

**Nihilistic Violence Aesthetics in Public Online Communication: A Non-Predictive
Theoretical Framework for Interpreting Hybridized Violent Signaling**

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Abstract

Online violent communication increasingly takes forms that are ironic, meme-based, aesthetically stylized, and only partially ideological. Existing scholarship has examined extremist memes, hybridized extremism, online radicalization, toxic multimodal content, and threat-assessment warning behaviors, yet the field still lacks a coherent conceptual vocabulary to describe the aesthetics of nihilistic violence as a distinct mode of public online communication. This theoretical article develops the Aesthetic-to-Risk Framework of Nihilistic Violence Aesthetics (ART-NVA) as an interpretive vocabulary rather than a risk instrument. The article first anchors the construct in scholarship on nihilism, distinguishing philosophical nihilism, vernacular online nihilism, and the communicative nihilism at issue here. It then replaces enumerative description with explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, defines the technical terms on which the argument depends, and establishes community, platform, and genre context as a scope condition that governs all interpretation rather than as background detail. Five conceptual dimensions are specified: meaning collapse, anti-human orientation, aesthetic packaging of violence, irony and ambiguity as communicative shields, and proximity to warning-behavior signaling. These are illustrated through a description of recurring aesthetic registers and through constructed vignettes that include boundary and negative cases. A three-part typology of ideal types is theorized in explicitly Weberian terms: performative nihilistic transgression, aestheticized anti-human violence, and escalatory nihilistic signaling. A dedicated section considers the framework's application to, and limits with respect to, coercive youth-facing online harm networks. Throughout, the framework rejects individual prediction, ideological profiling, group classification, and the use of surveillance, and specifies the point at which interpretation must be handed over to a formal threat assessment process governed by its own standards.

Keywords: nihilistic violence, online extremism, memes, aesthetics, warning behaviors, hybridized extremism, threat assessment, public online communication

Introduction

Research on terrorism, political violence, and violent extremism has traditionally prioritized ideology, organization, mobilization, propaganda, and explicit expressions of intent (Rothut et al., 2026). These dimensions remain essential but are insufficient on their own to interpret the full range of violence-related communication circulating in public digital spaces. Social media platforms, imageboards, forums, and short-form video environments have made violent communication more fragmented, hybridized, participatory, and aesthetically mediated (Petersen & Johansen, 2025). Violent meaning may be conveyed not only by doctrine or manifesto-like statements but also by the visual grammar, humor conventions, editing practices, and stylistic codes of the communities where the material circulates (Bolaños Somoano, 2022; Shifman, 2014).

Because a framework of this kind can be misread as an assessment tool, two commitments are stated at the outset rather than deferred to a closing caveat. The first is that the framework is non-predictive: it describes properties of public content and does not estimate the probability of violence, assess dangerousness, or license inferences about any individual's intent, capability, grievance, or imminence. The second is that no communicative unit can be interpreted apart from the community in which it appears. Violent register is common in competitive gaming, horror fandom, true-crime discussion, military occupational culture, and forensic practice. A person carrying that register from one setting into another is displaying communicative habit rather than escalation. Both commitments are constitutive of the framework and are restated whenever the analysis approaches the boundary of threat assessment.

Recent scholarship has begun to address this shift. Petersen and Johansen (2025) describe hybridized prefatory extremism spaces, where ideological fragments, conspiratorial claims,

personal grievances, platform affordances, aesthetics, and participatory practices combine in ways that may precede or normalize violent extremism. Bolaños Somoano (2022) shows that memes can function as extremist communication units, complicating prevention work because they communicate through ambiguity, humor, and shared subcultural literacy. Thorleifsson (2022) demonstrates how transgressive play frames and dehumanizing imaginaries amplify violent extremist meanings in anonymous milieus. Baele et al. (2021) show that the boards producing much of this material differ substantially from one another.

At the same time, threat assessment scholarship has developed a technical vocabulary to describe the communicative progression from ideation to potential violence. Warning behaviors, in the technical sense used in that literature, are dynamic, observable behaviors that precede an act of targeted violence and constitute a change in, or acceleration of, a pathway toward it (Meloy et al., 2012). Five recur throughout this article and are defined in Table 1: fixation, identification, leakage (Meloy & O'Toole, 2011), last resort, and operational detail, the last of which is drawn from linguistic-marker research rather than from the warning behavior typology itself (Kaati et al., 2026). Meloy et al. (2021) examine how such indicators sequence over time, and Kaati et al. (2026) show that corresponding markers can be examined in written online communication while cautioning against treating communication analysis as individual prediction. Content can contain violence-relevant signals without supporting reliable inference about a specific person's intent, capability, or imminent action (Kupper & Meloy, 2021).

This article argues that the field needs a more precise conceptual vocabulary for one mode of communication that these literatures touch but do not name: nihilistic violence aesthetics. Public and practitioner-facing accounts increasingly refer to nihilistic violence or nihilistic violent extremism to describe violent subcultures that are anti-human, chaos-oriented, ideologically

unstable, and organized around violence for its own sake rather than coherent political programs (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2026). Peer-reviewed research has begun to address nihilistic violent extremist texts directly, including recent work on nihilistic violent extremist manifestos (Hart, 2026). Nevertheless, the theoretical relationship among nihilism, aesthetics, online performativity, and violence-relevant signaling remains underdeveloped.

Nihilistic violence aesthetics are not a newly emerging form of communication. Transgressive, gore-saturated, and perpetrator-oriented online subcultures have been documented for at least two decades, including in scholarship on trolling cultures (Phillips, 2015) and in online communities organized around school shootings (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018). The participatory processes by which memes circulate, are remixed, and acquire shared cultural meaning were also theorized well before the recent expansion of extremism research (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014). The novelty therefore lies not in the phenomenon's existence but in its analytic recognition. Although these communicative forms have long been visible, the field has lacked a sufficiently precise vocabulary to identify and distinguish them without reducing them to ideology, humor, or threat.

This article develops a conceptual framework for interpreting the aesthetics of nihilistic violence in public online communication and distinguishes this construct from adjacent forms of extremist, transgressive, and meme-based violent content. The article reports no new empirical data. It synthesizes scholarship on hybridized extremism (Petersen & Johansen, 2025), extremist memes (Askanius & Keller, 2021), toxic multimodal content (Martinez Pandiani et al., 2025), online radicalization (Rothut et al., 2026), and threat assessment warning behaviors (Meloy et al., 2021) to propose the Aesthetic-to-Risk Framework of Nihilistic Violence Aesthetics (ART-NVA).

The article defines its recurring technical vocabulary, anchors the construct in scholarship on nihilism, offers a criterial rather than enumerative definition, and establishes community context as a scope condition. It then distinguishes the construct from four adjacent categories, sets out five dimensions and the aesthetic registers that realize them, illustrates the framework with constructed vignettes, including negative and ambiguous cases, theorizes the typology in Weberian terms, considers coercive youth-facing harm networks, and closes with implications, ethical boundaries, and limitations.

A Note on Terminology

One difficulty is that several key terms carry both vernacular and technical meanings. In ordinary speech, fixation means strong interest; in threat assessment, it is a defined construct with observable indicators. Collapse may describe economic or ecological decline; in this material, it more often refers to the asserted end of social and moral order, rendering present conduct inconsequential. Leakage ordinarily means disclosure; in threat assessment, it refers to a specific kind of communicated intent. Table 1 consolidates the working definitions used here, and the technical sense is intended throughout unless the text says otherwise.

This article also avoids reproducing in-group vocabulary. Coded terms, community-specific slurs, and the search strings communities use to identify one another are not enumerated anywhere, because enumeration itself is a form of amplification and provides a retrieval path to the material (Zhang et al., 2024). When such vocabulary is analytically relevant, it is described by function rather than reproduced.

Insert Table 1 here.

Why Nihilism? Anchoring the Construct

The construct proposed here is named nihilism, and that choice requires justification rather than assumption. Three distinct senses of the term circulate in the relevant literatures, and the argument depends on keeping them distinct.

Philosophical nihilism

In its classical formulation, nihilism names the condition in which the highest values devalue themselves, so that the question of why anything should matter no longer has an available answer (Nietzsche, 1968). Nietzsche distinguished passive nihilism, a decline of will expressed as exhaustion, from active nihilism, in which the loss of value is experienced as a release of destructive energy and destruction becomes a form of expression. That distinction matters, because the material at issue is rarely resigned; it is energetic and productive in the narrow sense that it generates large volumes of artifacts. Carr (1992) describes a further development in which nihilism ceases to be experienced as a crisis and becomes banal. Diken (2009) treats it as a social condition expressed in cultural forms rather than in argument. Both accounts locate nihilism in shared cultural production, which is where the present construct locates it.

Vernacular online nihilism

A second sense is vernacular. Large volumes of online content convey futility and the sense that effort is pointless, often through recognizable stock characters and image formats. This vernacular nihilism is widespread, frequently a vehicle for humor or distress, and overwhelmingly not violence relevant. Treating it as a risk indicator would pathologize an ordinary idiom of online speech and generate an unmanageable volume of false positives. The framework excludes it, and one function of the typology is to make that exclusion operational rather than merely stated.

Communicative nihilism as used in this article

The third sense is the one at issue. This article uses nihilism to name a communicative structure rather than a personal worldview. Communicative nihilism has three features. Devaluation: the content presents value, meaning, or moral order as absent, void, corrupted, or beyond repair. Leveling: persons are presented as interchangeable or indistinguishable in worth, so that no particular person's harm is more significant than any others. Disburdening: harm is presented as carrying no moral weight, so that horror, grief, or obligation are framed as naive or beside the point. Disburdening is closely related to what Bandura (1999) describes as moral disengagement, though the mechanism here operates through shared aesthetic convention rather than individual cognition.

Nihilism is the right anchor because the alternatives each capture only part of the construct. Cynicism concerns imputed motives and does not require the collapse of value. Misanthropy concerns contempt for human beings but is compatible with a stable moral order in which that contempt is meaningful. Extremism presupposes a program, a set of grievances, and an imagined end state, all of which are frequently absent here (Hart, 2026). Anti-humanism names the orientation but not the affective structure. Nihilism captures the combination at issue: simultaneous devaluation of meaning and of persons, coupled with the aesthetic organization of harm, and unaccompanied by a program that would explain what the harm is supposed to accomplish.

One caution applies throughout. To say that content is nihilistic in this communicative sense is not to say that its author is a nihilist or holds any particular belief; the claim concerns what the artifact does, not who made it. Participants frequently produce content that they do not accept as premises, and the conventions of a community are available to anyone who has learned them.

The Conceptual Problem

The conceptual problem is that multiple literatures describe parts of the phenomenon without providing a unified account. Extremism research examines online content through the lenses of ideology, propaganda, recruitment, and radicalization (Rothut et al., 2026). Meme scholarship examines humor, visual rhetoric, virality, and shared cultural references (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Shifman, 2014). Threat assessment focuses on behavioral indicators and concerning communications (Meloy et al., 2021). Toxic meme research treats hate, abuse, and multimodal toxicity primarily as computational or annotation problems (Martinez Pandiani et al., 2025). Nihilistic violence aesthetics sit at the intersection of these literatures yet are reducible to none of them.

Ideology-centered frameworks are only partially adequate for this material. Many online subcultures associated with violence present no stable worldview, hierarchy, manifesto, or doctrinal program (Hart, 2026). Instead, they may combine misogyny, racism, apocalyptic imagery, admiration for prior perpetrators, occult references, gaming conventions, true-crime material, gore aesthetics, and generalized contempt for human life (Petersen & Johansen, 2025). What emerges is not an absence of meaning but a different mode of meaning-making, in which violence, collapse, humiliation, and anti-human affect provide affective coherence where ideological coherence is weak (Hart, 2026).

Broad categories such as edgy humor are too imprecise. Not all taboo humor is violence-relevant, and not all ironic content signals risk (Moerking, 2026). Yet irony can serve as a communicative shield when violent content is framed as unserious or deliberately absurd (Askanius, 2021). This framing can facilitate deniability, lower the threshold for participation, and obscure the boundary between performance and endorsement (Crawford et al., 2021; Schmid et

al., 2025). The analytic problem is not that irony renders content dangerous; rather, it is that irony makes violent meaning harder to interpret when it appears alongside dehumanization, indifference to harm, or the technical signals described above (Askanius & Keller, 2021).

Threat-centered frameworks may be too narrow when they focus primarily on direct threats, which are comparatively legible. Nihilistic violence aesthetics often operate through diffuse affect, shared style, and symbolic affiliation rather than through declaration (Thorleifsson, 2022). A post may make no explicit statement of intent while framing harm as meaningless, treating prior perpetrators as objects of admiration, rendering victims disposable, or presenting collapse as desirable (Askanius & Keller, 2021). Such communication is not an actionable threat, but it matters for understanding how violent meaning circulates, normalizes, and acquires subcultural legibility (Petersen & Johansen, 2026).

Public online communication further requires attention to multimodality, meaning the simultaneous use of multiple semiotic channels, including images, captions, typography, editing, audio, platform conventions, and surrounding comment context (Karo et al., 2026). Toxic meme research highlights the need to examine targets, intent, conveyance tactics, and cross-modal reasoning rather than reducing memes to their text (Martinez Pandiani et al., 2025). A theoretical account of nihilistic violence aesthetics must therefore attend to form, not only to propositional content.

A fifth problem cuts across the others and has received the least attention. The meaning of a communicative unit is not a property of the unit alone. It is jointly produced by the unit, the community in which it appears, and the responses it receives. This is developed below as a scope condition because it changes what it means to apply any of the dimensions that follow.

Defining Nihilistic Violence Aesthetics

This article defines nihilistic violence aesthetics as multimodal forms of public online communication in which violent meaning is packaged through frames that devalue meaning and persons and render harm aesthetically consumable. The definition is criterial rather than enumerative. An earlier formulation listed frames such as meaning collapse, anti-human indifference, dehumanization, irony, gamification, stylized violence, and perpetrator identification; that list was intended as illustrative but was read as exhaustive. What follows specifies membership conditions instead, so that novel realizations can be recognized without amending a list.

Inclusion criteria

Three conditions are jointly necessary and, taken together, sufficient for content to fall within the construct.

Criterion 1, violence relevance. The content refers to, depicts, stylizes, celebrates, trivializes, rehearses, or symbolically organizes harm to persons. The reference may be direct, as in imagery of injury, or indirect, as in admiring references to prior attacks, in the framing of categories of people as targets, or in the use of finality and last-resort framing in a real setting.

Criterion 2, devaluative framing. Harm is framed as weightless, deserved, amusing, inevitable, or beneath moral notice, or people are framed as fungible, disposable, or not properly persons. This criterion distinguishes the construct from content depicting violence within an intact moral frame, such as reporting, memorial content, horror fiction that treats death as significant, or advocacy.

Criterion 3, aesthetic mediation. Form does substantive interpretive work. The test is loss under paraphrase: if the content can be restated in plain declarative prose without losing what it

communicates, its aesthetic dimension is incidental, and the construct does not apply. Where editing, image treatment, typography, genre citation, humor convention, or platform format carries meaning that a paraphrase cannot recover, the criterion is satisfied.

Content that satisfies all three criteria falls within the construct, regardless of which markers realize them; content that satisfies only one or two does not. This is the principal difference from the earlier formulation: the previously listed frames are recurrent realizations of the criteria rather than the construct itself.

Constitutive properties

Four properties follow from the criteria. The construct is communicative, meaning it refers to observable public content rather than to a diagnosis, identity, or inferred inner state; the object of analysis is the post, meme, caption, edit, thread fragment, or multimedia unit, not the person who produced it, and personal motivation, mental health status, and group membership should not be inferred from public content alone (Kupper & Meloy, 2021). It is aesthetic, meaning style is integral to how the message communicates rather than decorative (Price, 2025); degraded image quality, cinematic grading, montage, grotesque humor, interface overlays, and ironic disclaimers shape whether violence is rendered legible, desirable, detached, or unremarkable (Askanius, 2021; Askanius & Keller, 2021).

It is nihilistic in the specific communicative sense defined above, involving devaluation, leveling, and disburdening, rather than in the loose sense of sadness, pessimism, or philosophical skepticism; an assertion that nothing matters becomes analytically relevant only when linked to indifference to harm, the leveling of persons, or the stylization of violence. And it is violence-related, which narrows it considerably: it does not encompass all nihilistic memes, all dark humor,

or all online transgression, and becomes relevant only when content normalizes, glamorizes, trivializes, rehearses, or symbolically organizes harm (Thorleifsson, 2022).

Community, Platform, and Genre as a Scope Condition

The dimensions set out below cannot be applied to content in isolation. Before any of them is used, the interpretive setting must be established. This is a scope condition rather than a sixth dimension because it determines whether the dimensions can be applied at all.

Formal features carry different meanings across communities. First-person shooter communities routinely use language about killing and clearing that describes gameplay. Horror and extreme-cinema fandoms circulate gore imagery as an expression of genre appreciation. True-crime communities discuss perpetrators in detail without admiring them. Emergency medicine, forensic science, and military occupational cultures use language about bodies and injury that is jarring to outsiders and unremarkable to members. Coding without establishing the baseline register produces false positives at a rate that would render the framework useless and would concentrate those errors on communities whose ordinary speech is already treated with suspicion.

Two errors are therefore possible. The first is decontextualized over-reading, in which ordinary genre speech is treated as violence-relevant. The second is community relativism, in which every observation is dismissed as merely the group's culture. The corrective for both is the same: establish the baseline, then ask what departs from it.

Four elements of setting should be documented before coding. The first is the community and its baseline register, meaning the ordinary range of violent, ironic, or transgressive expression in that space. The second is genre convention, since much apparently alarming content is genre performance that requires membership to read competently. The third is platform affordance and moderation regime, since ambiguity and irony are partly adaptations to enforcement, and content

that is oblique on a heavily moderated platform may be explicit on a permissive one (Karo et al., 2026). The fourth is uptake, which refers to how other participants respond. Uptake is the most underused evidence available to researchers: normalization is observable in whether a post is met with joke-completion, escalation, correction, or discomfort, and it is observable in the community rather than in the individual.

Two consequences follow. A dimension is coded as present only where the content departs from, intensifies beyond, or is not accounted for by the baseline register of its setting. And movement of a register across settings is not, by itself, evidence of change: a participant who carries the interface language of competitive gaming into an unrelated conversation is displaying socialization and treating that migration as escalation would misread a fact about communicative habit as a fact about intent. This is the single most likely way the framework is misapplied in school, workplace, and platform settings.

Distinguishing the Construct from Adjacent Categories

Four adjacent categories are often conflated with the construct. Table 3 summarizes the comparison with the three inclusion criteria.

Ideological extremist propaganda

Nihilistic violence aesthetics overlap with extremist propaganda without being identical to it. Propaganda generally seeks to persuade, recruit, justify, or mobilize around a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause (Demir & Çona, 2024). Nihilistic violence aesthetics may lack a coherent program altogether and may be anti-doctrinal, self-contradictory, or organized by affective intensity (Hart, 2026). This does not render them harmless; it shifts the analytic focus from doctrinal persuasion to the aesthetic circulation of violence, contempt, and the collapse of

meaning (Petersen & Johansen, 2025). Analysts seeking a coherent worldview in this material will conclude, wrongly, that there is nothing there.

Generic dark humor and transgression

Generic dark humor addresses taboo, death, suffering, or social discomfort without devaluing persons, and therefore fails Criterion 2. The relevant distinction is not whether content is offensive, but what the humor requires to work. In generic dark humor, the object of the joke is the taboo itself, the situation, or the teller's willingness to say the unsayable, and the joke does not depend on the premise that persons lack worth. Where that premise is required, Criterion 2 is satisfied, and the content falls within the construct at its lowest intensity. A purely transgressive joke may be socially harmful or ethically objectionable while remaining outside the construct, and the framework should not be used to relabel offensiveness as violence relevance.

Direct threat communication

A direct threat communicates an intent to harm a person, group, or place. Nihilistic violence aesthetics typically operate below that threshold. They may be ambiguous, stylized, or performative, and may never become operationally meaningful (Schmid et al., 2025). Yet concerning communication can include leakage, identification, last resort, and operational detail without being framed as a declaration (Kupper & Meloy, 2021). The theoretical challenge is to preserve the distinction between aestheticized content and actionable threat while recognizing that a single post may contain both.

The framework contributes three things here. First, it separates the interpretive question from the assessment question: it answers what is present in the content and sets aside the question of what the author will do, which belongs to a different process with different evidentiary standards. Second, it treats aestheticization and threat as co-present layers rather than mutually

exclusive categories, so that a post may be coded as both heavily stylized and containing a directly communicated threat, with the first coding not discounting the second. This matters in practice, because the most common failure in applied settings is to discount a threat because the surrounding material is obviously joking. Third, it specifies a handoff rule: when the fifth dimension is observed, the material moves into a formal threat assessment process rather than into further aesthetic analysis.

Ordinary doomerism and internet nihilism

Nihilistic violence aesthetics differ from ordinary doomerism, despair, or existential pessimism, which fail Criterion 1. A person may express bleakness, hopelessness, or alienation without any reference to harm. The construct applies only when such a collapse of meaning is linked to violent reference, indifference to harm, the leveling of persons, or admiring identification with a perpetrator (Hart, 2026). This distinction matters ethically because it prevents the over-pathologization of distress and avoids treating all nihilistic language as dangerous (Kaati et al., 2026), and it matters practically because content of this kind may warrant a wellbeing response and almost never warrants a security response.

Insert Table 2 here.

The Aesthetic-to-Risk Framework of Nihilistic Violence Aesthetics

A note on the name is warranted because the acronym has caused confusion. ART is derived from the phrase Aesthetic-to-Risk, in which the T is the preposition to. The phrase names an interpretive relation rather than a causal pathway: questions about risk relevance are addressed through aesthetic form, and no claim is made that aesthetics produce, predict, or measure risk. The framework does not move content along a scale toward risk. It provides a vocabulary for describing what is present in content and for recognizing when a different process should take over.

The framework proposes five conceptual dimensions. These are not diagnostic criteria, and no communicative unit must display all five. They are interpretive lenses, coded independently as present, absent, or unclear, with unclear treated as a substantive category rather than a coding failure. The dimensions are deliberately not additive: no total score, index, or threshold is defined, and none should be constructed, because a summed score would reintroduce through arithmetic exactly the predictive claim the framework rejects. Figure 1 presents the structure schematically.

Dimension 1: Meaning collapse

Meaning collapse refers to frames in which the future, moral order, social life, or personal significance is portrayed as absent, void, corrupted, or beyond repair. Recurrent realizations include assertions that there is no future or that events have already concluded, imagery of ruin and aftermath, end-times language, and finality cues. Collapse imagery, used repeatedly in this literature and rarely defined, is used here to mean visual material depicting the aftermath or process of social, ecological, infrastructural, or cosmic breakdown, including ruins, depopulated space, catastrophe, and voided frames. It is common in mainstream art, film, and climate communication and is not by itself violence-relevant.

Meaning collapse alone does not place content within nihilistic violence aesthetics. A post depicting ruins, catastrophe, or a hopeless future may communicate despair without diminishing the value of human life. The dimension becomes relevant to the construct when the collapse frame is used to suggest that, because society or moral order has failed, harm to people is inevitable or no longer matters..

Dimension 2: Anti-human or dehumanizing orientation

The second dimension is an anti-human or dehumanizing orientation: content depicting people as objects, nonpersons, disposable units, pests, targets, or morally irrelevant bodies. Haslam

(2006) distinguishes animalistic dehumanization, which denies uniquely human attributes, from mechanistic dehumanization, which portrays persons as inert, interchangeable, or automated. The latter predominates here. The widely circulated figure of the non-player character, analyzed by Gallagher and Topinka (2023), is a compact instance: it represents other people as scripted and lacking interiority, and it does so through a gaming reference that supplies deniability.

Dehumanization has long been central to violence-supportive discourse, but here it is often expressed through meme shorthand rather than formal ideology (Askanius & Keller, 2021). Two features distinguish it from the dehumanization typical of ideological extremism. It is often generalized rather than directed at a specific out-group, one of the clearest signatures of the construct (Hart, 2026). And it operates through moral disengagement mechanisms carried by convention rather than argued for (Bandura, 1999): nobody has to make the case that the people depicted do not count because the format assumes it.

Dimension 3: Aesthetic packaging of violence

Aesthetic packaging refers to the stylization of violence as image, edit, spectacle, or atmosphere (Askanius & Keller, 2021). Violence is presented as cinematic, ironic, cool, ritualized, game-like, or visually compelling (Thorleifsson, 2022). This is where the construct's multimodal character is most evident (Martinez Pandiani et al., 2025).

The claim that aestheticization changes how violent meaning circulates requires support, and the meme literature offers three mechanisms. Genre transfer: when violent material is edited to conform to entertainment conventions, it is received through the frame those conventions carry, and the seriousness normally attached to the depicted events is reduced (Bogerts & Fielitz, 2019). Participation lowering: memetic forms invite reproduction and remix, so endorsement can be expressed through circulation rather than assertion (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014). A participant

who reposts does something socially meaningful while retaining the position of not having said anything. Ambiguity licensing: humor and irony create an entry point through which positions that would be rejected if stated plainly become sayable. This mechanism is documented in research on strategic mainstreaming (Crawford et al., 2021; Schmid et al., 2025) and on traffic between subcultural transgression and mainstream culture (Phillips, 2015; Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

These mechanisms support a modest claim, the only one being made: aestheticization does not cause violence, but it changes the social meaning of violence, altering who engages with it, what engagement commits them to, and how the artifact travels.

Dimension 4: Irony and ambiguity as communicative shields

The fourth dimension is irony and ambiguity. Irony can serve as humor, social belonging, status performance, or protective cover (Moerking, 2026), and it creates ambiguity that complicates moderation, prevention, and interpretation (Schmid et al., 2025). A joking disclaimer does not negate violent meaning, and violent imagery does not rule out joking (Price, 2025). The framework therefore treats irony as a shield: a device that allows violent content to be shared while preserving deniability for the sharer (Askanius, 2021; Crawford et al., 2021).

Two cautions apply. The dimension is not a claim that ironic framing is insincere, since the sincerity question is unanswerable from content. Nor does it license the inference that a disclaimer is evidence of concealment, which would make the dimension unfalsifiable by treating both the presence and absence of irony as confirmation. What it records is that the unit is constructed so that its meaning cannot be settled from its surface, and that this construction is doing work.

Dimension 5: Proximity to warning-behavior signaling

The fifth dimension concerns proximity to warning-behavior signaling and requires the most careful specification because it is the dimension most vulnerable to misuse. Proximity here means conceptual co-occurrence within a bounded communicative context: the question is whether the aesthetic frames described in the first four dimensions appear alongside forms corresponding to defined warning-behavior constructs, namely fixation, identification, leakage, last resort, directly communicated threat, or operational detail (Meloy et al., 2012; Meloy et al., 2021).

A fixation-like form is content that shows a sustained and intensifying preoccupation with a particular person, place, incident, or grievance across a body of material rather than in a single reference. An identification-like form is content in which the author aligns the self with a prior attacker, adopts an attacker's voice or iconography, or represents the self as the one who acts. A leakage-like form communicates an intent to harm a third party who is not the apparent target. These describe textual forms, not states: content can display a fixation-like form without any claim that the author is fixated.

Three procedural constraints govern the dimension. Co-occurrence is recorded, not interpreted as correlation, prediction, or evidence of intent. Coding is performed on communicative units within an established baseline and is never aggregated across a posting history to produce a profile. When the dimension is observed, the analysis stops, and the material moves to a formal threat assessment process. Threat assessment scholarship supports careful attention to these indicators while warning against reducing communication analysis to individual prediction (Kaati et al., 2026); this framework makes that warning procedurally binding rather than advisory (Kupper & Meloy, 2021).

Insert Figure 1 here.

Aesthetic Registers

The framework refers to eight registers, each representing recurrent bundles of formal features that carry a stable interpretive connotation within their respective communities. These registers are detailed in Table 2. No images are included, as reproduction offers a means of accessing the material, and the ethical considerations outweigh the illustrative benefits (Zhang et al., 2024).

Two of the eight are relatively construct-specific. The perpetrator-collage register applies fan-cultural conventions of collection, ranking, and devotional composition to real violent actors (Raitanen & Oksanen, 2018). The game-interface register renders persons as targets and harm as scored performance through overlays, objectives, and achievement language (Schlegel, 2020). The remaining six are widely used in horror, gaming, art, and design communities for purposes unrelated to this construct.

Three points follow. Registers are formal resources, not indicators. They become analytically relevant only when all three inclusion criteria are met and when they are read against the community baseline. The list is provisional: it describes what recurs now and should be expected to change as platforms and formats change.

Insert Table 3 here.

Illustrative Vignettes

Because the framework addresses inherently ambiguous content, illustration is necessary to evaluate whether the dimensions are operationalizable. The vignettes below are composites written for this article, not descriptions of real posts, accounts, or communities. They avoid

reproducing in-group vocabulary, imagery, or search terms. Table 4 maps each vignette to the criteria, dimensions, and typology.

Vignette 1: Outside the construct (generic dark humor)

In a horror film community, a member posts a clip from a well-known film with a caption that jokes about the inevitability of death. No person or category of person is framed as disposable, and the joke does not require that harm be meaningless to land; it requires only that death be uncomfortable. Criterion 1 is partially satisfied by the violence of the source material, but Criterion 2 is not, so the content falls outside the construct. Coding it otherwise would convert an entire genre community into a population of interest.

Vignette 2: Outside the construct (doomerism)

A user posts a photograph of an empty roadway at dawn, captioned with the statement that the future has already ended. The void-and-collapse register is present, and the first dimension is strongly expressed, but there is no reference to harm to persons, so Criterion 1 fails and the construct does not apply. The appropriate response, if any, is a wellbeing response rather than a security one, and the framework is designed to make that the default reading rather than an exception.

Vignette 3: Type 1, performative nihilistic transgression

A user remixes a mass-casualty sequence from a feature film so that it appears to be a reaction to a trivial workplace annoyance, adds a music-synced edit, and appends an ironic disclaimer. Criterion 1 is satisfied by the depicted violence; Criterion 2, by framing mass harm as a proportionate response to inconvenience; and Criterion 3, by the editing, which carries the joke.

The devaluative frame is thin: it is directed at the situation rather than at any category of persons, there is no admiring reference to a real perpetrator, and the uptake is joke-completion.

Vignette 4: Type 2, aestheticized anti-human violence

An account posts a montage that transforms documentary-appearing footage of injury into a music video, with typography asserting that the people depicted were never really people. There is no ironic disclaimer. Criterion 1 is satisfied directly; Criterion 2, through explicit leveling of the people depicted; and Criterion 3, through editing that renders the material consumable. Uptake includes requests for further material. Violent meaning is the organizing principle of the artifact rather than a garnish on it.

Vignette 5: Type 3, escalatory nihilistic signaling

Over several weeks, an account has posted in the perpetrator-collage register. It then adopts the first-person voice of a named prior attacker, posts finality language referencing a specific date, and includes references to the internal layout of a particular real building. The aesthetic frames of the first four dimensions are present, and forms corresponding to identification, last resort, and operational detail co-occur with them. This is the configuration the fifth dimension marks, and it is where the framework's remit ends: the correct next action is referral to a formal threat assessment process, and nothing in the coding constitutes a finding about what the account holder intends or will do.

Vignette 6: Ambiguous, coded unclear

In a competitive shooter community, a member posts an image in the game interface registry with a caption about clearing a location, two days after a widely reported public incident. Read without context, this looks alarming; read against the community baseline, the interface

language is ordinary genre speech, and the temporal coincidence establishes nothing. Criterion 2 is not evidenced. The coding is unclear on the second dimension and absent on the fifth, so the appropriate action is none. The framework's practical value depends as much on producing defensible non-escalation as on identifying content of interest.

Insert Table 4 here.

A Proposed Typology

The framework can be organized into three ideal types. An earlier version described these as theoretical categories rather than empirical classifications, while grounding each in five observationally oriented dimensions, leaving an unresolved tension. This tension is resolved here by specifying what kind of construct an ideal type is.

The status of the types

Ideal types in the Weberian sense are formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by synthesizing diffuse phenomena into a unified analytical construct. They are not descriptions of reality; no case is expected to correspond to them fully, and their function is to serve as a standard of comparison (Weber, 1949). The five dimensions are observational lenses applied to material; the types are constructed accentuations to which material is compared. Content is not sorted into types as though they were bins but described in terms of its distance from and resemblance to them. The types are therefore theoretical in construction and tractable in their constituents.

Two consequences follow. The types are not stages, and the typology is not an escalation ladder; no claim is made that content or authors move from the first type to the third. The typology is falsifiable as an instrument: if trained coders working from an established baseline cannot reliably distinguish the configurations the types accentuate, it fails as an instrument, even if it

survives as a heuristic. That is an empirical question, stated here so it can be tested rather than assumed.

Type 1: Performative nihilistic transgression

Performative nihilistic transgression is marked by irony, shock humor, futility language, and taboo violation, with weak second-dimension expression and absent fifth-dimension proximity. The content may be offensive or harmful, but its primary communicative function is transgressive performance: it signals detachment, cynicism, or an anti-normative identity rather than an operational interest (Gallagher & Topinka, 2023; Moerking, 2026).

This type must be distinguished from the generic dark humor the framework excludes, and the distinction is the framework's most consequential boundary. The difference is not warning-behavior proximity, which separates the first type from the third rather than from anything outside the construct. The difference is Criterion 2. Generic dark humor does not require the premise that people lack worth to function; it works because a taboo is being touched. Type 1 content does require that premise but expresses it thinly, situationally, and without direction at any category of persons. Type 1 is therefore within the construct at its lowest intensity, whereas generic transgression lies outside it altogether.

The type's function is to prevent overclassification. Without a named low-intensity category, analysts who encounter content that clearly meets the criteria have only two options: exclude it, which is inaccurate, or treat it as concerning, which is disproportionate. Type 1 provides a defensible place for content that is genuinely within the construct and should not be escalated.

Type 2: Aestheticized anti-human violence

Aestheticized anti-human violence features pronounced dehumanization, indifference to harm, collapse framing, and the stylization of violence (Askanius & Keller, 2021). It may portray people as disposable, suffering as meaningless, or violence as visually compelling (Thorleifsson, 2022). Unlike performative nihilistic transgression, violent meaning is not primarily used to facilitate shock, irony, or taboo violation. It becomes central to the artifact's affective and aesthetic structure.

Type 2 content therefore has greater analytic salience. Analytic salience is a property of the artifact and is defined by three features: centrality, density, and directedness. Centrality is the extent to which violent meaning organizes the communicative unit rather than functioning as a peripheral or decorative element. Density is the simultaneous presence of several ART-NVA dimensions. Directedness is the extent to which devaluation is focused on persons or categories of persons rather than on the world or social order in general.

Analytic salience does not indicate intent, dangerousness, or the likelihood of future violence. In research, content with greater analytic salience may warrant priority in sampling because it more fully captures the construct. In applied settings, it warrants a contextual review of the relevant community, audience uptake, and broader communicative patterns before any judgment is formed. It does not, by itself, justify escalation, referral, or intervention.

Type 3: Escalatory nihilistic signaling

Escalatory nihilistic signaling occurs when nihilistic aesthetic frames co-occur with forms corresponding to warning behavior constructs, such as identification with prior attackers, sustained fixation, last-resort language, leakage-like statements, or operational detail (Meloy et al., 2021).

The framework does not treat this type as evidence of intent or imminent action. It identifies a zone where aestheticized violent communication overlaps conceptually with an established literature on warning behavior (Kupper & Meloy, 2021).

Three grounds are offered. It is the only type whose constituents intersect with partially validated external literature, making it the most testable component and the one most exposed to disconfirmation. It is the point at which the boundary against threat assessment is under the greatest pressure, and therefore where misuse is most likely. And it should be by far the rarest configuration, which makes it hardest to sample and most likely to be inflated by motivated coding. Importance here means prioritizing research and caution; it is not a ranking of danger.

Insert Table 5 here.

Application and Limits: Coercive Youth-Facing Harm Networks

Since the concept of nihilistic violent extremism entered wider circulation, it has increasingly been applied to loosely connected online networks where gore aesthetics, coerced self-harm, and the sexual extortion of minors circulate together. Public authorities have documented networks that deliberately target minors and coerce them into producing images of self-harm and sexual content, which are then traded as status objects (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023). Platform-facing analysis has situated these formations within the broader discussion of nihilistic violence subcultures (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2026). Whether the present framework applies to them is a fair question, and the answer is that it applies to part of what they do and is insufficient for the rest.

The framework applies to the aesthetic surface. These networks are held together in substantial part by a shared stylistic economy that matches the registers described above, particularly the degraded-image, occult-ritual, perpetrator-collage, and cute-grotesque registers.

They exhibit a generalized anti-human orientation rather than targeting a specific out-group, use irony and layered obscurity as shields, and treat meaning collapse as a premise rather than a complaint. They also demonstrate the framework's core claim more clearly than almost any other current formation: violent intensity is high while doctrinal content is nearly absent, exactly the configuration that ideology-centered models fail to describe.

Where the framework falls short is in the structure beneath the surface. These networks are constituted by offending rather than by expression. Their core is a coercive relational process involving target selection, grooming, escalation of demands, extraction of compliance material, and circulation of that material as status currency. A communication-level framework can describe the aesthetics of that status economy but cannot capture the coercive pathway, the victimization, or the child protection response, and it should not be stretched to do so. Those require frameworks built for exploitation, coercive control, and child sexual abuse material, and the relationship is complementarity rather than extension.

Two constraints apply to this domain and are stricter than those governing the rest of the framework. Material produced by these networks is frequently criminal and involves minors, so it is not ordinary public online communication for research purposes: analysis must proceed through appropriate legal, institutional, and ethical channels, with no reproduction of material, no enumeration of network identifiers, and full observance of reporting obligations. Because victims are often coerced producers of the material, aesthetic analysis carries an acute risk of misattributing authorship and agency. Coding a communicative unit says nothing about who produced it or under what conditions, which in this domain is the central fact of the case.

Implications for Research

The framework offers a conceptual foundation for qualitative analysis of multimodal content in public posts, memes, and short-form media (Sengul, 2025). Researchers can operationalize the five dimensions as observable code families, assess whether the ideal types serve as useful standards for comparison across platforms, and compare nihilistic violence aesthetics with more explicitly ideological extremist content to determine whether the former differs systematically in its reliance on irony, generalized contempt, perpetrator fandom, and gamification (Hart, 2026).

Operationalization and unit of analysis

Three design commitments follow. The unit of analysis is the communicative unit within a documented setting, not the account or the person; aggregating across a posting history to produce a profile lies outside the framework's remit. The community baseline must be documented before coding begins, implying community-anchored rather than keyword-anchored sampling frames. Unclear must be retained as a substantive code with reported frequencies, because the proportion of material that cannot be resolved is itself a finding about the limits of content-level interpretation.

Reliability is central given the focus on ambiguous multimodal material. Studies should report chance-corrected agreement with confidence intervals and should report reliability separately by dimension rather than only in aggregate, since the dimensions are unlikely to be equally tractable (Krippendorff, 2019). The fifth dimension should be expected to show lower reliability than the first three, and a design that does not report it separately will obscure that.

Testable propositions

The framework generates propositions that can be tested and disconfirmed. First, trained coders working from a documented baseline can distinguish content that satisfies all three criteria from generic transgression at acceptable levels of agreement; failure to do so would falsify the framework as an instrument. Second, aesthetic registers cluster non-randomly by community and platform. Third, ironic framing is more prevalent where moderation pressure is higher, supporting the claim that the fourth dimension is partly an adaptation to enforcement (Karo et al., 2026). Fourth, fifth-dimension co-occurrence is rare in the general population of nihilistic content and is concentrated in a small subset. Fifth, baseline-adjusted coding yields materially fewer positive codings than context-free coding, which is the testable form of the scope condition.

Longitudinal, comparative, and computational work

The framework can also inform longitudinal research. Studies might examine whether meaning collapse, indifference to harm, or perpetrator identification appear earlier or later in posting trajectories (Calvert, 2024), or whether particular registers cluster around external trigger events (Fossberg & Fangen, 2025). Comparative work across platforms and languages is needed before any claim of generality is warranted, given that the literature synthesized here is predominantly anglophone and Western (Conway, 2017).

The framework invites methodological pluralism. Qualitative work can refine the types and their interpretive boundaries, while computational work can test whether specific features are detectable at scale. Martinez Pandiani et al. (2025) show that toxic meme research faces persistent challenges with definition, labeling, cross-modal reasoning, and cultural context, and that those challenges apply directly here. One caution is specific to this framework: because the scope condition requires a community baseline, a classifier trained without one will systematically

encode the decontextualized reading the framework rejects. Automated detection of the fifth dimension should be treated as a research question rather than a deployment target.

Implications for Practice

The framework's practical purpose is not to create a watchlist, label individuals, or identify extremist groups. Its value lies in helping practitioners and researchers speak more precisely about ambiguous public content. Prevention professionals, school safety teams, behavioral intervention teams, threat assessment practitioners, and public-safety partners routinely encounter content that is disturbing yet not clearly threatening (Kaati et al., 2026). A vocabulary that distinguishes generic transgression, low-intensity performative content, high-salience anti-human content, and content adjacent to warning behavior supports more disciplined interpretation and, equally important, more defensible decisions not to act.

The framework's licensing is limited. It licenses precisely describing content, deciding which material warrants contextual review, explaining why disturbing content is not automatically actionable, and recognizing when material should be referred to a formal process. It does not license rating individuals for risk, compiling accounts into lists, aggregating codes into scores or thresholds, treating aesthetic markers as evidence of intent, imposing discipline or making referrals based on aesthetic markers alone, attributing ideology or group membership, or drawing inferences about mental health. These are constraints on use, and a deployment that violates them is not a stricter application of the framework but a different instrument wearing its name.

The handoff rule bears repeating here. When fifth-dimension forms are observed, the appropriate action is to refer to a formal threat assessment process, in which qualified people use established methods to consider context, pattern, access, capability, grievance, behavioral change,

and collateral information (Meloy et al., 2021). Communication analysis is one component of a broader behavioral assessment and never a substitute for professional judgment (Kaati et al., 2026).

The framework may also support training. Practitioners can use it to discuss why irony, memes, and dark aesthetics complicate interpretation (Schmid et al., 2025), why ideological coherence is often absent (Hart, 2026), and why the same content means different things across communities (Moerking, 2026). That last point deserves emphasis in youth-facing settings. Adolescent online speech is highly ironic, densely intertextual, and calibrated to peer audiences that adults are not part of. A framework applied without attention to the scope condition will generate false positives that fall unevenly on students already subject to disproportionate institutional attention.

Ethical Boundaries

Any framework for analyzing public online content must set clear ethical boundaries. ART-NVA is not a diagnostic tool and does not assess mental health, dangerousness, radicalization, or group affiliation (Kupper & Meloy, 2021). It is not designed for surveillance, should not be used to generate lists of users, communities, or groups, and should not be applied to protected beliefs or political identities. The focus remains on observable patterns of violent communication rather than ideology or identity (Hart, 2026).

Scholars must also avoid amplifying harmful material. Publications should minimize direct quotation when searchability could expose users or communities, particularly in cases involving minors, self-harm, exploitation, or violent instruction (Zhang et al., 2024). This article applies a stricter version of that principle: it reproduces no imagery, quotes no posts, and enumerates no coded vocabulary, on the grounds that in this domain, enumerating terminology functions as a retrieval index. Ethical analysis further requires distinguishing public availability from ethical

appropriateness. Public posts are not automatically risk-free research objects, and as material becomes more sensitive, it becomes more important to minimize identifying detail and to report findings at the level of patterns rather than individual examples.

Two further considerations are often omitted from framework papers. The first concerns researcher and practitioner well-being: sustained exposure to gore, coerced self-harm material, and perpetrator content causes documented occupational harm, and any research program using this framework should treat exposure limits, supervision, and support as design requirements. The second is the risk of automation. Because the categories are legible to annotation pipelines, there is a foreseeable path by which the framework could be operationalized for automated enforcement. The dimensions are not designed for that use; the scope condition cannot presently be automated; and any deployment that removes human interpretive review eliminates the element that makes the framework defensible.

Limitations

Several limitations should be stated plainly. The framework is conceptual and reports no empirical data; its dimensions and types are proposals awaiting testing, and the reliability question raised above remains open. The literature synthesized here is predominantly anglophone and Western, and the registers are drawn from that material, so their cross-cultural applicability is unknown. The second inclusion criterion is the framework's most interpretive component and therefore its most likely point of failure in application, since judgments about whether a joke requires the premise that persons lack worth are precisely the judgments on which competent readers may disagree.

The construct is also vulnerable to concept creep. A vocabulary designed to describe ambiguous content can, under ordinary institutional pressure, expand to cover content that is

merely offensive or unfamiliar. The inclusion criteria, the negative vignettes, and the low-intensity type resist that expansion, but no design feature can prevent it if the framework is adopted by institutions that want a broader net. Finally, the scope condition imposes a resource requirement that many applied settings cannot meet. A framework that is valid only when properly applied has as its principal risk improper application, and that risk is acknowledged here rather than minimized.

Conclusion

Nihilistic violence aesthetics constitute a distinct and undertheorized mode of public online violent communication (Hart, 2026). They are not reducible to extremist propaganda, generic dark humor, explicit threats, or ordinary doomerism. They arise from the convergence of meaning collapse, anti-human orientation, aestheticized violence, irony as a shield, and, in a small subset of cases, proximity to warning-behavior signaling. They are especially salient where violent meaning is multimodal, participatory, hybridized, and ambiguous (Petersen & Johansen, 2025). The phenomenon is not new; what is new is the attempt to name it precisely enough to be studied without being either dismissed as humor or inflated into a threat.

The Aesthetic-to-Risk Framework of Nihilistic Violence Aesthetics offers a conceptual vocabulary for studying this phenomenon without turning it into a surveillance instrument or overclaiming its predictive value. By specifying inclusion criteria rather than listing them, establishing community context as a scope condition, defining its technical terms, and distinguishing three ideal types, it lays a foundation for empirical research, practitioner education, and more precise scholarly debate. Its central contribution is not the claim that nihilistic or disturbing online content is dangerous. Rather, it is a theory of how certain aesthetic forms package

violent meaning in ways that ideology-centered models do not capture, together with an explicit account of where that theory stops and a different kind of judgment must begin.

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