

The Underlying Mechanism Behind Quest for Significance and Its Role in Violence Extremism: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. Based on the Quest for Significance Theory (SQT), violent extremism is a consequence of the quest for significance activated by significance loss, significance gain, and threat of significance loss. This systematic literature review aims to synthesize previous research related to the quest for significance using SQT. The authors selected 103 articles, and 24 articles met the inclusion criteria. The review results indicate that loss of significance consistently tends to activate the quest for significance and predicts violent extremism stemming from various factors, including vulnerable environments, perceptions of injustice, social rejection, and failure to achieve goals. Conversely, significance gain shows inconsistency; studies suggest this factor strengthens, weakens, or predicts future involvement in violent extremism. There has been no empirical research specifically addressing the threat of significance loss. The measurement of significance loss and significance gain has not been clearly distinguished and uses various proxies, indicating that standardized measurement tools have not yet been established. Additionally, there is still overlap in the operationalization of measurement between significance loss and the quest for significance.

Keywords: the quest for significance; significance loss; significance gain; the threat of significance loss; violent extremism

Introduction

Violent extremism is a deviant behavior with high intensity and contains violence (Kruglanski et al., 2019). One theoretical explanation that can be used to explain this phenomenon is the Significance Quest Theory (SQT), which is a basic motivational explanation of extreme violent behavior (Kruglanski et al., 2019). Other theoretical approaches in explaining violent extremism argue that support or involvement in violence is a gradual process that involves cognitive and emotional changes (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008; Moghaddam, 2005). Compared to those approaches, SQT emphasizes more on the fundamental psychological mechanism underlying individual engagement in violent extremism. Nevertheless, as a theoretical approach that focuses more on the role of individual motivation, SQT

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tends to pay less attention to the social context that influences radicalization. Therefore, a systematic review is needed to integrate empirical findings to explore how SQT can be integrated with situational factors as a more comprehensive explanation of violent extremism.

The main assumption of Significance Quest Theory (SQT) is that violent extremism is driven by the need for significance, which refers to the need to feel important and valued by people considered significant (Kruglanski et al., 2022). The significance in question refers to perceived social worth, which is the validation of individuals or groups based on cultural values deemed important (Kruglanski et al., 2023). The condition in which individuals feel the need to achieve significance is called the quest for significance. Individuals are motivated to immediately restore their sense of significance (Kruglanski et al., 2018). This condition reflects a motivational imbalance, where the fulfillment of the need to be significant dominates and overrides the fulfillment of other needs (Köpetz et al., 2011). As a consequence, individuals are willing to engage in actions that are generally avoided, including committing acts of violence.

Most previous studies have focused on negative experiences that lead to a loss of significance, which underlies individuals' involvement in violent extremism. Examples include relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970), social and political dissatisfaction (Crenshaw, 1991; Scheuer, 2004), poverty (Horgan, 2004), and injustice (Della Porta, 2013). However, SQT offers a different perspective, suggesting that the motivation to achieve significance also stems from opportunities for significance gain and the anticipation of threats to significance loss, in addition to negative experiences that result in the loss of significance (Kruglanski et al., 2013). As explained more specifically by Kruglanski et al. (2009, 2014), the need for significance can be activated by three conditions: loss of significance, which originates from experiences of diminished meaning or significance (e.g., rejection, humiliation, and failure); threat of significance loss, which refers to the anticipation of losing a sense of significance (e.g., fear of rejection or negative judgment); and significance gain, which is the opportunity to achieve or enhance significance (e.g., gaining recognition, achieving success, and reaching goals). Essentially, SQT emphasizes that the motivation to achieve significance does not only arise from negative experiences but also from the desire to attain greater significance and the anticipation of losing it.

For more than a decade since the emergence of Significance Quest Theory (SQT), many previous studies have examined this perspective based on the mechanism of significance loss (Da Silva et al., 2024), while empirical explanations of how the other two mechanisms work—namely, threat of significance loss and significance gain—remain insufficient. In addition, overlapping operational definitions have been found within SQT terminology, particularly between the quest for significance and the loss of significance (Da Silva et al., 2024). As a consequence, this may affect the interpretation of previous research findings and raise issues related to the standardization of measurements used in studies. As an effort to explain how the three mechanisms account for violent extremism, including threat of significance loss and significance gain, the authors conducted a systematic literature review on the effects of significance loss, threat, and gain in predicting violent extremism, as well as the measurements or manipulations used.

Significance Quest Theory (SQT)

Most previous studies have focused on examining negative experiences that lead to the loss of personal significance, such as social rejection (Bäck et al., 2018; Dugas et al., 2016; Knapton et al., 2022; Renström et al., 2020), failure in achieving goals or tasks (Dugas et al., 2016; Jasko et al., 2017), and injustice (Lobato et al., 2023; Moyano et al., 2022; Resta et al., 2023). In addition, Kruglanski et al. (2009) stated that the threat of significance loss and the opportunity for significance gain can also explain violent extremism. For example, Osama bin Laden (leader of Al Qaeda), an educated and economically well-off individual, chose to live in exile to join and lead an armed struggle in pursuit of ideological goals (Kruglanski et al., 2023). Osama is one example of the activation of the quest for significance through significance gain (Kruglanski et al., 2014), which is the opportunity to do something valued that provides rewards capable of enhancing personal or group significance. In this case, the cause of violent extremism is not always identical to deprivation experiences, but the motivation to maintain or achieve greater significance also drives individuals to engage in violent extremism.

So far, previous studies have shown that research findings on significance gain remain inconsistent. Webber et al. (2017) showed that significance gain strengthens self-sacrifice, whereas Bélanger et al. (2022) showed that significance gain, interpreted as the achievement of personal significance, actually weakens violent extremism. Meanwhile, Jasko et al. (2019) showed an indirect relationship, namely predicting violent extremism in the future. On the other hand, the discussion on the threat of significance loss was explained by Kruglanski et al. (2013, 2014) through the story of six Japanese pilots who were willing to sacrifice themselves to avoid shame and humiliation. However, based on the literature review conducted by the authors, there has not yet been an empirical study that examines the threat of significance loss. A meta-analysis study conducted by Da Silva et al. (2024) examined the relationship between the need for significance, the quest for significance, narratives, and networks in predicting violent extremism. In this case, the discussion on the need for significance only refers to significance loss, while the differences in the effects of the components of the need for significance (loss, threat, and gain of significance) have not yet been empirically examined. Clarifying the differences among these three motivational components can contribute theoretically to explaining individual differences in the activation of the quest for significance along with its dynamics in predicting violent extremism.

Current Study

The authors conducted a systematic literature review as an effort to answer research questions related to the existence and differences among significance gain, threat of significance loss, and significance loss. More specifically, the following research questions are addressed: 1) How do significance loss, threat of significance loss, and significance gain predict violent extremism? 2) How are significance loss, threat of significance loss, and significance gain measured or manipulated? This systematic literature review consists of several sections. The discussion begins with an explanation of the data collection method and the data inclusion process. Next, the authors report the results of the analysis and discussion. In conducting the analysis, the authors consider influencing variables, participant

characteristics, research context, and methods to explain the overall research findings and discuss their implications for future studies.

Method

The authors used PRISMA 2020 as a reference for conducting the systematic review, as an update to PRISMA 2009 with more transparent and comprehensive guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The researcher established selection criteria during the search process by using various online databases. In addition, we used the PRISMA flow diagram to report the selection process, which includes identification, inclusion, assessment, and synthesis of studies transparently as an effort to reduce bias (Knobloch et al., 2011; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). We did not use generative AI in the process of compiling this literature review.

Search Strategy and Article Inclusion

The authors conducted a systematic search of peer-reviewed articles related to Significance Quest Theory (SQT) published between January 1, 2009, and November 2, 2023. The search for peer-reviewed articles was carried out through Scopus and PsycINFO using keywords relevant to SQT, referring to Da Silva et al. (2024), namely: 1) “quest* for significance” / “quest* for personal significance” / “significance quest*” / “significance restoration” / “significance loss” / “loss of significance” / “loss of personal significance” / “threat of significance loss” / “threat of loss of significance” / “significance gain”; 2) radical* / “political violence” / “ideological violence” / “political extremism” / “ideological extremism” / terror* / “violent behavior” / “violent extremism” / extremism / “extreme behavior” / “violence” / “violent radicalization” / “self-sacrifice” / “violent political activism” / “willingness to sacrifice” / “political aggression”

The search was conducted by combining two groups of keywords using the conjunction “AND,” for example, “quest* for significance” AND “violent extremism.” Several symbols were added in the search process: 1) the hash symbol (#) to include words with alternative spellings; 2) the asterisk (*) to include all words with the same initial letters; and 3) the question mark (?) to allow for alternative spellings. The inclusion criteria for articles were 1) empirical research published in peer-reviewed journals, 2) written in English, 3) based on primary or secondary data, and 4) focused on examining the need for significance (significance loss, threat of significance loss, and significance gain).

Results

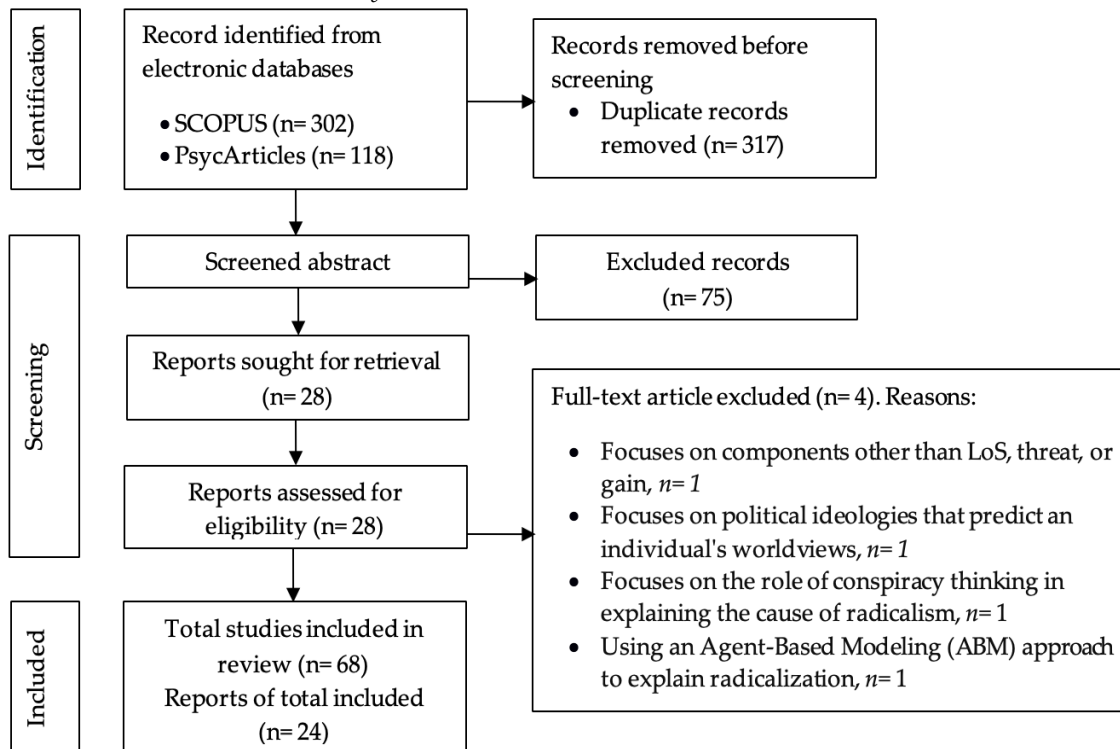
Sample and Study Characteristics

Based on the search results using two combinations of keywords, a total of 302 articles were found from SCOPUS and 118 articles from PsyArticles. Subsequently, the authors excluded 317 duplicate articles, leaving 103 articles for abstract review. Articles that did not use the theoretical framework of SQT, were not empirical studies, and were not related to significance loss, significance gain, or threat of

significance loss were excluded from the analysis. The authors excluded 75 articles, leaving 28 articles to be downloaded and reviewed thoroughly. Four articles did not focus on SQT in explaining the threat of significance loss, significance loss, and significance gain. In total, 24 articles met the inclusion criteria, namely studies focusing on significance gain, threat of significance loss, and significance loss. The article inclusion process is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Article Inclusion Process in The Systematic Literature Review



Based on the combined results of all articles, there were a total of 19,933 participants (activists or political party supporters $n = 5,531$; former and/or current members of radical groups $n = 695$; political party members $n = 787$; students or university students $n = 3,757$; Muslims $n = 260$; minorities $n = 525$; and the general public $n = 8,378$). Most of the studies were conducted in America with a total of 28 studies, followed by Europe (i.e., Spain, Poland, France, Italy, Belgium, Sweden, and Russia) with 26 studies, Asia (i.e., Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, the Philippines, Jordan, and Palestine) with 9 studies, and Africa (i.e., Morocco) with one study. In terms of research methods, there were 40 cross-sectional studies—38 of which used primary data sources and 2 used secondary data—28 experimental studies using primary data sources, and 1 longitudinal study based on primary data.

Discussion

Activation of the Quest for Significance through Needs

As previously explained, the need for significance refers to the motivation to possess social worth, that is, to be valued or recognized by people considered significant in one's living environment (Kruglanski et al., 2022). According to SQT, the need for significance can be driven by one of three factors (Kruglanski et al., 2014): 1) Significance loss, which refers to a condition of discrepancy between self-evaluation and evaluation by others, known as deprivation; 2) Threat of significance loss, which refers to the anticipation of a loss condition (avoidance); and 3) Opportunity for significance gain, which refers to the chance to achieve greater significance (incentive).

Individuals who experience significance loss are driven to search for meaning in life, which predicts a willingness to self-sacrifice (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 5). Furthermore, individuals engaged in the quest for significance are positively associated with support for violent extremism (Jasko et al., 2020), whereas the presence of life meaning reduces support for violence (Schumpe et al., 2020) (Study 3). This indicates that the drive to restore or achieve significance makes individuals vulnerable to involvement in violent extremism. Nevertheless, the concepts of significance loss and the quest for significance are often confused, and the measurement proxies for both are frequently operationalized as significance loss (Da Silva et al., 2024). For example, the items used by Jasko et al. (2020) to measure personal significance quest—such as “I feel that my life is worthless,” “I feel ashamed of myself,” and “I feel dissatisfied with myself”—actually refer to conditions of significance loss.

The final data included in the analysis consisted of 24 articles comprising 69 studies (40 cross-sectional, 28 experimental, and 1 longitudinal). Nevertheless, based on the researcher's search through online databases, no research reports were found that specifically examined the threat of significance loss. Therefore, the researcher focused on the role of significance loss and significance gain in predicting violent extremism through the activation of the quest for significance. The discussion section includes an analysis of the consistency in predicting violent extremism and issues related to measurement, which are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1*Evaluation of Significance Quest Activation in Predicting Violent Extremism*

No.	Evaluation aspect	Findings	Opportunities for further development
Loss of Significance			
1.	The role in predicting violent extremism through significance quest activation	Strengthens the prediction of violent extremism	Examine the differences between loss of significance, threat of loss, and gain of significance in activating significance quest and predicting violent extremism. Test the differences between personal-level and collective-level effects of loss, threat, and gain of significance. Develop experimental designs that place participants in loss-of-significance conditions. Develop experimental designs that simulate gain-of-significance conditions, such as providing opportunities for meaningful achievement. Develop experimental designs simulating the anticipation of loss of significance. Develop manipulations placing participants in realistic conditions (e.g., virtual reality scenarios representing loss of significance that predict willingness to self-sacrifice). Include manipulation checks to test the effectiveness of the applied manipulations.
2.	Predictors that explain violent extremism through significance quest activation	Perceived injustice (Lobato et al., 2020; Moyano et al., 2022; Resta et al., 2023); Social rejection (Bäck et al., 2018; Dugas et al., 2016; Knapton et al., 2022; Renström et al., 2020); Failure to achieve goals or tasks (Dugas et al., 2016; Jasko et al., 2017); Humiliation and shame (Webber et al., 2018); Anomie (Adam-Troian et al., 2020; Mahfud & Adam-Troian, 2021; Troian et al., 2019); Vulnerable environments (Lobato et al., 2021)	—

Table 1 (Continued)*Evaluation of Significance Quest Activation in Predicting Violent Extremism*

No.	Evaluation aspect	Findings	Opportunities for further development
3.	Measurement proxies	Perceived conflict (Lobato et al., 2021); Relative deprivation (Moyano et al., 2022; Resta et al., 2023); Discrimination (Troian et al., 2019); Oppression (Lobato et al., 2020); Political systems or government policies (Jasko et al., 2017); Anomie describing feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, social isolation, normlessness, and self-estrangement (Adam-Troian et al., 2020); Presence of meaning in life (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 1); Social rejection (Bäck et al., 2018; Dugas et al., 2016; Knapton et al., 2022) (Study 1); (Renström et al., 2020); Failure to achieve goals (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 3); Failure to accomplish tasks (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 4); Failure in romantic relationships (Contu et al., 2023) (Study 3); Failure at work (Contu et al., 2023) (Study 2); Limited opportunities (Resta et al., 2023) (Study 2); Experiences of being humiliated or mocked (Bélanger et al., 2022) (Study 1); (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 5); (Webber et al., 2018) (Studies 1–2)	—

Table 1 (Continued)*Evaluation of Significance Quest Activation in Predicting Violent Extremism*

No.	Evaluation aspect	Findings	Opportunities for further development
4.	Manipulations	Social rejection manipulation (Study 2), goal failure (Study 3), and task failure (Study 4), as well as frequency of humiliation experiences (Study 5) by Dugas et al. (2016) – PANAS used as manipulation check. Social rejection manipulation by Bäck et al. (2018) – no manipulation check. Recall of humiliating or shameful experiences by Webber et al. (2018), Mahfud and Adam-Troian (2021) – PANAS as manipulation check; (Bélanger et al., 2022) – no manipulation check. Exposure to statements contradicting ideological beliefs (Study 4) by Webber et al. (2018) – PANAS as manipulation check.	—
Gain of Significance			
1.	The role in predicting violent extremism through significance quest activation	Strengthens the prediction of violent extremism; Weakens the prediction of violent extremism; Predicts future engagement	Examine long-term motivational outcomes related to positive significance experiences.
2.	Predictors that explain violent extremism through significance quest activation	Experiences of admiration and respect (Bélanger et al., 2022); Positive experiences from group involvement predicting self-sacrifice and future activism intentions (Jasko et al., 2019)	—
3.	Measurement proxies	Feelings of pride, strength, and positive energy obtained from activism engagement (Studies 1–4) by Jasko et al. (2019)	—
4.	Manipulations	Recall of personal or group experiences of being valued and acknowledged (Study 3) by (Bélanger et al., 2022) – no manipulation check.	—
Threat of Significance Loss			

Table 1 (Continued)*Evaluation of Significance Quest Activation in Predicting Violent Extremism*

No.	Evaluation aspect	Findings	Opportunities for further development
1.	The role in predicting violent extremism through significance quest activation	No empirical evidence found	Encourage future research to empirically test this domain.
2.	Predictors that explain violent extremism through significance quest activation	No empirical evidence found	—
3.	Measurement proxies	No empirical evidence found	—
4.	Manipulations	No empirical evidence found	—

Significance Loss

A total of 18 out of 24 articles that met the inclusion criteria discussed significance loss in activating the quest for significance—which in turn predicts violent extremism. More specifically, significance loss is caused by various factors, namely: (1) Vulnerable environments that predict mosque attendance and the legitimacy of terrorism (Lobato et al., 2021); (2) Perceptions of injustice, such as Muslims toward Christians (Moyano et al., 2022), Study 1 and Study 2), negative feelings due to injustice (Resta et al., 2023), and minorities who feel oppressed experiencing significance loss at a collective level (Lobato et al., 2020); (3) Social rejection activating the search for meaning, which predicts self-sacrifice (Dugas et al., 2016), especially in real-life settings (Renström et al., 2020), among individuals with high sensitivity (Bäck et al., 2018), and minorities (Knapton et al., 2022); (4) Failure to achieve goals or tasks activating the search for meaning, which predicts self-sacrifice (Dugas et al., 2016; Jasko et al., 2017); (5) Humiliation and shame increasing the need for certainty (Webber et al., 2018); (6) Anomie, where the experience of significance loss leads to a state of anomie, referring to feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, social isolation, normlessness, and self-alienation, which drive individuals to support political violence (Adam-Troian et al., 2020; Mahfud & Adam-Troian, 2021; Troian et al., 2019); and (7) Obsessive passion, which makes individuals more vulnerable to involvement in violent activism (Bélanger et al., 2022). Overall, the activation of significance loss in predicting violent extremism can stem from negative experiences, be reinforced by social context, and be influenced by individual differences.

Based on the review results, various experiences and research contexts were found to drive individuals to engage in extremism. Experiences that trigger the motivation to restore significance include social rejection (Bäck et al., 2018; Dugas et al., 2016; Knapton et al., 2022; Renström et al., 2020), perceptions of injustice (Lobato et al., 2020, 2021; Moyano et al., 2022; Resta et al., 2023), and failure to achieve goals or tasks (Dugas et al., 2016; Jasko et al., 2017). In addition to experiences, individual differences also contribute, such as an increased need for certainty (Webber et al., 2018) and obsessive passion (Bélanger et al., 2022). Furthermore, vulnerable environments serve as fertile

ground for the development of extremist ideologies (Lobato et al., 2021). Additionally, Contu et al. (2023) demonstrated that when individuals experience significance loss, they are motivated to restore it through alternative actions in contexts where such actions are valued. These various predictors can motivate individuals to restore significance through extreme actions in both radical and non-radical populations. However, the specific type of experience most strongly predicting violent extremism through the activation of the quest for significance has not yet been clearly identified.

Contrary findings from Webber et al. (2017) showed that the motivation for self-sacrifice (suicide attackers) was not due to significance loss. Individuals who experienced significance loss actually doubted their own abilities and were therefore unwilling to engage in high-value attacks. It is important to note that this study was conducted within a specific population and context—Palestinian suicide bombers in Israel—so the findings cannot be directly generalized to the broader population. In general, most studies show consistency in identifying significance loss as a motivational factor for involvement in violent extremism. Nevertheless, there are studies that show opposite effects in specific populations and contexts (e.g., Palestine as a conflict area). Therefore, it is important to consider the type of cause as well as the characteristics of the population and research context.

Significance Gain

There are three articles that specifically examined significance gain in relation to violent extremism: Webber et al. (2017), which produced a catalog of situations based on open-source reports from Tel Aviv University; Jasko et al. (2019), which found that significance gained through activities or group affiliation predicted self-sacrifice and future activism intentions; and Bélanger et al. (2022), in Study 3, which showed that significance gain weakened violent extremism.

Unlike previous findings that showed predictors of significance loss consistently predicted violent extremism, research results on significance gain have shown inconsistencies. In the study by Bélanger et al. (2022), which involved a general population in the United States, each participant was exposed to one of three conditions: (1) Collective-level significance gain, where participants were asked to describe a moment when their group was respected and valued, including details to relive the experience; (2) Personal-level significance gain, where participants were asked to describe a moment when they themselves were respected and valued, including details to relive the experience; and (3) Control condition, where participants were asked to describe in detail the last television show they watched. The results showed that significance gain weakened support for violent extremism, especially among individuals with obsessive passion. However, a manipulation check was not conducted to test the effectiveness of the manipulation provided.

In line with SQT, Webber et al. (2017) found that the primary motivation for individuals to engage in self-sacrifice was significance gain. However, the findings of this study cannot be considered conclusive claims, as they are specific to the context of Palestine. In other countries, self-sacrifice may be viewed as a way to redeem humiliation or to compensate for experiences of significance loss. In Palestine, however, self-sacrifice is seen as a potential path to glory, fame, or heroic status (martyrdom). For example, Abdulrahim Timr carried out a suicide bombing on an Israeli school

bus due to his longing for martyrdom status, having come from Hamas activism, with his jihad journey beginning early in life. Feelings of insignificance increase identification with the group, which predicts willingness to self-sacrifice in the name of the group. Furthermore, Jasko et al. (2019) showed that significance gained through certain activities or group affiliation predicts future involvement. However, the participants in this study were already part of activist groups, so the research does not address the initial causes of individual involvement. Individuals are motivated to engage in similar actions because they hold values considered important, which provide a sense of fulfilment or personal significance.

Overall, based on SQT, significance gain serves as a motivational factor for individuals to engage in violent extremism. Nevertheless, inconsistencies were found in the effects of significance gain—whether it strengthens or weakens the prediction of violent extremism, or whether its role tends to predict future involvement.

Threat of Significance Loss

Based on the search conducted through online databases (Scopus and PsycArticles) using a combination of two keyword categories, the researcher did not find any research articles on the threat of significance loss. This indicates that the effect of the threat of significance loss has not yet been empirically proven in activating the quest for significance and predicting violent extremism. As a consequence, the existence of the threat of significance loss remains questionable, as does its distinction from significance loss. Therefore, empirical evidence is needed to explain the activation of the quest for significance and its difference from significance loss.

Measurement and Manipulation

The measurement of significance loss and significance gain still uses various proxies. Some instruments for measuring significance loss focus on perception-based assessments, such as conflict (Lobato et al., 2021), deprivation (Moyano et al., 2022; Resta et al., 2023), discrimination (Troian et al., 2019), and oppression (Lobato et al., 2020). Others focus on actual conditions experienced by individuals in the past, such as experiences of social rejection (Bäck et al., 2018; Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 1) (Renström et al., 2020), failure to achieve goals (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 3), failure in tasks (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 4), failure in romantic relationships (Contu et al., 2023) (Study 1), failure in employment (Contu et al., 2023) (Study 2), limited opportunities (Resta et al., 2023) (Study 2), and experiences of being humiliated, shamed, and mocked by others (Bélanger et al., 2022) (Study 1); (Dugas et al., 2016) (Study 5); (Webber et al., 2017) (Study 1 and Study 2). According to the meta-analysis conducted by Da Silva et al. (2024), the best measurement proxies are perceived oppression (Victoroff et al., n.d.) and social alienation (Bélanger et al., 2019), which are assessed at the collective level rather than the individual level. Nevertheless, there is still no standardized operationalization and measurement of significance loss.

Operationalization of Significance Loss and Measurement Issues

The operationalization of significance loss is often overlapping with the quest for significance. The need for significance is frequently operationalized as the quest for significance, while the measurement uses proxies of significance loss (Da Silva et al., 2024). For example, the items used by Jasko et al. (2020) to measure personal significance quest—such as “I feel that my life is worthless,” “I feel ashamed of myself,” and “I feel dissatisfied with myself”—refer to perceptions of meaninglessness and dissatisfaction, which align more closely with the concept of significance loss. Significance loss and the quest for significance are two distinct constructs. The quest for significance refers to the motivation to restore or achieve significance (individual and collective) through various efforts that may lead to violent extremism. Meanwhile, significance loss is the underlying cause that motivates individuals or makes them feel the need to restore significance that they consider important and valued by their group or environment.

Furthermore, instead of focusing on the opportunity to achieve significance, the instruments used to measure significance gain tend to assess feelings resulting from activities (e.g., happiness, pride, significance, enthusiasm, energy, activeness, and strength) (Jasko et al., 2019). The manipulation of significance gain by Bélanger et al. (2022) refers to a condition of having personal significance, rather than emphasizing the opportunity to maximize personal significance to be valued by others, and no manipulation check was conducted to test its effectiveness. In terms of methodology, most studies used cross-sectional designs, which cannot explain reciprocal relationships. Additionally, not all studies included manipulation checks (Bäck et al., 2018; Bélanger et al., 2022) (Study 2 and Study 3); (Knapton et al., 2022; Orehek et al., 2014; Troian et al., 2019) (Study 2 and Study 3); (Schumpe et al., 2020) (Study 3 and Study 4), which impacts the effectiveness of the manipulations in influencing the results.

Limitations

Although this systematic literature review provides valuable insights, but we recognize several limitations. First, the data sources were restricted to two databases (Scopus and PsycINFO), potentially leading to the exclusion of relevant studies indexed in other databases or identified in grey literature. Second, the review was limited to articles published in English because of the inclusion criteria. This could have led to language bias and left out important findings that were published in other languages. Third, most of the studies that were looked at used cross-sectional designs. This means that the evidence is mostly correlational, which makes it hard to make causal inferences or comprehend how the phenomena being studied change over time.

Conclusion

The literature review of empirical studies on the quest for significance in predicting violent extremism shows that various predictors of significance loss tend to consistently predict violent extremism. Meanwhile, findings related to significance gain remain inconsistent, either strengthening or weakening the activation of the quest for significance that predicts violent extremism or serving

more as a predictor of future involvement. In this regard, participant characteristics and research context influence the study outcomes. The role of significance gain tends to strengthen violent extremism in studies conducted in conflict areas (e.g., Palestine). On the other hand, findings outside conflict zones show that manipulation of significance gain weakens support for violent extremism among individuals with obsessive passion. Furthermore, several studies use various measurement proxies due to the lack of standardized instruments. The operationalization of the quest for significance and significance loss is often interchangeable, resulting in measurement items that are less specific. Additionally, items measuring significance gain still refer to emotional experiences from activities and the recollection of experiences that reflect personal significance.

Implications

The results of this research include both theoretical and practical significance for initiatives aimed to counter violent extremism. This systematic literature analysis underscores the need for the development of standardized measurement instruments for the fundamental elements of the Significance Quest Theory (SQT), including loss of significance, gain for significance, and the threat of significance loss. Theoretically, the integration of SQT, which focuses on motivational factors, with contextual variables is crucial for achieving a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. In practice, deradicalization and preventative programs ought to provide constructive pathways to fulfill individuals' need for significance, such as enhancing social connectedness and promoting positive collective narratives that can serve as alternatives to violent engagement.

Recommendations

Based on the literature review findings, it is shown that various predictors of significance loss tend to consistently predict violent extremism, while findings related to significance gain still show inconsistencies in activating the quest for significance. Meanwhile, the threat of significance loss remains underexplored, although theoretically it has the potential to be a driving factor for the quest for significance. Therefore, future research should examine the different roles of significance loss, threat of significance loss, and significance gain in activating the quest for significance in predicting violent extremism and explore the differences in their effects at the personal and collective levels. Moreover, it is shown that studies testing the SQT model mostly use cross-sectional designs, so developing experimental designs becomes a crucial step to enhance the validity of empirical findings. In this regard, innovative approaches such as virtual reality-based manipulations can be used to create conditions that closely resemble participants' real-life experiences. Furthermore, since significance loss and significance gain are measured using various proxies, it is necessary to standardize measurement instruments and test the effectiveness of manipulations through manipulation checks to improve reliability, which will contribute to the development of SQT.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this article.

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The authors declare that no generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used in the writing process of manuscript.

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