

# Thrill-seeking, search for meaning fuel political violence

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What drives someone to support or participate in politically or religiously motivated acts of violence, and what can be done to prevent them? While one factor may be a search for meaning in life, research published by the American Psychological Association suggests people may be further driven by an increased need for excitement and feeding that need with thrilling but non-violent alternatives may curb the desire.

"Recently, scholars have discussed how youths are lured to join political or religious movements," said Birga Schumpe, Ph.D., a social psychologist at New York University Abu Dhabi and lead author of the study. "Although research has recently linked people's search for meaning or significance with their willingness to use [violence](#) for a cause, our research suggests this is further advanced by a thirst for adventure."

The research was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Schumpe and her colleagues surveyed 460 [participants](#) from Spain asking a series of questions designed to measure how much they were searching for meaning in life, to what extent they craved new, exciting experiences, how willing they were to sacrifice themselves for a cause and how much did they [support](#) political violence. The researchers found that the search for meaning in life was strongly associated with a need for excitement and that, in turn, was associated with greater support for political violence. A second set of similar surveys, conducted three

months apart with approximately 300 participants from Spain, found that the need for adventure increased over time in people who were searching for meaning in life and as that need got greater, so did their potential to support political violence.

The researchers next conducted an experiment online with 121 participants. Half were asked to participate in an activity designed to increase their sense of meaning in life (write an essay about their legacy) and half were given a random control activity (write about their favorite sport shoes). They then completed the same set of surveys used previously. Those who wrote about leaving a legacy scored higher on feeling that their lives had meaning and subsequently lower in need for excitement and support of political violence than those who wrote about their shoes.

In a similar experiment, 305 participants were asked either to write about a time when they were searching for meaning in life or write about the last time they went shopping for shoes. Those who wrote about searching for meaning subsequently reported a greater need for meaning in life, which was associated with higher levels of adventure seeking and, again, support for extreme political violence.

Additional online experiments involving more than 800 participants confirmed the findings, but in those the researchers measured support for a hypothetical extreme activist group and determined that support for the activist group was due in part to participants' identifying the group as exciting.

Based on their findings, the researchers decided to test what they thought might be a strategy to reduce support for political violence. In one final online experiment, they presented 392 participants, who identified themselves as animal rights activists, with either an unexciting activist group (e.g., engaged in activities such as boycotts and pray-ins) or an

exciting but peaceful activist group (e.g., engaged in marches, parades or concerts). Participants who rated high in adventure seeking scored much lower in support for [political violence](#) when presented with the exciting compared with those who were shown the unexciting option.

"In recent years, many approaches to counter violent extremism have tried to tackle people's ideologies by producing counter-messages pleading them to say no to violence or trying to convince them that the foundations of their belief system are inappropriate or wrong," said Schumpe. "Our research indicates that this latter approach is likely to backfire and have the opposite of the intended effect. Interventions to counter [violent extremism](#) should be geared either toward helping individuals make [meaning](#) of their lives or redirecting their desire for thrilling experiences toward exciting but socially oriented groups.

**More information:** "The Role of Sensation Seeking in Political Violence: An Extension to Significance Quest Theory," by Birga Schumpe, PhD, Jocelyn Bélanger, PhD and Claudia Nisa, PhD, New York University Abu Dhabi and Manuel Moyano, PhD, University of Cordoba. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online Nov. 1, 2018.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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