

Explaining Fascination-Based Violence: A Four-Component Model and the Ideology Threshold in Five Jurisdictions

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Abstract

European prevention regimes are built to detect ideological commitment, and a growing share of the cases entering them supplies none. In the United Kingdom, referrals to Prevent, the statutory pre-criminal programme, that record no identifiable ideology now form a majority of intake, and a dedicated category records fascination with extreme violence. This article asks what draws such individuals toward violence and why prevention thresholds fail to identify them. Extending the phenomenology of crime, cultural criminology, significance quest theory and situational action theory, it specifies a four-component model. Attraction to violence for its own sake sustains voluntary exposure to violent material; mediation turns that attraction into a rehearsed attack script and persona; motivation comes from online communities that confer status for escalating transgression; and the setting, present throughout, supplies moral scripts that valorise harm. The central claim, termed the *esquisse* of violence, concerns sequence: the script forms before any cause, and ideology, where it appears, arrives late, as justification drawn from the setting. A structured comparison of the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and the European Union shows each making ideological purpose a threshold for intervention by a different legal route; the United States, a contrast case, has instead added an affect-based category alongside its purposive definition. Documentary analysis of the 2024 Southport attack traces that threshold across three referrals that never progressed. British policy now recognises the category but has no account of why such individuals are drawn to violence. Five falsifiable propositions specify what the model predicts.

Introduction

European criminal justice systems are encountering a category of case their categories do not accommodate. In the United Kingdom (UK), referrals to the Prevent programme recording no identifiable ideology now form a majority of intake, and the scheme has acquired a dedicated category for fascination with extreme violence where no ideology is present (Hargreaves, 2025). In 2024 a seventeen-year-old murdered three children in Southport after three referrals that never progressed to intervention, in part because practitioners could identify no coherent ideology behind his behaviour (Hall, 2025; Prevent, 2025); a statutory inquiry has since found that the attack could and should have been prevented (Home Office, 2026b). The difficulty is not confined to Britain. German authorities lack a settled vocabulary for nihilistic violence (Neumann, 2026), and the Italian Court of Cassation has been drawn into specifying, as doctrine, why actors of this kind fall outside terrorist association offences (*Associazioni con Finalità Eversiva*, 29/04/2025; *Condotte con finalità di terrorismo*, 27/10/2020).

These are criminal justice problems before they are legal ones. They concern how frontline practitioners assess risk, which cases cross a threshold into support, which agency owns a concern, and what happens when an assessment framework is calibrated to detect something the person in front of it does not have. This article argues that the difficulty is structural rather than operational. The frameworks European states use to identify individuals at risk of political violence presuppose ideological motivation, and a growing population of cases supplies none. Criminology already holds the resources to explain

those cases, and bringing them together shows why institutions built on the opposite assumption fail to identify them, with consequences that fall on prevention practice rather than on doctrine.

The emergence of what this paper terms ‘fascination-based pathways’ to violence presents a twofold challenge. First, it disrupts the frameworks that have dominated radicalisation research for two decades. Most radicalisation models presuppose that violent action emerges from progressive ideological commitment, with violence as the terminal point of cognitive radicalisation (Borum, 2011). Yet “Violent Fascinated Individuals” (VFIs) (Anderson, 2025) and nihilistic extremists appear to follow a different trajectory, one characterised less by ideological deepening than by aesthetic attraction to violence itself (Rousseau et al., 2024). “Non-ideological” here means the absence of a political programme, an articulated cause with demands and an imagined order to be brought about, rather than the absence of any disposition or worldview. Fascination-driven actors may hold recognisable attitudes; what they lack is a project.

Second, and more consequentially for this paper’s argument, fascination-based pathways expose gaps in the legal and institutional frameworks built to identify and intervene with individuals at risk of political violence. Those frameworks are constructed around the detection of ideological “tells”: the UK’s Prevent guidance centres ideology (Hargreaves, 2025), as does its independent review (Shawcross, 2023), as do European Union (EU) approaches coordinated through the Radicalisation Awareness Network (Ranstorp & Meines, 2024). The result is an “intervention gap” in which individuals exhibiting concerning behaviours never trigger the thresholds that activate support, precisely because they lack the markers those thresholds are built to detect. “Terrorism,” “extremism,” and “threat” are themselves constructed categories, products of legislative choice and institutional practice rather than of nature, and the argument here traces the consequences of how they have been drawn rather than naturalising them.

Objectives and Contribution

The paper’s contribution is a four-component model of the fascination-based pathway to violence. Its components come from established behavioural and criminological theory; what the paper adds is their configuration and the sequence it predicts. Attraction to violence precedes any ideological frame; mediation converts that attraction into an attack script and a persona; a network confers significance for escalating transgression; and the online setting in which all three occur supplies moral scripts that valorise harm. Ideology, where present, arrives last. This ordering is what the paper terms the *esquisse* of violence. Three lines of argument support it. First, phenomenological, cultural, and narrative criminology together establish the seductions of violence as an analytically distinct pathway that existing radicalisation models do not theorise. Second, Eco’s Ur-Fascist markers are shown to operate as aesthetic phenomena divorced from political programmes. Third, comparative legal analysis across five jurisdictions shows how statutory duties and operational practice presuppose ideological motivation, contrasting purpose-based definitions of terrorism with the affect-based category emerging in American practice. Because the model is offered as an explanation, it must be falsifiable, and the conclusion

derives five propositions testable through case-file and timeline analysis, practitioner interviews, manifestos and online traces, and published referral statistics.

Approach and Sources

The paper combines theory synthesis with structured comparison, and all material analysed is published. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, each component of the model is derived from a named body of theory, given an observable signature (Table 1), and linked to a testable proposition. Second, the comparison puts one question to every instrument: what becomes of a person whose conduct is grave but whose motivation supplies nothing for the instrument to test. For Italy, Germany and the European Union, Table 2 answers it against six fixed elements, from the principal instruments to the resulting position of the fascination-driven actor; the UK and the United States (US), the two poles of the comparison, are treated in prose. Third, the Southport attack is analysed as a critical case, tracing through the official record where in the referral sequence the ideology threshold operated. The five jurisdictions were chosen to maximise variation rather than to constitute a representative sample: the UK, where the ideological threshold is most explicit across statute, administrative duty, and operational guidance; the US, the only jurisdiction to have adopted an affect-based category in operational practice while leaving its statutory definition untouched; Italy and Germany, supplying civil-law variation through Cassation jurisprudence and through an association-offence and intelligence-led model respectively; and the EU as the supranational coordinating layer.

The comparison and the case analysis work from primary instruments, official guidance and independent statutory reviews (Hall, 2025); judicial material; the Southport Inquiry's Phase 1 report (Home Office, 2026b) and the Prevent Learning Review (Prevent, 2025); and published Prevent referral statistics (Hargreaves, 2025).

Southport is a least-likely case for the ideological threshold to fail: the perpetrator was referred three times, was known to services, and was preoccupied with mass violence over a sustained period, so its failure indicates structural difficulty rather than practitioner error. The case shows the threshold in operation and is not used to generalise. Three limitations follow. Categories such as nihilistic violent extremism (NVE), VFI and mixed, unclear or unstable (MUU) concerns are treated as institutional artefacts whose operation is analysed, and the paper does not validate them as natural kinds; public-domain material on any individual case is partial and shaped by the purposes for which it was produced; and the model specifies a pathway without estimating how often it is travelled.

Literature Review: The Ideological Assumption and Its Exceptions

The radicalisation literature has long tended to conflate the adoption of radical beliefs, the willingness to support violence, and the commission of violent acts (Horgan, 2008), and its dominant paradigm conceptualises the process as fundamentally ideological. Moghaddam's staircase posits a progressive narrowing of perceived options toward a terminal terrorist act (Moghaddam, 2005); network analysis

emphasises social bonds over individual psychology but still treats ideological commitment as the precondition for violence (Sageman, 2008); and the two-pyramids model separates radicalisation of opinion from radicalisation of action, accepting that most radical believers never act, yet takes radical opinion as the starting point (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2017). The empirical base reflects the premise: a study of 119 lone-actor terrorists found others aware of the individual's commitment to a specific extremist ideology in 79% of cases (P. Gill et al., 2014).

Two further features of the field bear on the argument. First, the purposive element is constitutive of how terrorism is defined, and the actors considered here fail precisely that criterion; they are correctly classified as falling outside a category the field has good reason to draw as it does. Second, Terrorism Studies has already produced a construct for serious violence lying outside that criterion: research comparing lone-actor terrorists with solo mass murderers finds the two populations resist clean disaggregation and proposes "lone-actor grievance-fuelled violence" as the better-fitting construct (Clemmow et al., 2022, p. 558). That work establishes that the boundary between terrorism and other targeted violence is behaviourally porous, but not what draws an individual toward violence when no grievance is legible either, which is the gap this paper occupies.

The cases that increasingly trouble practitioners are those in which there is no offline network and the online environment is where engagement begins and ends. The UK's MUU category captures individuals whose engagement with extremist material is eclectic and shifting, ranging across the *incelosphere*, accelerationist channels, and gore communities without settling into any doctrine (Hargreaves, 2025). Clinically, a specialist referral sample (Rousseau et al., 2025) placed 43 of 124 clients (34.7%) under an allied category of "nihilistic violence," drawn to the glorification of dystopic violence rather than to any cause, with adolescents far outnumbering adults. Scholarship has since identified online subcultures cultivating this attraction outside ideological frameworks: networks such as 764, CVLT, and No Lives Matter fuse Satanism, neo-Nazi aesthetics, and nihilism while eschewing political programmes, treating violence, degradation, and destruction as ends in themselves (Argentino et al., 2024). As the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD, 2025) observes, participants adopt extremist aesthetics without extremist ideologies, their interest being largely 'aesthetic'. Analysing such actors' manifestos, Hart finds four recurring themes, degeneracy, the devaluation of all lives, self-hatred, and the veneration of violence, of which only the last is a positive commitment, and to violence itself rather than anything it might achieve (Hart, 2026).

The emerging vocabulary has not gone unchallenged. It has been argued that 'nihilistic violent extremism' should be abandoned outright (Clifford, 2026): violent extremism is defined by the pursuit of political, social, or religious goals, nihilism denies that such goals have purchase, and a category yoking the two lumps neo-Nazi accelerationists, sextortion networks, and mass shooters together on no better ground than a shared online ecosystem. The objection is well made, but it establishes less than it appears to. Clifford's own evidence is that participants in networks such as 764 are motivated primarily by their fascination with violence, sexual gratification, and their desire to build clout and credibility within the network, which is to say that they are not purposive extremists at all (Clifford, 2026). That is a

description of the phenomenon, not a refutation of it. The incoherence Clifford identifies belongs to an institutional category constructed by analogy to purposive extremism; retiring the label without an account of the behavioural pathway it was reaching for would leave practitioners holding the cases with no theory of them. What follows attempts to supply it.

Seduction, Narrative, and the Aesthetics of Violence

The Seductions of Crime: Katz's Phenomenological Turn

Against criminology's tendency to explain crime through background variables such as deprivation, family dysfunction, and psychological abnormality, Katz's *Seductions of Crime* attended to the 'foreground' of criminal experience, the lived, sensual reality of committing transgressive acts, asking not why individuals become criminals but what crime feels like to those who commit it (Katz, 1988). Three features bear on fascination-based pathways. The attractions of crime are not reducible to instrumental calculation, since persistent robbers use violence where cost-benefit calculation does not justify it; violence is a source of existential meaning rather than a means to an end. Transgression exerts an aesthetic and sensual pull as felt experience. And criminal acts constitute new selves as well as expressing existing ones.

Cottee and Hayward carried Katz's framework into Terrorism Studies, arguing that the field's dominant strategic and organisational accounts had neglected terrorism's "existential attractions" (Cottee & Hayward, 2011). Their article identified three: the desire for excitement, the desire for ultimate meaning, and the desire for glory, and its claim was that terrorism is as much a site of self-drama and self-reinvention as a tactical instrument. Two features matter here. The first is the direction of agency: individuals are less pushed toward terrorism by distant psychological or political forces than drawn to it, seduced by violence as a "life-mode". The second is what the account retains. Their subjects remain terrorists in the full sense, members of the Brigade Rosse and the June 2nd Movement and jihadist volunteers, whose existential desires found expression inside an avowedly political project that supplied targets, justification, comradeship, and a vocabulary of glory.

The present argument extends that move further than its authors took it, because the cases now troubling practitioners are ones the framework was not built to reach. The fascination-driven actor exhibits those existential attractions with the political project subtracted. No cause supplies targets or justification, no organisation confers belonging, and the glory pursued is the saint culture's indiscriminate pantheon rather than the honour of a co-belligerent community. If the attractions were parasitic on the political project they should disappear with it, and the record of the nihilistic violence milieu suggests the opposite, which implies that in at least some cases they were never derivative of the cause at all. One reply is that the milieu supplies a functional substitute for the political project, in the network, the status economy and the saint pantheon. It does, but the substitute is social: it confers significance without supplying a cause.

Crucially, Katz describes a temporal inversion: the individual first experiences the sensual attraction of transgression, and only subsequently constructs narratives that render this attraction intelligible. For ideologically motivated actors, belief precedes action; for fascination-driven actors, affect may precede belief, and ideology, where it appears at all, arrives last. This extends Katz across timescales. His inversion describes the moment of the act, whereas the claim here is biographical, running across the months or years of immersion that precede any ideological frame. The extension is deliberate, and Proposition 1 states the terms on which it fails.

From the Act to the Image: Cultural and Narrative Criminology

Katz's foreground has no account of mediation: his robbers and 'badasses' act in physical settings, among bodies, in real time, whereas the online environments in which contemporary fascination crystallises do not. Cultural criminology supplies the bridge, fusing a phenomenology of transgression with a sociocultural analysis of late modernity and attending to the cultural scripts, styles, and images through which the felt quality of transgression is anticipated, performed, and circulated (Ferrell et al., 2015). That shift from act to image matters because the fascination-based pathway is mediated throughout, its spectacle of violence produced, consumed, and re-circulated as content. Karas brings the same apparatus to bear on counter-extremism, connecting Katz's 'badass', transgressive 'cool', and edgework to the aesthetics of the contemporary far right (Karas, 2025).

Narrative criminology extends Katz's approach by attending to the storied character of criminal action, on the premise that stories shape identities and mobilise action rather than merely communicating them (Presser, 2009). Analysis of Breivik's manifesto is exemplary: rather than reading the writings as evidence of ideological motivation, Sandberg found the ideology to be less a coherent belief system than a bricolage of available cultural materials assembled to construct a particular kind of self (2013). Read that way, a manifesto is a document of self-construction before it is a statement of cause, which is what makes ideological content in fascination-driven cases a poor guide to motivation.

Motivation and Setting: Significance Quest and Situational Action Theory

If the fascination-based actor is not driven by doctrine, the question of motivation remains. Significance quest theory, articulated through the "3N" model of needs, narratives, and networks, offers a parsimonious answer (Kruglanski et al., 2019): the proximate driver of extremist violence is a quest for personal significance, activated by loss or humiliation, channelled by a narrative identifying violence as the route to significance, and validated by a network conferring status for pursuing it. The theory's ideological content is contingent: the narrative that designates violence as significance-conferring need not be a coherent political programme.

Recent research applies precisely this insight to nihilistic violent extremism and the communities of the "Com," arguing that participants pursue personal significance within a subculture defined by the absence

of greater meaning (G. Gill, 2025). The paradox is instructive: the actor seeks to matter, yet the network confers mattering through escalating transgression rather than through commitment to a cause. The theory thus explains the attraction of notoriety, network status and an infamous “saint” identity without requiring any ideology.

Where significance quest theory addresses motivation, situational action theory (SAT) addresses the person-environment interaction through which motivation becomes action. SAT models the move to violence as a perception-choice process in which an individual’s moral propensity meets a criminogenic moral setting, rather than as the output of ideological commitment (Wikström & Bouhana, 2017). Notably, the Home Office rapid evidence assessment conducted within this framework found no distinctive vulnerability profile for radicalisation, concluding instead that a robust conventional morality renders individuals comparatively resistant to radicalising settings, while weak moral commitment combined with exposure to such settings generates risk (Wikström & Bouhana, 2017).

SAT locates causation in the moral character of the setting rather than in the doctrinal content of belief, and the closed servers and channels of the nihilistic violence ecosystem now function as criminogenic moral environments in precisely that sense, normalising extreme transgression, supplying moral scripts that valorise harm, and rewarding exposure with status.

A final body of work explains how the online setting aestheticises violence and strips it of doctrinal content. The mechanics of gamification, scoring, levels, achievements, and competitive ranking, render violence as play (Schlegel, 2020). After the 2019 Christchurch attack online observers discussed the perpetrator’s ‘high score’, and subsequent attackers adopted the conventions of the first-person shooter, including helmet-mounted cameras and livestreamed “Let’s Play” framings (Lakhani & Wiedlitzka, 2023). Mass-casualty violence becomes competitive performance, decoupled from political objective and legible to a network that confers significance for it.

Eco’s Ur-Fascism: Aesthetic Markers Without Political Content

Eco’s “Ur-Fascism” identified fourteen features of fascist movements, of which five are relevant here: the cult of action for action’s sake, beautiful in itself and requiring no prior reflection; life as permanent warfare; the cult of heroic death; machismo; and contempt for the weak. Eco treated them as components of a political ideology, and the typology travels to contemporary terrorism, the Islamic State exhibiting virtually every hallmark (Galimi, 2025). This paper contends that the markers can also operate independently of any coherent programme. Nihilistic violence subcultures exhibit that decoupling: the cult of action for action’s sake manifests in communities that valorise violence without specifying targets, and the cult of heroic death in the “saint culture” venerating mass shooters as a pantheon regardless of ideological orientation. Read through cultural criminology, Eco’s markers become available as style, severed from the programme that once gave them political meaning.

The Fascination-Based Pathway: A Four-Component Model

Each body of work was introduced because it supplies a component the ideological paradigm omits, and the components combine into a single specifiable pathway. Table 1 sets out the model.

Table 1

The fascination-based pathway: components, theoretical source, and observable signature.

Component	What it specifies	Theoretical source	Observable signature
1. Attraction	Initiates and sustains voluntary exposure to violence, which is experienced as sensually and existentially compelling in itself	Katz (1988); Cottee and Hayward (2011)	Sustained voluntary consumption of violent material absent instrumental purpose
2. Mediation	Converts the attraction into an attack script and a persona, anticipated, performed and circulated as image and style	Ferrell, Hayward and Young (2015); Presser (2009)	Bricolage of aesthetic markers; self-narration organised around an attack script
3. Motivation	Supplies the reward for acting: a network confers significance, as status, for escalating transgression	Kruglanski, Bélanger and Gunaratna (2019); Gill (2025)	Status contingent on harm content and gamified comparison
4. Setting	Present throughout: an online community whose moral scripts valorise harm, making violence a perceived option where moral commitment is weak	Wikström and Bouhana (2017); Schlegel (2020)	Duration and depth of immersion in communities that reward harm content

The first three components form a sequence; the fourth is the condition under which it runs. Attraction brings the individual into repeated contact with violent material, mediation turns that contact into a script and a persona, and motivation comes from the status a network confers for escalating transgression. All three occur within the setting, which is present from the first exposure and, where moral commitment is weak, makes the scripted act a perceived option. Ideology enters at the end if at all, as retrospective justification drawn from whatever the setting has made available. Propositions 1 to 4 in the conclusion test the components in turn.

That ordering is the paper’s central claim, which it terms the *esquisse* of violence, in the sense of a preparatory sketch. By the time a fascination-driven actor approaches violence, mediation has already produced an outline of the act, its aesthetics and the persona it will create, while nothing yet specifies what the violence is for. Ideology, where it is added, fills in that outline late and often arbitrarily, which is why the ideological material recovered from such cases is eclectic and unstable. The consequence for practice follows: frameworks calibrated to detect ideological content are looking for the last element to arrive. The model therefore departs from ideological radicalisation in endpoint, the enactment of a persona rather than commitment to a cause; in animating goal, personal transformation or notoriety rather than political effect; and in sequence, running affect first and belief last.

Ideology as Threshold in Counter-Terrorism Frameworks

Legal definitions matter here because they configure institutional behaviour: the statutes, judgments and directives below are read as instruments that shape prevention practice.

Comparative analysis across the UK, US, Italy, Germany, and the EU demonstrates that ideology functions as an implicit or explicit threshold condition for intervention in most jurisdictions, and that the principal exception, the US, has responded not by abolishing the threshold but by constructing an affect-based category alongside it. The analysis is organised around a structural distinction between purpose-based definitions of terrorism, which require that violence advance a specified cause, and affect-based categories, which require only a disposition toward indiscriminate destruction.

United Kingdom: Prevent, Channel, and the Ideology Requirement

The statutory foundation for Prevent lies in Section 26 of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (CTSA, 2015/17/07/2026), which imposes a duty on specified authorities to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. The Act incorporates the definition from Section 1 of the Terrorism Act 2000: the use or threat of action designed to influence the government or intimidate the public, made for the purpose of advancing a “political, religious, racial or ideological cause.” An act undertaken for no such cause is, in law, not terrorism at all, embedding ideology at the heart of the Prevent duty.

In the year ending 31 March 2025, Prevent received 8,778 referrals (8,517 individuals), the highest annual total on record, of which 1,472 were adopted as Channel cases (Hargreaves, 2025). Of the referrals where a concern type was specified, a majority, some 56%, related to individuals with no identified ideology (Hargreaves, 2025). The category records what assessors could not identify rather than what was demonstrably absent, so it sets an upper bound on non-ideological cases rather than measuring them. By contrast, extreme right-wing concerns accounted for 21% and Islamist concerns for 10%. Most telling, the dataset now contains a dedicated category for individuals exhibiting a “fascination with extreme violence or mass casualty attacks” where no other ideology is present: 469 referrals (5%), of which 243 (52%) were children aged eleven to fifteen and 126 (27%) were adopted as Channel cases (Hargreaves, 2025).

The policy response has been contradictory. The Shawcross Review of Prevent (Shawcross, 2023) diagnosed an overemphasis on vulnerability and an underemphasis on ideology, recommended refocusing Prevent on the ideological causes of terrorism, and questioned whether some MUU cases belonged within Prevent at all; the government accepted its recommendations. Within two years the direction had reversed. Following Southport, the Interim Independent Prevent Commissioner reported a significant rise in individuals interested in extreme violence whose ideologies are mixed, unstable, unclear, or principally non-ideological, and reaffirmed a responsibility to support all individuals at risk whether or not that risk is ideological (Anderson, 2025).

The reversal has since gone further. In February 2026 the Home Office published the Key Principles of Prevent, which state that a clear identifiable ideology is not mandatory to make or adopt a Prevent referral, and in July 2026 the government accepted the Southport Inquiry's recommendation that training materials be issued to strengthen understanding among referring organisations that a fixed ideology is not required for a referral to be made or accepted (Home Office, 2026a). The threshold has therefore been disclaimed at the referral gate. It has not been removed from the law. Section 26 imports Section 1, the purposive definition is untouched, and the instruments that assess a referral once made continue to look for what a fascination-driven individual does not have.

The Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation's review of the classification of the Southport violence reached three conclusions of direct relevance (Hall, 2025): the legal definition of terrorism is already wide and should not be widened; the lessons of counter-terrorism nonetheless bear on managing individuals who plan extreme violence for its own sake or out of personal grievance; and the government should consider a new offence, adapted from terrorism legislation, addressing non-terrorist mass-casualty attack-planning. Online rhetoric rarely reflects offline intentions, he cautioned, and no algorithm can distinguish the attacker from the fantasist (Hall, 2025).

The United States as Contrast Case: An Affect-Based Category Without a Statute

The United States enters this comparison as a contrast case rather than as a jurisdiction of equal standing. It is the only system to have responded to this population by constructing an affect-based investigative category alongside an untouched statutory definition, and it therefore isolates the choice European systems have so far declined to make, clarifying both what that refusal costs and what it protects.

American law contains a statutory definition of domestic terrorism (18 U.S.C. § 2331) but, unlike its treatment of international terrorism, no general criminal offence of domestic terrorism as such. Prosecutors confronting nihilistic violence therefore proceed through other instruments, including material-support provisions, conspiracy predicates, child-exploitation statutes, and the racketeering provisions of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (Cooter et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, federal authorities have constructed the category of NVE. Its working definition characterises NVEs as engaging in criminal conduct in furtherance of goals derived primarily from a hatred of society at large and a desire to bring about its collapse by sowing indiscriminate chaos, destruction, and social instability (Cooter et al., 2025). Where the UK, the EU, Italy, and Germany define terrorism by reference to the purpose the violence is meant to serve, the American NVE category is anchored in affect and disposition, in hatred of society rather than in any positive cause. The distinction survives the objection that collapse is itself a goal. A desire for collapse specifies no order to be brought about, and it is that specification, not the presence of a desire, which the purposive tests require. The US has codified at the investigative level the very pathway that purpose-based jurisdictions cannot accommodate, and the NVE

category has been increasingly invoked in federal practice, including in prosecutions of networks such as 764 (Cooter et al., 2025).

Civil-Law and Supranational Variants: Italy, Germany, and the European Union

Three further jurisdictions show that the purposive requirement is a structural feature of how liberal democracies constitute terrorism as a legal object. Each arrives at the same exclusion by a different doctrinal route (Table 2).

Table 2

Purposive requirements in Italy, Germany and the European Union, and their consequences for the fascination-driven actor.

Element compared	Italy	Germany	European Union
Principal instruments	Criminal Code, Arts. 270-bis to 270-sexies; Art. 270-sexies inserted by Law 155/2005 (L. 155/2005, 2005/08/05/2010)	Strafgesetzbuch, §§ 129a and 129b	Directive (EU) 2017/541, replacing Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA (2017/541, 2017) (2002/475/JHA, 2002)
Basis of liability	Terrorist association combined with terrorist purpose	Organisational: forming or participating in a terrorist association, including associations abroad	Enumerated acts committed with a specified aim
Purposive test	Acts committed to intimidate the population, compel a public authority or international organisation, or destabilise a state's fundamental structures	Purpose attaches to the association rather than to the individual act	Acts aimed at seriously intimidating a population, unduly compelling a government, or destabilising fundamental structures
Judicial or institutional gloss	Membership cannot rest on ideological adherence alone; the association must be genuinely capable of realising a programme of violence, and the conduct objectively capable of generating panic and diffuse insecurity (<i>Associazioni con Finalità Eversiva</i> , 29/04/2025) (<i>Condotte con finalità di terrorismo</i> , 27/10/2020)	Prevention resides in the Verfassungsschutz intelligence apparatus rather than in a statutory duty on frontline professionals	The Radicalisation Awareness Network frames radicalisation as the increasing adoption of extremist beliefs (Ranstorp & Meines, 2024)
Pre-criminal safeguarding duty	No statutory pre-criminal referral duty; practice emphasises social reintegration over ideological deradicalisation	No statutory duty on frontline professionals	Coordination and practitioner guidance only
Position of the fascination-driven actor	Neither organised nor purposive, and so outside the provisions entirely	No association, and so no organisational liability	No qualifying aim, and so outside the definition

Italy repays closer attention, because its Court of Cassation has specified, as doctrine, why the fascination-driven actor cannot be reached, and in doing so has set the outer boundary of what Italian prevention and prosecution can reach. The two holdings summarised in Table 2 set two requirements.

Adhesion in thought, without a structure capable of acting on the world, is not membership, and gravity of conduct without purposive direction falls outside the offence. The fascination-driven actor meets neither, belonging to no association capable of a programme and supplying no purpose against which the objective test could be run, however terrorising the violence. A jurisprudence built to restrain over-extension thus reaches the same exclusion the UK statute produces by drafting, and leaves such cases without an institutional home.

The word “ideology” appears in none of these instruments. It does not need to: the requirement of political destabilisation presupposes purposive violence, and the fascination-driven actor supplies no purpose to test. That the same exclusion is reached through Cassation jurisprudence in Italy, through association doctrine in Germany, and through a supranational directive at EU level indicates a gap generated by the concept of terrorism itself rather than by any national drafting choice. Germany illustrates the practical cost: in 2025 authorities arrested a young man linked to the 764 network for allegedly coercing minors into self-harm on livestream (Neumann, 2026). Practitioner outputs have begun to register mixed, unstable, and unclear cases and the gamification of extremism (Schlegel, 2020), yet the structural orientation of EU instruments toward ideologically defined threats remains intact.

The comparative analysis reveals a structural intervention gap with four aspects. Violence undertaken for no qualifying cause falls outside the legal definition of terrorism in every purpose-based jurisdiction, however severe. Assessment processes calibrated to detect ideological commitment may never advance concerning individuals to support. But for the contested American NVE category, threat taxonomies provide no settled home for fascination-driven violence. And resources follow recognised categories, leaving emerging threats poorly served.

Fascination in Practice: The Southport Attack and the 764 Ecosystem

On 29 July 2024, a seventeen-year-old attacked a children’s dance workshop in Southport, murdering three young girls and attempting to murder eight other children and two adults (*R v Axel Rudakubana*, 23/01/2025). The forthcoming Phase 2 of the inquiry, directed precisely at “violence-fixated individuals,” is treated here as terms of reference rather than findings (Home Office, 2026b).

The defining legal feature of the case is the disjunction between the gravity of the violence and its classification. At sentencing, the prosecution made clear the proceedings were not concerned with acts of terrorism within the meaning of the legislation, because no evidence showed his purpose was to advance any cause the statute specifies, a conclusion the court accepted while observing that his culpability was equivalent to terrorist murder (*R v Axel Rudakubana*, 23/01/2025). He was sentenced to detention at His Majesty’s pleasure with a minimum term of 52 years; a diagnosis of autism was found to offer no explanation for the offending.

Alongside the murders and attempted murders, the perpetrator was convicted of producing the biological toxin ricin and of possessing an al-Qaeda training manual, contrary to Section 58 of the

Terrorism Act (2000). The same individual was thus, simultaneously, a terrorism offender and a non-terrorist killer, a result that follows directly from the purpose-based structure of Section 1 and that exposes the artificiality of the threshold when applied to fascination-driven violence.

The perpetrator was referred to Prevent three times between 2019 and 2021, each time assessed and closed without progression to Channel. The Prevent Learning Review found a high level of procedural compliance, located the failure in subjective judgment rather than process, and concluded that he should have been referred to Channel and could have fallen within an MUU categorisation (Prevent, 2025). It identified a need to strengthen risk assessment where no coherent ideology is present and around repeat referrals, while senior counter-terrorism leadership acknowledged that young people fixated on violence rather than on terrorist ideology require new interventions and a clear institutional home (Hargreaves, 2025).

The statutory public inquiry's Phase 1 report found that the attack could and should have been prevented, that the perpetrator should have been progressed to Channel, and that he was not deemed suitable because he had no fixed ideology, an application of the thresholds that the inquiry considered ran counter to the guidance then in force, even as it found the thresholds themselves unclear and inconsistently applied (Home Office, 2026b). The inquiry further identified an absence of risk ownership across agencies, failures of information-sharing, a misunderstanding of the perpetrator's autism, and inadequate oversight of his online activity. On the autism finding the inquiry was precise in both directions: it stressed that no general association between autism and an increased risk of harm to others can be drawn, yet found that agencies repeatedly used the perpetrator's autism as an explanation and even an excuse for his conduct, including his violence (Home Office, 2026b). The case thus documents the intervention gap: fascination with violence unaccompanied by ideology repeatedly registered as concern yet never crossed the threshold for support. What the public record establishes, however, is the absence of an ideological frame rather than the order in which attraction and ideology appeared. Southport therefore evidences the pathway's endpoint, not its sequence; the sequence is what Proposition 1 sets out to test.

The government agreed with all sixty-seven of the Chair's recommendations in July 2026 and accepted those falling to central government. Two of those findings bear directly on the argument here. The first, which he identifies as his single most important conclusion, is that no organisation or multi-agency arrangement took ownership of the risk, producing what he calls an inappropriate merry-go-round of referral, assessment, case-closure and hand-off (Home Office, 2026a). The second adds to the inquiry's autism finding: in this case, aspects of the perpetrator's autism interacted with other factors to increase the risk he posed (Home Office, 2026a).

The Southport perpetrator's documented immersion in online violence belongs to a wider phenomenon that gives the fascination-based pathway its contemporary scale. The 764 network sits within a loose umbrella often called "the Com," spanning offshoots such as CVLT, No Lives Matter, and the Maniacs Murder Cult, which combine Satanist, neo-Nazi, incel, and anti-human motifs without coherent political

programme (G. Gill, 2025). Their characteristic activity, the coercion of minors into self-harm, the production and trading of gore and abusive material, the pursuit of notoriety through escalating transgression, instantiates the framework above: significance sought through a network conferring status for harm, violence aestheticised, ideology present only as borrowed style. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue’s characterisation of this milieu as “terror without ideology” captures exactly the category that purpose-based law cannot see (ISD, 2025).

In the UK, 764 and the Order of Nine Angles have been left un-proscribed, and the clearest 764-linked conviction rests on possession of an affiliated document useful for terrorism contrary to Section 58 (*R v Cameron Finnigan*, 16/01/2025).

Discussion: Implications for Identification and Intervention

The Identification Problem

Current risk assessment instruments, such as the UK’s Vulnerability Assessment Framework, operationalise vulnerability through markers that presuppose ideological progression. The fascination-based pathway inverts or renders irrelevant each of these indicators. The question shifts from what an individual believes to what an individual finds compelling about violence, and is considerably harder to operationalise. Accelerationist meme pages, ‘doomer’ communities, gore channels, and forums celebrating mass-casualty events trade in ironic detachment from sincere commitment, and monitoring calibrated to ideological radicalisation cannot readily separate concerning engagement from mere consumption. Such users move between National Socialist imagery, jihadist propaganda, and nihilistic manifestos and are frequently indifferent to all three, consuming each as transgressive content. One response is to shift the assessment question from belief to behaviour. The threat-assessment literature and the Terrorist Radicalization Assessment Protocol, TRAP-18 (Meloy & Gill, 2016), identify proximal warning behaviours, such as fixation, identification with prior attackers, and last-resort signals, that index movement toward an attack independently of ideology, capturing precisely the intensifying focus the fascination-based pathway describes. Behavioural assessment carries its own disambiguation burden, however. Fixation as a proximal warning behaviour and an autistic circumscribed interest can be identical in content while differing entirely in function (Al-Attar, 2020), a distinction the civil liberties analysis develops below.

Practitioner testimony independently supports this ordering. In focus groups with practitioners working with neurodivergent individuals in prevention contexts, Salman, Al-Attar and McKenzie record ideology as recurrently secondary: one participant reports that for such clients “the ideology is not the thing”, another that the doctrine is “just the outlet that it’s pinned on”, and a third describes ideological eclecticism as looking “scatter gun because I’m interested in the topic rather than the ideology” (Salman et al., 2026). The authors further note that an interest in violent content “may manifest independently of any extremist ideology”, and one practitioner describes intervention addressing extremism while a “wider diverse interest in destructiveness” was set aside, with violent offending following later.

The Intervention Dilemma

Intervention poses challenges more intractable still. Prevent and Channel assume individuals can be diverted by addressing the ideological vulnerabilities that motivate them, and mentoring, counter-narrative work, and cognitive interventions all presuppose beliefs susceptible to challenge. One possibility is to target the stories individuals tell about their relationship to violence. But if aesthetic attraction to violence operates beneath the level at which discursive intervention reaches, the Italian emphasis on social reintegration may prove better suited, restoring prosocial bonds irrespective of ideological orientation.

The Definitional Question

The comparative analysis frames a sharp policy choice among three options, each carrying distinct risks. The first is to widen the definition of terrorism to capture fascination-driven violence; Hall counsels firmly against it, holding the definition already wide and proposing instead a bespoke offence for non-terrorist mass-casualty attack-planning (Hall, 2025). The second, exemplified by the US, is to construct an affect-based investigative category alongside the existing definition, naming nihilistic violent extremism without folding it into terrorism law. The third is to resist new offences altogether and address the gap through safeguarding and welfare rather than counter-terrorism. Each distributes risk differently: expansion dilutes the category and extends exceptional powers, the affect-based route is elastic and politically usable, and safeguarding alone may leave dangerous individuals unmonitored.

The UK has since chosen, and chosen a fourth way. Legislation is before Parliament to criminalise the planning of a mass casualty attack, which is Hall's bespoke offence rather than an enlarged definition of terrorism, and further offences addressing the creation and dissemination of extreme violent content are proposed alongside it. Expansion was refused, safeguarding alone was judged insufficient, and the affect-based route was not taken: the response instead builds a non-terrorist offence outside the terrorism architecture while leaving that architecture intact. This vindicates the reading advanced here, that the exclusion is legally sound and the problem lies elsewhere. It does not resolve that problem: an offence operates at the point of planning, and identification sits upstream of it.

Expanding identification and intervention beyond ideological markers raises significant civil liberties concerns. Pre-criminal intervention has long been controversial, with critics arguing that programmes such as Prevent already reach too far into protected spheres of thought, expression, and association, governing present individuals on the basis of imagined future harms (Heath-Kelly, 2013). A framework attentive to fascination would cast a wider net still. Aesthetic appreciation of violence and attraction to transgressive content are widespread, often transient, and overwhelmingly benign, so treating fascination as a vulnerability marker risks pathologising ordinary responses and generating large numbers of false positives. The populations most likely to be captured also overlap with those already disproportionately subject to state attention: young men, neurodivergent individuals, and those experiencing mental health difficulties.

The neurodevelopmental overlap warrants particular scrutiny, because the evidence runs in two directions at once. At population level there is no empirical evidence linking autism to terrorism (Al-Attar, 2020), and review of the research record has upheld that conclusion (Druitt et al., 2023). Yet neurodivergent individuals recur in the pre-criminal space. The Interim Independent Prevent Commissioner notes that a higher than average proportion of violence-fascinated individuals have been recorded as having mental ill-health or neurodivergence, with the caveat that such conditions can increase, decrease, or bear no relation to the likelihood of involvement in violence (Anderson, 2025). The literature resolves the tension functionally rather than causally: autistic features such as circumscribed interests, obsessionality and collecting, and rich and vivid fantasy can contextualise how an individual encounters and is held by the settings in which fascination crystallises, without operating as causes of engagement (Al-Attar, 2020).

The difficulty for a fascination-attentive framework follows directly. Its first observable signature, sustained voluntary consumption of violent material absent instrumental purpose, is also a competent description of an autistic circumscribed interest, and the intensity of such an interest carries no implication about intent (Al-Attar, 2020). Practitioners working with neurodivergent individuals in extremism contexts report that restricted interests, collecting behaviours, and sensory needs are often present without any movement toward harm (Salman et al., 2026). Southport documents the inverse error: the perpetrator's first Prevent referral was closed partly on the reasoning that his vulnerabilities lay elsewhere, in a potential autism diagnosis, as though diagnosis and susceptibility were alternatives (Prevent, 2025). The two errors share a structure, each asking the diagnosis to answer a question that only function can answer. The discriminating question is what the violent material does for the individual, whether it feeds the ordering, cataloguing, and mastery characteristic of a circumscribed interest or the rehearsal of an attack script and the persona it promises, which is the signature of the pathway's second component. The analysis here clarifies the gap; it does not license closing it by indiscriminate means.

The government has established a taskforce on non-ideological extreme violence, directed at early intervention, the online environment and the operational response, and charged with developing an evidence base and options for a more coherent system response. It is piloting work within Prevent on individuals whose ideology is unclear, in order to establish which interventions are effective for those with a fascination with extreme violence, and has said it will draw on learning from academics in doing so. The category has been adopted; what the machinery still lacks is an account of why such individuals are drawn to violence at all.

Three implications follow, the first generated directly by the model. If exposure to the setting predicts movement toward violence better than individual profile, triage should weight what an individual has been immersed in over who that individual is, and referral processes built around ideological markers and demographic risk indicators will systematically under-detect this pathway. Assessment could record the duration and depth of immersion, the status economy of the communities involved, and the functional question set out above, alongside existing indicators. The second is epistemic humility, since instruments optimised for one pathway will miss another. The third is platform responsibility: regulatory

attention to algorithmic design may prove more tractable, and less corrosive of liberty, than intervening with individuals already on the pathway.

Scope Conditions

The model's four components are not equally portable. Attraction, mediation and motivation are claims about persons, and the theories they rest on are general rather than local: Katz's account is phenomenological, and situational action theory specifies an interaction rather than a culture. The fourth component travels for a different reason, because the setting is itself transnational; the same ecosystem produced an arrest in Germany and a conviction in the United Kingdom. What is jurisdiction-specific is the institutional half of the argument. The ideology threshold generalises only to systems that both operate a pre-criminal identification apparatus and define terrorism purposively, and the jurisdictions examined here were selected because they satisfy both conditions while differing in the doctrinal route by which they do so.

Stating the scope conditions specifies where the account should fail. Where no pre-criminal duty rests on frontline professionals, the gap should present as a question of intelligence coverage, which is how Germany already appears in the comparison. Where an affect-based category has been constructed alongside an untouched statutory definition, detection should improve and the governance costs set out above should surface in its place, which is the American pattern. And where the online milieu is thin or differently governed, the model predicts fewer cases of this kind rather than cases of a different shape.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the frameworks liberal democracies use to identify and intervene in pathways to violent extremism contain a structural blind spot: they presuppose ideological motivation, and so cannot apprehend individuals whose trajectory toward violence is animated by fascination. The four-component model specifies that trajectory, and the esquisse of violence names its defining feature: the script of the act forms before any cause, and ideology, where it appears, is added afterwards. The purpose-based definitions of the UK, the EU, Italy, and Germany each presuppose an articulable political objective, while the US, in naming NVE, has constructed an affect-based category that captures the pathway but raises governance concerns of its own. Southport demonstrated the gap in operation: an individual convicted of a terrorism documentary offence whose lethal attack was correctly held not to be terrorism, and repeatedly referred to a programme with no place for him.

The model is advanced as an explanation, and must therefore be falsifiable. Five propositions follow, each testable through case-file and timeline analysis, practitioner interviews, and examination of manifestos and online traces, and the fifth through published referral statistics.

1. Sequence. Sustained immersion in online settings that aestheticise violence will precede any identifiable ideological frame, and ideological material, where present, will be eclectic, unstable, and

late. Timelines regularly showing coherent commitment preceding immersion would disconfirm the model.

2. 2. Aesthetics without programme. The manifestos and online traces of fascination-driven perpetrators will exhibit the Ur-Fascist aesthetic markers without programmatic content: no articulated cause, no demands, no imagined order. Regular co-occurrence with programmatic content would disconfirm the decoupling claim.
3. 3. Status economy. Within fascination communities, status will track escalating transgression, harm content, gamified comparison, and the indiscriminate veneration of perpetrators rather than doctrinal fluency. Status tracking ideological commitment instead would defeat the significance-quest account.
4. 4. Setting over profile. Those who travel the pathway will display the interaction situational action theory specifies, weak conventional moral commitment plus sustained exposure to settings that valorise harm, but no distinctive demographic or psychopathological profile. Profile-based screening will therefore underperform measures of setting exposure.
5. 5. Institutional signature. In purpose-based jurisdictions, fascination-driven individuals will appear in prevention data as repeat referrals closed without progression at higher rates than ideologically legible counterparts, and behaviour-based or affect-based criteria will narrow that disparity. Published referral statistics make this measurable now.

Two limits of scope remain: the legal analysis, though spanning five jurisdictions, is selective, and “fascination” has been treated as relatively unified when it likely encompasses heterogeneous dynamics. Frameworks resting on assumptions about ideological motivation that may not hold for a significant and possibly growing category of actors require reconsideration of their conceptual foundations rather than technical adjustment to risk instruments. Definitions should not for that reason be dispensed with; they render a diffuse phenomenon legible, governable, and amenable to the rule of law. The task is to draw them better, beginning with attention to what individuals find seductive about violence, a question criminology is well placed to illuminate.

Declarations

Author Contribution

D.G. is the sole author.

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