the same mechanisms of behavioral conditioning, desensitization, and cognitive restructuring that make engagement performative also make it escalatory. Practitioners who read performance as literal plotting risk misreading the timeline and nature of the threat, yet dismissing these signals altogether risks underweighting indicators of continued radicalization. Understanding precisely which domains are being engaged during instances of research and planning can help better identify readiness for attack.

Preparation is considered a more advanced stage in the pathway model that entails acquiring materials to be used in carrying out an attack that has solidified following successful planning. In NVE, weapons acquisition remains a concerning signal of possible looming violence, but other acquisitions that would constitute preparation under the traditional model happen much earlier, sometimes very shortly after first engaging with an NVE space. Behavioral manipulations encourage participants to adopt personas of attackers in their online identities and to purchase or make materials that invoke and glorify past attackers. Acquiring materials, studying past attacks, and adopting an attacker's aesthetic are often primarily an act of informational alignment that demonstrates fluency with NVE's shared symbolic language. In many cases, this corresponds more with ideation than traditional preparation. Likewise, from a thought control perspective, individuals whose map of reality has been reconstructed around NVE's valorization of violence may engage with attacker-associated materials as identity expression. Pressures for emotional validation also operate with behaviors that may first appear to be planning: the act of acquiring or displaying these materials garners peer recognition and status within NVE spaces, meaning that emotional reward structures can help sustain these behaviors independent of any concrete attack plan. As with research and planning, distinguishing between true preparation and performative behaviors that satisfy multiple elements of coercion can thus be difficult.

Probing and breaching is the stage closest to committing violent action in the traditional model, but the BITE framework clarifies why even here the picture is complicated for NVE. Many times, these signals do not happen before NVE attacks. In cases where they do, staged selfies or engagement with games that recreate real mass shootings frequently occur within a context of ongoing behavioral conditioning in which rehearsal, identity performance, and social signaling are inseparable. Taking a selfie while posing outside the site of a past attack may be a clear indication of movement toward violence—a possible probing and breaching behavior—whereas taking a selfie with a skullmask in one's own bedroom may more accurately reflect ideation alone. When the same action can signal two very different stages of the traditional model, a cross-domain contextual interpretation becomes more important for understanding threat than the behavior itself.

Information control is also relevant for understanding how individuals reach behaviors resembling probing and breaching after having been immersed in narratives about attackers and broader violence, thoroughly displacing alternative interpretive frameworks. For some, violence may become not just acceptable but obligatory, reducing the experienced distance between ideation and action in ways that standard behavioral observation will not capture. Individuals approaching NVE violence have also undergone thought coercion that has made violence part of their identity, meaning that movement toward an attack may feel less like a discrete decision than a natural conclusion. Emotional manipulation they have experienced has consolidated fear and shame about exposures of NVE engagement into a belief that they have no other sources of support or validation.

Rather than progressing through discrete stages implied by the pathway model, individuals engaged in NVE have trajectories that are fragmented, recursive, and self-reinforcing. Traditional indicators are frequently entangled with cognitive and emotional transformations that began considerably earlier and are considerably harder to observe in NVE. Bringing the BITE framework to an analysis of NVE allows us to keep each of the traditional pathway's key concepts as important benchmarks but to de-stage them and understand them as ongoing, overlapping processes that occur due to simultaneous coercion across multiple domains of influence.

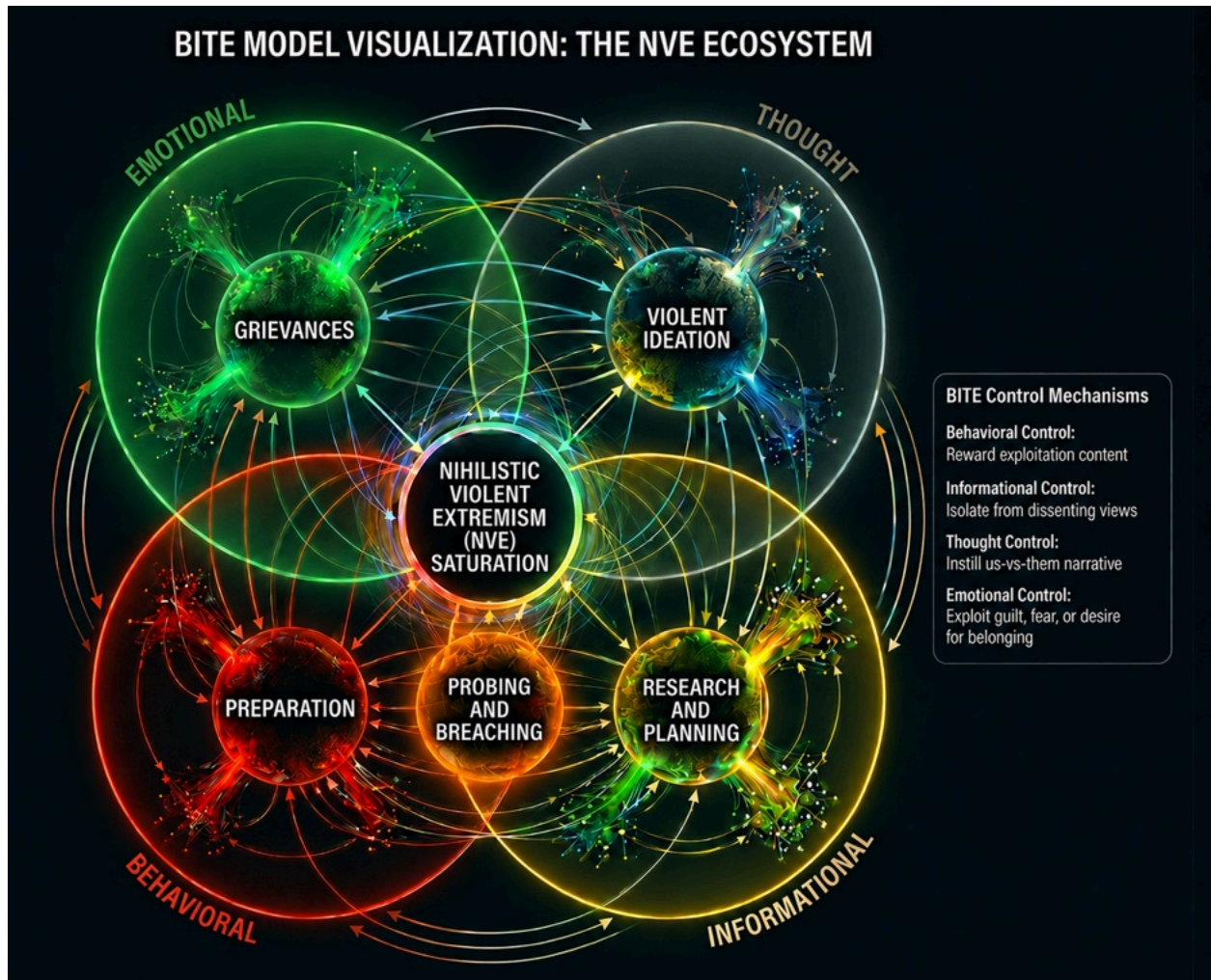


Image 6. Stages of the traditional pathway to violence model are influenced by each domain of coercive control, and this process is recursive and dynamic. In part because of the limitations of two-dimensional rendering, the pathway stages are visually depicted in the domain of likely-strongest influence but should not read as synonymous with or as exclusively influenced by that domain.

Implications for Intervention and Prevention

Consideration of the BITE model also brings cult disengagement research into dialogue with NVE prevention and intervention and quickly reveals something important: the threat of harm from engagement extends well beyond those who progress to externally-directed violence or even self-harm. Participants encounter extreme psychological stressors almost immediately upon entering NVE environments. Repeated exposure to hyper-violent, gory, and exploitative material can produce significant, lasting manipulation and other harm regardless of whether an individual ever commits violence. Compounding this, the gamified logic of escalation makes harm itself a currency, tying identity, social standing, and belonging to increasingly transgressive behavior. This makes passive observation functionally untenable for many participants: staying means engaging, and engaging means competing to see who can exact the most harm. The psychological toll on the broader population of NVE participants, most of whom will never attract law enforcement attention, is not presently being considered and is fundamentally unaddressed by the traditional model of radicalization.

The cult disengagement and extremism literatures converge on a consistent finding: prevention built through broad social investment yields more reliable outcomes than late-stage intervention. Effective intervention must instead work across behavioral, informational, cognitive, and emotional domains simultaneously. Because these domains constantly reinforce one another to facilitate dependency and engagement, targeting only discrete elements—whether behavioral risk, trauma response, or content exposure in isolation—is highly unlikely to succeed in general but especially with respect to countering the effects of NVE participation.

Addressing NVE harms requires a multi-layered approach that combines disruption of harmful networks with targeted support for vulnerable individuals and their families. Crucially, these efforts must be embedded within broader strategies that address the social conditions enabling these dynamics in the first place. A genuinely integrated, whole-of-society response coordinating educators, mental health providers, families, community organizations, technology platforms, and law enforcement is more aligned with how NVE perpetration actually functions and is thus better positioned to stop it. Education for caregivers and practitioners should emphasize the non-linear nature of NVE involvement and the importance of context-sensitive responses that do not facilitate a different form of dependency, but instead actively work to restore critical thinking capacity.

Cult disengagement research also points to three conditions most associated with durable recovery: rebuilt external support systems, restored personal autonomy, and recovered critical thinking capacity. NVE complicates each of these due to its youth constituency. Adolescents possess limited independence and therefore have a much narrower framework of autonomy to “restore,” meaning the opportunities provided by NVE may continue to appear comparatively more open and flexible than their offline circumstances. Some youth also turn to NVE precisely because they lack effective external supports, and such supports are difficult to artificially or retrospectively establish. Finally, youth are still developing critical thinking capacities—a fact that facilitates their susceptibility to coercive control in the first place and requires interventions to build those capacities largely from the ground up.

“This makes passive observation functionally untenable for many participants: staying means engaging, and engaging means competing to see who can exact the most harm.”

Too many individuals in NVE spaces, especially in the SadEx/SOE stream, also occupy an ambiguous position simultaneously as victims or former victims of exploitation and as perpetrators of harmful behavior. This raises difficult questions about consent, agency, and appropriate intervention thresholds from law enforcement, school, and psycho-social perspectives alike. Law enforcement in several U.S. jurisdictions have expressed to ICDE that they are particularly frustrated with how legislation lags behind online exploitation and with how U.S. District Attorneys seem either unwilling or unable to appropriately consider complexities of young NVE offenders even though there are clear signs of unaddressed plots and other dangers in their broader online networks. The victim-perpetrator duality also underscores the need for post-intervention integration. Approaches that rely on stigmatization or exclusion risk reinforcing the very alienation that drew individuals to these environments.

Literature on cult disengagement also points to a consistent point of failure. Forcible removal from high-control environments, absent internal motivation to disengage, tends to produce superficial compliance rather than genuine exit. Individuals frequently return to the group once external pressure lifts. This pattern appears to hold in NVE contexts. ICDE has observed multiple cases in which individuals resumed NVE engagement immediately upon regaining access to devices, including instances where

the individual was under active psychiatric care or imprisoned in juvenile detention facilities. Forcibly separating youth from internet-connected devices may be a necessary immediate intervention to prevent escalating harm, but durable disengagement can only be attained through the individual's active willingness and participation. Assessing this desire is further complicated by the fact that some NVE networks explicitly prepare participants for mental health and law enforcement intervention, coaching them to appear cooperative while remaining actively and perhaps increasingly engaged—a pattern that parallels how some cults instruct members to evade police wellness checks and similar inquiries.

The high-control environment literature has also examined how cult engagement and disengagement parallel addiction processes, not merely in abstract or theoretical terms but in terms of the neurochemical dynamics involved.⁴⁴ The intensity of social reward, status cycles, and escalating demands in NVE spaces likely activate similar reinforcement pathways, helping explain both the speed of entrenchment and the difficulty of durable exit. In many high-control contexts, lasting disengagement is associated with gradual self-disillusionment rather than abrupt external disruption. However, this dynamic is particularly difficult to navigate with NVE, given that these entities are actively oriented toward maximizing harm—not only against their members but against society as a whole—making waiting for internal motivation to withdraw a serious ethical concern.

Even if we assume a fully cooperative individual who is genuinely attempting to disaffiliate from NVE participation, a viable exit requires more than the removal of NVE influence. The presence of credible alternatives is necessary. Effective support must instead work to restore the sense of safety, belonging, identity, and meaning that NVE environments have co-opted—providing individuals not only something to disengage from, but something viable to move toward.

The central lesson is that no single intervention point is sufficient. Cross-domain coercion must be met with cross-domain support. Addressing trauma without rebuilding social context, or reducing compliance with behavioral coercion without restoring critical thinking, leaves core vulnerabilities intact. Incorporating BITE's coercion-informed, domain-based framework in an approach to NVE is not simply a conceptual refinement of the staged pathway model it is a necessary realignment of strategy with the lived realities of NVE involvement and with the full scope of harm these environments produce.

⁴⁴ Berger, "Similarities between Chemical or Psychological Addiction and Cult Membership: Treatment for Cult Exit (Dissertation)"; Cath, "Adolescence and Addiction to Alternative Belief Systems"; Rousselet et al., "Cult Membership."

References

- Achenbach, Joel, and Marc Fisher. "The Cult That Left as It Lived." *The Washington Post*, March 30, 1997. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/03/30/the-cult-that-left-as-it-lived/1e9baa-db-f465-4a7a-8026-0ab7e4822139/>.
- Association, Texas State Historical. "The History of the Children of God Movement." Texas State Historical Association. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/children-of-god>.
- Barker, Eileen. *Making of a Moonie*. Basil Blackwell, 1993.
- Beck, Don. "The Healings of Jim Jones." *Jonestown & Peoples Temple - A Digital Archive*. 2013. https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=32369.
- Berger, Kristina Hibshman. "Similarities between Chemical or Psychological Addiction and Cult Membership: Treatment for Cult Exit (Dissertation)." ProQuest, 2022. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2645893631>.
- Betancourt, Theresa S., Ivelina I. Borisova, Marie de la Soudière, and John Williamson. "Sierra Leone's Child Soldiers: War Exposures and Mental Health Problems by Gender." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 49, no. 1 (2011): 21–28. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.09.021>.
- Betancourt, Theresa S., Ivelina Borisova, Timothy P. Williams, et al. "Research Review: Psychosocial Adjustment and Mental Health in Former Child Soldiers – a Systematic Review of the Literature and Recommendations for Future Research." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 54, no. 1 (2013): 17–36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02620.x>.
- Borum, Randy. "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research." *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 37–62.
- Bromley, David G. *"Moonies" in America: Cult, Church, and Crusade*. SAGE Publications, Inc, 1979.
- Cartwright, Robert H., and Stephen A. Kent. "Social Control in Alternative Religions: A Familial Perspective." *Sociological Analysis* 53, no. 4 (1992): 345–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711432>.
- Cath, Stanley H. "Adolescence and Addiction to Alternative Belief Systems: Psychoanalytic and Psychophysiological Considerations." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry (Psychoanalytic Inquiry)* 2, no. 4 (2009). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07351698209533474>.
- Clemmow, Caitlin, Nicola Fowler, Amber Seaward, and Paul Gill. "Risk of What and Why? Disaggregating Pathways to Extremist Behaviours in Individuals Susceptible to Violent Extremism." *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 43, no. 2 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2710>.
- Cooter, Amy, Matthew Kriner, Arthur Bradley, and Lamphere-Englund. "The Digital Crucible: Understanding and Preventing Youth Recruitment to Terror, Hate, and Cartel Organizations Online." ICDE, 2025. <https://www.counteringextremism.org/analysis/reports/the-digital-crucible-understanding-and-preventing-youth-recruitment>.
- Corbetta, Maurizio, and Gordon L. Shulman. "Control of Goal-Directed and Stimulus-Driven Attention in the Brain." *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 3, no. 3 (2002): 201–15. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn755>.
- Davis, Deborah, and Bill Davis. *The Children of God: The Inside Story*. Zondervan, 1984. <https://www.abebooks.com/9780310278405/Children-God-Story-Davis-Deborah-0310278406/plp>.

- Derluyn, Ilse, Eric Broekaert, Gilberte Schuyten, and Els De Temmerman. "Post-Traumatic Stress in Former Ugandan Child Soldiers." *Lancet* (London, England) 363, no. 9412 (2004): 861–63. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(04\)15734-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(04)15734-6).
- Doherty, Simon. "Watch Our New Documentary About 'Love Has Won', a Group Former Members Call a Cult." VICE, March 23, 2021. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/love-has-won-vice-documentary/>.
- Edmondson, Sarah, and Kristine Gasbarre. *Scarred: The True Story of How I Escaped NXIVM, the Cult That Bound My Life*. Chronicle Prism, 2019.
- Fair, LaLanya. "What Are the 4 Stages of Radicalization? Why Extremists Act." American Public University, 2024. <https://www.apu.apus.edu/area-of-study/security-and-global-studies/resources/what-are-the-four-stages-of-radicalization/>.
- Freedom of Mind Resource Center. "BITE Model of Authoritarian Control." <https://freedomofmind.com/cult-mind-control/bite-model-pdf-download/>.
- Grigoriadis, Vanessa. "Inside Nxivm, the 'Sex Cult' That Preached Empowerment - The New York Times." New York Times, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/magazine/sex-cult-empowerment-nxivm-keith-raniere.html>.
- Hermenau, Katharin, Tobias Hecker, Anna Maedl, Maggie Schauer, and Thomas Elbert. "Growing up in Armed Groups: Trauma and Aggression among Child Soldiers in DR Congo." *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 4 (November 2013): 10.3402/ejpt.v4i0.21408. <https://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v4i0.21408>.
- Horgan, John. "From Profiles to Pathways and Roots to Routes: Perspectives from Psychology on Radicalization into Terrorism." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618, no. 1 (2008): 80–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716208317539>.
- Huet, Ellen. "The Dark Side of OneTaste, the Orgasmic Meditation Company - Bloomberg." Bloomberg, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2018-06-18/the-dark-side-of-onetaste-the-orgasmic-meditation-company>.
- Jensen, Michael A., Anita Atwell Seate, and Patrick A. James. "Radicalization to Violence: A Pathway Approach to Studying Extremism." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 5 (2020): 1067–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1442330>.
- "Jonestown & Peoples Temple – A Digital Archive." <https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/>.
- Justia Law. "Wollersheim v. Church of Scientology (1989)." 1989. <https://law.justia.com/cases/california/court-of-appeal/3d/212/872.html>.
- Lalich, Janja A. *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults*. University of California Press, 2004.
- Lalich, Janja, and Madeleine Tobias. *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from Cults and Abusive Relationships*. Bay Tree Publishing, 2006.
- Layton, Deborah. *Seductive Poison: A Jonestown Survivor's Story of Life and Death in the Peoples Temple*. Anchor, 2010.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of "brainwashing" in China*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

- Los Angeles Times. "Canadian Cult's Leader Sentenced in Maiming Case." October 12, 1989. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-10-12-mn-328-story.html>.
- McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970, 2nd Edition*. 2nd edition. The University Of Chicago Press, 1999.
- McCauley, Clark, and Sophia Moskalenko. "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model." *American Psychologist* (US) 72, no. 3 (2017): 205–16. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>.
- Ministry of Home Affairs. "21 Members of Unregistered Local Chapter of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus the Temple of the Tabernacle of the Testimony Arrested Under the Societies Act." <https://www.mha.gov.sg/media-room/newsroom/21-members-of-unregistered-local-chapter-of-the-shincheonji-church-of-jesus-the-temple-of-the-tabernacle-of-the-testimony-arrested-under-the-societies-act/>.
- Moghaddam, Fathali M. "The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration." *The American Psychologist* 60, no. 2 (2005): 161–69. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161>.
- Monckton Smith, Jane. "Intimate Partner Femicide: Using Foucauldian Analysis to Track an Eight Stage Progression to Homicide." *Violence Against Women* 26, no. 11 (2020): 1267–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219863876>.
- Moyer, Christopher. "From 'Mother God' to Mummified Corpse: Inside the Fringe Spiritual Sect 'Love Has Won.'" *Rolling Stone*, November 26, 2021. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/love-has-won-amy-carlson-mother-god-1254916/>.
- Munro, Daniel. "Cults, Conspiracies, and Fantasies of Knowledge." *Episteme* 21, no. 3 (2024): 949–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2022.55>.
- Murakami, Haruki. *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche*. Translated by Alfred Birnbaum and Philip Gabriel. Vintage, 2001.
- National Counterterrorism Center. "Mobilization Indicators Booklet." 2021. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/Mobilization_Indicators_Booklet_2021.pdf.
- Newcombe, Suzanne, Sarah Harvey, Jane Cooper, Ruby Forrester, Jo Banks, and Shannon Shah. "Cults and Online Violent Extremism." GNET, 2023. https://gnet-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/GNET-39-Cults-Online-Violent-Extremism_web.pdf.
- Niebuhr, Gustav. "'The Family' and the Final Harvest." *Washington Post*, 1993. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/06/02/the-family-and-the-final-harvest/2dab1727-d409-4fcf-bb8a-c04bd4aab752/>.
- Polletta, Francesca, and James M. Jasper. "Collective Identity and Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, no. Volume 27, 2001 (2001): 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.283>.
- Reader, Ian. *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The Case of Aum Shinrikyo*. University of Hawaii Press, 2000.
- Rousselet, M., O. Duretete, J. B. Hardouin, and M. Grall-Bronnec. "Cult Membership: What Factors Contribute to Joining or Leaving?" *Psychiatry Research* 257 (November 2017): 27–33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2017.07.018>.

- Sageman, Marc. *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- Sageman, Marc. *Understanding Terror Networks*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.
- Schauer, Elisabeth, and Thomas Elbert. "The Psychological Impact of Child Soldiering." In *Trauma Rehabilitation after War and Conflict: Community and Individual Perspectives*. Springer Science + Business Media, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-5722-1_14.
- Silber, Mitchell D., and Arvin Bhatt. "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat." Office of Justice Programs, 2007. <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/radicalization-west-homegrown-threat>.
- Singer, Margaret Thaler, and Robert Jay Lifton. *Cults in Our Midst: The Continuing Fight Against Their Hidden Menace*. Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Snow, David A., E. Burke Rochford Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford. "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation." *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 464–81.
- Sottile, Leah. *Blazing Eye Sees All: Love Has Won, False Prophets, and the Fever Dream of the American New Age*. Grand Central Publishing, 2025.
- Stein, Alexandra. *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. Routledge, 2017.
- Sweeney, John. "Row over Scientology Video." BBC News, May 14, 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6650545.stm>.
- The New Zealand Herald. "Sydney Student Shares Warning Signs after His Friend Joined a Religious Cult." 2022. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/sydney-student-shares-warning-signs-after-his-friend-joined-a-religious-cult/Z3NO5ZOPGCWMMHK64CFETSUMRI/>.
- Theeuwes, Jan. "Top-down and Bottom-up Control of Visual Selection." *Acta Psychologica* 135, no. 2 (2010): 77–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2010.02.006>.
- Tobin, Thomas C. "In Texas Lawsuit, Judge Orders Scientology and Its Leader to Stop Harassment." Tampa Bay Times, 2013. <https://www.tampabay.com/news/scientology/in-texas-lawsuit-judge-orders-scientology-and-its-leader-to-stop-harassment/2137671/>.
- Ugwu, Reggie. "Allison After NXIVM." New York Times, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/10/arts/allison-mack-nxivm-raniere.html>.
- United Nations Development Programme. "Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement." UNDP, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/publications/journey-extremism-africa-pathways-recruitment-and-disengagement>.
- U.S. Secret Service. "Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence." 2018. https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2020-10/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide.pdf.
- USAO. "Onetaste Founder Nicole Daedone Sentenced to Nine Years in Prison for Forced Labor Conspiracy." United States Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York, March 30, 2026.

<https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/onetaste-founder-nicole-daedone-sentenced-nine-years-prison-forced-labor-conspiracy>.

Violence Prevention Training. "The Pathway to Violence – Violence Prevention Training."
<https://vptraining.org/courses/community-member-training/lessons/module-2-notice-and-identify/topics/the-pathway-to-violence/>.

Walker, Pete. *Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving: A Guide and Map for Recovering from Childhood Trauma*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2025.

White, Stephen G. "Workplace Targeted Violence: Assessment and Management in Dynamic Contexts." In *International Handbook of Threat Assessment*, edited by J. Reid Meloy, Jens Hoffmann, J. Reid Meloy, and Jens Hoffmann. Oxford University Press, 2021.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/med-psych/9780190940164.003.0006>.

Wright, Lawrence. *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*. Vintage, 2013.

Yuzva Clement, David, Ruxandra M. Gheorghe, Dennis Walkenhorst, Jade Hutchinson, and Andrew McKenzie. "An Overview of Radicalization and Extremism Terminology and Theory." In *Social Work and Countering Violent Extremism: Case Management, Direct Practice and Multi-Sectoral Collaboration*, edited by David Yuzva Clement, Ruxandra M. Gheorghe, Dennis Walkenhorst, Jade Hutchinson, and Andrew McKenzie. Springer Nature Switzerland, 2026.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-07086-9_2.



Institute for Countering Digital Extremism
info@counteringextremism.org