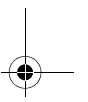
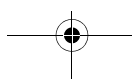
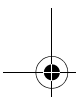
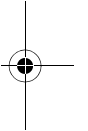
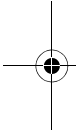
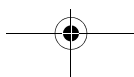
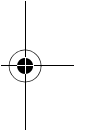
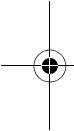


**Explaining and Understanding the Role of Exposure to
New Social Media on Violent Extremism
—An Integrative Quantitative and Qualitative Approach—**





Explaining and Understanding the Role of Exposure to New Social Media on Violent Extremism

—*An Integrative Quantitative and
Qualitative Approach*—

~~Prof. Dr. Lieven PAUWELS, Nele SCHILS, Julianne LAFINNEUR,~~
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ACADEMIA PRESS

© Academia Press
Eekhout 2, 9000 Gent
Tel. 09/233 80 88 Fax 09/233 14 09
Info@academiapress.be www.academiapress.be

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Explaining and Understanding the Role of Exposure to New Social Media on Violent Extremism
—An Integrative Quantitative and Qualitative Approach—

Gent, Academia Press, 2014, ### + ### pp.

Lay-out: proxessmaes.be

ISBN 978 90 382 ##### #
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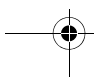
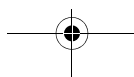
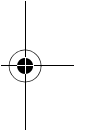
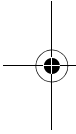
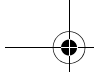
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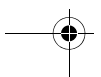
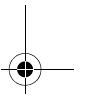
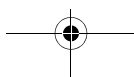
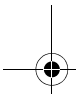
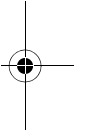
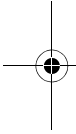
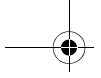
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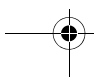
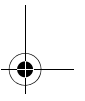
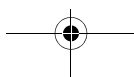
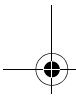
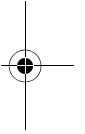
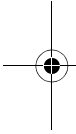
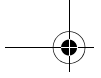
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PREFACE

The present research report “Explaining and Understanding the Role of Exposure to New Social Media on Violent Extremism—An Integrative Quantitative and Qualitative Approach” is the result of a cooperative research project between two research teams (Institute for Urban Security & Policing Studies, Ghent University, and Department of Criminology, Louvain La Neuve) aimed at empirically exploring the relationship between exposure to extremist content through New Social Media (henceforth NSM) and violent extremism among Belgian youth in two of Belgium’s major cities: Antwerp and Liege.

Violent extremism is a widely discussed topic in both widespread journals and academia. This research report came about in a period when violent extremism was high on the international political agenda giving rise to a need to understand the phenomenon. The case of lone wolf Anders Behring Breivik shocked the world as did numerous terrorist attacks mostly by Islamic extremist movements worldwide. During the project also the case of youth going to Syria to fight for the “good cause” was highly mediatized. Media and policy makers alike pointed in the direction of the calling of people to fight for an extremist version of Islam through the internet as the main cause of this new trend.

However, theorizing on the causes of violent extremism and in-depth exploration of the insider’s view remain extremely scarce within the field of criminology. This was (and is) also the case for theories and efforts trying to disentangle the effects of exposure to extremist content on violent extremism, even when the role of the internet is one of the most debated topics of the early 21st century. The public opinion is basically one that “fears” sudden unexpected violent radicalization through the immediate availability of extremist content on the internet, especially while using NSM.

The debate can be compared to earlier discussions governed by the fear that exposure to violence through traditional media such as television and movies, and more recently, violent video gaming will lead to violent behavior among children and youth. Research on the relation between exposure to violence through traditional media has yielded inconsistent results, varying from a small effect to the absence of

THE ROLE OF EXPOSURE TO NEW SOCIAL MEDIA ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

effects. In order to address this question for the relationship between exposure to extremist content through NSM and violent extremism, this research project has been called into life.

While most studies exclusively rely on either quantitative analysis or qualitative data, this research project enables organization of a large-scale survey of 6020 respondents, allowing us to test an integrated model that captures recurrent findings reported in the research literature, such as grievances, perceived personal and group level discrimination, procedural justice, and addresses the role of exposure to extremist content by using NSM.

The present study builds upon insights from a previous exploratory study (Noppe et al, 2010) on radicalization. The study starts with a literature review and synthesizes the findings from the literature. The quantitative study also explores the role of NSM on individual differences in political and religiously motivated violence. The third part is an in-depth exploration of the motives of radical extremist youth. Finally, the implications of our findings are discussed.

This project was commissioned by the Belgian Science Policy Office (Belspo) together with the Belgian Ministry of Interior (Biza) and is part of the Society and Future research program of Belspo. The research started in February 2012 and was terminated by April 2014.

PREFACE

The research groups wishes to thank BELSPO and the Ministry of the Interior for funding this scoping study. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors only. We would especially like to thank the members of the guidance committee for their constructive remarks.

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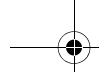
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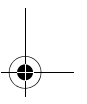
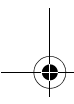
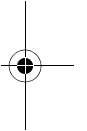
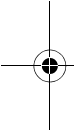
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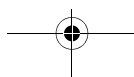
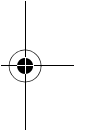
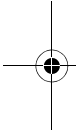
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PART 1

General Introduction





Worldwide, both policy and research pay a lot of attention to violent extremism, and violent radicalization as the process leading to violent extremism (Van de Linde & Rademaker, 2010). The recent exponential increase in concern about violent extremism and radicalization can partially be attributed to the events of and those since 9/11 but also to the realization that technological progress, such as the use of new social media and globalization have made our society vulnerable (Arts & Butter, 2009). Scholars and policy makers increasingly focus on unraveling the processes of radicalization, hoping to prevent the violent radicalization of their own youth and in the end political violence (Van de Linde & Rademaker, 2010). In particular, the internet and its constant technological developments are cause of concern (Conway, 2012). Since the 1990s, the internet has become an indispensable part of daily life, is widespread among the general population, and is used in an increasingly professional way (AIVD, 2012). This means, an increasing number of individuals and groups are capable of hiding their identity, location, and content of communication while using the internet and display a large virtual adaptability.

Recently, we have seen a boom in [NSM](#) and other web 2.0 applications, bearing a large potential for communication and networking (Conway, 2012). These developments have transformed the world in an online village, with every offline actor being represented online. So it is to no surprise that criminals, radicals, extremists, and terrorists also use this medium to their advantage (Benschop, 2006; Stevens & Neuhmann, 2009; Weimann, 2004). Using the internet and NSM, extremist organizations and individuals can easily reach each other and address a broad, global, audience, using an extensive and dynamic set of narratives. Further, for reasons of security, safety, accessibility, and anonymity, terrorist and extremist movements have shifted many of their activities from public spaces to private places and personal computers (von Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013).

Therefore, there is a growing concern that the process of extremist recruitment and violent radicalization will continue to rise under the influence of the internet (Thompson, 2011). Indeed, some recent national and international extremist attacks seemed to be inspired, planned, and organized through the internet, by using NSM. According to the AIVD¹

¹ The AIVD is the Dutch General Intelligence and Information Office and falls under the Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs.

(2006), the internet can even be seen as the turbo of contemporary violent Jihad and one of the principal instigators of bottom up processes of violent radicalization and "Jihadization." This has caused policy makers to increasingly worry about what governments can do to prevent (online) violent radicalization and recruitment.

Nonetheless, there is no consensus on the question of whether changes in the use and possibilities of the internet provoked by web 2.0 applications have caused the internet to become a central explanatory factor in the process of (violent) radicalization. In this regard, it is problematic that there is hardly any empirical evidence confirming the relationship between exposure to extremist messages and attitudes that are supportive of violent extremism (Conway, 2012). The assumption that the internet plays an important role in the process of (violent) radicalization is mostly based on secondary sources and anecdotic evidence, with no empirical studies to back this up or to measure the strength of a possible influence. Silke (2008), for example, states that only 1% of all research on (Islamic) radicalization in general is based on systematic interviews with radicalized individuals. The few available empirical studies that do tackle the topic of internet exposure and violent extremism are limited to content analysis of extremist forums and websites, focus on the practical usage of the internet and NSM by extremist groups or analyze virtual communication². These studies have demonstrated that the internet provides political and religious extremists with incredibly valuable instruments for propaganda and recruitment, practical organization, knowledge transfer and community building, but the actual role and possible (causal) influence of exposure to extremist content through NSM on violent extremism remains unclear. This kind of studies cannot and do not provide empirical evidence for such a relationship. Although the influence of the internet seems logical and inevitable, it is difficult to make a distinction between a real causal connection between the internet and violent extremism and just a simple co-existence of the two (Morris, 2000).

It is, nevertheless, important to not only understand how the internet and web 2.0 applications are used by extremist groups and individuals but also to increase our understanding of the relationship between

² Some exceptions can be found (De Koster & Houtman, 2006; Lee & Leets, 2002; Simi & Futrell, 2006; Wojcieszak, 2010b).

NSM and violent radicalization. This is necessary to come to a better understanding of contemporary violent extremism and subsequently successfully tackle processes of racialization and recruitment, online and offline (Zhou, Reid, Qin, Chen, & Lai, 2005). *“Government and academic community have focused on the general phenomenon of the internet and radicalisation, rather than on a persons’ individual experience online. Many studies focus on online content and attempt to describe how it influences people by describing the aims and successes of media strategies and media presence, suggesting a degree of causality between online content and its influence on the person exposed to it. This provides insights into narratives, marketing strategies, organization, community building, etc., but this is only one side of the market of online radicalisation, namely the supply side of content. On the demand side, i.e., how individuals choose to engage with material and interact online with like-minded individuals, there remains a gap in policy making and academic understanding (von Behr et al., 2013).”* The present study³ assesses the impact of exposure to extremist content through NSM on the processes of violent radicalization and recruitment among Belgian adolescents.

The central research question focusses on the role of NSM in the process of violent radicalization. The following key research questions will be addressed.

1. *Is exposure to extremist content through NSM related to offline violent extremist activities and how strong is this relationship?*
2. *What is the relationship between NSM and offline (risk) factors of violent extremism?*
3. *What is the relationship between exposure to extremist content through NSM and individual extremist propensity?*

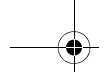
In order to answer these question, first, quantitative research is conducted based on a web survey in the general population, and second, in-depth interviews with radicalized individuals are conducted.

³ This project is conducted on demand of the Federal Science Policy (Belspo) and the Federal Ministry of Interior (FOD BIZA). The project is embedded in the research line “radicalization” within the Institute for Urban Security and Policy Studies, Ghent University. The institute has built some expertise on radicalization during the research project “Polariseren en radicaliseren: een integrale preventieve aanpak” on demand of BIZA. During this research, as the first empirical research on radicalization in Belgium, a first model of radicalization was developed.

THE ROLE OF EXPOSURE TO NEW SOCIAL MEDIA ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

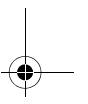
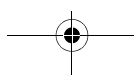
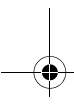
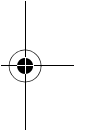
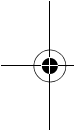
The structure outline is as follows: Chapter 1 discusses the process of (violent) radicalization. Why and how do individuals radicalize? What causes bring about this process and what stages does an individual go through once he/she is a member of an extremist group? Chapter 2 addresses the relationship between youth and NSM. Why is NSM so popular among youth and how does it affect their political participation? Chapter 3 provides an overview of the way the internet is used by extremist groups and/or individuals. Chapter 4 reviews what is known about the influence of media exposure on violent behavior and attitudes and whether these findings can be generalized to the explanation of violent extremism. Chapter 5 summarizes key arguments in the debate on the influence of NSM on violent extremism. Chapter 6 gives a short overview of the literature and highlights its most important elements. Chapter 7 explains why a risk factor approach, as discussed in chapter 1, is problematic, and it introduces an integrated model for the explanation of violent extremism. This model is based on the situational action theory as developed by Wikström (2014) and integrates key concepts as the causes of the causes of offending. More specific insights from procedural justice theory (Tyler, 2006), social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), social learning theory (Sutherland, 1947), and general strain theory (Agnew, 2006) are integrated. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss the results of the quantitative and the qualitative research, respectively. Finally, chapter 10 presents a general conclusion and chapter 11 outlines some general recommendations.

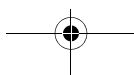
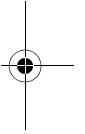
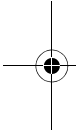
First, it has to be pointed out that the current debate focusses one-dimensionally on (political) Islam, Islamic radicalization, Salafism, and Jihadism (Van de Linde & Rademaker, 2010). This is not entirely justified. Violent radicalization can also occur among political right, political left, and single-issue movements such as animal activism. This project attempts to give a general overview of (violent) radicalization and NSM and to describe the general mechanisms of influence that are observed within all forms of violent extremism. Even so, the literature mainly covers right-wing and Islamic extremism, and this is reflected in this report. On the contrary, this does not imply that left-wing extremism or animal rights extremism are of less importance.



PART 2

Theoretical Review





1. RADICALIZATION: CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

1.1. Introduction

“The attempt to find a unique explanation for political violence is the same chance that you succeed in the attempt to find an explanation for holes” (Della Porta, 2009, p. 23).

This contribution has not the intention to be complete or comprehensive but rather to form a starting point, summarizing the current knowledge on (violent) radicalization, in order to reach a verifiable theoretical model for the explanation of radicalization into violent extremism. An overview of the current state of the art makes it clear that there is no definite or straight-forward answer to the question of why and how (violent) radicalization occurs. The available literature gives a long and diverse list of possible causes, lined up in the form of risk factors. It is remarkable that the same risk factors can be found when talking about radicalization out of different ideological perspectives. This can be explained by the fact that the reason most young people radicalize is almost never based purely on ideology but more often on social considerations (desires, beliefs, perceived opportunities, and perceived constraints (Elster, 1989)).

Radicalization can best be described as a process (Kundnani, 2012), but it is hard to determine with certainty the phases involved in this process and what makes an individual progress from one phase to another. Researchers are not able to reach an agreement on the subject, and consequently, several competing explanatory models are on the market trying to unravel the process of radicalization; for example, the cognitive opening model (Wiktorowicz, 2004), the staircase model (Moghaddam, 2005), and the pyramid model (Mc Cauley & Moskaleiko, 2008).

Despite this diversity, most researchers agree that radicalization is preceded by what can be described as a prephase (Bjørge, 2002; Koomen & Van der Pligt, 2009; Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). In this prephase, the seed for further, possibly violent, radicalization is planted. Whether this seed develops into a full grown tree depends on the interaction of contributing risk factors. According to most studies, a special role is reserved for perceived rela-

tive deprivation, identity, certain personality traits, and the social context as contributing factors (King & Taylor, 2011). After the prephase, group processes become important and radical support from the environment, friends, and family ~~could~~ cause further radicalization (Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009). The following section will provide an overview of different risk factors that may be of importance in the prephase. First, a short description of the most important concepts is given.

1.2. Definition of concepts

Radicalization is a highly contested and politicized container concept (Schmid, 2013). So far, there is no universally accepted definition of what exactly constitutes radicalization. This can partially be explained by the fact that the perception of radicalization is context dependent and as such based on social, political, and economic factors. This implies that radicalization has different meanings for different actors. Furthermore, the concept of radicalization is used interchangeably with the concepts of violent extremism and terrorism, although radicalization need not necessarily lead to violence and terrorism can take place without radicalization (Schmid, 2013). Unfortunately, governments and researchers tend to cling to vague, politicized, and one-sided definitions. So for clarity and practicability, first, some essential concepts need to be defined and outlined.

Radicalization

In general radicalization can be seen as a complex and dynamic process that is subjected to differential influences and can have different, multiple goals (Geeraerts, 2012; Van de Linde & Rademaker, 2010). This characterization of radicalization as a process is essential because it implies different stages and gradations. Further, the formation of alternative political ideas, goals, and ideals can take place within any religion, belief system and/or ideology (Corens, 2008). Despite the lack of consensus, a number of elements are consistent among different definitions: 1) *alienation from society and the political system* (Slootman & Tillie, 2006a, p24), 2) *increasing willingness to use violence for political goals* (Van den Bos, Loseman, & Doosje, 2009, p. 1), and 3) *the importance of the group* (Olesen, 2009).

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Radicalization refers principally to the development of extremist convictions and ideologies (Borum, 2011). The transfer to engagement in violent extremism or terrorism is not inevitable and can follow different pathways, radicalization being only one of them. Therefore, radicalization does not necessarily lead to violence or other unwanted acts. Most individuals holding radical ideas never get involved in violent extremism or terrorism (Borum, 2011). Radicals can adhere to an ideology that promotes political and physical distance between themselves and other social/political groups without ever resorting to violence. On the other hand, (political) violence can take place without (ideological) radicalization. Many terrorist are not ideologically motivated but commit terrorist acts because of other more individual and often practical reasons. For example, Gavray, Fournier and Born (2012) found in their research that unconventional/illegal political participation was strongly related to other positive and legitimate types of civic and political participation, but that violence and illegal actions were considered more effective in attracting attention to the cause. Radicalization can, besides violence, also have disruptive effects by giving rise to parallel societal structures, severe political polarization and/or tensions between societal population groups that hold different positions in the social structure (Van den Bos et al., 2009).

Based on an extensive literature review, Schmid (2013) gives a nuanced definition of radicalization, incorporating all the above elements.

“Radicalisation is an individual or collective (group) process whereby, usually in a situation of political polarization, normal practices of dialogue, compromise and tolerance between political actors and groups with diverging interests are abandoned by one or both sides in a conflict dyad in favor of a growing commitment to engage in confrontational tactics of conflict-waging. These can include (i) the use of (non-violent) pressure and coercion, (ii) various forms of political violence other than terrorism or (iii) acts of violent extremism in the form of terrorism and war crimes. The process is, on the side of the rebel factions, generally accompanied by an ideological socialization away from mainstream or status quo-oriented positions towards more radical or extremist positions involving a dichotomous world view and the acceptance of an alternative focal point of political mobilization outside the dominant political order as the existing system is no longer recognized as appropriate or legitimate.” (Schmid, 2013, p. 18)

According to Schmid, we must make sure to

- “1. See radicalisation as a process that can affect conflict parties on both sides in a confrontation;*
- 2. Remain aware of the fact that radical opinions do not necessarily lead to political violence or terrorism*
- 3. Detach radicalisation to some extent from radicalism and link it more to the process of growing commitment to and engagement with (violent) extremism*
- 4. Apply it not only to individuals and small groups but also to larger collectivities*
- 5. Analyse radicalisation not only on the micro- but also on the meso- and macro-levels.” (Schmid, 2013, p. 39)*

For reasons of clarity we will henceforth use the term violent radicalization when referring to radicalization into violent extremism.

Radicalism

Radicalism is a relative construct, and what is considered to be radical depends on who we are and when and where we come from. Radicalism is not negative per definition. Radical ideas can sometimes even be necessary to promote social change and emancipation of minorities. In the course of history, “radicals” have fought for and changed a lot of things that are now considered as normal and necessary. Still they were considered as dangerous; for example, the French revolution, feminism and the Suffragette movement, the anti-apartheid movement with Nelson Mandela, the civil rights movements with Martin Luther etc. Their demands were warded from the political sphere, automatically channeling them into the extra political system (Van de Linde & Rademaker, 2010). Still, when defining radicalism, usually negative and vague definitions are involved (Corens, 2008).

To resolve the confusion and end the endless debates, a benchmark is needed to determine what is radical and what is not. In the context of Western democratic societies, what is radical can best be defined in relation to mainstream political activities and Western (liberal, democratic, and secular) core values (Segwick in Schmid, 2013). With this in mind, Schmidt describes radicalism based on attitudes and behavior.

“Radicalism might [...] usefully be described [as] 1. The advocating of sweeping political change, based on a conviction that the status quo is

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unacceptable while at the same time a fundamentally different alternative appears to be available to the radical 2. The means advocated to bring about the system-transforming radical solution for government and society [which] can be non-violent and democratic (through persuasion and reform) or violent and non-democratic (through coercion and revolution.” (Schmid, 2013, p. 8)

So radicals are not violent and anti-democratic by default. In other words, radicalism has to be distinguished from violent extremism that is anti-democratic by default.

Violent extremism

With respect to the content, extremism may best be defined against the same benchmark as radicalism, since it also revolves around political views that oppose mainstream political positions and core values of (Western) society (see also Neumann & Rogers, 2007). However, compared with radicalism, extremism takes one step further and fully denounces pluralism, strongly emphasizes (dogmatic) ideology, and uses violent and oppressive methods to achieve the political goals (Schmid, 2013). Defined this way, extremism leaves no place for diversity or compromise. Violence is always accepted as a legitimate means to obtain and hold on to political power, which manifests itself either in violent attitudes or violent actions or both. This means that the distinction between extremism and violent extremism is not useful and redundant. Although violence is not always used by every extremists, a positive identification with violent methods is always present.

However, some might argue that the single concept “extremism” deprived of “violent” also can be used in other context than radicalization, and thus refer to extreme behavior or extreme interests in general. So when addressing this interdisciplinary phenomenon, the term violent extremism is always used to avoid confusion. Therefore, for clarity and avoiding confusion, in the rest of the report, the term violent extremism will be used. It should be kept in mind, however, that in the context of radicalization and according to our definition, non-violent extremism does not exist.

“While radicals might be violent or not, might be democrats or not, extremists are never democrats. Their state of mind tolerates no diversity. They are also positively in favour of the use of force to obtain and

maintain political power. Extremists generally tend to have inflexible 'closed minds' adhering to a simplified mono-causal interpretation of the world where you are either with them or against them, part of the problem or part of the solution. Radicals, on the other hand, have historically tended to be more open to rationality and pragmatic compromise, without abandoning their search for getting to the root of the problem." (Schmid, 2013, p. 10)

Terrorism

Terrorism is, even more than radicalization or violent extremism, a politicized term (Coolsaet, 2005b). Terrorism and violent extremism are often interchangeably used and governments have the tendency to quickly condemn every form of political protest or violence as terrorism. Still, not every form of political violence is terrorism, nor is political violence always illegitimate. The question of whether one can speak of terrorism is always intertwined with a question of power (Deflem, 2004b). Dominant actors have the power to define what is legitimate and not, and the capacity to act upon this definition (Corens, 2008). For example, the bombing of Afghanistan is legitimate in the eyes of the USA, contrary to the attacks of 9/11 that are defined as terrorism.

According to Schmid (2013), terrorism has to be situated in a broader spectrum of political action in which *"it makes sense to differentiate normless and criminal terrorism from illegal but sometimes (more) legitimate forms of political violence (p. 13)."* In this spectrum, terrorism is the kind of violence that can never, under any circumstance, be legitimized and thus falls in the same category as torture, genocide, and war crimes. Terrorism does not necessarily refer to physical violence, but can also mean "society disrupting damage" (AIVD, 2007, p. 18). Note that this definition still leaves room for interpretation and is only useable when kept in mind that the same benchmark as for radicalism and violent extremism is used.

Schmid (2013) refers to the academic consensus definition⁴ that states that terrorism is a tactic that can be used in three different contexts: *"a) illegal state repression, b) propagandistic agitation by non-state actors in times of peace or outside zones of conflict and c) as an illicit tactic of irregular*

⁴ Without an academic consensus definition, empirical studies become highly problematic.

warfare employed by state-and non-state actors (p. 16)." Terrorism is defined as follows: "*terrorism is on the one hand a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear generating coercive political violence and, on the other hand, a conspiratorial practice of calculated demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, targeting mainly civilians and non-combatants, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.*"

Note that the current study is limited to the explanation of violent extremism and does not answer any questions regarding the origins of terrorism.

1.3. Prephase

Clearly, multiple complex risk factors alternate in facilitating the radicalization process (Van den Bos et al., 2009). No single factor can be indicated as causal⁵ and the extent to which certain factors are decisive varies from case to case (Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). A (changing) combination of risk factors is always required to explain radicalization (Precht, 2007).

First, the context has to be taken into account. Second, similarities can be found in the form of push factors (characteristics of individual or life course that enhance the chance of radicalization), pull factors (characteristics of the extremist group or context that make radicalization attractive), and catalyst factors (Säkerhetspolisen, 2010). Push, pull, and catalyst factors form a breeding ground for radicalization and can be found on different levels of aggregation, from personal feelings to events in wider society (see figure 1).

These risk factors are typical for many individuals, but only a very small percentage of them will eventually radicalize (Precht, 2007). Likewise, there is no deterministic relationship between certain risk

⁵ In social sciences, a cause can be defined as a causal factor that increases the probability of action or, put differently, a causal factor that has the characteristics to bring about action. This definition makes it clear that although causes are more than simple correlation, in social sciences, they are not perceived as deterministic. Dealing with social phenomena, it is very unlikely to find a causal factor that is both necessary and sufficient (Mackie, 1980). Such a factor would, when present, always lead to the phenomenon under study. So far, in social science in general and in the study of extremism more specifically, such a factor has not yet been identified and is very unlikely to exist. The complexity of the social world demands several causal factors in interaction with each other to explain social phenomena.

factors and violent extremism. Risk factors affect the probability of violent extremism, but on their own they do not explain why some individuals radicalize and others, in similar situations, do not. In what follows, the most important risk factors are grouped and discussed. An overview can be found in table 1.

Table 1: Overview of risk factors for violent extremism identified in the literature

Contextual risk factors	Broad (global) contextual factors	Structural global processes
	Local societal circumstances	Socio-economic situation
Push factors	Personal characteristics and traits	NO psychopathology
		NO socio-demographic profile
		Personality traits
	Social-psychological mechanisms	Perceived injustice
		Perceived group threat
		Perceived insecurity
	Social mechanisms	Search for social inclusion
		Search for identity and meaning
	Emotions	Fear, anger, hatred, contempt...
Pull factors	Extremist group	Fulfil social and psychological needs
	Radical belief system	Ideological recognition
Catalysts	Trigger events	Altering personal or social events
	Violence	Need for excitement and kicks
	Biographical availability	Lack of social ties
	Significant others	Persuasion from friends, family,...

1.3.1. Contextual risk factors

1.3.1.1. Broad (global) contextual factors

In the model developed by the Dutch IVA⁶ (Moors & Van den Reek Vermeulen, 2010), “context” is described as broad long-term societal processes that can be at the foundation of the development of a breeding ground for (violent) radicalization. It mostly constitutes structural demographic, socio-economic, and/or (geo-)political processes and trends at an international level, beyond the scope of individuals or even individual states. Examples are segregation, overpopulation, and economic recessions. The position of the context in

⁶ The “IVA beleidsonderzoek en advies” is a Dutch research bureau that conducts policy-oriented research in different domains for the government, institutions, and private companies. The IVA is affiliated with the University of Tilburg.

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relation to radicalization is displayed in figure 1. There is no linear connection between certain (global) trends and (violent) radicalization (Van de Linde & Rademaker, 2010). Some trends can facilitate (violent) radicalization but processes of radicalization emerge from a broad spectrum of factors, and the way these global processes are locally perceived and translated is crucial. The influences of all environmental characteristics are dependent of individual perception.

One has to be careful not to align and limit the understanding of the context to foreign political influences (Harchaoui, 2006). That would be a holistic approach, very deterministic, and leaves no room for the perception-based choice processes of individuals. An example is the presentation of global political Islam as the main cause and explanation for extremist Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium. This perspective of a “catastrophic terrorism” that strikes Western society from outside its borders reduces the capability to be self-critical and recognize the own shortcomings, making the actual problems and social issues invisible. Violent extremism and terrorism are inextricably linked to the society they emerged from (Sunier, 2006). By placing perpetrators as it were opposite to society, Western society itself stays out of the picture. This way, the context is not included but rather excluded from the analysis.

1.3.1.2. Local societal circumstances

The global context can give rise to certain local societal circumstances. These are mostly comprised of socio-economic factors such as political inequality, poverty, and unemployment. For example, a period of economic recession (context) can lead to an increase in poverty, rising income inequality, unemployment, and structural discrimination. This kind of societal circumstances can provoke feelings of dissatisfaction and distrust with society and/or certain groups (Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). Coolsaet (2005a) argues that such structural factors lead to perceived and actual marginalization and thus can cause violent extremism (see section 1.3.2.2).

1.3.2. *Push factors at the individual level*

Push factors render individuals susceptible to (violent) radicalization. Especially, identity seems to be a central factor. Both the search for a

positive personal identity and the need to protect a “threatened” cultural identity can be powerful push factors toward (violent) radicalization. Although push factors can each have an independent influence on (violent) radicalization, individually they barely explain anything and there is no necessary consequence.

1.3.2.1. Personal characteristics and traits

An intuitive first reaction to violent extremism and terrorism is that the perpetrators have to be mentally disturbed or at least **psychologically** abnormal (Silke, 2008). Still, the majority of extremists and even terrorist are perfectly sane. Furthermore, in general, they are mentally more stable than other violent offenders or even members of the general population. After all, the execution of a terrorist attack demands a high level of self-control, discipline, and rationality. Psychotic behavior, trauma, or personality disorders make individuals less suitable to function in a high-demanding organization (Sageman, 2008; see also Horgan, 2004; 2008). This does not mean that such individuals are never part of extremist movements, but rather exceptionally and they are usually denied central positions in the organization. Only for *lone wolves* and *loners* the picture might be different (Pantucci, 2011)⁷. Especially the latter are supposed to suffer from psychological and social problems.

Second, certain **personality traits** can make individuals susceptible for particular experiences (King & Taylor, 2011; Victoroff, 2005). Some individuals display high levels of sensationalism and/or thrill seeking behavior, which can make them susceptible to the seemingly exciting lifestyle of extremists (Bjergo, 2002; King & Taylor, 2011). Having an authoritarian personality is also linked to susceptibility to violent extremism, especially in case of right-wing extremism (Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009; Victoroff, 2005, De Waele & Pauwels, 2014; De Waele 2013; Pauwels & De Waele, in press). Still, it is unlikely that one personality trait can account for all activists in all different extremist fractions (Fermin, 2009).

Further, with prevention in mind, a lot of attention has been given to **socio-demographical profiles** of extremists and terrorists (Fermin, 2009). Researchers tried to determine age, gender, origin, class, etc., of

⁷ See paragraph 1.5.2.

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typical extremists and potential terrorists. However, extremists and terrorists generally form a very diverse group. Needless to say, this kind of profiles is dependent on the nature and background of both the individual and movement (Buijs, Demant, & Hamdy, 2006; Silke, 2008). A starting legal movement in the United States will attract different individuals than an underground organization in Afghanistan. Furthermore, within each group, different functions are possible, each demanding additional skills (Fermin, 2009). In addition, radicalization is a gradual process that can change the individual drastically over time. Put differently, it is not possible to link demographic characteristics and (violent) radicalization. There is no demographic profile of the individual likely to radicalize (Van den Bos et al., 2009). Moreover, attributes can *never* be causes! This still is a mistake often made by practitioners. Certain behaviors may possibly be grouped among individuals with similar demographic background characteristics (Doosje, Loseman, & Van den Bos, 2009; Fermin, 2009). These characteristics by themselves do not account for violent extremism but can be an indication of underlying causes explaining why members of these groups are more likely to radicalize.

1.3.2.2. Socio-psychological mechanisms

As already discussed, a combination of societal circumstances can make individuals susceptible to extremist ideas. However, individuals differ in the extent to which they are sensitive to these circumstances (King & Taylor, 2011; Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009). Thoughts and actions of individuals are strongly determined by the interpretation of the situation they are in (Doosje et al., 2009). This means that in order to understand (violent) radicalization, sufficient attention must be paid to the way individuals perceive and define a situation (Buijs et al., 2006). This is possible by taking socio-psychological cognitions/beliefs and mechanisms⁸ into account. According to Van den Bos et al. (2009), the following three socio-psychological factors play a crucial role in the explanation of radicalization by linking the individual to its environment: perceived injustice, perceived group threat, and perceived inse-

⁸ Mechanisms explain how something works by linking cause and consequence. They explain the link between a certain event (cause) and the reaction of the individual (action). In doing so, they provide insight into the relation between social structure and offending. In other words, mechanisms are the intervening processes that link causal risk factors and action outcomes, in this case, political violence (Hedström, 2005).

curity. These factors relate to the assessment and perception the individual has of his/her own situation. It is important to keep in mind that not the objective situation but rather personal experience and perception are decisive.

Perceived injustice entails the perception that one's own group is unjustly disadvantaged compared to other groups and/or the feeling of being treated unfairly by society. Objective discrimination and deprivation are not of importance but rather the experience and perception of being disadvantaged⁹. Especially relative group deprivation seems to be a strong predictor of positive attitudes toward extremist ideas. It also appears that even when one acquires a better position within a deprived group, the probability of (violent) radicalization rises if one's own situation does not improve despite newly acquired accomplishments (Koomen & Van der Pligt, 2009)¹⁰.

Second, a strong feeling of (*group*) *threat* can enhance negative feelings toward other groups, especially if the own identity is strongly based on the own social group (see Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006 for an overview). The perceived threat can not only be real (e.g., announced attacks) but also, and more often, be symbolic and based on conflicting norms and values (e.g., headscarves at work) (see also Koomen & Van der Pligt, 2009; Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009). In this case, one is afraid to lose the own cultural identity. Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler (2011) and Bartlett and Littler (2011) showed, for instance, that the majority of online sympathizers of a populist movement had joined the movement out of concern for the preservation of Western values under threat of

⁹ "Perceived" does not automatically mean "not real." It refers to the way an individual experiences a certain situation. It is possible, although not necessary, that this perception is objectively grounded.

¹⁰ This idea follows more or less the classical strain theories that are developed in criminology to explain crime (Agnew, 2010). Strain theory has roots in Merton's anomie theory. The idea is that there exists a discrepancy between 1) the common cultural goals for everybody and 2) the structural reality of unequal possibilities to reach these goals. This leads to tension or strain. According to Merton, different reactions to the experience of strain are possible: conformism, innovation, ritualism, rebellion, or retreatism. To explain general crime, strain theories usually refer to innovation or the use of alternative (illegal) means to obtain the traditional goals. Radicalization seems to be more a case of rebellion, as the values of mainstream society are denounced and replaced by other values and goals, the means to reach them included (van Gemert, 2008). Religion or ideology can be used as a source of inspiration for the creation of a new system of norms and values, addressing and relieving feelings of strain. Failure according to the old values (e.g., being unemployed) can now be transformed into victory in light of the new ones (e.g., breaking free from capitalism).

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Islam and uncontrolled migration. Van San (2013) showed, in turn, that numerous Muslim youth support the notion that a war is being waged against Islam by the West. For them this means not only that their entire group and their way of life are threatened but also that they are personally under attack. This creates a strong feeling of indignation, which can easily turn into anger. Experienced group threat is strongly related to relative (group) deprivation.

Finally, perceived group threat can also lead to general *feelings of insecurity* about the future existence of the group but also about the individual future. This leads to actions aiming at reducing the perceived insecurity and regaining control of one's own life. This can, for example, be done by voting for a certain political party but also by joining a radical or even an extremist movement. Extremist groups offer a strictly defined worldview and clear rules about what is expected from a group member. In other words, they offer anchor points in life, providing feelings of security and safety¹¹.

In this regard, Coolsaet (2005a) argues that when addressing the root causes of violent extremism, attention should be diverted from ideology and relative deprivation. Instead, the focus should be on structural problems and the feelings of injustice and marginalization they cause. *"Terrorism is not born out of poverty, nor out of religion. The particular brand of terrorism we witness today is bred by marginalization—as was the case in the past with similar waves of terrorism. This terrorism is a symptom of a society gone awry. When a world changes too rapidly in too many dimensions at once, it makes—rightly or wrongly—large groups of people, nations, or countries feel excluded. And it is precisely this which constitutes the breeding ground for small extremist splinter groups searching for a way to justify their acts of terror. As self-appointed vanguards, they are thus seeking to present themselves as champions of justice. That is how it was a hundred years ago. That is how it is today."* (Coolsaet, 2005, p. vii)

¹¹ Especially adolescents and ethnic minorities are at risk of being disappointed about the opportunities they get and/or of experiencing stigmatization and discrimination (Buijs et al., 2006; Slootman & Tillie, 2006a; Van den Bos et al., 2009). They have to find their way in a society marked by polarization on ethnic and religious lines. Because of this, some of them easily experience feelings of insecurity that go hand in hand with the need for rebellion and action in order to rectify the situation.

1.3.2.3. Social mechanisms

Social mechanisms refer to the social situation of the individual in relation to others in the same group. Especially “searching” individuals are susceptible to (violent) radicalization. Poor social ties can lead to individual feelings of rejection and loneliness that can provoke strong reactions¹². In case traditional leaders, social institutions and/or parents are not able to sufficiently fulfill this need, radical and extremist groups can take over this role and provide structure, meaning, and significance (Corens, 2008)

First, individuals have a strong need for *social inclusion, acceptance, and a sense of security* (Bjørger, 2002). Often individuals are attracted to extremist groups in light of their search for friendship, social protection, and a communal feeling, especially when these things are absent in their daily lives. Second, aspects of *meaning and identity* are also of importance (Slootman & Tillie, 2006a). In particular, individuals in search of their own identity often struggle with questions such as “who am I?” “what am I doing here?” and “what is the meaning of life?” (see also Van den Bos et al., 2009; Veldhuis & Bakker, 2007).

¹² In the dominant discourse, this is often reduced to a problem of integration for youths of foreign descent (Sunier, 2006). The dominant idea is that (violent) radicalization is mainly a psycho-pathological problem related to cultural marginalization. Radicalization is seen as an irrational reaction to the incapacity (or incompetence) to find a valuable place in society. In this view, these youngsters are not capable of closing the gap between the different cultures that they are a part of. This results in weak ties with both cultures, leaving them confused about the right way to act (Buijs et al., 2006; Precht, 2007; Slootman & Tillie, 2006a). Still, the described process does not automatically imply that (violent) radicalization is a consequence of a *lack of integration* (Sunier, 2006; Van der Valk, 2010). If one is well integrated, social acceptance by the rest of society is expected. This makes it harder to accept discrimination and exclusion (e.g., Schiffauer, 1999). In other words, it is a lack of acknowledgement rather than a lack of integration that can lead to radicalization (see e.g., Moors & Van den Reek Vermeulen, 2010). A second critique on this dominant discourse is that the existence of an “unbridgeable gap between cultures” presumes the existence of significant and identifiable difference between these two cultures. However, culture is not something fixed or static. On the contrary, youngsters are active agents in the creation of their own, ever changing, cultural environment (Sunier, 2006). Furthermore, cultural change can be an opportunity for creativity, instead of something negative. Third, questions can be raised by the equation of radicalization and culture (Geelhoed, 2012). Members of both current and former extremist movements have the same cultural background as their non-extremist peers. This implicates that explanations for the rise of these groups cannot be found in cultural but rather in social and political processes and conflicts. This has been widely accepted for the explanation of left- and right-wing extremism and there is no apparent reason why this should be different for extremist Muslims in the West. Granted these youngsters indeed have a partially non-western cultural background, this argument falls short because it does not account for 1) radical converts, 2) non-extremist Salafists, and 3) the only marginal position of Islamic fundamentalism among western Muslims.

Moreover, a lack of self-esteem can lead to a hunkering for stabilizing securities. In other words, extremist groups are eager to act upon an *“unfulfilled need to define themselves”* (Venhaus, 2010). By joining a group, individuals always obtain something positive they want (Opp, 2009). The fact that this search for identity and meaning is crucial is confirmed by several (auto)biographical histories of former extremists (De Stoop, 2010; Nawaz, 2012).

1.3.2.4. Emotions

Often, diffuse feelings of frustration and hatred toward other population segments are present. Although these feelings can be associated with specific negative experiences, it is equally possible that they are the consequence of perceived group threat and linked to this perceived injustice (Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009). From these negative perceptions, feelings of aversion and contempt as well as fear and anger can arise. These are strong emotions that can possibly influence behavior and action readiness. Especially hatred, which builds on all mentioned emotions, can pave the way for (violent) radicalization because it is linked to the conviction that the others are inherently evil and/or inferior¹³. Based on these feelings, the group held responsible for the experienced injustice will trigger a want for revenge (Silke, 2008). Revenge is seen as a key motivation for violent extremism because it contains a powerful and aggressive intention to restore feelings of self-worth and end the experienced injustice.

Next to emotions, rationality is also of importance; for example, the knowledge someone has about the political and economic situation (Veldhuis & Bakker, 2007).

1.3.3. Pull factors

1.3.3.1. The extremist group

Extremist groups often fulfill certain fundamental social and psychological needs (Bjørge, 2002, 2012). First, it is not very likely that somebody will join an extremist group when they are satisfied about the current personal and/of political situation and when the social

¹³ See Sternberg (2003) for an overview on “hate.”

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status quo does not provoke any frustration. Something has to be off. Second, it is necessary that extremist groups offer something that is wanted by, at least part of, their target audience. This is made visible in the supply–demand chain in figure 1. Perceived grievances, such as insecurity, group threat, and lack of social integration, form a breeding ground from which a demand, more specifically a need for friendship, meaning, significance, and/or action and change, emerges. Sometimes these demands can be so urgent that the personal resilience against violent extremism starts to fall apart, creating *cognitive openings* (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 7). This suggests that individuals become susceptible to new ideas and perspectives, including extremist views that otherwise would have been immediately rejected. If the nature of the (perceived) grievances matches with what a certain extremist groups has to offer, radicalization can occur (Mellis, 2007; Moors & Van den Reek Vermeulen, 2010)¹⁴.

Most extremist groups actively try to match supply and demand by *framing* their message based on grievances that can be found among their target audience (Thompson, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2004). By using language and symbols, they place radical claims within a certain interpretative framework. In doing so, they strive for **frame alignment**, or the alignment of their own narratives with the perceptions and grievances that are already present among the target population (see also, Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008; Neumann & Rogers, 2007). Successful extremist frames offer alternative and simple ideological explanations for the perceived grievances, point out causes and consequences, and emphasize the own political and social efficiency (Adams & Roscigno, 2005). Extremist groups are very well aware of the grievances of potential members and offer them a purposeful answer by placing these feelings within a bigger extremist picture. A positive, collective identity is created by using a frame that offers a clear us versus them logic, the ideology to explain the distinction between the two, and the grievances to prove and legitimize the distinction. ~~“You are not the only one going through this, we are all in the same battle and it is all because of that enemy.”~~ Sloodman and Tillie say the following about this:

¹⁴ This need not necessarily be true. Answers and solutions to problems can also be found among other social and political actors, oneself and/or the environment. In the case of radicalization, the individual has difficulties connecting to one of those more mainstream groups and/or does not succeed in obtaining a positive status in society by legitimate means. (Bjørge, 2002).

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"The radical division of the world into friend and enemy and good and evil gives clarity and simplicity. This world view of the unequal struggle between friend and enemy provides an explanation of the unjust situation which many experience in their daily lives. This explanation of the world offers a simple manner to justify the complex emotions of anger and frustration, while the emphasis on solidarity and brotherhood [...] provides a feeling of belonging. A feeling of superiority [...] contributes to an increase in self-worth. The distinct rules [...] also provide the clear framework which so many individuals need."(Slootman & Tillie, 2006b, p. 59)

"[...] radical ideology has some advantages compared to what the democratically active Muslims have to offer. Although the premise of the democratically active, participating in dealing with the excesses of the inherently beneficial society, is powerful and emancipatory, it has less to offer on the socio-cultural level and in the search for meaning. It has no ready answers to difficult questions about subjects such as individual liberty, the position of religion, the role of the family and the bond with the community.[...] In contrast, the radical ideology offers certainty, stability, and acceptance. It is made up of clear prescriptions of what to do and what not to do; it offers an identity to be proud of and affiliation with brothers and sisters in the world-wide community of Muslims."(Slootman & Tillie, 2006b, p. 59)

In other words, extremist groups are attractive to searching and frustrated individuals because they seem to offer an answer on all their questions and problems. Extremist groups often seem the place to be in order to accomplish something and get rid of frustrations (Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). Vulnerable and searching youth are furthermore susceptible to an easily accessible, clear and simple worldview and a clear definition of their role and place within this world. Even more important is the social appeal of these groups (Bjørge, 2012). This can include friendship, a community or family feeling, the presence of a father figure, a chance to rebel against parents, protection, social status, identity, etc. (see also Murer, 2011).

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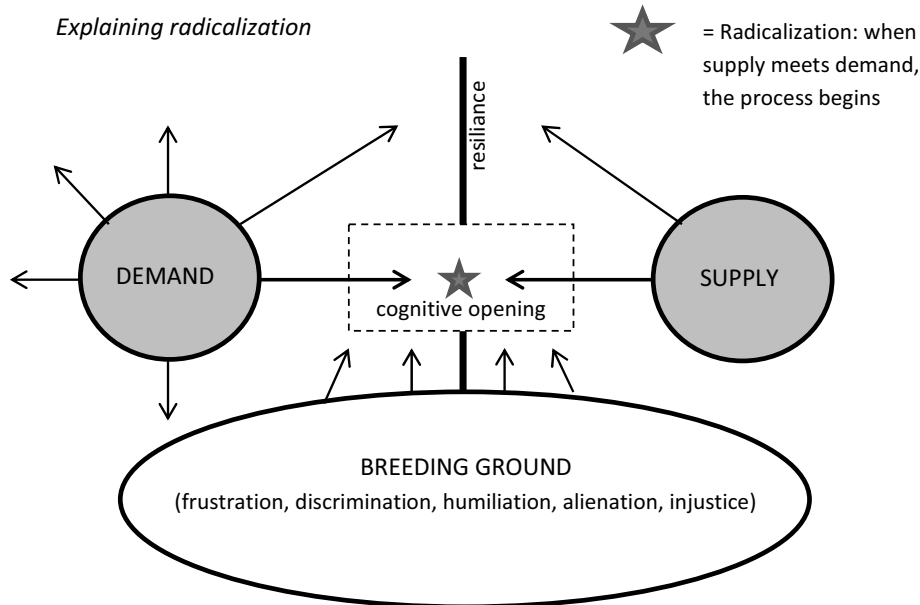


Figure 1: Radicalization: supply and demand

Only when supply and demand are congruent the process of radicalization can possibly take place. If supply and demand find each other because (i) there is a breeding ground for both supply and demand and (ii) there is a weakened resilience against violent extremism, this can, but does not necessarily has to, lead to violent radicalization (Mellis, 2007; Moors & Van den Reek Vermeulen, 2010, p. 21).

1.3.3.2. Ideology

Although ideological considerations are the most common justification given for being a member of an extremist movement, the specific ideology of an extremist group is usually not the central factor leading to violent extremism. The real reasons for joining an extremist group are principally social in nature (Bjørger, 1997, 2012). In fact, most individuals joining an extremist group are not ideologically or religiously schooled at the moment of entering the group (Buijs et al., 2006; Sageman, 2004; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). According to Roy (2008), the success of organizations such as Al Qaeda is not based on their development as a political organization grounded in a certain ideology but rather on the creation of "a narrative that could allow rebels without a cause to connect with a cause" (p. 1). The complete ideology, with all its details, is only learned and adopted after one becomes a member of the group (Bjørger, 2002). Once active in the group, different

group processes are responsible for further radicalization and polarization, until the individual identifies himself completely with the group and has internalized its goal and ideology¹⁵ (Bjørger, 2002; Rogers et al., 2007).

On the other hand, individuals do not join just any group. Individual opinions are always shaped within a normative framework, causing certain paradigms to be present from a very early stage, even before the development of an ideological consciousness. According to Doosje, Loseman and Van den Bos (Doosje et al., 2009; Doosje, Van den Bos, Loseman, Feddes, & Mann, 2012), what is attractive to individuals in the prephase of (violent) radicalization is not a specific, detailed, and complex ideology, but the nature of the offered "*radical belief system*," which consists of four components that each, to some degree, can be found in all (extremist) ideologies: 1) The perception of the own social group as superior, 2) the perception of the authorities as illegitimate, 3) an encouraged distance regarding other social groups, and 4) a feeling of alienation from the rest of society. These aspects of the *radical belief system* can be found, in different shapes, among all extremist groups. The choice for a specific extremist groups is subsequently determined by "*ideological recognition*" or the recognition of the own general viewpoints in the radical belief system of the group (Silke, 2008; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). In general, people tend to connect with others similar to themselves, the so called mirror effect or selection process. Individuals usually enter a group holding some general and diffuse ideas, resembling those of the group, that have been shaped by different experiences. The extremist group then places these ideas within their own interpretative framework.

1.3.4. Catalysts

Sometimes, certain events or circumstances can have an accelerating influence on (violent) radicalization. Veldhuis and Bakker (2007) describe these as catalysts. Mostly they contribute to (violent) radicalization by confirming already existing convictions. Compared to push and pull factors that work on the long term, catalysts can start and accelerate the radicalization process on a very short term.

¹⁵ See also paragraph 1.5.3.

1.3.4.1. Trigger events (~~Veldhuis & Bakker, 2007~~)

Certain events can have a recruiting effect. ~~Trigger events~~ instigate the impression of intense injustice and can provoke great anger and a strong longing for revenge and retaliation (Silke, 2008). Some events can be so compelling that the individuals involved have to reassess their place in society, political and religious attitudes, and even their own identity. Such a crisis can be cultural, political, economic, or personal and shakes existing convictions, creating cognitive openings (see supra). These trigger events can be related to personal issues (Olesen, 2009); however, events that do not involve personal victimization but are related to other members of the same social group can also have the same effect, especially if there is a strong identification with the group in question (Silke, 2008). In addition, symbolic actions that are considered hurtful or sacrilege can act as trigger events (e.g., the burning of the Koran by American soldiers in Kabul) (Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009). Likewise, the foreign policy of certain states can trigger similar feelings of discontent (Precht, 2007). Finally, a direct confrontation with the opponent group or an event where one was treated in an unjust manner can also act as triggers.

1.3.4.2. Violence

Violence holds a special position because there is a strong, but no necessary, connection with (violent) radicalization. Violence can act as both a push and a pull factor (Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). On the one hand, violence can be part of what makes extremist groups attractive. Some individuals have a strong interest and fascination for violence and adventure or a strong need for excitement and kicks (Bjørge, 2002). Others are attracted to the violent and military character of extremist groups and the accompanying guns, uniforms, cult of masculinity, etc. On the other hand, violence by third parties can also be a trigger to join extremist groups. This can be about violence in society in general or the personal experiences of violence.

Some researchers think that non-violent extremist movements form a gateway into violent extremism. However, in a British report on the difference between violent and non-violent radicalization, no direct linear connection was established between holding extremist convictions and the actual use of violence. Political violence was rather the result of a process of violent radicalization imbedded in a culture of

violence, peer pressure, and the existence of an honor code where violence was an important way to gain status (Bartlett, Birdwell, & King, 2010). In this sense, extremist movements can be regarded and analyzed as youth movements that place violence in the core of their existence (Roy, 2008). It seems that in places where youngsters have access to organized crime, extremist groups are a lot less represented.

1.3.4.3. Biographical availability

Biographical availability is defined as 1) the absence of engagement to the wider society and 2) a lack of feelings of guild. Social and institutional ties that can be lacking are full-time employment, conjugal obligations, children, etc. In general, young men are the most at risk of a high biographical availability (Olesen, 2009)

1.3.4.4. Significant others

Researchers point out that violent radicalization in Western countries is often a horizontal phenomenon that spreads through networks of friends, rather than a hierarchical and vertical phenomenon where new participants are recruited by leaders at the top (Atran, 2010). The factor identified by most researchers as central and crucial in the explanation of political activism, in general, (Olesen, 2009) and the joining of extremist groups, more specifically, (Sageman, 2004), is the presence of social ties with others that are already active. Extremist groups grow principally through social networks¹⁶ (Sageman, 2004) and the fact that an extremist message is delivered by a significant other or a person of confidence is of detrimental importance in this process. It is social ties with peers, family, or colleagues that convince individuals to join extremist groups (see e.g., Bartlett et al., 2010; Sageman, 2004; SOU,

¹⁶ It is not completely clear how criminal networks arise, through selection or through socialization. The selection principle states that people choose each other as friends based on characteristics they have in common, such as their criminal or extremist behavior. The socialization principle, on the other hand, states that criminal or extremist behavior is the consequence of processes of influence and socialization during the friendship. In the classic criminological theories explaining crime, the selection principle can be found in control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Völker, Baerveldt, & Driessen, 2008). Social learning theory is based on the principle of socialization (Akers, 1998; Sutherland, 1947). In the current research, it is assumed that both processes are of importance and simultaneously play a role during different stages of the development of criminal or extremist behavior. For instance, it is possible that friends and family introduce extremist thinking to an individual (socialization) but that in later phases, like-minded individuals are actively sought out (selection).

2010). Commitment and feelings of obligation toward the group are initially founded upon these social ties and not on ideological considerations (Atran, 2010; Fermin, 2009). Especially, an extremist peer group seems to be of importance. During adolescence, social networks expand and become more diverse by the incorporation of new friends (Völker et al., 2008). These friends and acquaintances are crucial in the lives of youngsters, while family bonds start losing their importance.

1.4. Recruitment

The concept of recruitment has the implicit connotation, especially in the context of radicalization, to refer to a passive process of brainwashing and manipulation of innocent individuals by third parties (Neumann & Rogers, 2007). However, this is not necessarily true. This is a top-down description that does not capture the phenomenon in its totality. The recruited individual always plays more or less an active role in his/her own recruitment. Recruitment is a process of identifying oneself with a social and/or political movement (Opp, 2009). This can take place within any social or political movement, including extremist ones. In some circumstances, individuals actively look for the possibility to be recruited into the movement. Olesen summarizes the definition of recruitment as follows:

"Recruitment is the process through which individuals become part of a collective and come to share the views and goals of this collective. [...] Recruitment to activism is a voluntary decision on the part of the individual. The individual, however, can be more or less proactive in the process. At least three ideal-typical pathways to recruitment can be specified: 1) individuals identify an organization they sympathize with and approach it; 2) organizations actively seek out potential recruits; 3) individuals are recruited through friendship and family networks. [...] Recruitment is a general process occurring in all forms of collective activism." (Olesen, 2009, p. 8)

The place of recruitment is of lesser importance compared to the present social relationships (Neumann & Rogers, 2007). In fact, recruitment can take place following different pathways. ~~these~~ can be described on the basis of the position on two axes as shown in figure 2.

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The first axis represents the difference between active and passive recruitment. In case of passive recruitment, individuals are noted by a third party and brought into the movement without this being the individual's deliberate choice. In case of active recruitment, individuals actively search for a group or something the group has to offer, such as friendship. The second axis displays the difference between intentional and unintentional recruitment. In case of intentional recruitment, the individual is aware of the fact that he is joining a certain movement and of what the movement entails. In contrast, in case of unintentional recruitment, the individual more or less "accidentally" joins the movement.

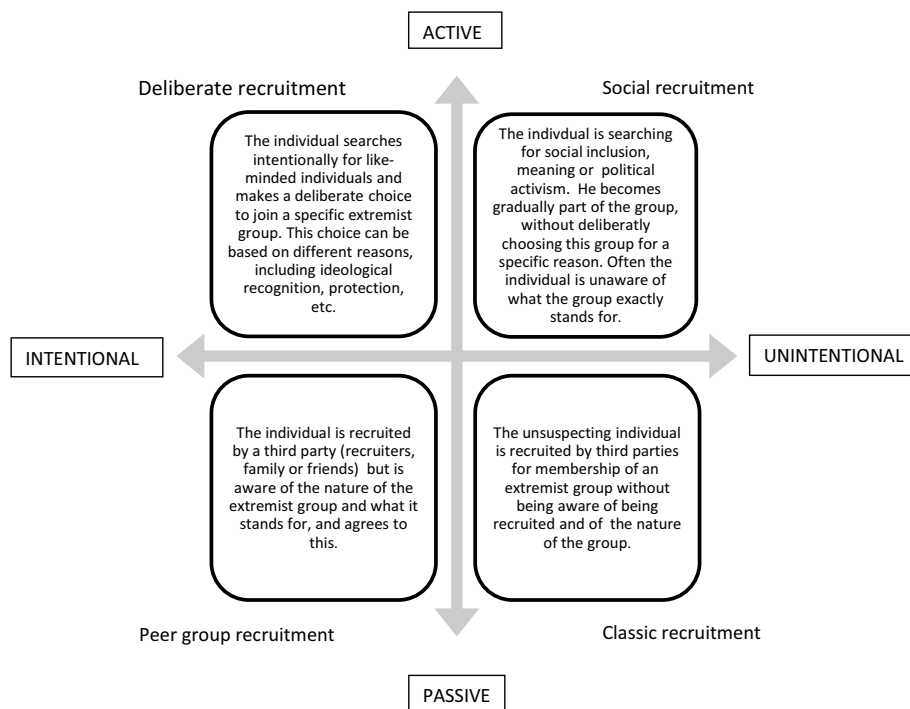


Figure 2: Ideal types of recruitment

This typology is created from the standpoint of the individual; however, the extremist group can also similarly play an active or a passive role (King & Taylor, 2011). Active extremist groups are external actors that wait along the sidelines for the right moment to convince searching individuals of their ideas and convictions. These groups

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strive to be as effective and efficient as possible, and therefore first identify those most likely to agree to join/act before starting their recruitment efforts (Brady, Schlozman, & Verba, 1999). Other extremist groups are formed bottom-up, through the grouping of some like-minded extremist individuals. These groups do not necessarily have official ties with formal extremist organizations but are usually inspired by them. In this case, formal organizations are not responsible for the formation and recruitment of the members of these groups. They do make already existing autonomous groups more dangerous by supplying them with training, inspiration, and ideological justification.

There are different ways to get into contact with an extremist group. A distinction can be made between recruitment by third parties, peer pressure and family, and self-recruitment (Murer, 2011). Recruitment by third parties is usually aimed at youth who already placed themselves outside the mainstream political sphere and as such are recruited and pulled into more organized political or social groups by active recruiters. Peer pressure refers to individuals that join a certain group because of family and/or friends. Either they join a group by following friends and family, usually older brothers and sisters, who are already active in the group or they join a certain group to rebel against family expectations, traditions, and values. Self-recruitment involves searching individuals, including those who do not exactly know what they are searching for. More often than not it is about finding social inclusion and acceptance. These individuals, deliberately or unintentionally, go searching for a group that can provide in these needs¹⁷.

There are different actors that can take on the role of active recruiter. Rogers and Neuhman (2007) identified, among others, *radical preachers, gateway organizations, activists and the community*. The community must be seen as part of the breeding ground of radicalization and as such can push individuals in the direction of violent extremism. It is not so much about what the community does as about what it does not do, more specifically failing to provide in social inclusion, social identity, and sufficient opportunities and appreciation for all its members. Finally, the presence of a charismatic leader seems to be essential (Cilluffo,

¹⁷ This is not the same as self-radicalization that implies a complete individual radicalization without any connection to an extremist group or movement.

Cozzens, & Ranstorp, 2010; Precht, 2007). Such leaders can easily influence individuals on the basis of the position of authority that they hold within the group or movement. However, since (violent) radicalization increasingly takes place through bottom-up processes instead of within hierarchical organization, the role of personal mentors and group leaders gains importance. Mostly, one specific member of the group influences and inspires the others. (e.g., Atta for the 9/11 attackers and Khan for the London Bombers).

1.5. Process of Radicalization

The previous section discussed the prephase of (violent) radicalization and more specifically those factors that make individuals more susceptible to violent extremism. The prephase is followed by the actual process of radicalization, which will be discussed in the following sections (Van Leeuwen, 2005; Olesen, 2009).

1.5.1. Stages

Sloutman and Tillie (2006a) and Buijs, Demant and Hamdy (2006) link violent radicalization to an increasing loss of legitimacy of the democratic society. They identify three general stages of development that are characterized by a diminishing level of confidence in the system and an increasing folding back on the own group. According to Van de Linde and Rademaker (2010), every stage is accompanied by a growing readiness for action. This trajectory can be found among all ideological forms of radicalization.

First, a **crisis of confidence** develops during the prephase. Usually this is a consequence of discontent with certain authorities and the conducted policy. The existing confidence in the government is undermined but does not yet lead to an ideological break. A militant attitude is adopted but actions stay within the law and rely mostly on political arguments and debate. Next, a **crisis of legitimacy** develops. Not only policy is debated but the legitimacy of the system itself is questioned (radicalism). This means a break with the existing political order and the development of an alternative ideological and cultural system. Political actions intensify and disturb the public order, but in a

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relatively harmless way. Finally, the crisis develops into a **conflict of legitimacy**. Not only is the entire system denounced but also everyone who is part of this system (violent extremism). A new moral develops that gives the individual the responsibility to fight “evil.” In general, the movement becomes isolated of the outside world, focused on its own reality, and enforces the new developed moral codes on its members. Political actions become increasingly violent, in extreme cases leading to terrorism. Noppe, Ponsaers, Verhage, De Ruyver & Easton (2011) developed a dynamic model of violent radicalization that encompasses all of these stages. The model is shown in figure 3.

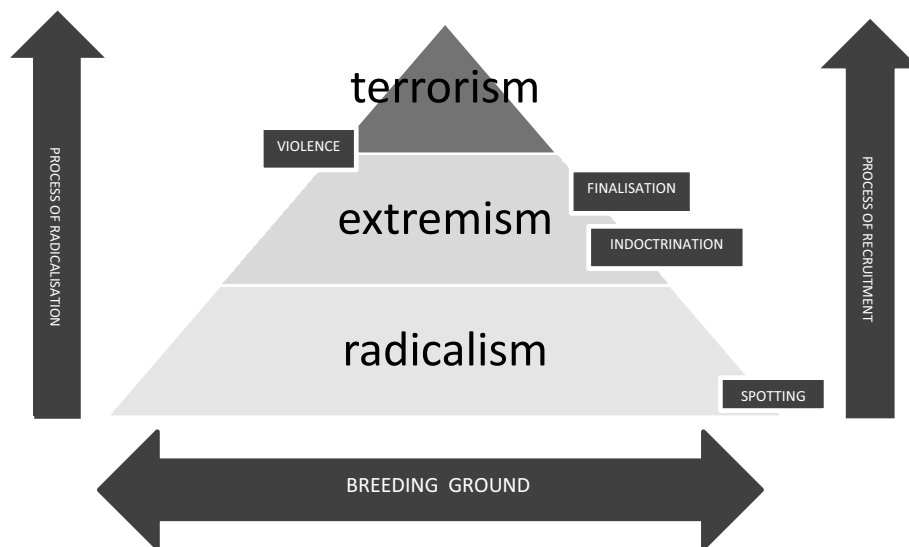


Figure 3: Dynamic model of violent radicalization (Noppe et al., 2011, based on McCauley & Moscalenco, 2008)

It is important to emphasize that the pyramid shape does **not** imply a linear deterministic development from bottom to top (Van de Linde & Rademaker, 2010). An individual finding himself at the base of the pyramid does not necessarily has to progress to the top. The higher in the pyramid the smaller and more isolated the group. The process can stop, speed up, slow down, turn around, or skip steps. There is no deterministic relation or logic progression, nor does this take place within a fixed time frame (Precht, 2007). Individuals can radicalize in just a few weeks, but this can also take several years. In other words,

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there is not one default pathway into further radicalization. The development of the process is unique for every person and does not necessarily lead to violence.¹⁸ Moreover, each step does not necessarily imply a conscious decision of the individual (Buijs et al., 2006). Often, it comprises a gliding and insidious process that guides the individual through a seemingly logical sequence of events. Although it is of course possible for an individual to make a deliberate decision about the group he wants to join and the role he wants to play. Keeping this in mind, it is more accurate to visualize the process of radicalization using concentric circles, rather than a pyramid, as is shown on figure 4.

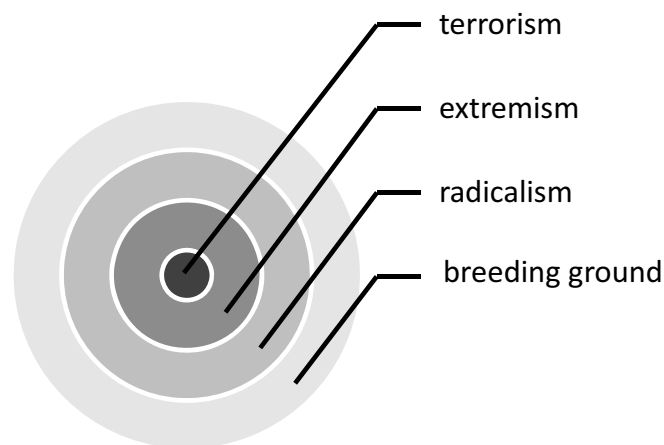


Figure 4: Circular model of radicalization (Säkerhetspolisen, 2009)

This model starts from the idea that after the prephase a moment of entry into an extremist groups takes place (initial recruitment), and radicalization and recruitment further develop together and mutually influence each other.^{19 20} It is possible for an individual to find himself in an advanced stage of radicalization prior to joining an extremist

¹⁸ It is important to keep in mind that violent radicalization and adopting extremist beliefs is only one possible pathway into terrorism and most certainly not the only one (Borum, 2011).

¹⁹ This is confirmed by the fact that within one movement individuals can hold different attitudes and take on different roles. The core members of an extremist movement, or those the most often actively involved in the group, show stronger and more extremist attitudes compared to regular sympathizers and supporters. See for example the research of Goodwin and Evans (2012) on the right wing (extremist) political parties BNP and UKIP in the UK.

²⁰ This doesn't necessarily has to entail a formal membership. It can also entail the formation of a group with some friends and/or the identification with a specific extremist group or movement.

group but is not very likely that one is already fully integrated into the ideology of the extremist group at the moment of joining. Specific ideological frameworks are gradually incorporated after joining. Once part of the group, individuals will gradually practice a more active role and take on more responsibilities.

For extremist movements, it is often a pragmatic choice to only gradually allow new members in the organization (Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). Reliability and devotion are assessed through low profile activities that cannot cause much harm to the movement. Only if loyalty is sufficiently proven, a recruit will be granted access to the core of the movement. This implies a constant assessment and recruitment, both internal and external. In particular, members for terrorist cells will be carefully selected (King & Taylor, 2011). For the recruits, this means that they are only gradually exposed to more extreme activities and viewpoints. This process goes hand in hand with an increasing radicalization.

According to Van der Valk & Wagenaar (2010), the process of joining an extremist group generally progresses in four stages. In the first two stages, the emphasis is on social factors and activities. Only in the third and fourth stage ideology becomes decisive. In the fourth stage, violence is introduced. These stages more or less correspond to stages identified by other authors (Precht, 2007; Van den Bos et al., 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2004).

1. Getting acquainted and joining

This can take place in different ways but mostly by looking to join a group oneself, through active recruitment, or through friends and family.

2. Walking along and exploration

This is about “spotting” or the exploration of the group (Noppe et al., 2011). Contact is made with the other members of the group, new friendships arise, and one gets involved into the extremist social network. Especially the social context is of importance (Precht, 2007; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). The social life and associating with friends and like-minded individuals are central to the experience. However, social gatherings often have a political goal as well, such as recruitment, fund raising, and ideological education. The most important change in the individual is the altering of identity, attitudes, and behavior.

3. Ideological development and identification

This stage entails a growing involvement in and commitment to the movement. From this stage onward, ideology plays a key role and political views harden more and more. This can take place under the influence of the group or out of an own intrinsic motivation. By interacting with other members, one learns what is expected of an accepted member of the movement. New, extremist norms and values are internalized. In fact, a process of re-socialization is taking place (Bjørge, 2002; Fermin, 2009). Eventually, the full extremist worldview of the movement will be completely internalized until the point of full identification with the group and its goals (Precht, 2007). This process is reinforced by exclusively associating with like-minded others and banning all other social contacts. Noppe et al. (2011) describe this stage as “indoctrination and isolation.”

The idea of being surrounded by enemies is central to this resocialization. It not only creates solidarity and loyalty but also paranoia and distrust of both the outside world and the other members of the group. A distance is created with the rest of society, and friends and family are pushed further away. Confrontations with “enemies” reinforce the group feeling and push members further into the group. From hereon, the individual will take on more important roles such as those of a recruiter, a leader, and/or an organizer (Bartlett et al., 2010; Wiktorowicz, 2004). The ideological development and proficiency reached by each individual member can vary.

4. Isolation and violence

Sometimes even further violent radicalization is possible. First, violence becomes central to the extremist experience and former attitudes about violence fundamentally change. Increasingly more and **extreme** violence is used as the moral and social barriers to do so disappear and violent situations are deliberately sought after. Second, the extremist ideology is now completely internalized. The personal goals coincide completely with the goals of the movement (Precht, 2007). Counter arguments are completely filtered out. Group ties and loyalty become more intense and remaining bonds with family and friends are broken. The individual is now completely isolated. Noppe et al. (2011) label this “completion.”

1.5.1.1. Self-radicalization

Radicalization is usually a product of social interaction. However, what worries policy makers and some researchers the most is the process of so-called self-radicalization (Neumann & Rogers, 2007). For some researchers, self-radicalization and internet radicalization are the same thing (see von Behr et al., 2013). In their view, some processes of radicalization take place almost exclusively through the internet, without any physical, offline contact with extremist groups or individuals. They can thus be seen as self-radicalization although online contacts and communication remain possible. For other scholars, these are two different phenomena. Here self-radicalization differs from online radicalization because the former takes place in total isolation, without any contact with other people, whether offline or online. Following this view, self-radicalization is actually very rare, if not non-existent.

Pantucci (2011) makes a distinction between *loners* and *lone wolves*. *Lone wolves* are individuals that almost exclusively radicalize through the internet before the use of political violence. They have no contacts with other extremists in real life, but do so through the internet. This resembles more to virtual radicalization than to self-radicalization. Note that they do not rely on virtual or offline networks in the actual preparation and execution of violent attacks. These actors always have contacts among members of extremist movements, but it is unclear whether they are part of organized networks and/or have offline ties with known extremist groups. Violence is always committed out of political consideration.

Loners differ from *lone wolves* because they not only act alone but also do not have any contact with other extremists, online or offline. They gather information about extremist ideologies from passive sources on the internet and use this ideology as justification and explanation for their actions. Often, the extent to which they actually adhere to this ideology is unclear²¹.

²¹ A further distinction has to be made with *lone attackers* (Pantucci, 2011). *Lone attackers* operate alone but have clear connections with established extremist groups instead of loose online connections. They act under clear "command and control chains." The networks they are part of supply them with the needed knowledge and material. See Pantucci (2011) for examples of *lone wolves*, *loners*, and *lone attackers*.

Although in most cases, the process of self-radicalization starts out lonely, there are only a few that stay alone. In most cases, like-minded individuals are quickly searched for and found, opening the door to a more established extremist environment that accounts for further radicalization and socialization. Another possibility is that a group of like-minded individuals starts an own (isolated) movement. Whatever the case, physical gatherings are almost always part of the radicalization process. Especially in situations where violent expressions start to become more serious and specific, these physical encounters are essential (Ätran 2010:3).

1.5.2. *Group processes*

Most researcher are of the opinion that (violent) radicalization occurs within a “collective.” These are (usually) small and informal groups of peers that intensively interact with each other during an extensive period of time and share the same school, recreation center, work place, gym, or other social spaces (including web forums) (Silke, 2008). This allows for the creation of a shared social identity, as a result of which the ideas of the more extremist members are adopted by the rest of the group after some time. This implies that the decision to support or participate in violence is not easily reduced to an individual choice. This is even more the case when the new formed friendships are action oriented from the start, as is clearly shown in some scientific studies (Atran, 2010; Della Porta, 2009; Horgan, 2004).

Individuals derive their self-worth not only from their own actions but also membership of social groups and the social identity of this group (Rogers et al., 2007; Van der Pligt & Koomen, 2009). To maintain a positive identity, one strives to positively distinguish the own group from other groups. This tendency becomes stronger when the self-worth of the individual is under pressure and/or when the group is under threat. This triggers strong feelings of group cohesion and increasingly negative and stereotypical opinions about the opposing group. Within this kind of homogenous groups, group processes take place that can enhance polarization and radicalization. First is *group polarization*. The group as a whole is in general more extremist than the individual, and the opinion of the majority will receive the most attention within the group. This causes the information exchange in the

group to lead to increasing polarization. Second, *groupthink* occurs when unity and consensus are more important than the quality of judgment. Only information confirming the own ideas is taken in and any other information is ignored. A feeling of treat can make a group close their ranks and become isolated, lowering the chances of coming into contact with different views (see also Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Finally, the *risky shift* phenomenon causes groups to take more risky and extreme decisions than the individual.

Individuals actively involved in violent extremist groups tend to refer to the other members of the group in terms of a “brotherhood,” comparing their friendship to the bonds that are formed between war comrades fighting a common battle (Olesen, 2009, p. 16). It can be very difficult to resist the social pressure that arises from this kind of comradeship, especially for those members who would be socially isolated without the group. According to Sageman (2004), the strong bonds between members of the same extremist group can even be an alternative explanation for the use of political violence. After all, most people are prepared to cross boundaries for love and/or friendship.

The same feelings of loyalty and proximity also form strong forces preventing disengagement from the group (Sageman, 2004). After joining an extremist group, most members find themselves alienated from their prior lives outside the group and living in complete isolation, without any social bonds to outsiders. This creates a mutual dependency and inhibits disengagement (Olesen, 2009). Sometimes an analogy is made between drug use and violent radicalization, since both are equally difficult to let go (Beski-Chafiq, 2010; Sou, 2010).

1.6. Summary

In general, it can be stated that (violent) radicalization usually develops out of a prephase that is characterized by a number of diverse risk factors, creating a breeding ground for (violent) radicalization and enhancing the probability of (violent) radicalization. Individuals in this prephase usually experience feelings of frustration and discontent with certain aspects of their lives, society in general, and/or the political policy. Especially, socio-psychological mechanisms such as insecurity, perceived injustice, and group threat are of importance, next to the

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search for social inclusion, meaning, and identity. These individuals typically meet (intentionally or unintentionally) other like-minded individuals and go through the further process of radicalization together. This further process entails a number of stages of (violent) radicalization and recruitment that eventually can lead to violent extremism and in extreme cases terrorism. Only a few will reach this stage, others will drop out of the radicalization process sooner or later. It is important to note that these risk factors continue to influence the individual, even when no longer in the prephase but already in the process of radicalization. Moreover, they are manipulated by extremist groups not only for recruitment purposes but also to ensure further radicalization and loyalty.

Still there is no single triggering factor that can be pointed out as the cause of (violent) radicalization. A combination of factors always seems to be required (Precht, 2007). In general, (violent) radicalization can be described as a social phenomenon in which factors such as belonging, identity, group dynamics, and social values are important elements. Ideological arguments are often given as a post hoc justification for membership of an extremist groups, but the real explanatory factors are most of the time social in nature (Bjørge, 2012). Ideology does play an important role, but usually as a justification to reach other goals. Ideological recognition can inform the choice of extremist groups but the specific ideological framework of an extremist group is only adopted after recruitment.

What radicalizing individuals have in common is that they seem to be at a crossing point in their lives and “searching.” In general, extremist movements offer these individuals three things (Fermin, 2009): (1) an answer to existential life questions, (2) a political activist answer to injustice, and (3) a warm home and sense of belonging. This corresponds to the three most important grounds for (violent) radicalization: (1) the need of meaning and significance, (2) a reaction to (experienced) injustice, and (3) the need for social inclusion (Buijs et al., 2006). If these things are missing in the lives of individuals and they cannot be found in regular society, extremist groups can become very appealing and attractive. At the first sight, very different movements, including the white-power movement, autonomous networks, violent Islamic movements, troublesome youth groups, hooliganism, and in some extent, religious sects, have common traits of providing a sense of

acknowledgment, protection (Adams & Roscigno, 2005), identity, and belonging to their members (Odén, 2008). The difference between violent radicalizing and not radicalizing is often dependent on the presence of extremist networks and social ties that can pull the individual into an extremist group.

Based on this, two preconditions for violent radicalization can be derived: (1) Extremist viewpoints providing an answer to experienced grievances have to be present and accessible, and (2) [Social](#) bonds, networks, and/or extremist groups that can pull individuals further into violent extremism have to be present and accessible. Further, poor access to alternative information on social reality and the absence of distraction from violent extremism, such as social activities linked to participation in civic society, are of importance (Bartlett et al., 2010). These factors make it less likely that the extremist arguments will be questioned.

With this in mind, it is worrying that the internet and especially NSM make the fulfillment of these preconditions possible in just a few clicks. Through the internet, unlimited access to a vast amount of extremist content is possible. Furthermore, NSM have made it possible to make contact and communicate with extremists regardless of time and place. Moreover, it is very easy to become isolated from the rest of society through the internet. It is not necessarily that the internet will provide the two preconditions for radicalization but if so, it will be done in a fast, safe, and easy accessible way. In other words, the question remains whether the internet and, more specifically, NSM are another risk factor (*cause*²²) related to radicalization and violent extremism. To find some first indications for answering this question, in the next chapters, we review how NSM are used by youth (Chapter 2), how extremist groups use the internet (Chapter 3), what influences exposure to violent media content has on behavior (Chapter 4) and how the risks of NSM exposure to extremist content is assessed in the literature (Chapter 5).

²² See also footnote 5.

2. ~~NSM AND YOUTH~~

2.1. Introduction

The modern internet was originated in the 1960's (Livingstone, 2005). The relatively short period between then and now is characterized by a swift and significant social change. Since the end of 1990, the internet has become indispensable at home, school, and work place, to the point that daily life can no longer be imagined without it. The implications of this fast rise are the subject of both social, political, cultural, and economic debates on the influence, significance, and consequences of the internet on society. This analysis has not been made easier by the continuous and fast change of the internet, constantly creating new possibilities. Some of the current trends comprise the popularity of social network sites, the popularity of blogs, and the fading popularity of traditional newsgroups even online. Especially, ~~NSM~~ are popular among youth. First, a short description is given of the internet on the one hand and of NSM on the other. Next, the influence of internet usage in the political participation of youth is assessed.

2.2. Definition of concepts

A distinction has to be made between what can be described as the regular internet, websites etc., and **web 2.0 applications**. The latter facilitate the interaction between internet users through social media. This is done by allowing the creation of user-generated content in a virtual community. This means that virtual content and applications are no longer top down created and put online in a finished form, but are constantly changed and modified by all internet users in a participatory way (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). A good example is Wikipedia. Examples of web 2.0 applications are social network sites, blogs, wikis, video sharing, hosted services, web applications, digital mashups, and social tagging.

(New) social media are online platforms where users, with minimal or no intervention of professionals, deliver the content. The principal characteristics of NSM are interaction and dialogue among its users.

Communication is altered into an active dialogue. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define NSM as

“a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61)

Social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and Linked In are part of the web 2.0 and a specific kind of NSM. Since their creation, they have attracted millions of users worldwide, mostly youth, adolescents and young adults, of which most have integrated SNSs in their daily lives (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Most SNSs support existing social networks, while others aim at connecting strangers based on shared interests, political conviction, or shared activities. Some SNSs appeal to a diverse audience, others target a specific group based on certain characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and religion.

2.3. Why are NSM popular among adolescents

The popularity of NSM among youth is based on the possibility to share content and to express one-self (Klein, 2009b). Using NSM, it is possible to show interests, share opinions, and contribute to the formation of a community. This is in strong contrast to traditional media, which are controlled by (commercial) gatekeepers and allow no personal input. The driving force behind NSM is the wish of youth to independently shape their own culture and identity. Identity is the main theme of virtually all use of NSM by youth.

Regan & Steeves (2010) state that NSM offer an answer to the structural and social barriers that limit and even inhibit youngster to participate in (offline) public life (see also Boyd, 2008; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008). Youth and adolescents live in a strictly regulated environment and the social spaces where they gather are mostly controlled by adults (e.g., school) (Jewkes, 2010). The objective and social nature of NSM allow for the creation of own *“spaces and places that young people can and do use to empower themselves”* (Regan & Steeves, 2010, p. 161). In other words, NSM allow for an own public space where young people are free to develop their own identity, interact with each other, and express themselves, independent of established authorities (see also De Koning,

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2008; Jewkes, 2010; Van Manen, 2010). At the same time, NSM can act as a public forum that allows youth to organize themselves and react against attempts of top-down control and surveillance (Regan & Steeves, 2010).

Especially, SNSs (like Facebook) are popular because they form complete functioning communities aimed at the exposition of social networks and in doing so identity (Boyd, 2008). Through the creation of a profile on an SNS, it is possible to highlight the most important aspects of one's identity, for friends and peers to view, interpret and judge. This can result in new contacts but the main goal is to be valued by the already existing peer group (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Research suggests that there is a link between online and offline interactions. Most users only use SNSs to maintain existing social relations (*bonding social capital*) and to reinforce distant offline social contacts (*bridging social capital*)²³ (see for example Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In other words, this kind of usage mainly supports sociability within existing groups of friends. Youth "*write themselves into being*" through their profiles (Boyd, 2008, p129). The way profiles are linked to each other makes both the group structure and one's own place in the group visible and thus displays the own (social) identity. Youth also "*write their community into being*" by choosing who to accept in their network and who not (Boyd, 2008, p131). SNSs are, in other words, "*networked publics*" that support sociability just as unmediated public spaces do (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 221). This renders the difference between offline and online artificial because both are social spaces where communication and the construction and definition of identity are central (De Koning, 2008).

Finally, research shows that the online and offline social contexts are also strongly linked in case of young adults, even if they experience less

²³ Social capital refers to benefits and opportunities that are derived from cooperation and interaction between individuals and groups. (Important sociological scholars on the subject are, for example, Bourdieu, Putnam, and Fukuyama.) Bonding social capital refers to the benefits as a consequence of the formation of social bonds between members of the same groups or between a homogenous group of individuals. Bridging social capital refers to the benefits as a consequence of the formation of social bonds between members of different groups or between a heterogeneous group of individuals. Although social capital is always a positive asset for the individual, not all forms of social capital are beneficial for society as a whole (for example gangs). Bridging social capital has in general the most positive consequences for societies and communities because it strengthens the bonds between members of different and sometimes opposing groups (Putnam, 2000).

structural barriers to public participation. Online communication is mostly used in light of those things that are also of importance offline, like the need for social connection and inclusion (Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Similar to adolescents, young adults use SNSs to reinforce and support existing offline social networks. However, the goal is not to explore and define one's own identity, like is the case for adolescents, but to confirm and anchor previously formed identities (Mcmillan & Morrison, 2006).

2.4. Adolescents, the internet, and political participation

A declining political interest, especially among youngster, has caused much political concern and subsequently has given rise to a large body of literature addressing the causes of this issue (Livingstone, 2005). At the same time, the rise of internet and the apparent ease and enthusiasm at which youngster have massively embraced this new technology have put the internet forward as both the cause and the solution for the problem²⁴, leading to numerous studies on the relation between youth, the internet, and political participation.

These studies show that youth indeed prefer the internet over traditional forms of political participation (Livingstone, 2005). However, this does not mean that internet usage in itself leads to more online political participation, such as visiting political or civic websites (Livingstone et al., 2007). The amount of time spent online and the level of internet literacy does not seem to influence political participation contrary to background characteristics and socialization that do. Livingstone et al. (2005) suggests that the life of youth is shaped by the daily political context and institutional structures such as peers, school,

²⁴ Supporters of the amplification theory state that the internet will even more amplify the differences between the traditionally political active and the less engaged groups of society because of the self-selective character of the internet (Vissers, Hooghe, & Mareas, 2009). The internet requires to actively search for information, implying that only those who are interested, have the necessary resources and the right accommodation will do so (Kraut et al., 2002; Livingstone, Couldry, & Markham, 2007). Supporters of the mobilization theory, on the other hand, state that the internet, on the contrary, has the potential to engage groups into political activities (Vissers et al., 2009). Through its capacity to inform, mobilize, and engage, the internet could potentially be the technology that makes it possible for citizens to be direct and actively engaged in political processes (see also Bentivegna, 2002; Levine & Lopez, 2004; Montgomery, Gottlieb-Robles, & Larson, 2004; Rice, 2002).

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and parents, creating (or not) possibilities to participate in the public or civic sphere. Those who are already politically interested will use the internet as an important and useful tool for participation, and the others will not (see also Livingstone, 2005; Livingstone et al., 2005). In other words, the internet seems to be a tool to pursue already existing interests shaped by social capital, social expectations and general opportunities in the daily lives of individuals. Research indeed concludes that more and better informed internet users are more inclined to be politically active, but that the collecting of information is mainly dependent on political interest (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2006; Vissers et al., 2009). Involvement and participation are not enhanced or limited by (general) internet usage

Youth groups linked to traditional political institutions mostly use the internet as an extension of traditional media (reading the newspaper online, consult the political program, etc.) (Dahlgren & Olsson, 2007). Youth involved in alternative political movements (outside traditional political parties) are, on the other hand, skeptical of traditional media. They find that their standpoints and actions are almost not represented because they diverge too much from the mainstream. The few times that they do make the news, they are depicted in a generalizing and negative way and constructed as deviant, creating a strong us versus them narrative. Through the internet, however, it is possible to find relevant and supporting information, meet like-minded others, organize oneself, mobilize, and debate. Because of this, it is possible to construct a positive self-image as a political actor with an aberrant opinion. In other words, internet is a useful resource for information gathering and identity construction and is used in that context by new and alternative social movements.

Because of their specific demands, alternative political movements usually do not use commercial SNSs for their civic aspirations but resort to what Goldie and Walker (2008) describe as **online civic engagement sites**. Online civic engagement sites offer similar tools and services (mail, blogs, forums, etc.) as commercial SNSs, but they are linked to information and resources allowing their members to strive for offline social change. They provide background information on broad social themes, action plans, and connections to relevant groups, organizations, and peers. These websites are used in support of offline actions, rather than as a place for online action.

2.5. Summary

For youth, NSM appear mainly to be attractive in light of the construction of the own (social) identity and the possibility for self-expression. Through NSM, it is possible to spread the own message in a creative and attractive way within a multi-dimensional community and to channel reactions of peers. In the end, these actions serve the purpose of reinforcing already existing (offline) networks. Liberated from restricting measures and structures, online activities act as an extension of the offline social world. NSM allow youth to control content and access to “their own” public space.

So it is to no surprise that youngsters prefer the internet for political participation and the development of political identities. Still, research indicates that NSM mainly reinforce the development of offline originated interests. It is unlikely that the use of NSM in general will lead to increasing political participation. NSM are rather used as a useful tool by those who are already politically active. Especially those youth active in alternative political movements use the internet for information gathering and identity formation because this is not enough supported in the offline world. Because, in essence, extremist movements are still social and political groups (Klandermans & Mayer, 2010), it is likely that the internet and new social media will be used in a similar way by extremist youth (see among others Dean, Bell, & Newman, 2012; Thompson, 2011), namely as an extension of their offline activities and interests.

Based on this analysis, it is important to keep a number of recommendations in mind while researching NSM and violent radicalization (Dahlgren & Olsson, 2007). First, it is important not to approach NSM as a separate phenomenon but rather to frame it within an integrated media environment (see also Konijn et al., 2010). Second, the internet and NSM have to be placed within daily routines. Attention should be given to the significance of the internet for concrete, daily political engagement. Third, (extremist) identity formation through the internet should not be seen as isolated from identity formation in real life. On the contrary, the internet is a source of constant identity formation contributing to already formed offline identities.

3. EXTREMIST GROUPS AND THE INTERNET

3.1. Introduction

Almost every social group or actor of importance in the real world is also represented online (Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010). So it not surprising that radicals, extremists, and terrorist also use this medium and respond to the many possibilities that the internet has to offer (Benschop, 2006; Stevens & Neumann, 2009; Thompson, 2009; Weimann, 2004, 2010). Especially, NSM offer numerous possibilities in terms of information exchange and recruitment. Right-wing extremism (Daniels, 2008; Zhou et al., 2005), left-wing extremism, Islamic extremism (Conway, 2012), and extremist animal activism (ADL, 2005; Zhou et al., 2005) can all be found on the internet.

Political extremists and radicals do not use the internet fundamentally different compared with other social movements (Kohlman, 2006; NCTb, 2010). Extremists groups also try to organize communication and information as smooth as possible, reinforce solidarity, and build a collective identity. The changes in communication as a consequence of the internet that are grasped by the rest of the world hold the same advantages for extremist groups (Benschop, 2006; Stevens & Neumann, 2009; Weimann, 2004, 2010; Weimann & Tsfat, 2002).

1. *The internet has strongly reduced the costs of communication, making the exchange of information virtually free. Furthermore, the internet is fast and easy to use.*
2. *The internet has created unlimited access to information and knowledge from over the world. A free zone with limited police control is created. Everybody can contribute to this knowledge by uploading information.*
3. *The internet has made it easy to find like-minded individuals and create social networks, even across borders.*
4. *As a relative anonymous medium, crossing social lines is made easier and more acceptable. It is relatively easy to keep one's identity hidden.*

These developments have mainly had positive consequences, holding the promise of better communities, mutual understanding, and more solidarity (Neumann & Rogers, 2007). The difference between the use of the internet for these kind of objectives or for extremist objectives lies

not within the nature of the activities but rather in the content and goal of the shared information. In the next section, the supply and demand for extremist online content is further explored. Why are individuals attracted to extremist content and how is NSM used by extremist groups? Finally, it is assessed where extremist groups can be found on the internet.

3.2. Online supply and demand

3.2.1. Why are individuals attracted to extremist websites?

Media gratifies certain needs of the public. In order to do so, media provides a wide range of information and entertainment functions. The “uses and gratifications model” as developed in communication sciences describes how user’s needs motivate media use. Aly (2009; 2010) applies this model to the internet and violent radicalization, while taking the social realities that create needs and that are antecedent to internet usage into account. In doing so, she positions terrorist propaganda on the internet in the context of a range of motivations and needs. She suggests that exposure to online extremist propaganda alone cannot account for violent radicalization in its entirety but that propaganda may satisfy informational, personal identity, and social integration needs. At the same time, the internet, through its various media functions, acts as a facilitator of needs both in terms of content and attributes. The social situation of individuals generates media needs that are gratified by different content and functions of the internet, as used by radical and extremist groups. Figure 5 visualizes this.

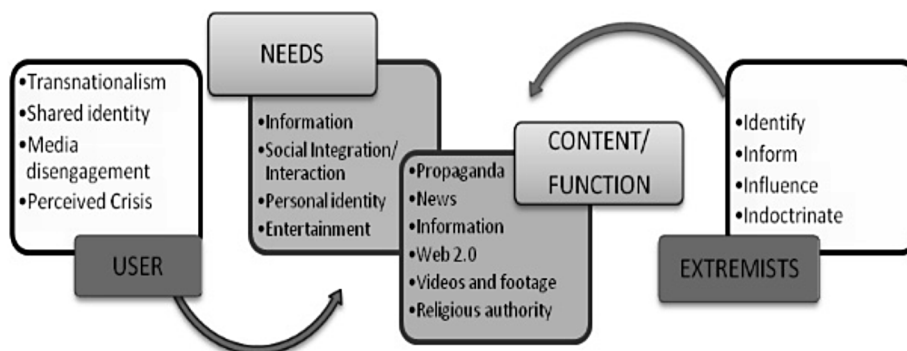


Figure 5: Uses and gratification model of internet radicalization (Aly, 2009)

3.2.2. *How do radical and extremist groups use the internet?*

A whole range of online activities can be useful for extremists (Benschop, 2006; Weimann, 2004). In general, the literature agrees that there are three specific activities that are of importance in the context of violent radicalization and recruitment (Bowman-Grieve, 2011; Fermin, 2009; Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003; NCTb, 2010; Neumann & Rogers, 2007; Stevens & Neumann, 2009; Zhou et al., 2005). These activities are in line with the way alternative (non-radical) political movements use the internet (see also section 3.4.4). These activities are discussed in the next section. Before doing so, it must be pointed out that making a clear distinction is not always possible. Dependent on differences in geographical reach of the groups in question, their ideology, strategic goals, and political legitimacy, different aspects will be accentuated (Reid & Chen, 2007).

Propaganda

The roles of the different actors in the process of (violent) radicalization are varied and change constantly (Neumann & Rogers, 2007). It would be wrong to see only the official core of the movement as the active suppliers of information and reduce the individual recruits and grassroots movements to passive receivers. The latter also play an important part in the dissemination and production of information.

Propaganda provides supporters (and potential recruits) in alternative frames to interpret their grievances (Adams & Roscigno, 2005). Websites and forums act as introduction channels to the extremist worldview and provide legitimacy and access to specialized sources. The group that conveys the most convincing message can count on the most support (Brown & Silke, 2011). For contemporary political and social movements, media attention is crucial to this end (Morris, 2000) because through media, symbolic frames and messages can be spread for public consumption. Terrorist actions are not of intrinsic importance, but the media attention and publicity they generate and the message they convey are (cfr. Theater of terror) (Weimann & Tsfaty, 2002).

Extremist movements are aware of the, often marginalized, position they hold in the mainstream media. Therefore, they opt to legitimize their goals, methods, and tactics through the internet, allowing to

control the content of the message (Hoskins, O'Loughlin, & Awan, 2009). The internet allows to control their image, paint a respectable picture of the movement (Blazak, 2001; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003), and reach a broad audience (Weimann & Tsfat, 2002). By drawing attention to the barbarity of others, supporters can be attracted and passive sympathizers can be pursued into action (Brown & Silke, 2011).

The internet also eliminates the dependency of journalists, making it possible to circumvent filters in the traditional media. As a result, material that otherwise would ~~have never been~~ broadcasted can now be distributed (Olesen, 2009) and certain events can be spread, interpreted, and commented upon from the standpoint of the extremist group (see also Brown & Silke, 2011). Furthermore, the internet allows small groups with limited resources to convey their standpoints, while creating the impression of being more influential and successful than is actually the case (Benschop, 2006).

Ideological messages and/or narratives can be reinforced and confirmed by images and videos that are directly accessible through the internet (Kohlman, 2006). New members will be directed to certain websites for precisely this purpose. Image and sound can make an otherwise abstract message realistic and dramatic. The viewer is personally addressed, which increases the impact (Browne & Silke, 2011). These kinds of images have always been available but the internet and free software allow to reach a broad audience in a relatively cheap, fast, and anonymous way without leaving any trail (NCTb, 2010).

Finally, practical information on potential targets and structural weaknesses are distributed in a similar fashion, as are detailed explanations on how to undertake certain actions (see also ADL, 2005; Benschop, 2006)²⁵. Moreover, extremist groups will always try to establish contact and interaction with interested individuals, which can be done much more easily through the internet. The same information can be distributed through forums, allowing to react much faster to certain questions and give personal and contextual advice.

²⁵ According to Stenersen (2008), so far, the internet does not constitute an organized virtual training camp. Instead, the internet has to be seen as a resource bank maintained and accessed largely by (self-)radicalized sympathizers and autonomous cells, which is used alongside more traditional ways of training and preparing. Training material on the internet rather serves as a preparation to classic Jihadi training.

Network

Besides ideological formation, organizational development increasingly occurs through the internet and online networks. The internet forms a relatively safe way for new members and like-minded individuals to meet each other and network. The internet's technical possibilities ensure anonymity and shield communication, promoting intensive interaction between the members of a network (AIVD, 2012). Moreover, the internet can bring people into contact who otherwise never would have met. Extensive and well-functioning networks can give the group an image of being efficient and effective (Adams & Roscigno, 2005). This kind of virtual networks has limited social costs and huge advantages.

Recently, as increasing number of self-directed and self-organized networks appear that are bottom-up created. This is partially possible because the internet allows to easily find like-minded peers and to participate in otherwise closed discussions (AIVD, 2006). These networks are characterized by a strong organization and directive capacity, making them very resilient (AIVD, 2012; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). Nevertheless, new networks usually rise very fast but disappear even faster as well. This, however, does not restrict these networks from becoming bigger than physical networks and acquiring an international character²⁶. It is such networks that can increase the striking power of a movement because they ensure the availability of an informal pool of willing individuals who can be recruited (NCTb, 2010). Because of this, virtual networks enable the achievement of practical goals and aspirations.

Information is gathered about who visits certain websites and what is posted and uploaded. Next, the most promising supporters are contacted by recruiters (Benschop, 2006). The other way around, the internet makes it also easier for would-be extremists to contact the movement themselves. Most extremist websites offer the possibility to become an online member or to request an information package. Furthermore, online it is much easier to transcend initial small and marginal groups of self-starters and integrate into more formal organizations with much more resources and know-how (Neumann & Rogers, 2007).

²⁶ See Leuprecht & Hall (2014) for an overview of extremist network structure.

Finally, the internet allows different small groups to link themselves (Blazak, 2001; Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). For example, there exists a wide range of right-extremist movements (e.g., Skinheads, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis) that each are further divided into several sub and splinter groups. In reality, the difference between these groups is rather small. The internet makes it possible for these groups to become electronically and logistically linked to each other, allowing for the sharing of information and the formation of a collective identity and goal. This creates the impression of these movements to be less extreme and more influential.

Community formation

All strong marginalized groups need a free space to meet each other and share convictions and culture without having to worry about what members of the (dominant) majority will think or do (Evans & Boyte, 1992). In this free space, it is possible to discuss narratives that would be unacceptable in other contexts and otherwise unacceptable social behavior and ideas can be normalized. For extremist groups, who are perceived as a high risk to society, it is not easy to gain access to such offline free spaces. The internet, on the other side, is freely accessible and can form a similar online free space (Simi & Futrell, 2006).

The internet facilitates connecting and identifying with like-minded peers, regardless of distance, time, or borders (Daniels, 2009; Olesen, 2009). This creates a mondial “us versus them” feeling and can even trigger a translocal identity, amplifying group bonds. Most individuals join extremist communities without taking an explicit stance on different issues (Bowman-Grieve, 2011). Their standpoints are formed through interactions with other members. Often, older and more experienced individuals take on younger and insecure members and facilitate the formation of their identity. These kinds of virtual social environments can become a sanctuary for individuals that have difficulty finding their place in society and/or of which the opinions provoke revulsion within the personal environment (De Koster & Houtman, 2006). Shared experiences of social rejection create a shared identity that together with the possibility to communicate with like-minded peers in a safe environment triggers a feeling of alliance. Shared experiences are, in other words, the driving power behind the virtual community formation.

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Although most members have never met, these kinds of virtual environments are perceived as a community because of the social and supporting functions they fulfill. Extremist websites recruit youth by emphasizing and linking their message to this community feeling and shared grievances (Simi & Futrell, 2006). Deeper into the website, a carefully framed message of intolerance can be found.

"Hate websites tend to build on this sense of welcoming in the outsider by constructing messages thematically-linked to one form of identity or another, whether it be cultural, religious, political, patriotic, or something else, the underlying subtext is still black and white. However, within the more refined recruiting bases (often forums and downloadable contents of these sites) a narrower approach is evident in the framed messages of intolerance. These messages, posed as contemporary forum topics, are introduced by the hate website and its associated inscribers and gradually accepted by new members." (Klein, 2009b, p. 83).

The whole of online activities creates the impression of the existence of a *"collective movement community"* (Simi & Futrell, 2006) that consists of other extremists that openly adhere to the same ideals and with whom one can sympathize and make contact²⁷. Through the internet, continuous involvement in this community is ensured even when offline encounters are not possible. Virtual images reinforce this feeling by their big emotional impact (AIVD, 2006). These virtual communities become dangerous when the virtual world takes in the place of real societal circumstances, causing individuals to become detached of society and to ignore cultural historical factors and/or the societal context.

3.2.3. *What kind of websites do extremists use?*

Extremist groups make use of different kinds of websites. The most important group can be described as the **official websites** of important organizations. First, this group includes websites of official political organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood (<http://www.ikhwanweb.com>). These are open and free-access websites that contain information about the history, mission, and ideology of the

²⁷ See Simi en Futrell (2006) for an overview of the white power movement in this aspect.

organization (Aly, 2010). They offer links to the own media statements, publications, news channels, etc. Second, this group includes websites of (extremist) political counter movements, which act as the digital face and information board of the group (Wagenaar, 2010), much like the right-extremist websites www.kkk.bz or www.natvan.com. Third, in case of targeted or illegal organizations, another format is needed because it is very unlikely that a website like alQaeda.com would be possible. The solution is found in more or less official Jihadi forums that can be described as *Jihadist core forums* (AIVD, 2012) or *mother sites* (NCTb, 2010) and are principally localized in the invisible part of web²⁸. These forums are not directly linked to global organizations such as Al Qaeda, although they are dependent on the approval and input of the official media branches of these organizations (e.g., As-Sahab). The infrastructure and members of these forums are used in the functions of mobilization, recruitment, propaganda, and ideological indoctrination. Access to these forums is limited and the content is subjected to control and censorship.

A second group of websites is formed by **independent interactive web 2.0 applications** and websites²⁹ endorsed by extremist groups without official ties with or guidance from official organizations; for example, newsaxon.org (Conway, 2012; ICT, 2012; Qualyle & Taylor, 2011)³⁰. (Unofficial) extremist groups often start their own interactive websites in order to reach a bigger and more diverse audience than would be possible by just using regular websites. Recruitment and guidance of new members often takes place on these websites, making them the most dangerous applications. Interaction with members and other interested parties is introduced through reactions on news items, (inter)national events, personal experiences, etc. By following certain links, individuals are easily redirected from small websites to “official” extremist organizations. Especially, classic web forums remain of importance (Wagenaar, 2010).

²⁸ The invisible web refers to that part of the internet that has not been indexed and thus cannot be found using public search engines like Google. The visible web, on the contrary, is visible and searchable. It is estimated that about 99.8% of the total internet is still invisible (AIVD, 2012).

²⁹ Social network applications (e.g., finding friends, sharing photos) are not the same as social network sites that are not limited to Facebook and Myspace. Groups can create their own social networking sites or social network applications can be incorporated into existing websites, etc.

³⁰ This does not exclude possible links between this kind of forums and members of subgroups who can resort to violent action on their own.

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These forums differ in the extent to which they are freely accessible, controlled, and guided. Jihadi forums are often exclusively closed spaces that are used as a platform for continued involvement of loyal members (Hoskins et al., 2009). They are often hierarchically organized and controlled by moderators and representatives of official media branches (ICT, 2012). Other forums are freely accessible, allowing them to reach a broad audience. This advantage can turn into a disadvantage because a lack of guidance can result in fierce discussions between different subgroups, undermining the popularity and usefulness of the websites. On the other hand, these open forums allow new members to read posts, form an opinion, and gather information without being disturbed (Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010).

Still these kinds of thematic websites mostly reach those individuals who are already interested and they miss a large group of searching individuals. For this reason, extremist groups also use **mainstream NSM**, such as Youtube and Facebook, and **general (religious or political) websites** because they know these attract youth (Arts & Butter, 2009; NCTb, 2010; Weimann, 2010). NSM have made it easy and cheap to upload and watch information and videos. Because of this, access to extremist material is strongly increased and a much broader audience is reached (Conway, 2012; ISD, 2012b). These websites harbor individual extremists but can also be used as a platform for extremist organizations (Wagenaar, 2010). NSM mirror especially the growth of populist movements. Next to formal members, these movements are formed out of thousands of online sympathizers and followers (Bartlett et al., 2011). On the other side, general NSM are less suitable for recruitment and communication. First, NSM are often moderated. Second, the open individual communication characteristic of NSM is in sharp contrast with necessary secrecy and control demanded by extremist movements. Third, the further a website is removed from the official extremist organization, the less it is possible to control content and users, paving the way for new and conflicting interpretations of the extremist message (see also Conway, 2012). In other words, mainstream NSM are mainly suitable for reproducing and emphasizing what is available online and bringing individuals into contact with like-minded others and organizations.

Individuals that radicalize under the influence of the internet usually go through a certain number of stages (AIVD, 2012). General websites

usually host open discussions and debates. Starting from here, the further the individual radicalizes, the more online activities are moved into specific and closed forums and the more shielded communication is preferred (AIVD, 2006; ICT, 2012). First radicalizing individuals look for like-minded peers on NSM and mainstream websites (AIVD, 2012). They stand out because of their extremist statements and the dissemination of propaganda. Eventually, they are noticed by recruiters who try to get into contact through one to one chat sessions and work toward recruitment (AIVD, 2006). Through specific secondary forums, the individual eventually ends up in an increasingly extremist online environment of like-minded others holding an extremist discourse that limits their worldview, nurtures their ideological conviction, and creates a climate for violence. Finally, accounts on mainstream NSM and websites are deleted in order to be able to disappear into the deep web and prepare oneself for the violent battle. Often, offline meetings will take place sooner or later.

3.3. Summary

The benefits in terms of communication, information exchange, networking, and privacy that the use of NSM implies for the general population also brought extremist groups and individuals to increasingly locate their activities online. This implies that the difference between the use of the internet for general, positive objectives and extremist objectives lies not in the nature of the activities but rather in the content and goal of the shared information. Media gratifies certain needs and the nature of these needs determines how and why media is used. In case of extremist groups, NSM, which are inherently based on communication and interaction, form a perfect channel to realize their own agenda of recruitment and indoctrination by allowing to easily anticipate and satisfy the needs for information, identity, and social integration of their target audience.

The online routine activities of extremists in itself do not differ fundamentally from general internet use and are in line with the way non-extremist alternative political movements use the internet to their advantage. Extremists mainly use the internet for propaganda and information sharing, networking, and community formation. These activities allow to optimize the functioning of the movement, recruit

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new members, and thus further the own cause while providing in the needs of their supporters.

These functions are mainly exercised from three different kinds of online spaces. First, official websites and forums of organizations; second, independent and autonomous interactive websites; and third, mainstream NSM and websites. Although these last websites have the most potential in terms of connecting individuals, reaching a broad audience and the distribution of propaganda, they are not the focal point of recruitment because of limited control on the own anonymity and the actions of the audience. Mainstream NSM are mainly used for reproducing and emphasizing what is available and directing interested individuals and potential recruits to more suitable websites and organizations. This implies that exposure to extremist content online becomes worrying when individuals switch to more specialized and closed websites and forums where the extremist voice is no longer one among many but specifically aimed at indoctrination and radicalization.

4. INFLUENCE OF MEDIA EXPOSURE ON VIOLENT ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR

4.1. Introduction

It is clear that radical and extremist groups use the internet for (violent) radicalization, organization, and recruitment (Kohlman, 2006; NCTb, 2010; Weimann & Tsfat, 2002). Still, it remains unclear to what extent the internet and, more specifically, social media influence the process of (violent) radicalization. The general consensus shared by political actors and policy makers is that NSM facilitates the search for information and subsequently the immersion into online extremist milieus. This creates the dangerous possibility of becoming involved in extremist groups or movements, both online and/or offline (Conway, 2012). Academics, on the other hand, do not agree on the internet playing a significant role in the process of (violent) radicalization.

In general, the internet, because of its low threshold, provides in the possibility for individuals to convey their opinions regardless of their social status and thus fulfills a positive social function by enabling free debate (Arts & Butter, 2009; Benschop, 2006). However, the same low threshold together with high levels of anonymity have also turned the internet into a free haven of free speech, a place where one can proclaim the own opinion in an unlimited and unnuanced manner. Especially internet forums contain a lot of extremist expressions, sometimes leading to sharp, black and white debates and/or interactive scolding sessions. This way, the internet also functions as a catalyst of societal polarization and intensification. This trend is noticeable, not only on extremist websites, but also on more moderate websites and, for example, forums of newspapers and news channels. Another concern focusses on the amount of online extremist impressions that youth are subjected to as being so extensive that they are not enough counterbalanced by real offline experiences (Klein, 2009a). These offline experiences should enable individuals to judge the reliability and reality of online content. This is dangerous in an online world, where the social spaces that are occupied by youth are easily infiltrated by commercial, social, political, and extremist actors.

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However, this is not new. Messages of hate, the recruitment of others in name of this message, and the use of media can be found throughout history (Klein, 2009a). What is continuously changing are the context and receivers of this message. This means that in order to stay adapted to the audience, the methods to reach them have to change as well, using all media elements that the public has access to. In other words, it is not so strange that the internet and NSM will also be used. Unfortunately, the relation between NSM and (violent) radicalization is not sufficiently researched. On the contrary, the relationship between violent media exposure and violent behavior is thoroughly researched, providing first indications for the relationship between NSM and extremist behavior. In section 5.2, the results of this research on the influence of exposure to violent content through (traditional) media on violent behavior and attitudes will be discussed

4.2. Media, behavior, and attitudes

There has been little research conducted to investigate the relationship between NSM and political violence. However, the relationship between exposure to violence in the media and violent behavior and attitudes has been extensively researched. Concerns about violent and sexually explicit images as the root causes of all sorts of deviant behavior, especially violence, among youth long predate the emergence of the internet. It seems that every new technology goes together with an outburst of moral panic regarding its content (Trend, 2007)³¹. One of the most discussed public debates covers the potential and actual negative effects of mass media and especially television and videogames (Newburn, 2007). Similar concerns have been expressed about the radio, cartoons, comic books, and even newspapers. The idea is that exposure to violent media content leads to the undermining of social norms and values and the learning of deviant norms through cultural transmission, resulting in crime and violent behavior

³¹ New technologies provide (certain) groups with access to information that previously was off limits. This means that not only the new technology in itself causes concern but also does the discovery of this information by the new audience (Trend, 2007). Usually this refers to members of low social classes, youth, and/or immigrants. The concerns about exposure to media violence are limited to media use by sub and youth cultures while violence in media consumed by the mainstream audience does not provoke any reaction. So, it is not about the content of media but about its audience.

(Newburn, 2007). Anderson et al. (2007) have categorically stated that “exposure to media violence causes an increase in the likelihood of aggression in at least some significant proportion of the population.”

Nevertheless, the debate about the effects of exposure to violent images on behavior is highly polarized with, on one side, researchers convinced of a moderate (negative) effect of violent media content on behavior (Anderson et al., 2010; Bushman, Rothstein, & Anderson, 2010), and on the other side, more skeptical scholars (Ferguson, 2007; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010) who submit that most of these studies only find small and marginal effects, of which the direction is unclear and which, most of the time, cannot be reproduced (Savage & Yancey, 2008; Sherry, 2001). The first group of researchers seems able to draw upon a large body of scientific literature and empirical studies to reinforce its statements, pointing out both short-term (experimental and cross-sectional studies³²) (Anderson et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2003; Huesmann, 2007) and long-term effects (longitudinal studies) (Anderson et al., 2003).

Other, more critical reviews of the media-effects literature suggest that while some studies provide support for short-term media effects on attitudes and behavior, they also often suffer from severe methodological problems and the findings tend to be inconsistent (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Freedman, 2002). Typically, some evidence can be found for small effects of violent media images on children’s thoughts and behavior. However, the evidence only points in the direction of short-term effects and is less clear for older children and adolescents. Second, most studies only measure aggression (temper) and not actual violence (Savage & Yancey, 2008). This makes it hard to address the real-life link between media violence and violence. Furthermore, many studies fail to address causation, since the observed results are based on correlations, which in themselves do not imply causation (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004; Newburn, 2007). So one must assume that this relation can mean a number of things. For example, children who prefer violent programs also tend to be more aggressive than children who watch less violent programs (Freedman, 2002).

³² For a review see Chaffee (1972), Comstock (1980), Eysenck & Nias (1978), and Huesmann & Miller (1994) as cited in Anderson et al. (2003).

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Finally, only a few studies consider background factors when assessing media effects, although most scholars do recognize that factors such as culture, context, social environment, family (violence), and personality have to be taken into account when explaining real-life violent behavior (Anderson et al., 2003; Ferguson et al., 2008; Ferguson, San Miguel, & Hartley, 2009). A critical reading of the findings of Anderson and colleagues suggests that when statistically controlling for other factors that may moderate the relation between exposure to violent video games and aggression, the effect of media violence exposure on aggression becomes non-significant. Anderson et al. (2003) found similar results for their cross-sectional and longitudinal study on television violence and physical aggression. If exposure to media violence is indeed an added risk for aggression, one would expect that its effects would remain significant even after controlling for other factors. However, this is not the case. As such, these three studies suggest that exposure to media violence does not lead to increased aggression.

A criticism that can be lodged against both viewpoints is that many of the studies cited to support their respective views of media effects are somewhat dated (i.e., from the 1960s to the mid-1990s). Many recent studies of media effects seek to identify “third factors” that may account for both youth’s consumption of violent media and their aggressive behavior^{67, 68} and reviews of the literature suggest that it is important to do so (Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Chen, Miller, Grube, & Waiters, 2006). One may, therefore, hypothesize that third, fourth, and fifth factors frequently operate in reported media-effects findings.

Within the communication sciences an equally large amount of literature can be found on the influence of (mass) media on attitudes and convictions. These studies also show that not one simple direct effect can be determined, but that instead different factors are of importance.

1. The “*hypodermic needle*” effect of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) that depicts media as directly injecting ideas and attitudes into the psyche of the target audience is dated by now.
2. The *social cognitive theory* of Bandura (2001a, 2001b) challenges this idea and instead states that the audience plays an active role in

media influence by identifying (or not) with the message or messenger.

3. Ever since, a number of important theories on the influence of media have been developed. Most importantly (see Konijn et al., 2010), on the one hand, the cultivation theory³³ (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002) and social learning theory³⁴ (Bandura, 1977) focus on the receiver, and on the other hand, the agenda setting theory³⁵ (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and the two step flow model³⁶ (Lazersfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1949) focus on the content. Based on these theories a clear influence of media on society in general can be established but this relationship is less clear on the individual level. Research shows that the effects of media vary according to personal characteristics and process variables³⁷ (Konijn et al., 2010).

4.3. Summary

Concerning the formation of attitudes, exposure to violent media content appears to be only one of several environmental factors that in combination with individual characteristics can lead to aggressive and/or extremist attitudes (see Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991). On the effects of exposure to violent media content on behavior, the opinions remain divided. Although a large body of research maintains that exposure to violent media can cause violent behavior, empirical evidence only points into the direction of small and marginal effects. It seems to be a question of a specific combination of specific personal

³³ The *cultivation theory* states that individuals who are exposed to media for longer periods of time are more likely to be influenced by the ideas and standpoints conveyed by this media compared to those who hardly use these media. The worldview displayed by media is supposed to be distorted, implying that long-term media exposure will likewise lead to a distorted worldview.

³⁴ *Social learning theory* states that individuals adopt behavior and attitudes of role models in society, explicitly showing how to react on others and their environment. Individuals searching for identity (e.g., adolescents) are supposed to be more susceptible for this kind of influence and turn more quickly to attractive role models in the media.

³⁵ The *agenda setting theory* states that topic and themes that are picked out by media are adopted by the audience. What the media defines as important is also viewed as important by the audience.

³⁶ Receivers discuss media content and these discussions eventually influence the final effects. Especially on sensitive topics, it is found important by the audience to know how others view the matter.

³⁷ The way in which individuals process media content, for example, emotional involvement.

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factors and specific environmental factors that can lead to specific behavior. If one factor changes, the outcome changes as well.

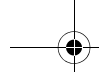
“Any act—delinquent or otherwise—depends on ‘something about the actor’, that is, something about his values, his goals, his interests, his temperament or, speaking inclusively, his personality, and it depends also on ‘something about the situation’ in which he finds himself. Change either actor or situation and you get a different act [...] delinquent acts always depend on appropriate combinations of actor and situation...” (Cohen & Short, 1961, pp. 89-90).

Trend (2007) states that media exposure does not directly cause violence but enhances the acceptance of violence in daily life, by giving rise to the idea that the world is a dangerous place and violence is needed to make it safer. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that violence can be part of what makes violent extremism attractive and as such can be a trigger through NSM.

However, it should be kept in mind that NSM differ fundamentally from traditional media in one aspect. The content of traditional mass media is determined top-down and offered to the public in its final and fixed form (ISD, 2012b). On the contrary, NSM are based on interaction and revolve around constantly changing user-generated content (Thompson, 2011). In fact, criminological theories, or at least some key etiological variables in contemporary criminology, can be applied to the online world, as NSM more than any other medium are interactive, making real-life interaction possible in cyberspace. This importance of virtual communities has been recognized previously (Pauwels, Weerman, Bernasco, & Volker, 2012; Soudijn & Monsma, 2012; Weerman, 1998). This makes NSM, compared to traditional media, especially effective in providing the “preconditions for radicalization,” as we discussed earlier³⁸. Through the internet 1) extremist narratives encouraging political violence are easily accessible at any time and place and 2) the necessary social bonds and networks are easily accessible.

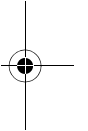
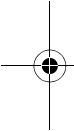
Thus, although it seems unlikely that exposure to extremist content through NSM can give rise to violent radicalization, it does seem to be the ideal medium to enhance and facilitate violent radicalization once a

³⁸ See section 1.6



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breeding ground is already in place. In the next chapter, the strength of possible influence of exposure to extremist content through NSM is assessed, both for involuntary (passive) exposure of uninterested individuals and for deliberate (active) exposure of already motivated individuals.



5. RADICALIZATION: ONLINE OR OFFLINE

5.1. Introduction

The internet is characterized by an increasing distribution and technological development. This contributes to the possibilities and risks of NSM being much more pertinent compared to other traditional media. Although previous research on NSM and political participation suggests that NSM will be used only in ~~the~~ function of previously formed interests and research on violent media exposure and behavior only reveals small and marginal effects, the specific characteristics of NSM could entail stronger and more influential effects.

First, the possibilities offered by the internet and NSM in terms of socialization of new recruits and maintenance of (violent) radicalization should not be underestimated (Bashar, 2012; Torok, 2010). NSM hold a lot of potential in terms of networking, information exchange, integration of applications, etc. Second, this also causes the involuntarily exposure of youth to dangerous content and groups, simply by using the internet as it is supposed to be used (Dean et al., 2012). Youth have access to a diverse and extended network of friends and peers. This provides them with access to not only the own social network but also the social networks of other members of the own network. This way youth can get involved in extremist milieus on a very short notice just by following links, checking out groups, liking posts, and giving comments (Maura Conway & McInerney, 2008). In other words, the use of NSM as it should be can give rise to a whole array of access and influencing possibilities.

By being inventive and adapting to the target audience, extremist groups try to maximize these possibilities. Still, a causal connection between exposure to extremist content through NSM and violent radicalization and violent extremism cannot be assumed. The majority of individuals exposed to the same extremist content do not radicalize (Conway, 2012). The next section will discuss in what ways extremist try to enhance their influence through NSM, followed by some arguments that nuance the extent of this influence.

5.2. Virtual techniques of influence

The use of the internet by extremist groups to introduce oneself to the general public has become more **professional** over the last few years (Europol, 2011). At the first glance, many extremist websites appear to represent objective opinions and plausible arguments through user friendly and professional designed webpages. The content of the website is adapted and targeted at the group one wants to reach (Thompson, 2009). Instead of offering openly racist or extremist messages, these websites are adapted to the culture, interests, frustrations, trends, etc., of a new generation of internet users. Homepages are designed to convey the image of a fully functioning and active cyber community, providing access to a range of activities that appeal to contemporary internet users like chatting, shopping, dating, etc. (Klein, 2009a). Individuals visiting these websites are less vigilant when interpreting the extremist messages because of the mainstream and subtle character of these websites, making it more likely that 1) the message will be positively received and 2) the rest of the website will be explored with a positive attitude (Lee & Leets, 2002)³⁹.

Social network sites and forums also adapt their names, images, and information to the profile of the social group that is targeted for recruitment (Klein, 2009b; Weimann, 2010). This is facilitated by member profiles that hold a lot of useful information that can help extremist groups to determine which groups and individuals to target and how to convey the message.

Right-extremist websites especially synchronize their message with popular trends and try to use popular images and rhetoric from youth culture (Klein, 2009b). Salafist websites are also very popular among Islamic youth because these sites offer information on questions relevant to them and provide simple and appealing answers (De Koning, 2008).

One step further, we can find **cloaked websites** or websites that actively try to conceal the fact that they are offering extremist

³⁹ For comparison, see www.kkk.be, www.aryan-nation.org, and www.stromfront.org. The first website seems, at first glance, to represent mainstream family values. The real message is hidden deeper into the website. On the contrary, the second website openly calls for hate and violence. Stormfront is clearly a white nationalist forum, proudly displaying the message "white pride world wide" but still comes across as reasonable because of the wide variety of topic items and a clearly stated prohibition of illegal content and insulting messages.

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information (Daniels, 2008). Although professionally designed, it is not very likely that an individual will accidentally start to browse www.kkk.bz since everybody knows what KKK stands for. Cloaked websites, on the other hand, are carefully designed around a respectable theme such as civil rights or history. Individuals looking for information on these themes could easily end up on these websites through the use of general search terms in online search engines⁴⁰. The combination of a professional graphic design and the seemingly absence of extremist content can easily deceive visitors. This is certainly true for youth who have not yet acquired enough internet literacy to accurately judge these websites nor possess thorough knowledge and understanding of social (in)equality, racism, and different forms of suppression. The cloaked website tactic is mostly used when trying to attract and “educate” new members (Weatherby & Scoggins, 2005).

The internet facilitates the formation of so called “echo-rooms” (Geeraerts, 2012). Echo-rooms are spaces on the internet where individuals can meet other like-minded individuals. Within this kind of homogenous groups the risk of violent radicalization is significantly higher than in other groups because the same opinions and arguments are constantly repeated and both formally and informally reinforced (Wojcieszak, 2010b). The AIVD (2006) refers to “ideological ghetto formation” because the rest of society is completely disregarded. Arguments, both pro and contra, are simplified in black and white statements. This gives rise to a popular and polarizing discourse especially appealing to youth. Although mostly this does not go any further than rhetoric, in some cases, it can have the effect of hyper radicalization (AIVD, 2006).

Of course, this kind of homogenous groups can also be found in real life; however, the effect of them is amplified by the internet (Geeraerts, 2012). Through the internet, it is not only easy to find alternative points of view but also equally easy to ignore certain information. Communication through the internet often lacks personal details, transforming individuals into exponents of the entire group. This causes the group to look more homogenous. This can be dangerous because anti-status quo

⁴⁰ Examples of this kind of websites are the website of the Institute for Historical Review, www.IHR.org, an organization that denies the holocaust, and martinlutherking.org, offering alternative information on Martin Luther King. The extension .org also gives the impression of reliable and objective information.

activists and extremists are over represented in radical forums (Oegema, Kleinnijenhuis, Anderson, & Van Hoof, 2008).

5.3. Need to nuance

1. The processes described until now clarify the role of the internet once already interested in violent extremism. It would be very difficult for extremist groups to attune themselves to the target group if there was not already a ground for discontent and/or extremist ideas. *Extremist forums and webpages need a foundation in the real world.* The internet is the perfect place to recruit, because it is used by searching and disgruntled individuals to search for information and access to networks (NCTb, 2010). Those with a certain extremist frame/understanding of the world will participate on the internet in accordance to this frame (Daniels, 2009).
2. Youth are exposed to the same amount of extremist content through traditional media as through websites and forums (Konijn et al., 2010). Traditional media increasingly emphasize extreme opinions, terrorism, the link with Islam, and often do so in bold and strong words. This can provide a ground for violent radicalization not only among minorities but also among the majority that is offered a scapegoat for the many discussed problems (see e.g., ISD, 2012a). This creates a need for a more accurate image and correct information, pursued on international news channels and the internet (Arts & Butter, 2009; Buijs et al., 2006; Konijn et al., 2010). So the internet in itself does not lead to violent radicalization but does form a reflection of social tendencies in general society. The social structure that can be found on forums reflects the social structure within society (van Stekelenburg, Oegema, & Klandermans, 2008). This way, forums are nothing more than online places of conversation, digitally reflecting societal polarization. Radicalizing and polarized debates on internet forums and NSM mirror the development of the same radicalizing and polarized debates in the offline world. This, polarization and radicalization of the public debate can create a susceptible social climate for violent extremism (ISD, 2012a). Oegema, Kleinnijenhuis, Anderson & Van Hoof (2008) indeed conclude that the subject and content of discussions on online discussion groups are largely based on what can be

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found in mainstream mass media. The topics as well as the negative attitudes and opinions that are offered through traditional media are adopted and magnified on online forums. Furthermore, Van Stekelenburg et al. (2008) show that participation on the internet only increases after the occurrence of an important event and not the other way around. With each new relevant event, the tone and nature of the conversation more and more polarizes in terms of us versus them⁴¹.

3. It is very unlikely for somebody to go through the entire process of (violent) radicalization without any offline contacts. Recruitment is a complex social process that mainly occurs offline and through face to face contacts (see Blazak, 2001). Personal relationships and direct human contact still remain essential and so far the internet cannot replace the bonds of friendship and kinship that are at the base of personal loyalty without a minimum of direct personal contact (Precht, 2007). Even in case of extensive and meaningful online community formation, these online activities are mainly used to obtain and maintain access to offline free spaces, gatherings and communities (Simi & Futrell, 2006). Especially regarding the kind of loyalty and dedication demanded by extremist activism, online social ties are not very likely to suffice. Violent activism implies significant risks (Olesen, 2009). The decision to join an extremist, violent, and illegal movement is seldom individual but instead based on existing offline social bonds (Della Porta, 1995). Also, for the extremist movement, recruitment can be dangerous because of the risks of exposure and dismantling (Della Porta, 1995). Because of this, considerable attention goes to security and trust when recruiting new members. This aspect of trust and the lack thereof is one of the major disadvantages of virtual networks (NCTb, 2010)⁴².

⁴¹ Van Stekelenburg et al. (2008) explain this by general group processes. Following an intergroup incident, members of a group will try to "repair" their damaged social group identity by intergroup differentiation processes. These processes occur within all social groups whose identity is threatened and are not limited to an online environment (van Stekelenburg et al., 2008).

⁴² Within virtual groups, subgroups can arise that possess the necessary offline social bonds (AIVD, 2006; Olesen, 2009). In this case, Pantucci (2011) refers to a "*lone wolf pack*" and Rogers & Neumann (2007) to "*self-starter groups*." In other words, small, isolated groups of extremist individuals form without formal bonds or guidance of more organized extremist groups. Even then, this would not automatically mean that the internet plays a unique or decisive role. Rather the internet merely took the place of other institutional settings where individuals can meet and network, such as schools, work, and youth movements (Olesen, 2009).

4. The offline environment directly impacts violent extremism and negotiates the extent to which individuals participate on online extremist forums and are influenced by this participation. Strong social ties moderate the influence exerted by media to the extent that which media will affect individuals depends on interpersonal political talk. Individuals that do not feel supported by their offline environment and whose opinions are disapproved of, will be more strongly drawn to antisocial websites, judge their content more positively (Plaisir & Konijn, 2013), and be more strongly influenced by them (Wojcieszak, 2010a, 2010b).
5. Among participants of extremist websites a difference has to be made between visitors out of curiosity (or lurkers), supporters, and active participants, although new web 2.0 applications have made the difference less clear (Daniels, 2008; Ramsay, 2009). Online activism is ideal for participation along the sidelines without making too much effort. Some researchers suggest that most of online participants are only passive extremists, limiting themselves to supporting and encouraging violent extremism through the internet. They voice extremist attitudes but will rarely be an active member of an extremist group or use political violence (Al-Lami & O'Loughlin, 2009; Hoskins et al., 2009; Neumann & Rogers, 2007; Ramsay, 2009). What can be found on general forums and NSM can be described as a "culture of talking big" (Benschop, 2006) or a Jihadist youth culture (Bovenkerk, 2011). Extremist expressions are mostly an attempt to make an impression and fit in. Through the internet, it is easy to put up a big mouth without being called on this later (van San, 2013). Therefore, it is important not to confuse the number of online participants of an online group with the actual influence of that group. There are indications that the online presence of extremist groups often exceeds their actual capacity to mobilize (Bartlett & Littler, 2011; ISD, 2012c). Most of the time, such groups are formed by a core of activists and a larger group of sympathizers without official membership. Official statements often do not reflect the aspirations of these individual sympathizers. The research of Bartlett and Littler (2011) suggest that the majority of online supporter only tries to bring legitimate concerns on the political agenda. This means that not considering these groups and by defining them as extremist and thus illegal

holds a risk for further violent radicalization of a large group of non-extremist supporters (see also ISD, 2012a).

6. Finally, networks formed via online forums often consist of loose, horizontal structures without any hierarchical organized leadership (Wagenaar, 2010)⁴³. Mostly they consist of a broad variety of individuals that do not necessarily hold the same conviction, on the contrary. If the charismatic leaders that monitor these forums and the related social networks fall out, the group becomes more or less afloat (ICT, 2012). If nobody succeeds in taking over this leadership, most probably the group will fall apart because of internal discussions and arguments. An example is the Dutch right extremist Stormfront website, which lost a lot of its influence in the Dutch and Flemish community because of internal quarrels and disagreements (Wagenaar, 2010).

5.4. Summary

*“The internet is an important part of the radicalization process in most cases, **intensifying and accelerating radicalization**. It can provide the user with the information they are looking for **to confirm their beliefs**. Especially important in this regard are videos and images that reinforce a particular world view [...]. It allows individuals to find like-minded people when they are not able to do so offline, creating an online community. [...] There is less evidence about the role of the internet in recruitment for the purpose of violent activity. In the majority of cases to date, the internet tends to be complemented by offline contacts and influences (ISD, 2012b, p. 3).”*

In summary, the literature shows no straightforward evidence for the internet in itself being a cause of violent radicalization. Radicalization grounds are determined by the social, societal, and personal offline factors that are discussed in section 1.3. Online extremist content can at most reinforce the decision of an individual to use political violence but cannot be at the foundation of this decision (Githens-Mazer, 2010).

⁴³ Secondary forums differ in level of access and control. The more important in terms of organization and coordination, the less accessible, the higher the level of control and the stricter the social structure and hierarchy. More popular and open forums in general have a broad base of supporters and therefore also more loose horizontal structures (Conway, 2012).

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Similar to any other technology or medium of communication, the internet and NSM can be used for both positive and negative goals (Conings & Van Linthout, 2012; Tops & Zouridis, 2012). NSM do not entail a new thread of something that did not exist before. The internet seems only a means to an end or, in other words, an enabler (Weir, Toolan, & Smeed, 2011). The internet is the place par excellence for radicalization to take place and a powerful means for the recruitment of vulnerable youth (NCTb, 2010) but it does not cause violent radicalization (Europol, 2011, 2012; see also, [Thompson, 2009](#)). In other words, involuntary exposure of “innocent” individuals to extremist content through NSM will be most unlikely to cause violent radicalization.

Most researchers agree that offline contacts remain essential to bring the entire process of violent radicalization to an end and to allow for trust between the members of a group. Therefore, for now, violent radicalization remains a social phenomenon that mainly occurs in the offline world and is only partially virtual in nature. Radicalization is a mutual process where events from the offline world are brought into the online world and vice versa (Weir et al., 2011). The internet complements rather than substitutes face to face communication (von Behr, 2013). This is confirmed by von Behr et al. (2013). Based on qualitative interviews, they conclude that *“the internet has to be seen as a mode, rather than a unitary method of radicalisation (the internet can play an important role in facilitating the radicalisation process; however it cannot drive it on its own). Instead, the internet appears to enhance the process, which in turn may or may not accelerate it (p. 33).”* For all their respondents, the internet forms a key source of information and communication. Because of the easy accessibility and the possibility to make contacts with like-minded individuals from all over the world, the internet offers more opportunities for radicalizing individuals than does the offline world. However, in all cases, the offline world remains essential, and physical contacts are always present. Clearly, the internet facilitates the process of violent radicalization but it is hard to determine whether it also accelerates the process because this is individually determined.

Therefore, the risk of online recruitment is not so much a problem as the fact that some youth actually want to visit certain websites (Daniels, 2008). The danger of online media lies in the ease at which alienated and/or frustrated youngsters can find validation for their opinions. Van San (2013) noted that the majority of (Islamic) youth who follow

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violence online hold a strong black and white image of the world (De Koning, 2008). Their vision leaves no room for nuance or compromise. What matches their point of view is the truth and everything else is propaganda. The internet is very attractive to this kind of individuals because it allows to very precisely select what information can be used within a certain frame and what has to be ignored. Extremist groups try hard to keep up with the continuous development of internet and to adjust themselves to their audience. This means that constant and fast analysis is needed to be ready for new developments (Dean et al., 2012; Thompson, 2011). If not, the problem is at risk of being underestimated and anti-radicalization policy will be based on outdated analyses.

6. OVERVIEW

In *Chapter 1*, different risk factors that could lead to violent radicalization and violent extremism have been discussed. Based on this overview, two preconditions for violent radicalization could be identified: 1) extremist viewpoints providing an answer to experienced grievances have to be present and accessible and 2) social bonds, networks, and/or extremist groups that can pull individuals further into violent extremism have to be present and accessible. The internet and especially NSM can easily provide these two preconditions, emphasizing the question whether exposure to extremist content through NSM is a risk factor for violent extremism or not. In order to answer this question, the subsequent chapters reviewed existing research, looking for indicators.

Chapter 2 reviewed why NSM are popular among youth and how they affect their political participation. Youth indeed prefer the internet and NSM for political participation and the development of (political) identities. However, this mainly applies for youth who are already politically active in the offline world. NSM use does not lead to more political participation if one is not interested in politics. Especially youth active in alternative political movements will prefer the internet and NSM for positive identity formation and political activities because of the limited possibilities they have in the real world. Since extremist groups are essentially just another kind of political movement, it is likely that NSM will be used in a similar way.

Chapter 3 revealed that extremist groups do not use the internet very differently from other political and social movements. The advantages the internet has to offer also apply to them. They mainly use the internet for 1) propaganda, 2) networking and practical organization, and 3) community formation. Extremist groups actively try to adapt their (online) offer to the media demands of their audience. In particular, in terms of propaganda, they strive for frame alignment, adapting their narratives to the grievances and demands of their target audience. Although these activities are common for all political and social movements, they can hold extra importance for extremist groups because they have difficulties enfoldng these activities in real life. Especially in terms of community formation, the internet can provide a

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free haven or sanctuary for extremist individuals who face difficulties in expressing their opinions or keeping contact with like-minded individuals in the offline world.

Now that it is established how NSM is used in terms of political participation by both extremist individuals and extremist groups, the question remains whether exposure to extremist content through NSM will lead to violent radicalization and violent extremism. Unfortunately, this has not been researched yet. Therefore, in *Chapter 4* some indications are sought in previous research on the relationship between exposure to violent media content and violent behavior and attitudes. Most research only finds small and marginal effects, indicating that it is unlikely that exposure to extremist content through NSM will cause violent extremism. However, NSM differs fundamentally from traditional media in one aspect; namely, it is based on interaction and user-generated content. This implies that NSM can make real-life interaction possible in cyberspace. Consequently, a possible influence of (involuntary or passive) exposure to extremist content through NSM, although unlikely, cannot be excluded. Second, these characteristics of NSM make them especially effective in providing the two preconditions for (violent) radicalization. Therefore, although it seems unlikely that exposure to extremist content through NSM can give rise to violent radicalization, NSM do seem to be the ideal medium to enhance and facilitate violent radicalization once a breeding ground is already in place (active or deliberate exposure).

Chapter 5 discussed in what ways extremist groups try to enhance their influence through NSM, followed by some arguments that nuance the extent of this influence, for both deliberate (active) and undeliberate (passive) exposure. In this literature, there is no evidence for the internet in itself to be a cause⁴⁴ of violent radicalization. Exposure through NSM can at most reinforce the decision of an individual to use political violence but is unlikely to be the cause of violent extremism. In other words, involuntary exposure of “innocent” individuals to extremist content through NSM will most likely not cause violent radicalization. On the other hand, NSM hold the power to reinforce and facilitate violent radicalization of searching and already interested individuals. This already implies an interaction between the individual

⁴⁴ See also footnote 5.

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(attitudes) and the environment (exposure). The processes of violent radicalization and recruitment, on the other hand, seem to move more and more to the online world. This confirms our previous presumptions.

However, there is virtually no empirical research confirming or contradicting these assumptions. Therefore, the goal of this project is to test the influence of exposure to extremist content through NSM on violent extremism. Special attention will go to the difference between the use of NSM by already interested individuals (deliberate or active exposure) and real or undeliberate (passive) exposure. Before doing so, the next chapter will explain what is problematic about the risk factor approach we started from and how this can be resolved in order to come to better and more straight-forward results.

7. TOWARD AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

7.1. In general

Although considerable research has been conducted on the process of radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism, the domain is still lacking overarching theoretical frameworks. The existing theoretical frameworks are fragmented and not integrated. This situation is a consequence of a number of conceptual and methodological difficulties, poor access to valid and reliable data banks, and multiple conceptual definitions of the phenomenon under study (see Bouhana & Wikström, 2008). Edwin Sutherland made the same remarks concerning the state of affairs in etiological criminology in the 1930's. Sutherland criticized the fragmented field and confusion as a consequence of empirical research starting from a multiple risk factor approach, endlessly reporting on risk and protective factors. Since the 1990s, one can observe attempts to integrate the study of crime against the broader framework of several integrated theoretical perspectives. Regarding traditional theories of offending, Elliott, Zgeton and Canter (1979) argued more than two decades ago that theoretical reliance on a single explanatory variable to explain criminal behavior has resulted in theories that are capable of explaining only a small percentage of the variance in crime or criminal behavior. That statement is probably equally true for political violence and we argue subsequently that criminology has useful theoretical and methodological insights to offer in the study of violent extremism (Deflem, 2004b).

Subsequently, in the last fifteen years, the integrative approach in sociology and criminology has had an impact on the field. For example, in criminology, we see a renewed attention for integrated theories that aim at internal coherence and clear substantive argumentation on the direct and indirect causes of crime (Wikström 2014; see also, Pauwels & Svensson, 2013). According to us, the research domain on the causes of violent radicalization and violent extremism will equally benefit from a similar theoretical reflection and reconsideration of the relevant risk factors: which ones can be seen as direct causes and which ones not. This is also important for a (prevention) policy that strives to

comprehend and control the phenomenon through an interventionist approach (Wikström, 2011; Pauwels, Svensson & Ponsaers 2010).

We believe that integration has merits as long as it is built around an internal causal logic, i.e., distinguishing between proximate and distant factors⁴⁵. This standpoint is taken from the analytical tradition in criminology and provides a thorough start for the development of integrated theories: an analytical approach is concerned with the understanding of why people engage in acts of political violence, which can be accomplished by identifying the key social, developmental, and situational processes (mechanisms) involved in crime causation. The key message of an analytical approach to political violence is to take causation, human agency, and the person–environment interaction more seriously to advance our knowledge about (political) violence, its causes, and prevention. This has implications for the study of political violence: it is important to gain not only insight into what is referred to as the “causes” of political violence but also to what can be referred to as “the causes of the causes of political violence.”

The integrated framework to study individual differences in violent extremism (political violence) that we propose is built on the principle of end-to-end integration. End-to-end integration entails the integration of mechanisms that play a role in different theories so that the dependent variables of some theories become the independent variables of the integrated theory (Pauwels, Ponsaers, & Svensson, 2010).

⁴⁵ Starting in the 1970's, it is regularly debated whether the integration of criminological theories is in fact a good idea. Proponents and opponents are often directly opposed (Miedema, Bruinsma, & Hoogerwerf, 1998). Opponents state that criminological theories tend to contradict each other and thus cannot be integrated. Integration does not automatically lead to a better theoretical perspective and is seen as deadly for a healthy competition between the theories. Hirschi is one of the most famous opponents. He states that “*separate and unequal is better*” (Hirschi, 1979). Proponents, on the other hand, maintain that theoretical integration has to be seen as an opportunity to develop less but more comprehensive theories (Vold, Bernhard, & Snipes, 2002). By means of integration, new questions arise, making scientific progress possible (Miedema et al., 1998). According to Wikström and Sampson (2006), at least four types of integration are possible: 1) integration of theories (cf. social learning theory and social control theory), 2) integration of methods (cfr. quantitative and qualitative methods), 3) integration of level of analysis (cf. neighborhood and individual), and 4) integration of disciplines (cf. psychology and sociology). Especially integration of level of analysis and, more specifically, of individual and environmental factors leading to violent extremism is often overlooked in etiology. By starting from an integrated, action-focused approach, we make an attempt to fill this gap.

We draw upon one of the most promising etiological theories of our time, the situational action theory, and we apply its philosophy on the phenomenon of violent extremism and political violence. The key assumption of this theory is that individual propensity and environment exposer in interaction with each other cause criminal acts (Wikström, 2014) or, in this case, acts of political violence (Bouhana & Wikström, 2008, 2011). In terms of causes of the causes, concepts for the explanation of violent extremism are derived from different theoretical perspectives in criminology addressing crime and offending, ranging from strain theory, control theory, and procedural justice theory.

In this section, we will first focus on why theoretical integration is needed in research on violent extremism and political violence, the analytical problems hindering theoretical integration, and how the solutions for this problem in the explanation of crime also apply to the explanation of violent extremism. Second, we will discuss the situational action theory as a useful framework for theoretical integration on the explanation of violent extremism. Third, key concepts from theories explaining offending will be outlined as causes of the causes of violent extremism.

7.2. Analytical problems in the research on violent extremism and political violence

When examining the literature, various risk factors can be found that are related to violent extremism and political violence. In other words, there is a large knowledge base on the individual factors and circumstances that can be linked to this phenomenon, as clarified in Chapter 1. This situation is almost identical for what can be found in the literature on criminal and deviant behavior of adolescents (Farrington, 2007; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; Wikström, 2004). However, this kind of risk factor approach is not capable in distinguishing between real causes and mere correlates, causing confusion about what is of importance and what not (Horgan, 2008). Theoretical integration and fully developed frameworks integrating individual, situational, and environmental levels of explanation are lacking. This is partially due to some analytical problems hindering integration.

7.2.1. *Need for theoretical integration*

Wikström (2004) states that the risk factor approach essentially is a theoretical approach that does nothing more than gathering and inventorying characteristics associated with delinquent behavior in a non-random pattern. A factor is seen as a risk factor when it increases the chance of the commitment of an act of crime. In reality, these are all correlates “predicting” crime. This listing of correlates has become a goal in itself, causing the problem of causality in etiological criminology to be neglected. Namely, there are too many correlates, making it impossible to see the wood from the trees. Risk and protective factors do not per definition qualify as the causes of delinquent behavior⁴⁶. They have been seen as events that are linked to a higher opportunity for a specific outcome, in this case, delinquent behavior. A number of those risk factors can rightly be interpreted as causal but the majority not. Exactly this establishment makes some criminologists to state that “everything matters” and others that “nothing matters” (Wikström, 2007). This has caused research to be arbitrary.

In order to avoid making the same mistakes as most 20th century criminological theories, research into violent extremism and political violence should not stay trapped in such a risk factor approach. However, if we review the scientific literature and theory formation on violent radicalization and violent extremism, it is noticeable that this danger lurks around the corner. The catalogue of identified risk factors is very long and still expanding, and researchers are not able to agree on a general causal model (Christmann, 2012). Still, not every risk factor leads to violent extremism, and even more, experts agree that multiple and complex factors alternate in function and significance. Bouhana and Wikström (2008, p. 1) state that “*though quite a lot is known about terrorism—and certainly much has been published [...]—one may feel as if little is understood.*” Researchers disagree on the relative importance of different levels of explanation (individual vs environment); there is no attention to the interaction between both and statistical correlation is misinterpreted as causality ascribing causal value to mere background characteristics (e.g., gender, origin, race).

⁴⁶ Strictly speaking, the establishment of causal connections is limited to experiments. However, this is not always possible or desirable because of ethical reasons. The alternative is statistical analysis using non-experimental data to study causal effects. Its value is limited since statistical correlations do not imply causality. However, vice versa, causality does imply a correlation.

Wikström and Bouhana (2008; 2011) state that if we really want to explain violent extremism, we have to evolve from a risk factor approach to a more explanatory method. They propose to conduct etiological research on violent extremism by looking for explanatory mechanisms⁴⁷ that link background characteristics (“background of crime”) to the real causal factors (“foreground of crime”) (see also, Wikström, 2004). We have to make a difference between the direct causes or mechanisms that have a direct influence on violent extremism, and distant causes that only have an indirect influence on violent extremism⁴⁸.

In other words, we have to use our knowledge on how background characteristics (genetics, biological psychological, and social) influence extremist behavior to assess their impact on the real direct causes (what individuals move to action). This allows to look for those correlates that qualify as causes (or part of a cause) and to discover causal mechanisms. In short, this approach searches for the reasons for the linking of background characteristics to crime and identifies the intervening processes. What was and is needed is a comprehensive theoretical framework capable of differentiating causal factors from the rest.

7.2.2. *Analytical shortcomings hindering theoretical integration*

In order to establish a clear theoretical framework, a couple of shortcomings characterizing the research into violent extremism and political violence have to be addressed first (Bouhana & Wikström, 2008). It is argued how the solution for similar problems in the explanation of offending as outlined by Wikström can also be applied on the study of violent extremism and political violence.

⁴⁷ The concept “explaining” is not always unambiguous. Establishing causal connections does not mean to be able to explain a phenomenon. Explaining has to do with the identification of causal mechanisms that answer the question why there is a causal connection. This is the field of etiological theories. In other words, explaining is a theoretical process. The following mechanisms can be distinguished: i) social mechanisms, ii) situational mechanisms, and iii) developmental mechanisms.

⁴⁸ A cause is a causal factor that increases the probability of action or, put differently, that has the characteristics to bring about action. In social sciences, causes are never deterministic. See also footnote 5.

(1) Conceptual confusion

There is some conceptual confusion on what exactly needs to be explained. The subjectivity of violent extremism means that researchers do not agree on a common, widely accepted definition. Also, the concepts of violent radicalization, radicalism, violent extremism, and terrorism are used interchangeably, thus further hindering the search for direct causes. These concepts are related but not identical. *“Without a clear understanding of what it is we propose to explain, it is difficult to unambiguously identify putative causes and suggest plausible causal processes that may produce the effect under study.”* (Wikström, 2010, p. 214).

Wikström already addressed the same problem in the explanation of crime. What crime entails is in fact dependent on a political decision and thus dependent of time and place (Wikström, 2007). By defining criminality as a special form of moral action, Wikström (2010) is able to circumvent this conceptual discussion⁴⁹. More specific, he defines crime as *“acts that breach moral rules as defined in law.”* Using this definition, the explanation of crime fundamentally lies in the question why individuals break moral rules when they know it is wrong to do so. In other words, the focus rests on the breaking of the moral rule (as defined in law) and not on the moral rule itself (Wikström, 2010). Defining crime this way makes it possible to cradle different kinds of criminal behavior, including violent extremism (political violence). What differs between different types of crime is not the explanatory process but the content of the offense. When committing a murder, moral rules defined in law are broken, so is the case when damaging government property, stealing a bicycle, or dodging taxes. *“When explaining acts of crime, the aim is not primarily to explain, for example, why people drive at 100 mph, smoke cannabis or demolish a building, but why they do so when it is against a rule of conduct (defined in law).”* (Wikström, 2010, p. 218).

According to Bouhana and Wiström (2008), violent extremism and political violence can be defined in exactly the same way, i.e., as an offense against the moral rules as defined in law. Although expressions of violent extremism differ, all forms of violent extremism are violent in

⁴⁹ Moral actions are guided by moral rules about what is right or wrong to do, or not to do, in certain circumstances. How a crime differs from other actions that break moral rules is that crime breaks those moral rules that are stated in (penal) law.

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nature⁵⁰, and violence refers to violations of the (penal) law⁵¹. This has as an advantage that all expressions of violent extremism fall under the same umbrella; be it the throwing of rocks during a manifestation, the taking of hostages, or violent attacks. Furthermore, studying violent extremism as a moral action solves the problem of violent acts being perceived as violent extremism in some jurisdiction and/or time periods and not in others. The focus lies on the explanation of the breaching of the moral rule. The validity of the moral rule and/or whether or not the breaking of the rule can be justified is not addressed. The only thing of importance is the breaking of the moral rules, as stated in the law irrespective of motive.

(2) Intervening mechanisms

Research has identified a long list of possible causal factors, but a vision about causality, explaining the **mechanisms that account for violent actions of individuals**, is missing. It is unclear how causal factors and action outcomes are connected. This could be resolved by a mechanism based approach. The basic idea behind such an approach is to explain a social phenomenon starting from the mechanisms that account for differences and changes in a certain condition. In other words, mechanisms explain how something works by clarifying how a certain cause is linked to a certain outcome (action) (Agnew, 1993; Hedström, 2005). Situational action theory (SAT) states that in order to unravel such a mechanism, it is important to keep two basic principles of human behavior in mind. First, humans have agency, meaning that they can act deliberately in reaction to their environment. This means that the causes of action are situational. People act because of who they are in relation to the characteristics of the environments they are part of. Second, humans are essentially rule guided actors. They base their

⁵⁰ This is where the problem starts: different phenomena are located on different spots of the same continuum. This different "location" cannot be seen as an argument to look for different causes for each different expression of the same phenomenon.

For example, the same discussion can be found on the geographical distribution of vandalism and crime. Both are phenomenological different in terms of gradation, but have possibly the same root causes. Using one expression (vandalism) to causally explain the other expression (crime) creates problems of tautology. The same element cannot be part of both the explanans and the explanandum.

⁵¹ Penal laws are a crystallization of moral rules that are present in a society in a certain time and space. The moral "one should not use violence" is part of most societies since violence threatens the integrity of the society as whole and its members individually.

actions on moral and social rules about what is right or wrong to do in certain situations. Since action is the expression of agency, defined as the behavior exhibited under a person's guidance, in order to explain acts of criminality, one must specify what prompts people to break the rules of law (Wikström, 2004). Consequently, the basic argument of Wikström (2014) is that violent extremism, as well as crime, is ultimately the result of

- The perception of what is right or wrong to do and based on this the action alternatives a person perceives in a certain situation.
- The way people choose to carry out a specific (perceived) action alternative.

In other words, people commit acts of political violence because they perceive and choose a particular kind of violence as an action alternative in response to a specific motivation. In SAT, this is referred to as the perception–choice process. It is the mechanism that forms the base for the explanation of action. Perception is what links a person to his or her environment and choice is what links a person to his or her actions. Therefore, the perception–choice process is crucial for understanding action.

For research on the causes of violent extremisms, this means that identified risk factors, both individual and environment factors, can only be accepted as causes of political violence if they can be shown to directly influence 1) the perception of action alternatives in a particular situation and 2) the process of choice.

(3) Individual and environment

Research is polarized between explanations based on individual factors and those based on environmental factors, while in fact, it is the interaction between individual and environment that can explain behavior. Interaction means that the correlation between two factors is dependent on another third factor. In other words, we speak of an interaction when the effect of the theoretical explanans X on explanandum Y varies according to a third factor Z. Environmental influences (exposure) can, for example, have an effect on violent extremism but the strength of this effect depends on certain individual characteristics (propensity). In short, whether or not an individual will undertake an extremist action depends on a specific combination of

individual propensity and environmental exposure⁵². This is made visually in Table 2. According to Wikström (2004, p. 19) attention should be paid to “*kinds of individuals in kinds of settings*.” In some cases, the environment will be decisive, in other cases, the individual.

Table 2: Violent extremism resulting from the individual–environment interaction ~~from the standpoint of SAT~~

		Individual	
		Propensity to extremism	No propensity to extremism
Environment	High exposure to extremist environmental influences	Extremism ++	Extremism (depended of situation) (cf. peer pressure)
	Low exposure to extremist environmental influences	Extremism +	No extremism

(4) Direct causes and causes of the causes

The causes of violent extremism (action process) need to be distinguished from the causes of the causes (social and developmental processes). Some factors directly influence action (causes); other factors influence the emergence of these causes. They are the “causes of the causes.” Early theories, including the risk factor approach, only seldom take this into account.

Causes (or proximate causes) are causal factors that directly bring about action. These can be certain individual characteristics (propensity) or environmental characteristics (exposure) that influence the perception–choice process and thus initiate action. Causes of the causes (or distant causes) are factors that influence these individual and environmental factors. The difference between the two is crucial if one wants to study and explain violent extremism and political violence. Some factors influence directly the perception of violence as an action alternative and/or the process of choice of whether or not to carry it out. Other factors only indirectly influence the perception–choice process through their influence on propensity and exposure.

⁵² It must also be noted that individuals will only undertake action if motivated to do so. If not, even in case of an encouraging match between individual (high propensity) and environment (high exposure), the action will not take place, simply because one is not motivated to do so. However, motivation alone can never be the cause of action.

7.3. Situational action theory (SAT) as a useful framework for theoretical integration

SAT is based on insights and research from the social sciences, in general, and criminology more specifically. SAT offers a comprehensive and integrated approach for the study of crime as moral action and its causes. By placing violent extremism under the same umbrella, it is possible to use SAT as a framework to explain political violence. The basic arguments of SAT are the following (Wikström, 2004, 2010, 2014; Wikström & Butterworth, 2006):

1. *Acts of crime* are moral actions guided by what is right or wrong to do, or not to do, in a certain situation, and should be explained as such. More specific crime can be seen as the breaking of moral rules stated in law. Violent extremism and political violence are, as other forms of crime, equal to intentional breaking of the rules.
2. Action, including political violence, is ultimately an outcome of a perception–choice process. It is necessary to 1) see political violence as a valid action alternative and 2) chose to carry out this action alternative over others.
3. This perception–choice process is initiated and guided by relevant aspects of the individual–environment interaction. In other words, the probability of political violence is dependent on the individual propensity for political violence and the interaction with exposure to extremist settings.
4. What kinds of people and environments are present in a jurisdiction is the result of historical processes of personal and social emergence. Processes of social and self-selection place kinds of people in kinds of settings (creating particular kinds of interactions).

Perception–choice process

According to SAT, action is not the result of the person (propensity) or the setting (environmental characteristics) but of the perception–choice process that arises from the person–setting interaction (situation). Crucially SAT states that the decision–choice process is shaped by a combination of characteristics of the individual (crime/extremist propensity) and the environment (exposure to criminogenic/extremist settings). Wikström (2014) puts it as follows: “When a particular kind of

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person is exposed to a particular kind of setting, a particular situation (a perception choice process) arises that initiates and guides his action in relation to a specific motivation" (p77). According to SAT, propensity and exposure are causally relevant, indicating that changes in propensity and/or exposure will lead to changes in action, through their impact on the perception-choice process (Wikström, 2014; Wikström & Treiber, 2007). This has already been tested numerous times on youth delinquency (Pauwels & Svensson, 2011; Svensson & Pauwels, 2010; Svensson, Pauwels, & Weerman, 2010).

Every action is guided by moral rules about what is not acceptable given a certain situation. Based on this situation, people perceive a number of action alternatives. What particular action alternatives are perceived is dependent on the interplay between the personal moral rules and the moral norms of the setting in which the action takes place (moral filter). Out of these alternatives, one is chosen to be carried out over the others. So in order for an act of political violence to be committed, a person must, first, perceive to act as a valid action alternative, and second, choose to carry it out. This perception-choice mechanism, as shown in Figure 6, is the basic explanatory mechanism for actions, in this case, political violence. The perception of action alternatives precedes the process of choice. When a person does not perceive a certain action as a valid action alternative, this action cannot be chosen and thus will not take place. This means that the perception of action alternatives is more important for the explanation of actions than the process of choice. In other words, the process of choice only becomes relevant in the explanation of political violence (or the refrainment from it) if the individual considers political violence as a valid option. Only then, the choice whether or not to commit political violence could be made.

SAT states that individual choices can be made out of habit or after deliberation, depending on the circumstances. Repeated exposure to a certain situation creates an automatic association with a default reaction. The individual only sees one effective action alternative, selected on the basis of previous experiences in previous similar circumstances. The individual will automatically choose this course of action or, in other words, just do what he normally does in the same circumstances. The more well-known the circumstances are, the more likely the perception choice process will be based on habit. This is also

true for very stressful or emotional circumstances. Deliberative choices do not fall back on predetermined alternatives, makes an assessment of what is a morally acceptable way to act and achieve ones goal. This is mostly the case in new or unfamiliar circumstance. The individual has to assess the moral pros and cons of the different perceived action alternatives. Actions out of habit draw upon prior experiences to guide current choices. Actions out of deliberation are future oriented and consider potential future outcomes and consequences of perceived action alternatives. In both cases, the result is intentional, reflecting agency. Most actions come forth out of habit (Wikström, 2010; Wikström & Treiber, 2007).

People, of course, differ in their crime propensities and settings differ in their criminogeneity⁵³. Individuals vary in the likelihood of perceiving political violence as an action alternative in response to a particular setting. For example, person A has a higher extremist propensity than person B if person A is more likely than person B to see an act of political violence as an action alternative when they are in the same setting. Settings vary in the extent to which their characteristics promote extremist behavior. For example, setting A is more extremist then setting B if the same person in setting A is more inclined to see political violence as an action alternative than in setting B. When crime-prone people are exposed to criminogenic settings, it is very likely that they may see crime as an action alternative and choose to act on it.

"Situational Action Theory does not propose a simple additive model of propensity and exposure but that propensity and exposure interact to initiate a perception-choice process that encourages or discourages a person's crime involvement Crime propensity is activated by criminogenic exposure and criminogenic exposure is made relevant by crime propensity. The general nature of this interaction is that the influence of exposure depends on a person's propensity: the importance of criminogenic exposure amplifies with increasing crime propensity." (Wikström, 2010, p. 221).

⁵³ Of course, people's crime propensity may also vary depending on the crime in question and the criminogeneity of a setting may vary depending on the crime in question (Wikström, 2014).

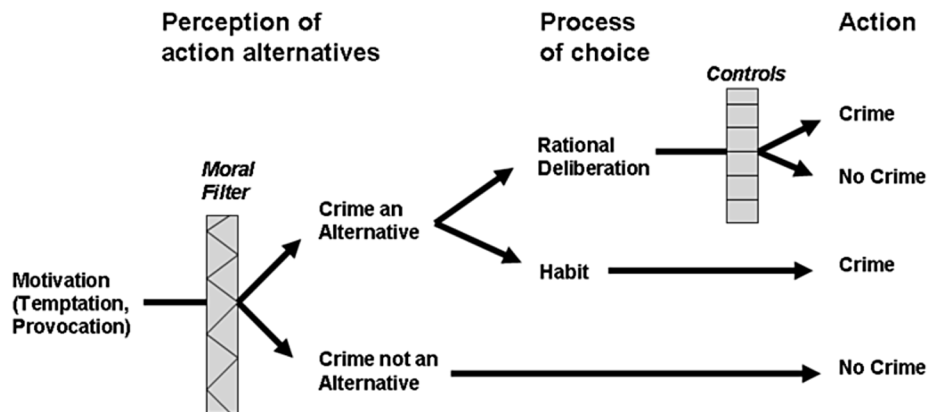


Figure 6: Illustration of the perception–choice process (Wikström, 2011)

Propensity

Variations in propensity to violent extremism are essentially determined by (Wikström, 2010, 2014):

1. The morality of the person. This corresponds to the extent to which personal morality corresponds to the various rules of conduct stated in the law and the level of rule breaking a person allows for himself. It encompasses both a cognitive component (disposition or moral attitudes) as well as moral emotions (feelings of guilt and shame). Moral rules are important because they determine which action alternatives an individual perceives (Wikström, 2010). Together with control they also determine the evaluation and choice of the perceived alternatives.
2. The possibility to exercise self-control. Self-control is determined by several individual characteristics such as impulsivity, sensitivity, and risk taking and momentary environmental influences such as intoxication or high levels of stress. Self-control is not a lifelong stable characteristic (Wikström & Treiber, 2007).

Moral setting or exposure

A setting is part of the environment that is directly accessible through an individual's senses (including media). The environment of an individual thus consists of multiple different settings, each with different characteristics. The complete set of settings an individual

interacts in is called the activity field. Settings give rise to situations that facilitate violent extremism and political violence. Only when present in such a setting, it becomes causal importance for individuals with low morality and/or self-control.

The criminogenic character of the setting is determined, according to (Wikström, 2010, 2014) by:

1. the moral rules of the setting or the extent to which they encourage (or discourage) the breaking of particular laws in relation to the opportunities and frictions created in the setting;
2. the level of enforcement of these moral rules...

Moral correspondence

From this, it follows that morality can be seen as the most important individual factor and the moral context of the setting as the most important environmental factor in crime causation. Their interaction largely determines which action alternatives will be perceived by the individual and whether or not one of these alternatives is a crime.

When personal morals and the moral norms of the setting both encourage (or discourage) a particular action in response to a motivation, that action is likely (or unlikely). This is referred to as the principle of *moral correspondence*. Only when people deliberate between several action alternatives and there is conflicting rule guidance, control becomes important. This is referred to as the *conditional relevance of control*. Both self-control (internal control processes) and social control or deterrence (external control processes) can play a role in the decision process. Self-control refers to compliance with their personal moral rules and deterrence impels people to comply with the moral rules of the setting. The role of controls is shown in Figure 7.

In other words, the moral correspondence between the individual and the setting is crucial in explaining political violence. It is plausible that based on the principle of moral correspondence, an individual already susceptible to extremist convictions is more likely to further radicalize when coming in contact with an extremist organization compared with an individual who holds the same convictions but is not exposed to a similar extremist milieu.

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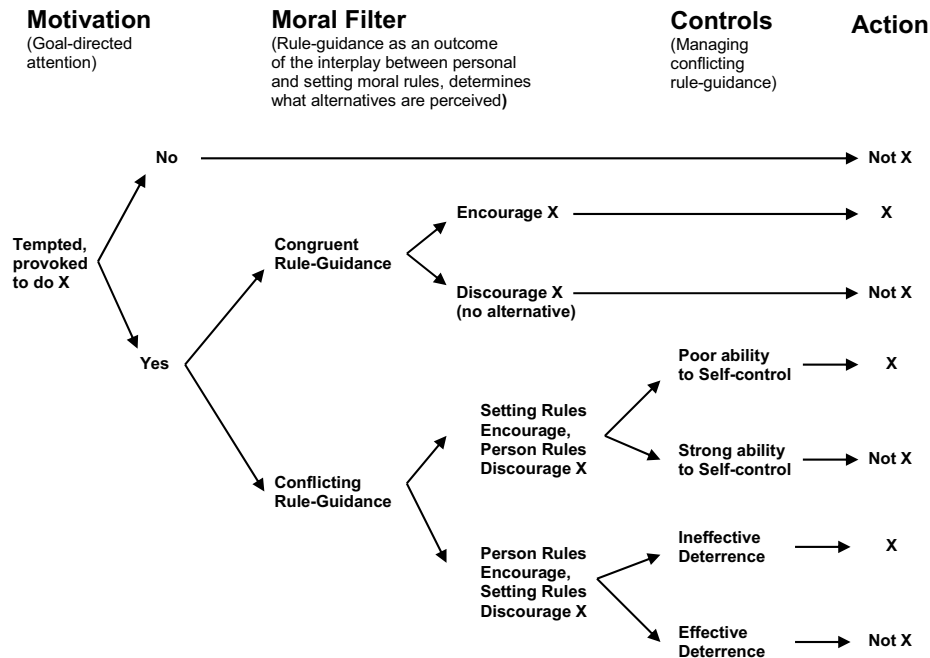


Figure 7: Role of the moral filter and control in case of a deliberate action choice, according to SAT (Wikström, 2003)

Causes of the causes: emergence and selection

As already explained, the direct causes are these factors that directly influence an individual to violent behavior. Distant causes (or the causes of the causes) are factors that influence the direct causes. Social context and development must be addressed as causes of the causes. Most literature identified that causes (e.g., bad upbringing) are in fact causes of the causes. They are, however, part of the causal chain leading up to political violence. For example, a bad upbringing can influence the capability to self-control, which in turn influence an individual's reaction to temptations in its environment, leading to violent behavior (or not).

We also explained that the interaction between individual propensity and environmental exposure as direct causes initiates a perception–choice process leading to criminal or violent behavior. So in order to fully explain political violence, it is necessary to:

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1. Understand how individual propensity develops; or in other words, why individuals differ in terms of propensity to violent extremism.
2. Understand why some settings have acquired an extremist character and others not.
3. Understand how certain kind of individuals end up in certain kind of settings.

The first two questions are questions of emergence. The third question is a question of selection.

Emergence refers to the process of development. How does something develop to be what it is? More specifically, it refers to the causes of the causes explaining propensity and exposure. Personal emergence refers to the processes that lead to crime-prone people or an individual propensity that sees violent extremism as an action alternative. This is best addressed by developmental psychosocial processes of moral education and cognitive nurturing. Social emergence refers to the processes that explain the development of a criminogenic character of some settings. This is best addressed by historical socio-ecological processes such as processes of segregation and their consequence.

Selection explains how certain kinds of individuals get introduced in certain kind of settings. This is best addressed by cotemporaneous social and self-selection processes. Social selection refers to social forces that encourage, discourage, limit, or ban certain kinds of people from interacting in certain kinds of settings. Self-selection refers to preferences of individuals for certain settings, within the limits of social selection.

Attributes and motivations

Situational action theory strongly opposes the idea that (social demographic) background characteristics (e.g., gender, nationality, level of education, class) can ever be causes of criminality. Empirical research by Wikström & Butterworth (2006) clearly shows that such characteristics do not contribute to the explanation of crime. Instead, SAT understands background characteristics as attributes (Wikström, 2007, 2010). Attributes are factors that correlate with offending but, logically speaking, cannot be causes. They are either factors that correlate with the outcome (symptoms) or factors that correlate with

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the causes of this outcome (markers). Although they do not hold any explanatory power, they can be helpful in discovering the real causes.

The concept of motivation is often and repeatedly confused with the concept of cause. However, following SAT, a motive can never be a cause of criminal behavior. According to SAT, motivation is a necessary but insufficient precondition to break moral rules (Wikström, 2010). It is a necessary precondition because undertaking a certain action demands a certain motivation to do so. It is an insufficient precondition because the motivation in itself does not necessarily entail the breaking of a moral rule. Individuals are motivated to obtain a certain goal, not to break a moral rule. A motivation is a specific achievement (like establishing the Sharia in Belgium or founding a state based on white nationalism,) that does not always require the breaking of a moral rule to get there. In general, there are several options to achieve this goal, and breaking the moral rule is only one of them. So, motivations can provide insight into the goals individuals want to realize, but they do not explain why they do or do not break the moral rule to achieve these goals.

7.4. Causes of the causes of violent extremism: elements of key theories in the explanation of offending

Basically, we propose an integrated perspective on political violence that includes concepts of strain theory, procedural justice theory, and social control theory as causes of the causes. The integrated approach argues that strains lead to weakened bonds, which in turn affect personal beliefs and exposure to extremist settings. The study takes as an explicit starting point that social integration, procedural justice, and perceived discrimination may positively affect moral support for violent extremism and, therefore, be of importance in the explanation of individual differences in the study of violent extremism and political violence.

7.4.1. Concepts from general strain theory (Agnew)

General strain theory (GST) is one of the leading theories on crime and delinquency, and it essentially argues that strain or negative treatment by others leads to negative emotions, particularly anger and frustration, which may lead to a number of outcomes. Agnew (2006) argues that violent delinquency is one possible response to the pressure created by these negative emotions. GST identifies three main sources of strain: 1) situations that block positively valued goals (e.g., money, status, autonomy), 2) situations that remove positively valued stimuli (e.g., loss of spouse, theft of valued possessions), and 3) situations that produce negative stimuli (e.g., discrimination).

These responses can be behavioral, cognitive (attitudes), or emotional. Not all responses are violent or delinquent but these are of most interest to GST. Strains that are 1) seen as unjust, 2) high in magnitude 3) associated with low social control, and 4) create some incentive to engage in criminal coping are most likely to lead to delinquency and violence. Coping via illegal behavior and violence may be especially true for adolescents because of their limited coping resource, greater influence from peers, and inability to escape many stressful environments. Some vent out their aggression on people, while others engage in delinquent behaviors such as drug use and property crime (Agnew, 2004).

GST has attempted to specify the factors that increase the likelihood that individuals will cope with strain by committing crime. Agnew contends that crime becomes a likely outcome when individuals have a low tolerance for strain, when they have poor coping skills and resources, when they have few conventional social supports, when they perceive that the costs of committing crime is low, and when they are disposed to committing crime because of factors such as low self-control, negative emotionality, or their learning history. Empirical research has offered some support for the above (Agnew, 2002). On the other hand, some factors (e.g., social support, positive relationship with adults, and attachment to school) can reduce the negative outcomes of strain and help explain why only some youth become delinquent (Agnew, 2004; Morash & Moon, 2007).

Perceptions of injustice and discrimination can be viewed as stressors that can lead to delinquency as a coping mechanism. Agnew actually

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identifies experiences with prejudice and discrimination, based on ascribed characteristics like race/ethnicity, as one of several strains that increase the probability of crime (Agnew, 2004). Perceived personal and group discrimination may not only trigger negative emotions as a response toward situations of personal and group discrimination but may also affect personal belief systems that are relevant for the explanation of violent extremism (such as moral support of right-wing violent extremism, authoritarianism, political powerlessness (or anomia)). Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, Schmeelk-Cone, Chavous and Zimmerman (2004) reported that for both females and males, involvement in violence significantly increases with perceived discrimination. Previous research has also documented a positive association between perceived discrimination and delinquency (Gibbons, Gerrard, Cleveland, Wills, & Brody, 2004; Simons, Chen, Stewart, & Brody, 2003; Stewart & Simons, 2006) both for minority groups and parts of majority groups, such as right-wing extremist youth who experience their own situation as discriminating and unjust (Bjørge, 1997; Van der Valk & Wagenaar, 2010). Therefore, it is likely that other kinds of discrimination and injustice effect delinquency and problem behavior in general and not only in minority groups. Taken together, these findings suggest that perceived discrimination will increase negative emotions that contribute to political violence.

7.4.2. *Concepts from control theory and the importance of social bonds (Hirschi)*

Control theory has traditionally pointed to the importance of social bonds of the individual to society to keep individuals from committing crime. Contrary to strain theory, control theory argues that differences in crime are caused by variation in control and not motivation. The very nature of mankind as gratification seekers makes individuals per definition motivated to commit crime. Only the presences of controlling social bonds keep individuals from acting on these motivations.

Hirschi (1969) distinguished in his social bonds theory between attachment to parents, commitment to school, social involvement, and conventional beliefs as important elements that restrain an individual from committing acts of (violent) crime. The (cumulative) absence of these bonds leaves individuals unattached to society and thus free from

constraints to committing crime and violence. Sampson and Laub (2003) redefined Hirschi's elements of the social bonds in terms of social capital. They argue that participation in a coherent social network, built around social institutions such as family, school, or work keeps individuals from committing crime and violence. An accumulation of social bonds to society provides individuals a means to enable them to live with critical situations. Sampson and Laub (2003) argued that it is not the social bonds in itself, but the social control resulting from these bonds that prevent youth from committing (violent) crimes.

Since its publication in 1969, Hirschi's social bond theory has been one of the most tested theories in the field of criminology. Although empirical tests have sometimes used weak operational measures, there is a large body of evidence that the elements of control theory are inversely related to the commitment of crimes (Kempf, 1993). It is hypothesized that high levels of societal integration (social bonds with parents, parental control, school bonds, social integration at school, absence of school failure) may decrease the chances of being involved in political violence. We argue that social bonds to the family and school are an important condition that fosters law abiding through several ways; not only through the support of conventional beliefs but also through the shaping of the individual's trust in the police as a legitimate element of law enforcement.

7.4.3. Concepts of procedural justice theory (Tyler)

According to the procedural justice model, confidence and compliance depend largely on perceptions of fairness of the justice system (Reisig, Bratton, & Gertz, 2007; Tyler, 2006). Research has shown that the legitimacy of authorities plays an important role in gaining public support for imposed rules and decisions made by these authorities (Hinds & Murphy, 2007). Individuals are willing to accept decisions made by relevant authorities if these authorities are perceived as legitimate, independent of personal gain, possible sanctions and desirability of the outcome (Tyler, 1997, 2006; Tyler & Lind, 1992). In other words, individuals will comply, even if the outcome has negative personal consequences or is only beneficial for others. This implies that legitimacy is of major concern to guarantee an effective functioning of democratic institutions, such as the police and the criminal justice system. Legitimacy

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can be understood in two ways. When institutions meet various agreed objective criteria, such as the absence of corruption, they achieve *legitimacy based on an objective standard*. In the case of perceived *legitimacy*, it does not matter whether institutions meet objective criteria, as only the public perception of legitimacy matters. Only an institution that commands high levels of perceived legitimacy can count on public support (Hough, Jackson, Bradford, Myhill, & Quinton, 2010).

So the legitimacy of authorities is not judged on its efficacy but on the perception of it to be just and fair (Tyler, 2006). This depends on the assessment of the fairness of the decision-making procedures used by the relevant authority (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Murphy, 2003). In general, there are two criteria: (1) *the quality of decision-making* and (2) *the quality of the personal treatment*. First, citizens want to feel that authorities handle their questions and/or problems honestly, objectively, and without bias. Second, citizens want to be treated with *dignity and respect*, regardless of their role as a victim, suspect, or witness. Lastly, it is important for citizens to have the opportunity to explain their visions and behavior before the police take decisions (Tyler & Fagan, 2008). They want to participate actively (having a *voice*) in discussions during the decision-making process. Hence, if an individual believes that an authority has attempted to be neutral, has treated him/her with respect, and has given him/her voice, feelings of fairness will be enhanced (Murphy, 2003) and he/she might perceive this authority as having legitimate power and thus has to be obeyed.

On the contrary, those who distrust the authorities are bound to engage in crime, and might even develop radical and/or violent attitudes. Research has already shown that minorities often feel discriminated against and targeted by police (Tyler & Wakslak, 2004). This undermines perceptions of procedural justice and legitimacy. Furthermore, Jackson et al. (2012) make a distinction in perceived legitimacy as not only *the recognition of power* by the public, which is based on the idea that a legitimate authority has the right to be obeyed, but also *the justification of power*, which is based on the perception that the police and public share similar values and norms. Hence, the perception of police legitimacy is instantiated due to not only the willingness to obey the police (public recognition) but also the belief that citizens and police share the same values and norms (moral alignment) (see also, Tyler & Sunshine, 2003). This is important regarding violent radicalization and

violent extremism because certain individuals or groups might advocate a radically different view on society and distance themselves from core western values. If this is the case, they may feel as if the authorities only represent the majority, resulting in the rejection of the (legitimacy) of these authorities.

Analogous to social bond theory, procedural justice theory examines why people conform to the law, instead of asking why people are motivated to break the law. Yet, unlike social bond theory, procedural justice theory accepts that controls are weakened by structural constraints. These constraints are situated at the institutional level: the police, the criminal justice system, can treat people unfairly, which may have consequences for the commitment of (violent) crimes. The fact that procedural justice theory recognizes the importance of strains, especially strains caused by institutions of law enforcement, makes it an important candidate for theoretical integration of social bond theory and strain theory.

7.5. How is NSM exposure related to violent extremism

The central focus of this study is the influence of exposure to extremist content through NSM on behavior and attitudes. The public concern focusses on the idea that unlimited exposure to extremist content will influence vulnerable adolescents to the point that they will take over and adopt the displayed attitudes and behaviors. In other words there is a concern that exposure to violent extremism will lead to “online brainwashing” and radicalize youth. This concern is especially pertinent for NSM because of its communication and networking characteristics. Theoretically this concern can be framed using a social learning approach, that states that behavior is adopted through processes of social learning, dependent on communication and social relations. The social learning theory (SLT) emerged from the differential association theory as developed by Sutherland. The principle of differential association asserts that a person becomes delinquent because of an “excess” of definitions favorable to violation of law over definitions unfavorable to violation of law. In other words, criminal behavior emerges when one is exposed to more social messages favoring criminal conduct than to prosocial messages (Sutherland,

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1947). The same reasoning can be applied to the explanation of violent extremism or political violence (Akers & Silverman, 2004).

Social learning is a general extended version of differential association theory that seeks to explain all forms of (criminal) behavior by offering an explanation of the acquisition, maintenance, and change in criminal and deviant behavior. It embraces social, non-social, and cultural factors operating both to motivate and control criminal behavior, and both to promote and undermine conformity. The basic proposition is that the same learning process, in a context of social structure and interaction, produces both behavior defined as deviant and behavior defined as conforming (Akers, 1998; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). The emphasis is on the mechanism of social learning, transmitting certain norms and values justifying certain behavior and not, as could wrongly be understood, on what constitutes deviant behavior and what not. For example, in the case of political violence one would have acquired the belief that such actions are necessary and justified through the same process of social learning that brought others to condemn these actions.

The probability of criminal or conforming behavior is a function of the balance of exposure to criminal versus conforming social settings and definitions. Not only are present associations of importance but also those operative in one's learning history and those predictive of future behavior (Akers, 1998). SLT argues that there are four learning mechanisms.

Differential association refers to direct and indirect association and interaction with others who engage in certain kinds of behavior or express certain attitudes. These groups provide the major social context in which all the mechanism of social learning operates. The most important groups are primary ones, such as friends and family; nevertheless, secondary and reference groups as well as mass media and the internet can also be of importance. If one's differential associations balance in the direction of greater exposure to extremist behavior and attitudes, the greater the probability of engagement in political violence will be. **Definitions** refer to an individual's own values and belief system about what is and is not acceptable behavior. These attitudes and values are learned and reinforced through differential association. The greater the number of definitions favorable to violent extremism, the greater the likelihood that an individual will take part in political violence. On the contrary, the greater the number of definitions

favorable to conventional norms, the less likely an individual is to engage in political violence. **Differential reinforcement** refers to the balance of anticipated or actual rewards and punishments that follow behavior. The greater the value, frequency and probability of rewards for deviant behavior, the more likely it will be repeated. Most of the learning in political violence is the result of interaction in settings where political violence is rewarded and encouraged. **Imitation** is the notion that individuals engage in behavior that they have previously witnessed others doing (Bandura, 1962; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

7.6. Integrated conceptual model

Each of the discussed criminological theories can make a valuable contribution to the explanation of violent extremism but are on their own only capable of partially explaining violent extremism. They each highlight specific (important) aspects, causing the knowledge on violent extremism and political violence to be fragmented. In order to come to a full explanation, we argue to combine their insights by integrating these theories. As already explained, SAT offers a useful framework that allows us to structure and integrate what is already known. This model is shown in figure 8.

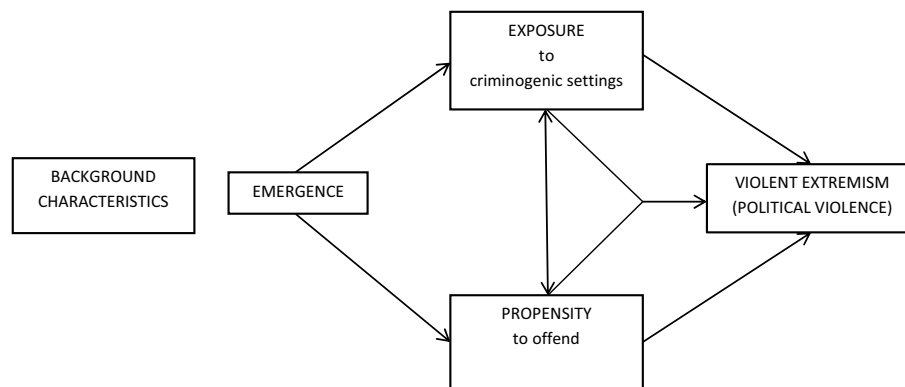


Figure 8: Situational Action Theory framework

Based on this framework, we developed an integrated model for the explanation of violent extremism (political violence) that distinguishes between direct causes and causes of the causes, and pays attention to both the individual level as well as the environment. This model is

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shown in figure 9⁵⁴. Key concepts from criminological theories explaining offending are integrated as the causes of the causes. We state that factors derived from control theory, strain theory, and procedural justice theory form the causes of the causes of political violence. They can be found in the components “poor social integration,” “subjective alienation,” and “perceived discrimination.” They influence personal beliefs and attitudes favorable to violent extremism (propensity) and exposure to extremist settings, as the direct causes of political violence. Since the main focus of this project lies on the influence of NSM, our attention will mainly go to exposure to NSM and its influence on political violence. The focus is on exposure to extremist content through NSM, but other forms of exposure can be equally important (for example, peer pressure or delinquent peers). In our definition of violent extremism, it was made clear that the concept encompasses both an attitudinal and behavioral component. Keeping in mind that the behavioral consequence of violent extremisms (the use of violence) poses the greatest direct threat to society and following the logic of SAT, we focus only on explaining this behavioral aspect of violent extremism: the use of political violence. The cognitive aspect of violent extremism (extremist attitudes) is incorporated in the model as a dependent variable (part of propensity).

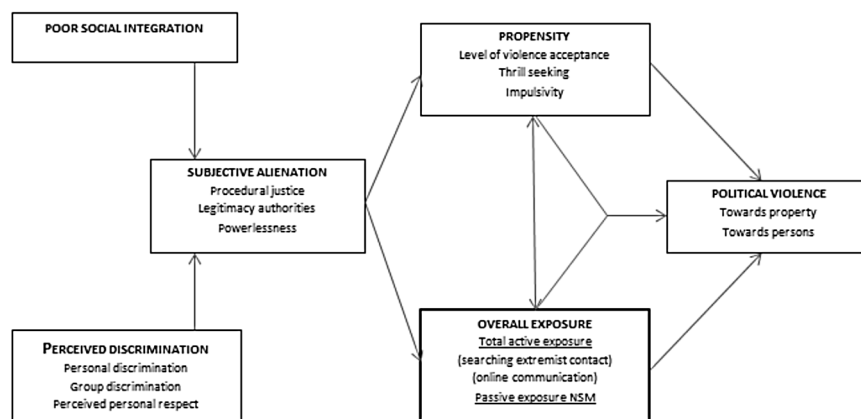
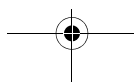
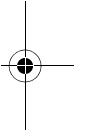
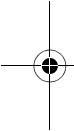
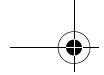


Figure 9: Integrated model explaining political violence

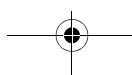
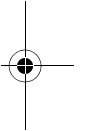
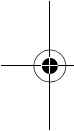
⁵⁴ Note that we did not include the trigger events in this model. This is because trigger events are essentially a motivation to act and as such cannot be causes of political violence. Most people experience something that can be described as a trigger event in their lives. This does not explain the use of political violence. Often they are only given as a justification for political violence in retrospect. See also sections 1.3.4.1 and 7.3.

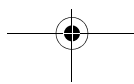
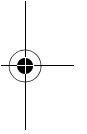
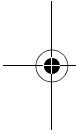




PART 3

Empirical Research





8. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH: EXPLAINING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL VIOLENCE

8.1. Introduction

This study aims at gaining insight into the relationship between exposure to extremist content through NSM (ENSM) and violent extremism among Belgian adolescents and young adults. More specifically, the focus is on testing the developed integrated model, explaining political violence, and testing the relative strength of the relationship between different measures of NSM exposure and political violence, controlled for other risk factors. Data were collected (1) through a classic paper and pencil survey of pupils (aged 16–18) in the third cycle of secondary education in Antwerp and Liege and (2) through a web-survey of young adults—both students and young adults who have left school.

8.2. Research design

8.2.1. Data

8.2.1.1. Self-report study

During, but especially right after, the Second World War, survey methodology was slowly introduced in North American criminology (Bruinsma, 1991; Ponsaers & Pauwels, 2003). Originally, the survey manifested itself in two forms: self-report studies and, sometime later, victim research. Both wanted to overcome the flaws in official registered criminology, the so-called dark number⁵⁵. The self-report

⁵⁵ The number and nature of criminal offenses that are officially registered in police statistics reflect only a fraction of the real amount of crime committed. The offenses that end up in these statistics are the ones that come to the surface or of which the perpetrators are arrested. This means that official (police) statistics and self-reported crime measure two different things. Research has repeatedly shown that official (police) statistics are flawed and incomplete (Farrington, 1992; Junger-Tas, 1990). They show a distorted image about the real number and distribution of crime over different population groups (Van Kerckvoorde, 1995). Already very early on, it was established that different population groups commit the same kind of offenses but that crime committed by certain groups was less likely to end up in the justice system (Short & Nye, 1958). See also Akers (1964), Clark and Wenniger (1962); Dentler and Monroe (1961), Erickson and Empey (1963), Slocum and Stone (1963), Vaz (1966) and Voss (1966).

method aims at asking potential offenders about (self-reported) committed crimes, while victim surveys measure victimization and feelings of insecurity. In the current context, self-report studies are slowly introduced into a new developing research tradition: the study of violent extremism (Dunkel & Gengn, 2003).

It was Porterfeld (1943, 1946) and Wallsterstein and Wylie (1947) who first discovered that 1) young people are prepared to admit crimes they have committed and 2) young people in the general population have committed the same offenses as institutionalized individuals, although less frequently and under the radar. First, examples of survey research among extremists indicates the same is true for this population (Skillicorn, Leuprecht, & Winn, 2012). Today, self-report studies are still mostly used for youth. This has to do with the fact that people commit most offences in this phase of life (Farrington, 1992; Junger-Tas, 1990). In addition, through schools, this population is easy to reach for researchers. By posing questions about different aspects of the social lives of the adolescents, on the one hand, and self-reported criminality, on the other hand, in the same questionnaire, statements can be made about the connection between self-reported crime, attitudes, free time, behavior, attitudes of friends, and social situations in school and the family. This makes it possible to answer theoretical research questions.

There is a lot of discussion on the validity and reliability of self-report studies⁵⁶. According to some, it is not possible to reach a valid and reliable image of delinquent behavior using self-report studies (Bruinsma, 1994; Hessing & Elffers, 1995). However, although it is indeed impossible to reach one hundred percent valid and reliable conclusions about delinquency based on self-report studies, it is important to keep in mind that it is equally impossible using official police data (Thornberry & Krohn, 2000). When self-report studies comply to certain preconditions, it is certainly possible to reach a sufficiently valid and reliable image of delinquent behavior (Farrington, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, Kammen, & Schmidt, 1996; Huizinga & Elliott, 1986; Thornberry & Krohn, 2000; Van Kerckvoorde, 1995).

⁵⁶ (Internal) validity can be described as the extent to which a concept is measured as described. Reliability refers to the extent to which a new measurement would result in similar results.

Most problems are situated around possible over or under report of offenses. On the one hand, there is the risk of more severe offenses to be held back and, on the other hand, it is possible that facts are reported that do not qualify as crime in a juridical sense (Tourangeau & Smith, 1996). It is also possible that questions are interpreted wrongly, or interpreted to broad or not broad enough.

Because of social desirability, there is also a chance that certain (major) facts are not reported and/or other (minor) facts are exaggerated. Furthermore, “nonresponse” can be an issue in case of refusal to participate by the youngster himself, his parents, or the school. Some students might not take the questionnaire seriously or are not motivated to fill out all of the questions. Finally, also “item nonresponse” can be an issue when certain respondents do not answer on certain questions.

8.2.1.2. Web survey

A web survey was conducted in addition to the classic paper and pencil studies⁵⁷. Web surveys are increasingly acknowledged as a valid and reliable tool for measuring self-reported delinquency, with their data quality measuring up to that of paper and pencil studies (Lucia, Herrmann, & Killias, 2007). This is confirmed for studies targeting children in primary school (McCabe, Boyd, Young, Crawford, & Pope, 2005) as well as youth in high school (Wang et al., 2005) and higher education (Miller et al., 2002). Two factors influencing the response rate compared with paper and pencil studies were taken into account. (1) Research population (Nulty, 2008). For certain groups, e.g., students or certain professionals, a survey can generate higher response rates than paper and pencil studies (Greenlaw & Brown-Welty, 2009; Kiernan, Kiernan, Oyler, & Gilles, 2005) because these groups are familiar with computer usage and the internet is part of their daily life (Yetter & Capaccioli, 2010). This is also true for youth, the research population of our research. (2) Survey presentation (Shih & Fan, 2008). We presented the survey in such a way that minimizes effort for completion. Invitation emails provide a direct link to the project’s Facebook page and the survey. Respondents had to click to start and click again to submit the results. This means there is no requirement for

⁵⁷ A copy of the Dutch and French web survey can be found in Appendix 1 and 2.

saving of files, mailing of questionnaires, switching between paper and computer, etc. (Kiernan et al., 2005).

This web survey consisted of a self-administrated questionnaire that was conducted online. Access to the survey could be gained through a link on the survey's webpage on Facebook. This survey mode requires almost no organization, does not cause disruption of working time, is more fun to complete, has minimum costs, boosts confidence in anonymity, and leaves decisions to participate entirely to the students. This method proved to be most effective. In other words, an online survey has numerous advantages compared with the paper and pencil method, without compromising data quality.

Although the possibility of distributing the questionnaire via online platforms or mailing lists has significantly contributed to the survey response, one must still have some reservations with regard to the response: while web surveys seem to be increasingly popular in social science research, there are some questions left with regard to the systematic bias that might result from exclusively using the world wide web as a sample frame. (1) We acknowledge that the researcher cannot completely monitor the processes of response selection and we must admit that we cannot verify the conditions under which the questionnaire is completed. The researcher cannot control where, when, and in the presence of whom the questionnaires are completed and cannot answer questions. In extreme cases, this can lead to poor quality data because of misunderstanding of questions, wrong answers, and social desirability. (2) In addition, the initiative to participate in the survey is entirely left to the respondent. It should, however, be mentioned that issues such as preparedness to answer survey questions and willingness to report are central to the more traditional survey modes as well. (3) Finally, since it is not possible to verify what and how many youth received the questionnaire or to say something about the response rate and non-response.

8.2.1.3. Distribution of the paper and pencil survey

The paper and pencil study was restricted to the cities of Liege and Antwerp for practical reasons: Liege and Antwerp are, except for Brussels, the two largest cities of Belgium (+100 000 inhabitants). It has numerous times been empirically shown that deviance is concentrated

in cities. In order to maximize variation in self-reported offending the following strategy was followed.

All schools in the third cycle of the secondary education in Antwerp and Liege were contacted and invited to participate in the study. A total of 34 schools in Antwerp and 32 schools in Liege were contacted. The initial request for participation was sent to the schools principals in the second part of August 2012 both by email and regular mail. Schools that did not reply after the second request were contacted by telephone, with a maximum of five contact points. Only three schools in Antwerp (470 students) and no school in Liège were prepared to participate through a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and for handing out the questionnaires in class. In case of refusal, the schools were given the option to offer the survey to their students through the online educational platform of the school. This forced us to apply the web survey design to the sampling of adolescents who were still in secondary education at the moment of data collection. Otherwise, almost no adolescents would have participated⁵⁸. Since this method hardly needs any organization and does not imply loss of class hours, it was included to anticipate the strain on schools because of the many questions to participate in research. Through this method, we could convince six additional schools in Antwerp (1748 potential respondents), making a total of nine, and six schools in Liege (1500 potential respondents). To enhance participation, teachers were asked to introduce the research in class and hand out flyers and/or put up some posters. Often, there were no refusals for substantive reasons. The practical and organizational constraints nevertheless continued to be a barrier to participation. Schools that continued to refuse were offered the possibility of putting up posters and handing out flyers in the school. This was done by 6 additional schools in Antwerp and 3 additional schools in Liege. Schools wishing to review a draft of the questionnaire had access to the document.

⁵⁸ This is an alarming tendency. As survey methodologists have, during the last decade, repeatedly warned about the decrease of citizens' willingness to participate in surveys, we certainly were expecting that this tendency would be reflected in a decreasing participation of organizations. However, we had not expected that no school (Liège) and only a handful of schools (Antwerp) would have been prepared to participate through the classic paper and pencil study. It soon became clear that the web survey was the only way to obtain the participation of secondary school pupils.

8.2.1.4. Distribution of the web survey

The web survey was developed using the free software program thesis-tools.com. In order to distribute the survey, a Facebook page was created, where a direct link to the questionnaire as well as more information on the project and researchers and contact information could be found. We provided a Dutch as well as a French Facebook page⁵⁹. The pages were moderated by the researchers, who posted videos, links, articles, etc., on a regular basis. In addition, an email address was provided where youth could send all their questions⁶⁰.

As the web survey was meant to reach both students and non-studying young adults, posters were placed visibly in different strategic places that attract a high number of the target population, such as popular pubs and bars in Antwerp, Gent, and Liège. Additionally, flyers were distributed in buildings of virtually all faculties of the university and university colleges in Antwerp, Ghent, Louvain la Neuve, and Liège, and pamphlets were distributed among the students. The central faculties and administrative services for students of all universities and university colleges of Flanders, Liege, and Louvain la Neuve were sent an email invitation with a request to circulate the web link to the questionnaire's Facebook page. This method proved to be most effective. This resulted in very diverse reactions. The University of Liège and HELMo College centrally distributed the survey among all their students. There was no cooperation of individual departments or faculties. In Flanders, on the contrary, only student administrations at faculty level were willing to cooperate⁶¹. Some departments confirmed their cooperation; however, based on the public information on respondents Facebook pages, some additional departments distributed the survey among their students. Finally, many additional organizations, associations, sport clubs, and local youth clubs were contacted with a request to distribute the survey to their members and to reach youth who are no longer in school.

The fact that the questionnaire was visible and could be shared on Facebook meant that a high number of respondents could be reached in a very short time. The survey was online between September and

⁵⁹ www.facebook.com/radimedonline and www.facebook.com/radimeducl.

⁶⁰ radimed@ugent.be and radimed-juri@uclouvain.be.

⁶¹ With the exception of University College Gent, who mentioned the survey in their weekly newsletter.

December 2012 and the response was huge with 3653 respondents in Flanders (including the 470 paper and pencil surveys) and 2367 respondents in Wallonia.

8.2.2. *Sample description*

Age was originally measured as year of birth but was categorized for the purpose of the analyses into three categories: 0 for <18, 1 for 18–22, and 2 for >22. The respondents were on average 20 years old. *Gender* is coded 0 for women and 1 for men. 64.7% of the respondents were female and 35.5% of the respondents were male. *Native background* is coded 1 if the respondent and both the parents were born in Belgium and 0 in all other cases. 76.2% of the respondents were native Belgian, with both parents born in Belgium. The other respondents have at least one parent born elsewhere. The *importance of religion* is coded from 1 (religion not being important at all) to 7 (religion being very important). When asked about the importance of religion in their lives, 35.8% indicated that religion has no importance at all, 38.5% indicated that religion has no importance, 10.1% reported no opinion, 10.4% stated religion to be important, and 5.2% indicated that religion is very important. *Attending religious services* is coded from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). Concerning the attending of religious services, 40.6% of the respondents never attend a religious service, 32.1% only once a year, 19.3% once every six months, 4.3% every month, 3.3% once a week, and 0.4% every day.

8.2.3. *Measurement of constructs*

In the present study, numerous scale constructs are used to assess the relationship between the exogenous variables, mediators, and self-reported political violence. Scales were constructed using the following formula: $X * \text{MEAN}(Y_1, Y_2, Y_3, \dots)$, where X is the number of scale items and Y is the individual scale items used to construct the scale. This resulted in scales on a metrical level. Due to the extensive nature of the concepts that were used in the present empirical study, we chose to present a general overview of the scale constructs in the present section (see also table 3) and refer to Appendix 3 for a more detailed overview of the scales. We included question wording and additional factor loadings per item for each scale.

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Table 3: Scale constructs and Cronbach's alpha

Scale construct	Cronbach's alpha
Political violence toward property	0.80
Political violence toward persons	0.87
Overall political violence	0.89
Online communication extremism NSM	0.69
Exposure extremism NSM	0.78
Exposure extremism TM	0.82
Police procedural justice	0.84
Police legitimacy	0.80
Perceived political powerlessness (anomy)	0.85
Perceived personal discrimination	0.89
Perceived group discrimination	0.95
Perceived personal respect	0.86
Religious authoritarianism	0.87
Impulsivity	0.63
Thrill-seeking behavior	0.73
Support for violent extremism	0.92
Peer racism	0.68
Peer delinquency	0.70

Dependent variables

Political violence was measured using two scales: one that measures acts of violence committed toward persons and another that measures acts of violence committed toward property (damaging or destroying things) for political or religious reasons. Self-reported *political violence toward property* was measured by asking the respondents if they had ever “vandalized anything in the street or at the public transport stations (e.g., bus stops, bicycles, streetlights, or something else),” “participated in a political action that was not allowed,” “thrown stones at the police during a demonstration,” “destroyed something on the streets because of your political or religious belief,” “damaged someone’s property because of your political or religious belief,” or “set something on fire because of your political or religious beliefs. The scale is derived from a Belgian study of nonconventional/illegal political participation by youth (Gavray et al., 2012). Self-reported *political violence toward persons* was measured by asking the respondents if they had ever “fought with someone because of your political or religious belief,” “threatened someone on the internet because of your political or religious belief,” “threatened someone in the streets because

of your political or religious belief,” “hit a foreigner,” or “hit a capitalist.” The scale is translated from Swedish and was originally used in a youth survey conducted by the Swedish Council for Crime Prevention (Säkerhetspolisen, 2009; Wikström, Oberwittler, Treiber, & Hardie, 2012). *Overall political violence* was measured by combining the two scales measuring violence toward persons and violence toward property.

Independent variables

Independent variables are drawn from the well know criminological theories explaining crime that we used to construct our integrated model. These are strain theory, procedural justice theory, social control theory, social learning theory, and situational action theory.

The first set of variables refers to **online exposure**. *Active extremist contact NSM* was coded 1 if the respondent has been searching contact with extremists using NSM and 0 if this was not the case. *Online communication extremism NSM* measures the extent to which the respondent takes part in discussions on violent extremism via different NSM applications. *Exposure extremism NSM* measures the extent to which the respondent has been exposed to extremist content via different NSM applications. *Exposure extremism TM* measures the extent to which the respondent has been exposed to extremist content via traditional media. *Peer racism* measures racist behavior of peers. This scale is adapted from Van den Bos, Loseman, and Doosje (2009).

Next, measures of offline exposure or **peer influences** are also included. *Peer delinquency* refers to the respondent's perception of law-breaking behavior by their best friends. This scale originates from the PADS+ study (Wikström, 2010).

A number of individual traits/beliefs that reflect a certain **propensity** for violent behavior can make individuals more susceptible for violent extremism. *Religious authoritarianism* refers to extreme dogmatic views with regard to religion. This scale is based on Altemeyer's authoritarianism scale. Two dimensions of Hirschi and Gottfredson's conceptualization of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) were used in the present study: *impulsivity*, the tendency to seek immediate gratification, and *thrill-seeking behavior*, the tendency to seek adventure and kicks. The items for the two scales were taken from the attitudinal self-control

scale used by Grasmick et al. (Grasmick, Tittle, Bursik, & Arneklev, 1993). *Support for violent extremism* was measured combining three scales measuring support for religious and left-wing and right-wing extremism. These items were originally used in a Dutch survey of attitudes toward extremism conducted by Van den Bos, Loseman, and Doosje (~~Van den Bos et al., 2009~~).

Certain **strains** may pressure individuals into political violence. *Perceived personal discrimination* refers to the feeling that one is discriminated against by other groups in society. *Perceived group discrimination* refers to the feeling that the group to which the respondent feels he/she belongs to is being discriminated against. *Perceived personal respect* refers to whether or not an individual feels the authorities treat him with respect and dignity. The items were taken from the study by ~~Bos, Loseman, and Doosje~~. To study the impact of variables derived from procedural justice theory, the survey included items that measure trust in *police procedural justice* and *police legitimacy*. These scales have previously been used in the European Social Survey (Hough et al., 2010) and have been additionally tested in a large-scale student survey in Belgium (Van Damme & Pauwels, 2013). The difference between police procedural justice and legitimacy is that the justice variable corresponds to people's overall picture of how citizens are treated by the police. The variable legitimacy, on the other hand, concentrates on the extent to which persons perceive the police as legitimate. *Perceived political powerlessness* (or anomia) is derived from Srole's (1956) study of personal alienation. This scale has been numerous used in the European social survey.

Finally the **absence of strong social ties** with different key institutions in society are taken into account. *Low social integration* addresses the accumulation of low social ties with key institutions. An overall scale was constructed based on subscales that refer to attachment to parents, parental monitoring, academic orientation, and school integration and 3 variables measuring household disadvantage, family structure, and school performance. The original scales were used to create risk scores (1= upper risk quartile) and these risk scores were then collapsed into a general scale that measures the number of risk factors. The higher the number of low scores on the indicators of low social ties, the higher the score on this scale (indicating a high risk of low social integration).

Risk scales

We grouped relevant independent variables in a series of risk end scales, reflecting our integrated model. The same procedure was followed as for the creation of the low social integration scale. The original scales were used to create risk scores (1= upper risk quartile) and these risk scores were then collapsed into a general scales that measure the number of risk factors. *Perceived discrimination* was created combining perceived personal discrimination, perceived group discrimination, and perceived personal respect. The scales measure general levels of perceived strain by focusing on the experience of discrimination. *Subjective alienation* measures feelings of alienation of society or not fitting in. It was created combining procedural justice, overall legitimacy, and powerlessness. *Propensity* measures the level of individual propensity to violent extremism. It contains both elements of personal control as well as attitudes supporting violent extremism. It was created combining impulsivity, thrill seeking behavior, and the level of violence support (or attitudes toward violent extremism). *Exposure* focusses on exposure to extremist content through NSM and thus is the focus of our research. Overall NSM exposure combines a measure of passive exposure with total active exposure. In order to get a complete and nuanced image of the role and influence of exposure, these measures are also incorporated separately into the analysis. Total active exposure is created combining the variables active extremist contact NSM and online communication extremism NSM. The latter was dichotomized. Passive exposure was visually binned. Since our focus is on NSM exposure, peers where not included.

8.2.4. Analysis

Both dependent variables are highly skewed. This means that most respondents group around the low values of these scales. After all, the majority of respondents have never committed an act of political violence. This poses problems for analyzing the data, since regression analysis demands a normal distributed dependent variable. So, these variables are dichotomized and binary logistic regression is used to gain insight into the independent effects of the available set of independent variables (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000).

The emphasis is on the effects of different measures of ENSM on self-reported political violence. A difference is drawn between more active forms of exposure (extremist contact through NSM, online communication with extremists via NSM) and more passive forms of exposure (exposure to extremism through NSM and exposure to extremism through TM). Active exposure refers to actively and deliberately seeking out certain information and communication. Passive exposure, on the other hand, refers to accidental encounters with extremist content while doing other things online. Distinguishing between these types of exposure allows for studying the differential effect of ENSM. According to social learning theory/differential association theory, active forms of communications would have a stronger impact than passive exposure. Sutherland previously argued that exposure that develops through processes of communication should be more strongly related to criminal behavior than exposure through traditional media.

First, we estimate the effect of a series of independent variables on the likelihood of having committed political violence toward property/persons versus not having committed political violence toward property/persons. Scale variables have been standardized in order to facilitate the comparison of effects. The extent to which different ENSM are related to toward political violence toward property/persons, controlled for other risk factors, is assessed. For each dependent variable, various logistic regression models are presented. Each regression model shows the net effects of indicators of exposure to extremist content on the dependent variables. These effects are presented independent of a series of demographic background variables and low social integration (model 1), independent of variables indicating strain (model 2), independent of personal characteristics (model 3), and independent of measures of peer deviance (model 4). Finally, all direct effects are presented in model 5. This procedure was chosen to get an insight into the strength of the association between measures of exposure to violent extremism and self-reported political violence and to identify potential mediators of this relationship.

Second, we grouped the relevant independent variables into a series of risk scales reflecting our integrated model. (See also figure 9 and Appendix 3 for the measurement of constructs.) By performing a logistic regression using these risk scales for each dependent variable, we were able to test the integrated model for the explanation of polit-

ical violence. Given our research focus, our main attention lies with the role and function of exposure and more specifically ENSM. In order to fully assess the extent to which different ENSM are related to toward political violence toward property/persons, the difference between active and passive forms of exposure is maintained. A first series of logistic regression models incorporated total active NSM exposure, on the one hand, and passive NSM exposure, on the other. A second series of logistic regression models assessed the influence of overall NSM exposure on political violence. **Third**, the model was tested for the interaction between propensity and (overall) NSM exposure.

Fourth, a series of path-models were analyzed using the statistical program Mplus⁶². Path analysis describes the directed dependencies among a set of variables. This allows us to test for the sequence of constructs in our integrated model and compare the best statistical fit with the theoretical model.

8.3. Results

8.3.1. Descriptive

The different scales are constructed on a metrical level. In order to make the descriptive analysis more comprehensive, these scales are brought back to a categorical level, using the original (item) categories as offered to the respondents in the questionnaire⁶³. An overview and bar charts can be found in Appendix 4, and crosstabs in Appendix 5.

8.3.1.1. Dependent variables

Concerning *political violence toward property*, almost all respondents (96.7%) reported never to have committed any act of political violence toward property. 2.7% reported to have done this 1 to 6 times (over different delict items) and 0.3% between 7 and 18 times. Only 0.1% reported more than 18 acts of political violence toward property. 0.1% is equivalent to 8 respondents out of 4459 respondents who answered the question. Concerning *political violence toward persons*, we see the same pattern. 96.9% reported never to have committed an act of political

⁶² Although the other analysis were conducted using SPSS, the execution of a path analysis on a dichotomous dependent variable is not possible using SPSS. Therefore, M-plus was used.

⁶³ $[X * \text{MEAN}(y_1, y_2, y_3, \dots)] / X$

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violence toward persons, 2.2% 1 six times, 0.7% 7 to 18 times, and only 0.2% more than 18 times. This is equivalent to 11 respondents out of 4457 respondents who answered the question. (This means that only 11 respondents indicated on all six items of political violence toward property to have done this more than 3 times).

For *overall political violence*, 97.6% of the respondents reported never to have committed any act of political violence. 1.8% of the respondents confessed to have committed an act of political violence 1 to 6 times. Only 0.4% 7 to 18 times, and only 0.2% more than 18 times.

When the individual delict items used to construct the scale are looked at more closely, the following results can be noted. The large majority of respondents had never committed any of the individual delict items (95% or more for all delict items). The most popular delicts item within political violence toward property are participation in a forbidden action and vandalism. 5.1% of the respondents indicated to have participated in a forbidden political action and 5% reported to have vandalized something. The scores on the other delict items measuring political violence toward property were relatively low. Only 1.6% had thrown stones at the police, 1.9% reported to have destroyed something, 1.7% admitted to have damaged someone's property, and 1.2% indicated to have set something on fire. Concerning political violence toward property, the most popular delict item is fighting with somebody over political beliefs. 4% admitted to have been involved at least once in a fight with somebody because of political reasons. Threatening somebody in the streets (1.4%) and hitting a racist because of political beliefs (1.4%) scored the lowest. 3.1% of the respondents reported to have threatened somebody on the internet because of political beliefs. 3.7% of the respondents admitted to have hit a capitalist because of political beliefs, and 3.2% stated the same for hitting a foreigner. The results can be found in table 4.

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Table 4: Self-reported political violence

PV property	Never % (N)	Ever % (N)	Once % (N)	2–3 times % (N)	+ 3 times % (N)
vandalized anything...	95 (4204)	5 (219)	2.6 (114)	1.3 (58)	1.1 (47)
participated in a forbidden political action	94.9 (4215)	5.1 (228)	2.6 (115)	1.3 (57)	1.3 (57)
thrown stones at the police	98.4 (4372)	1.6 (70)	1.0 (44)	0.3 (12)	0.3 (14)
destroyed something on the streets	98.1 (4346)	1.9 (82)	1.1 (48)	0.3 (12)	0.5 (22)
damaged someone's property	98.3 (4341)	1.7 (76)	0.8 (36)	0.6 (26)	0.3 (14)
set something on fire	98.8 (4372)	1.2 (55)	0.6 (26)	0.2 (11)	0.4 (18)
PV persons					
fought with someone	96.0 (4257)	4.0 (176)	2.6 (114)	0.8 (36)	0.6 (26)
threatened someone on the internet	96.9 (4302)	3.1 (138)	1.8 (82)	0.6 (26)	0.7 (30)
threatened someone in the streets	98.1 (4338)	1.4 (85)	1.1 (49)	0.3 (14)	0.5 (22)
hit a foreigner	96.8 (4303)	3.2 (142)	1.8 (81)	0.7 (29)	0.7 (32)
hit a capitalist	96.3 (4280)	3.7 (165)	2.2 (97)	0.7 (29)	0.9 (39)
hit a racist	98.6 (4373)	1.4 (63)	0.7 (29)	0.4 (16)	0.4 (18)

8.3.1.2. Individual scales

Independent variables measuring ENSM

For *activist extremist contact NSM*, a relatively large number (7.1%) of the respondents indicated to have sought contact with extremists using NSM, compared to 92.9% who reported never to have done this. Regarding *online communication extremism NSM*, 96.2% stated never to have taken part in online discussions on extremist forums or websites. This left only a small minority that had taken part in these activities. 2.5% reported to do this less than once a month, 0.8% indicated to do this at least once a month, and 0.3% supposedly does this less than once a week. Only 0.1% reported to go online to participate on extremist at least once a week and 0.1% indicated to do this every day. Concerning passive *exposure to extremism NSM*, 49.3% stated never to have been exposed to extremist content through NSM. 25.1% reported to have encountered extremist content through NSM less than once a month, 13.3% at least once a month, and 7.5% less than once a week. However, 3.3% stated to have been confronted with violent extremism using NSM at least once a week and 1.6% even stated that this happens every day. Surprisingly, we see similar numbers for *exposure to extremism using traditional media*: 50.6% reported never to have encountered extremist content using traditional media, 21.3% less than once almost, 12.2% at

least once a month, 8.2% less than once a week, 5.6% at least once a week, and 2.2% every day.

Independent variables measuring possible strains

When asked about *police procedural justice*, a large proportion of respondents had strong (26%) to very strong (1.9%) feelings of procedural justice. Still, 16.6% of the respondents had only weak feelings of procedural justice. For 2.4%, these feelings were even very weak. The majority of respondents (53.1%) stated to perceive the police neither as just nor as unjust. Regarding the perception of *being treated with respect* the majority (47.2%) of respondents had strong perceptions of personal respect in daily treatment by the police. For 26%, these perceptions were very strong. Only 5.9% had weak to very weak perceptions of personal respect and 21% had neutral feelings. Regarding *police legitimacy*, 37.5% of the respondents strongly perceived the police as being legitimate. For 2.8%, these perceptions were very strong. Only 10.3% had weak to very weak perceptions of legitimacy concerning the police. 19.4% of the respondents perceived the police as neither legitimate nor illegitimate. For *perceived personal discrimination*, 74% did not perceive themselves as being discriminated against. Still 7.4% of the respondents perceived themselves as being discriminated against. 19.6% did not express an opinion. A similar pattern emerges for *perceived group discrimination*. 75.2% of the respondents did not feel their own group as being discriminated, compared to 8.8% that did. 15.9% did not agree nor disagree. Lastly, a similar proportion of respondents report strong (22.1%) to very strong (6.6%) compared with low (23.7%) and very low (4.9%) feelings of *perceived political powerlessness*. 42.8% remained undecided.

Independent variables measuring personal characteristics (extremist propensity)

On the questions measuring *thrill seeking behavior*, 10.8% could be described as having a moderate risk taking personality and 1.5% as highly risk taking personality. On the contrary, the majority scored low (38.5%) to very low (17.4%) on the risk taking scale. 31.7% remains undecided. About *impulsivity*, we see that 23.8% classified as impulsive, 3.1% as very impulsive, 24.5% as not very impulsive, and 1.5% as not impulsive at all. 47.1% remained undecided. Measuring *religious*

authoritarianism, we see a fairly skewed distribution. The majority of the respondents scored very low (38.9%) to low (38.6%), compared to only 3.4% that scored high and 0.7% that scored very high. 18.4% remained undecided. The majority of respondents strongly disagreed with *violent extremism* (57.1%), 24.7% disagreed, only 1.8% agreed, and 0.6% strongly agreed. 15.8% of the respondents took a neutral stance.

Independent variables measuring peer influences and low social integration

17.9% of the respondents indicated to have no *racist friends*, compared to 53.8% indicating to have some racist friends; 26.0% had mostly racist friends and 2.3% stated to have only racist friends. Regarding *peer delinquency*, a large majority (80%) of the respondents indicated to have no delinquent peers. Still 19.4% reported to have some delinquent peers. Only 0.5% stated to have mostly delinquent peers and 0.1% indicated to have only delinquent peers. 24.4% of the respondents proved only to be of negligible risk to low social integration. 50.8% was at low risk of low social integration, while 13.8% proved to be at normal or general risk. 10.4% was at high risk of low social integration. Only 0.6% of all the respondents qualified as at very high risk of low social integration.

8.3.1.3. Risk scales

Causes of the causes

For *poor social integration*, we see that 24.4% of the respondents proved only to be of negligible risk to low social integration. 50.8% were at low risk of low social integration, while 13.8% proved to be at normal or general risk. 10.4% were at high risk of low social integration. Only 0.6% of all the respondents qualified as at very high risk of low social integration. Concerning *perceived discrimination*, we see that 56.5% of the respondents were at very low risk of feeling discriminated. 20.3% were at low risk, whereas 10.5% were at risk and no less than 12.7% were at high risk of feeling discriminated against. Measuring *feelings of alienation* from society, we find that the majority of the respondents were of very low (42%) to low (23%) risk of feeling alienated. Still, 13.2% were of high risk and 4.5% even at very high risk of feeling alienated.

Propensity

Assessing individual *propensity* to violent extremism, we see that half (52.2%) of the respondents were at (almost) no risk at developing a propensity toward violent extremism. As the risk increases, the number of individuals at risk decreases. Only 3% displayed a high (risk of) propensity toward violent extremism.

Exposure

Looking at *total active exposure*, we see that a large majority of respondents were only at low risk of actively seeking out extremist content through NSM. 11.1% were at medium risk and only 1.1% were at high risk. For *passive exposure*, we see a different picture with only 40.4% of the respondent being at risk of passively being exposed to extremist content while using NSM for other purposes. 28.2% were of medium risk and no less than 31.4% is at high risk. Combining the two (passive and active ENSM), we see that for *overall exposure*, the majority (37.4%) were at very low risk of being ENSM, while only 0.7% were at very high risk.

8.3.1.4. Cross tabs

The following section tries to answer a few descriptive questions, using cross tabs. The numbers and tables that these conclusions are based on can be found in Appendix 5. Because political violence is the dependent variable, in this case, the column percentages provide the most relevant information. It is after all political violence that is possibly being influence by the other variables⁶⁴.

Political violence and native background

If we look at native background and violent extremism, we see that only 12.1% of all respondents of foreign origin indicated to have been involved in political violence toward property and 14, 2% in political violence toward persons. However, this is still twice as much compared to the respondents of Belgian origin. For these respondents only 8.6% stated to have been involved in political violence toward property and

⁶⁴ Nevertheless, we also comment on the row percentages in footnote. They can be intuitively interesting and can help us to nuance certain results.

only 6.7% in political violence against persons⁶⁵. These results can be found in table 5.

Table 5: Political violence according to native background

		Native background	
		other	Belgian
PV property	Not reported	87.9% (931)	91.4% (3107)
	Reported	12.1% (128)	8.6% (291)
	Total	100.0% (1059)	100.0% (3398)
PV persons	Not reported	85.8% (907)	93.3% (3171)
	Reported	14.2% (150)	6.7% (227)
	Total	100.0% (1057)	100.0% (3398)

Pv property: chi: 11.765, df.: 1, sig. .001; Pv persons chi: 58,711, df.:1, sig: .000

Political violence and the use of NSM for extremist discussions

This cross tab shows that 32.9% of the respondents that used NSM for extremist discussions reported to already have used political violence toward property, compared to 7.7% of the non-users. For political violence toward persons, these numbers are similar; 25.4% for NSM users and 7.2% for non-users. Results are listed in table 6.

Table 6: Political violence according to extremist use of NSM

		Extremist use NSM	
		no	yes
PV property	Not reported	92.3% (3830)	67.1% (198)
	Reported	7.7% (321)	32.9% (198)
	Total	100.0% (4151)	100.0% (295)
PV persons	Not reported	92.8% (3849)	74.6% (220)
	Reported	7.2% (300)	24.4% (75)
	Total	100.0% (4149)	100.0% (295)

Pv property: chi. 204.501, df. 1, sig. .000; Pv persons: chi: 117,987, df. 1, sig: .000

Political violence and gender

About twice as much boys (14.4% of all the boys in the data set) as girls (6.8% of all the girls in the dataset) reported to have already committed

⁶⁵ However, of all the acts of political violence, the majority was reported by Belgians. In case of political violence toward persons, 69.5% were Belgians and in case of political violence toward property, 60.2% were Belgian.

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political violence toward property. For political violence toward persons, these numbers are respectively 15.3% (boys) and 4.9% (girls)⁶⁶. Results are shown in table 7.

Table 7: Political violence according to gender

		Gender	
		Boy	Girl
PV property	Not reported	85.6% (1299)	93.2% (2729)
	Reported	14.4% (219)	6.8% (199)
	Total	100.0% (1518)	100.0% (2928)
PV persons	Not reported	84.7% (1285)	95.1% (2784)
	Reported	15.3% (232)	4.9% (143)
	Total	100.0% (1517)	100.0% (2927)

Pv property: chi: 68.335, df: 1, sig. .000; Pv persons: chi: 140, 081, df: 1, sig: .000

Political violence and the importance of religion

For political violence against property, we see that 15.1% of the respondents that find religion very important reported this behavior. For medium and low importance of religion, this number decreased to respectively 9.9% and 8.4%. For political violence against persons, the numbers lie even further apart with 21.2% for those that find religion very important and, respectively, 8.6% and 6.6% for those that find religion medium to low important. Here, we have to point out that the distribution looks different when we take the total number of offenses into account⁶⁷. These numbers can be found in table 8.

⁶⁶ If we compare this with the total number of political violence against persons, we see that indeed $\frac{3}{4}$ is committed by boys, or 61, 9%. However, political violence against property shows a different image. Boys and girls are equally guilty; about half of the offenses were reported by boys (52.4%) and the other half by girls (47.6%).

⁶⁷ For political violence against property only, 13.8% of all offenses were committed by the strongly religious, compared to 29.8% for medium religious and 56.3% for non-religious respondents. For political violence against persons, we see similar numbers.

Table 8: Political violence according to the importance of religion

		Importance of religion		
		not	average	very
PV property	Not reported	91.6% (2566)	90.1% (1139)	84.9% (325)
	Reported	8.4% (236)	9.9% (125)	15.1% (58)
	Total	100.0% (2802)	100.0% (1264)	100.0% (383)
PV persons	Not reported	93.4% (2616)	91.4% (1155)	78.8% (301)
	Reported	6.6% (186)	8.6% (108)	21.2% (81)
	Total	100.0% (2802)	100.0% (1263)	100.0% (382)

Pv property: chi: 18,302, df: 2, sig: .000; Pv persons: chi: 92,404, df: 2, sig: .000

Political violence and age

Concerning political violence against property, we see that 10.4% off all 18 year olds reported to be guilty of this offense, compared with 8.5% off all 19–22 year olds and 11% of all +22 year olds. For political violence against persons, these numbers are, respectively, 12.7%, 7.2%, and 5.6%. These numbers can be found in table 9.

Table 9: Political violence according to age

		Age		
		<18 years	19–22 years	>22 years
PV property	Not reported	89.6% (1069)	91.5% (2372)	89.0% (585)
	Reported	10.4% (124)	8.5% (220)	11.0% (72)
	Total	100.0% (1193)	100.0% (2592)	100.0% (657)
PV persons	Not reported	87.3% (1040)	92.8% (2406)	94.4% (620)
	Reported	12.7% (151)	7.2% (186)	5.6% (37)
	Total	100.0% (1191)	100.0% (2592)	100.0% (657)

Pv property: chi: 5,805, df: 2, sig: .055; Pv persons: chi: 39,821, df:2, sig: .000

8.3.2. Bivariate correlations

Bivariate correlations can give us an idea of the (non-explanatory) association between political violence and the independent variables. Although they do not indicate causal relationship, they can give an idea of what to look for and what to expect. The complete correlation matrixes can be found in Appendix 8.

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Table 10 gives an overview of the correlations between political violence and the different measures of exposure. These results seem to indicate already a difference in the influence of accidental exposure to extremist content using NSM (passive exposure) and deliberately looking up certain information (active exposure). Compared with passive exposure, the correlation between this last category and political violence, both toward persons and property, is much stronger. This indicates that active exposure is more important (or influential) in the explanation of political violence than passive exposure. Furthermore, there seems not to be a big difference in passive exposure coming from TM or NSM.

Table 10: Correlation matrix of political violence and exposure

	Political violence property	Political violence persons
Active searching contact	0.171**	0.150**
Online communication	0.421**	0.405**
Passive exposure NSM	0.157**	0.142**
Passive exposure TM	0.76**	0.045**

** significant at 0.01 level *significant at 0.05 level

Table 11 gives an overview of the correlations between political violence and the independent variables measuring strain, personal characteristics, poor social integration, and peer influences. The strongest correlations (>0.2) can be found for peer delinquency and extremist attitudes. The strong correlations between political violence and peer delinquency compared with other variables indicate that especially the presence of a delinquent peer group will be of importance in explaining both political violence toward property and toward persons. Extremist attitudes especially correlate strongly with political violence toward persons. Also, perceived discrimination and personality characteristics seem to correlate more strongly with political violence toward persons compared with that toward property.

Table 11: Correlation matrix of political violence and independent variables

	Political violence property	Political violence persons
Perceived procedural justice	-0.124**	-0.123**
Overall police legitimacy	-0.166**	-0.158**
Perceived personal respect	-0.116**	-0.124**
Perceived personal discrimination	0.144**	0.184**
Perceived group discrimination	0.161**	0.180**
Perceived powerlessness	0.036*	0.111**
Poor social integration	0.139**	0.157**
Thrill seeking	0.164**	0.164**
Impulsivity	0.122**	0.194**
Religious authoritarianism	0.109**	0.173**
Support for violent extremism	0.195**	0.247**
Racist friends	0.133**	0.189**
Delinquent friends	0.307**	0.311**

** significant at 0.01 level *significant at 0.05 level

8.3.3. Regression analysis

Since both dependent variables are highly skewed, these variables are dichotomized and binary logistic regression is used to get an insight into the independent effects of the independent variables (Lemeshow & Hosmer, 2000). These independent effects are presented as the net odds ratios (Exp B)⁶⁸.

8.3.3.1. Effects of active and passive exposure through NSM controlled for other risk factors

First, we estimate the effect of a series of independent variables in the likelihood of having committed political violence versus not having

⁶⁸ Odds ratios (Exp (B)) mirror the chance (or odds) that an individual scores positive on the dependent variable.

For categorical independent variables, they indicate the odds of political violence between a certain comparison category (coded 1) of the independent variable and a reference category (coded 0). An individual in the comparison category has x times more likelihood of committing political violence than an individual in the reference category. For metric variables, the odds ratio indicates the x rise in odds of political violence when the independent variable rises with 1 unit. An odds ratio >1 indicates positive effects (a rise in odds), while an odds ratio <1 indicates a negative effect (decline in odds). Odds ratios can be made easier to interpret by converting them to % using the following formula: $[(\text{Exp}(B)-1) \times 100\%]$. For example: an individual attending a religious service once a year has 1.030 times, or 3%, more likelihood of committing political violence compared with an individual never attending religious service.

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committed political violence. Various logistic regression models are presented, showing the net effects of indicators of NSM exposure, independent of demographic background variables and low social integration (model 1), variables indicating strain (model 2), personal characteristics (model 3), and measures of peer deviance (model 4). Model 5 presents all direct effects. The full results can be found in Appendix 6 and are elaborated upon in [Schils and Pauwels \(2014\)](#). For now, we only present the results of model 5. The results for political violence toward property and that toward persons are shown in table 12.

Table 12: Binary logistic regression analysis of political violence on ENSM controlling for other risk factors

	Political violence toward property	Political violence toward persons
	Model 5 Exp (B)	Model 5 Exp (B)
Active extremist contact NSM (ref: no)		
Yes	1.947***	1.306
Online communication extremism NSM (ref: no)		
Yes	3.061***	1.911**
Exposure extremism NSM (ref: low)		
Medium	1.109	1.455*
High	1.431***	2.102***
Exposure extremism TM (ref: low)		
Medium	1.219	0.961
High	1.335	0.759
Native background (ref: other)		
Belgian	0.965	0.611**
Gender (ref: women)		
men	1.476**	2.746***
Age (ref: -18)		
19-22	1.348*	0.899
22+	1.930**	0.751
Attending religious service (ref: never)		
1x year	1.030	1.123
2x year	1.119	1.067
1x month	1.243	1.139
1x a weak	0.820	0.720
Importance of religion	1.098	1.224*
Low social integration	1.091	1.236**
Police procedural justice	0.892	0.918
Perceived personal discrimination	0.915	1.121
Perceived group discrimination	1.304**	1.031
Overall police legitimacy	0.953	0.846*
Support for violent extremism	1.108	1.080

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Table 12: Binary logistic regression analysis of political violence on ENSM controlling for other risk factors (continued)

	Political violence toward property	Political violence toward persons
	Model 5 Exp (B)	Model 5 Exp (B)
Religious authoritarianism	0.980	1.073
Thrill seeking behavior	1.264**	0.978
Impulsivity	1.128	1.847***
Peer racism	0.968	1.193**
Peer delinquency	1.477***	1.325***
PCP	91.2%	92.2%
-2ll	2054.676	1742.396
Nagelkerke R ²	0.217	0.304

*** significant at 0.00 level ** significant at 0.01 level *significant at 0.05 level
Reference category = Low/0

Concerning *political violence toward property*, significant direct effects were still found for *active extremist contact NSM* (OR: 1.95), *online communication extremism NSM* (OR: 3.06), and *exposure extremism NSM* (OR high: 1.43). Of all statistical control variables, only gender (OR: 1.47) and age (OR oldest group: 1.93) remain significant. Furthermore, perceived group discrimination (OR: 1.30), thrill-seeking behavior (OR: 1.26) and peer delinquency (OR: 1.47) are significantly related to self-reported political violence toward property. Nagelkerke R-square reaches a value of 21.7%. The results of these analyses should be interpreted with care as these are mere regression coefficients that do not demonstrate causality, yet it is striking how strong the association between ENSM and self-reported political violence toward property is. Even when controlling for important background variables, variables indicating strain and even personality characteristics such as impulsivity and thrill-seeking behavior as well as attitudes such as authoritarianism and support for violent extremism and peer influences, the statistical association remains statistically significant and fairly constant. It should further be noted that the strongest effect comes from the variable measuring the *active* use of NSM for radical purposes (A-ENSM)⁶⁹. For the more passive measures of ENSM (P-ENSM), only the

⁶⁹ A-ENSM refers to the measures of exposure through NSM that are more active in nature: active extremist contact NSM and online communication extremist NSM. P-ENSM refers to the measure of exposure through NSM that are more passive in nature: Exposure extremism NSM.

highest category of *exposure extremism NSM* remains significant. Surprisingly, support for violent extremism shows no significant effect.

Concerning *political violence toward persons*, *online communication extremism NSM* (OR: 1.91) and *exposure extremism NSM* (OR medium: 1.46; OR high: 2.10) still show significant positive effects. Of all the statistical control variables, native background (OR: 0.61), gender (OR: 2.75), and importance of religion (OR: 1.22) have a significant statistical effect on self-reported political violence toward persons. Also, low social integration still has a direct significant effect (OR: 1.24). Of the variables indicating strain, only overall police legitimacy (OR: 0.85) seems to be significantly related to the independent variable. Finally, the same can be said of impulsivity (OR: 1.85), peer racism (OR: 1.19), and peer delinquency (OR: 1.33). Similar to the analysis of political violence toward property, a strong association between ENSM and political violence toward persons remains present even after controlling for background variables, variables indicating strain, peer delinquency, and personality characteristics. However, it can be noted that contrary to the previous analysis, the effect of A-ENSM seems to decrease when controlling for all the other variables in the model, while the effects of P-ENSM remain constant. In this final model, support for violent extremism has no significant effect. Nagelkerke R^2 is 30%.

In sum, the following should be remembered from these results. **First**, we clearly see that different measures of exposure to violent extremism through NSM are related to political violence. The relationship between these measures and political violence is strong and continuous to exist even when controlling for measures derived from rival theoretical explanations. This is true for both active measure of exposure as well as passive measures of exposure. However, it appears that active measures of NSM exposure (especially online extremist communication) are more consistently related to political violence than the more passive modality of exposure. In other words, passive ENSM cannot be disregarded when explaining political violence but the strongest and most influential effects can be expected from active ENSM, especially when actively and deliberately engaging in direct communication with other extremist using NSM. **Second**, offline associations with peers with racist attitudes and delinquent peers are also strongly related to political violence, implying that we must not forget that harmful and influential exposure does not come from NSM and the internet only. Other

offline sources of exposure, such as peers, are of extreme importance as well. **Third**, the offline world and individual experiences in it stay important in providing relevant strains, facilitating radicalization into violent extremism. In other words, it is likely that the causes of the causes are still located in the real world. **Finally**, the individual and the presence of certain characteristics must be taken into account when assessing the influence of ENSM. Both have an effect on political violence, suggesting a possible interaction. This is in line with SAT that states that interaction between propensity and exposure will determine the perception choice process explaining action.

8.3.3.2. Effects of propensity and exposure through NSM controlled for the causes of the causes

For the analysis of the risk scales, in order to test the influence of the individual elements of the integrated model⁷⁰ explaining political violence, we relied on logistic regression.

First, a logistic analysis was conducted with poor social integration, perceived discrimination, subjective alienation, propensity, and total active NSM exposure and passive NSM exposure as two separate independent variables. The results can be found in table 13. For political violence toward persons, we see positive direct effects of all risk scales, both the ones measuring emergence (OR poor social integration: 1.36; OR perceived discrimination: 1.34; OR subjective alienation), propensity (OR: 1.5), and exposure (OR medium passive exposure: 1.46, OR high passive exposure: 1.98, OR medium total active exposure: 1.37, OR high total active exposure: 4.15). This indicates that the chance of being involved in political violence toward persons rises as higher levels of ENSM are experienced. This is true for passive exposure and even more so for active exposure. Roughly the same results can be found for political violence toward property. All risk scales have positive significant effects on political violence toward property (OR poor social integration: 1.20; OR subjective alienation: 1.19; OR propensity: 1.34, OR medium passive exposure: 1.83; OR medium total active exposure: 2.71; OR high total active exposure 6.29) except for perceived discrimination and the medium measurement of passive exposure. This indicates that

⁷⁰ As can be seen in figure 9, we included propensity and different measures of NSM exposure as elements of exposure and poor social integration, subjective alienation, and perceived discrimination as elements of emergence.

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individuals who experience medium levels of passive exposure to extremist content through NSM are no more at risk of political violence against property than individuals that only experience low levels of ENSM.

However, what should be remembered is that the influence of total active NSM exposure is far more important in the explanation of political violence than the effect of passive NSM exposure. The OR for the highest measure of total active exposure is twice as big as the OR for the highest measure of passive exposure for political violence toward persons and even three times as big for political violence toward property. For example, individuals experiencing high levels of total active exposure have 6.29 times more change of committing political violence toward property than individuals only experiencing low levels of total active exposure. For high levels of passive exposure, this is only 4.15 times more likely than individuals experiencing only low levels of passive exposure. The strong effect of active exposure also implies the importance of individual propensity. (In order to actively search for information, one has to be interested in the subject; or in other words, have a propensity toward the subject.) This in line with previous research we discussed earlier: 1) on NSM and political participation that suggest that youth actively use NSM as a tool to pursue their political interests⁷¹ and 2) on media and violent behavior and attitudes that suggest that the effect of (passive) exposure to violent media content has only small and marginal effects on behavior and attitudes and that these effects are most likely dependent on individual factors⁷².

⁷¹ See paragraph 2.

⁷² See paragraph 4.

Table 13: Binary logistic regression analysis of political violence on active/passive ENSM controlling for causes of the causes

	Political violence toward persons	Political violence toward property
	Exp (B)	Exp (B)
Poor social integration	1.361***	1.204**
Perceived discrimination	1.136*	1.108 NS
Subjective alienation	1.334***	1.193
Propensity	1.497***	1.343***
Passive exposure low	Ref	Ref
Passive exposure medium	1.462*	1.230 NS
Passive exposure high	1.976***	1.832***
Total active exposure low	Ref	Ref
Total active exposure medium	1.365*	2.714***
Total active exposure high	4.146***	6.293***
PCP	92.2%	91.1%
-2ll	2000.012	2341.141
Nagelkerke R ²	0.257	0.169

*** significant at 0.00 level ** significant at 0.01 level *significant at 0.05 level

Reference category = Low/0

Second, the effect of poor social integration, perceived discrimination, subjective alienation, propensity, and overall NSM exposure (combining total active NSM exposure and passive NSM exposure) on political violence was assessed, again using a logistic analysis. The results can be found in table 14. We see similar results as for the previous analysis. For political violence toward persons, this means positive direct effects of poor social integration (OR: 1.36), perceived discrimination (OR: 1.14), propensity (OR: 1.50), and exposure (OR medium overall exposure: 2.04; OR high overall exposure 2.6; OR very high overall exposure: 7.52). For political violence toward property, this means direct positive effects of poor social integration (OR: 1.22), subjective alienation (OR: 1.21), propensity (OR: 1.36), and exposure (OR medium overall exposure: 1.81; OR high overall exposure: 4.59; OR: very high overall exposure: 13.16).

What is noticeable here is that the effects of overall exposure remain more or less constant over different levels of overall exposure but rise exponentially for the highest measurement of overall exposure. Where the odds ratio for individuals experiencing high levels of overall exposure is only 2.60 for political violence toward persons, this

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becomes 7.52 for individuals experiencing very high levels of overall exposure. For political violence toward property, the odds ratios are even further apart, with 4.6 for individuals experiencing high levels of overall exposure and 13.16 for individuals experiencing very high levels of overall exposure. Furthermore, there are only very low rates for the lower and medium levels of overall exposure, the OR for low level of overall exposure not even being significant. These results offer new insights compared with those provided by previously discussed research on media and violent behavior and attitudes⁷³. Those studies do not address the level of exposure, but instead suggest a linear effect. Our results show that this is not the case and that the influence of media exposure is, on the contrary, exponential.

Table 14: Binary logistic regression analysis of political violence on overall ENSM controlling for causes of the causes

	Political violence toward persons	Political violence toward property
	Exp (B)	Exp (B)
Poor social integration	1.360***	1.216***
Perceived discrimination	1.137*	1.107
Subjective alienation	1.336***	1.207**
Propensity	1.500***	1.355***
Overall exposure very low	Ref	Ref
Overall exposure low	1.310 NS	1.181 NS
Overall exposure medium	2.037***	1.814***
Overall exposure high	2.597***	4.594***
Overall exposure very high	7.519***	13.162***
PCP	92.0	91.0
-2ll	2001.752	2347.732
Nagelkerke R ²	0.256	0.166

*** significant at 0.00 level ** significant at 0.01 level *significant at 0.05 level
Reference category = Low/0

⁷³ See chapter 4.

8.3.4. *Testing for the interaction between propensity and exposure to extremist content*

Next, the model was tested for the interaction between the individual and the environment. In other words, the model was tested for the core assumption of SAT, that is, exposure (to extremist settings) and propensity (to violent extremism) are the direct causes of action and that their interaction sets the main explanatory mechanism (perception–choice process) in motion. The existence of this interaction was already indicated in the previous analysis. An OLS regression was performed with overall political violence as the independent variable and extremist propensity, total active exposure, and their interaction as the independent variables. In order to study the interaction effects, the independent variables are standardized to minimize problems of multicollinearity (Aiken & West, 1991). Table 15 shows the results for the full dataset. The interaction between propensity and exposure for subgroups on gender and native background can be found in Appendix 7.

Table 15: OLS regression analysis. The interaction between propensity and exposure

	B	Beta	SE
Exposure to extremist moral settings (total active exposure)	0.323	0.132***	0.042
Propensity to extremism	0.355	0.120***	0.042
Interaction term	0.428	0.243***	0.030
R ² *100	13.7***		

*, p < 0.05, **, p < 0.01, ***, p < 0.001

From this table, we see that 13% of the variance in overall political violence is explained by both independent variables and the interaction effect. Furthermore, both total active exposure (Beta = 0.132) and propensity (Beta = 0.120) have significant independent positive effects on overall political violence. These effects are more or less the same in size. This means that both a higher propensity and a higher active exposure will independently lead to higher rates of overall political violence. More importantly, the interaction term also appears to have a significant, rather strong, and positive effect on overall political violence (Beta = 0.243). This means that the positive effect of active ENSM will rise (with a factor of 0.243) if propensity rises with 1 (standardized) unit. In other words, the effects of active exposure on overall political violence will be stronger for individuals with a high

extremist propensity. If we compare the standardized coefficients⁷⁴ (Beta) for the interaction term and propensity and exposure, it can be concluded that the interaction between propensity and exposure has twice as much effect on overall political violence as either exposure or propensity independently. The interaction effect is unaffected for demographic background variables (see Appendix 7).

These results can also be seen on the accompanying regression lines that are shown in figure 10. In this figure, we can clearly see the independent effects of both extremist propensity⁷⁵ and total active exposure⁷⁶ on overall political violence but also the interaction between both⁷⁷. Figure 11 presents a more intuitive visualization that shows the observed values (group/category means) for extremist propensity and total active exposure plotted against each other on overall political violence⁷⁸. From this figure, we can make a fourth observation, namely, the effect of active ENSM seems to be exponential at the end. This means that active exposure remains unproblematic (indicating low corresponding measures of overall political violence) until a certain point in time, even for those with a high propensity for violent extremism. After this breakpoint, the effect of (active) ENSM rises exponentially for medium and high propensity. For low or no propensity, the effect becomes negative. This also confirms our previous analysis.

⁷⁴ Standardized coefficients or beta coefficients are the estimates resulting from an analysis carried out on independent variables that have been standardized so that their variances are 1. Therefore, standardized coefficients refer to how many standard deviations a dependent variable (political violence) will change per standard deviation increase in the predictor variable (e.g., propensity). Standardization of the coefficient is also done to answer the question of which of the independent variables have greater effect. This is not possible using the unstandardized coefficients, whose interpretation relies on the unit of measurement of the independent variable.

⁷⁵ High measures of propensity (orange line) score much higher overall political violence than medium (blue) and low (green) measures of propensity, independently of total active exposure.

⁷⁶ Higher measures of total active exposure mean higher levels of overall political violence for all measures of propensity; low, medium, and high. All lines, orange, blue, and green, rise

⁷⁷ The higher the level of exposure, the stronger the effects of total active exposure on overall political violence. The orange line rises much more steeply than the green or blue line.

⁷⁸ The image for the interaction between overall exposure and propensity and passive exposure and propensity can be found in Appendix 7. These figures show the same general interaction effect between propensity and exposure.

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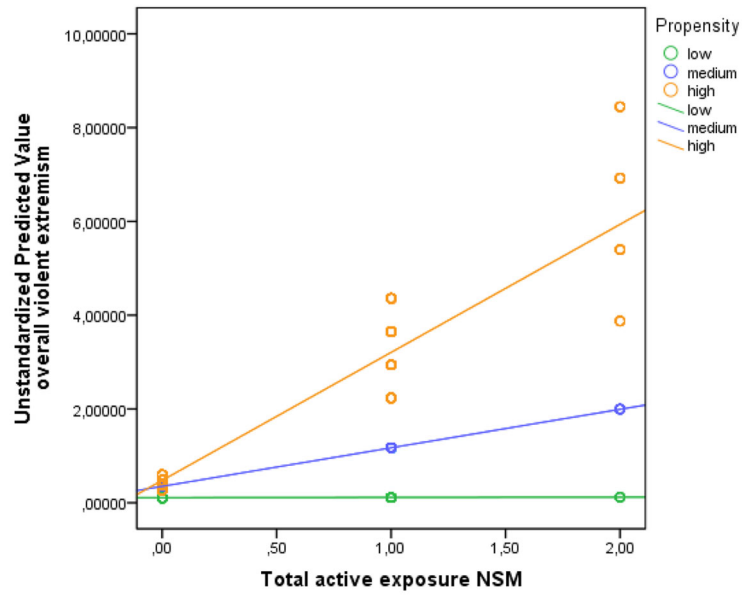


Figure 10: Regression lines for the interaction between propensity and exposure on overall political violence for the total dataset

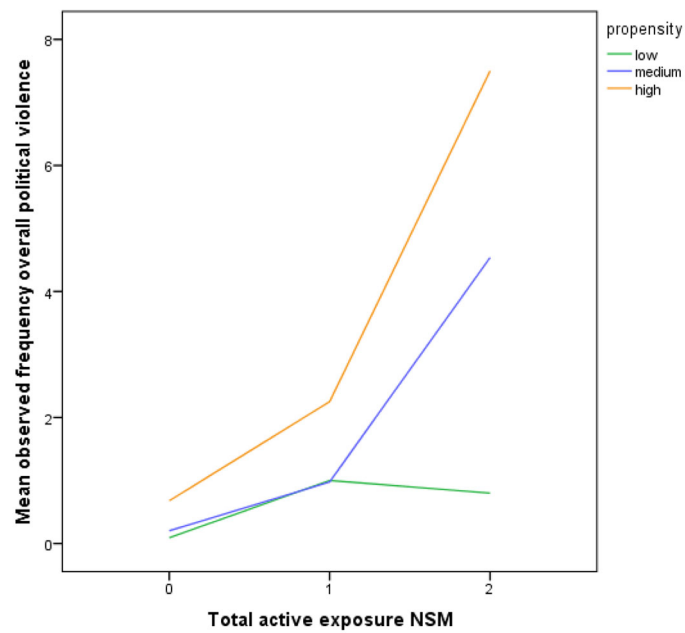


Figure 11: Interaction between propensity and exposure (group/category means)

The key findings from these results are the following:

- a. Propensity has a direct positive effect on political violence, independent of total active exposure. This means that individuals with a high propensity toward violent extremism have a higher chance of committing political violence, independent of the level of extremist exposure. This is in line with the previous analysis.
- b. Total active exposure has a direct positive effect on political violence, independent of propensity. In other words, individuals that experience a higher level of (total active) exposure to extremist content through NSM have a higher chance of committing political violence, independent of propensity. This means that everybody experiences an effect of ENSM, whether or not this person has a high propensity toward political violence. This is also in line with our previous analysis.
- c. We also see a clear interaction effect between propensity and total active exposure. This means that the effect of (total active) ENSM is much stronger for individuals with a high propensity for violent extremism. This confirms the core assumption of SAT.
- d. Finally, the figure clearly shows the effect of (total active) exposure to be exponential at the end, meaning that high levels of active exposure have a much stronger effect on overall political violence relative to the fairly low and stable effects of medium and low active exposure.

It is important to note that the observed interaction between extremist propensity and (active) ENSM remains in place for subgroups by gender and native background. This is elaborated upon by [Schils, Dewaele and Pauwels \(forthcoming\)](#). The results of this analysis can be found in Appendix 7.

8.3.5. *The integrated model*

Finally, the model as a whole was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) or path analysis. SEM offers the opportunity to explore the extent to which a specific theoretical model can explain the relations between the observed variables. The previous analysis showed both the 1) influence and interaction of propensity and exposure and 2) the importance of the offline world (emergence). Because

these analyses only show the direct effects of all these elements on political violence, it is not clear in which order they must be placed. Does the sequence of influences follow the integrated model or not? In order to verify this, a series of path models was executed using the statistical program Mplus. Mplus was used for the following reasons. First, a path analysis allows to simultaneously test for multiple independent variables with different measurement levels. This makes it possible to simultaneously determine which variables directly affect political violence (dichotomous) and extremist propensity and NSM exposure (metrical) and thus determine the direct causes and the causes of the causes. Second, the statistical program SPSS used for the other analyses does not allow for path models with a dichotomous independent variable.

The integrated model specifies a number of routes leading to political violence, which are tested using path analysis. Therefore, the integrated model also forms the testable model, as can be seen in figure 12. The basic idea is to gain an insight into the magnitude of the direct effects of all exogenous variables on all endogenous variables. The exogenous variables are low social integration and perceived discrimination. Subjective alienation, propensity, overall exposure, and political violence are treated as endogenous variables. Political violence is the ultimate dependent variable in the present study. Based on this model, the following hypotheses can be distilled.

- H1 Subjective alienation from society can be explained by low social integration and perceived discrimination.
- H2 Propensity can be explained by subjective alienation and exposure.
- H2a Given hypothesis 1, there will be an effect of poor social integration and perceived discrimination through subjective alienation on propensity.
- H3 Overall exposure can be explained by subjective alienation.
- H3a Given hypothesis 1, there will be an effect of poor social integration and perceived discrimination through subjective alienation on exposure.
- H4 Political violence can be explained by propensity.
- H4a Relative to propensity, the effect of exposure on political violence will be stronger.

H4b Given hypotheses 1, 2, and 3, there will be an effect of poor social integration and perceived discrimination through subjective alienation, propensity, and overall exposure on political violence.

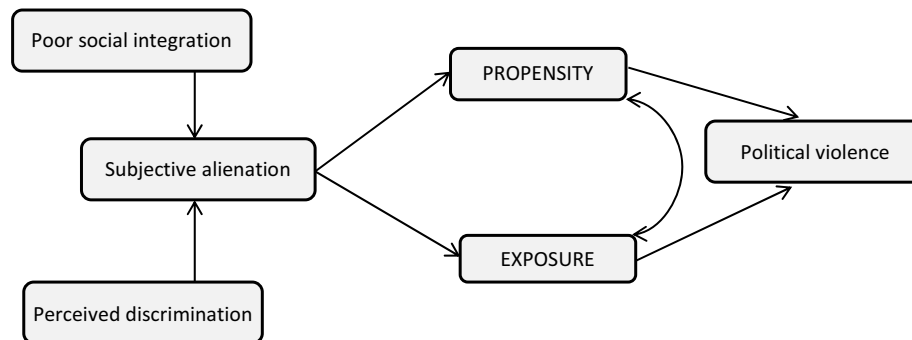


Figure 12: Testable path model

Several models were run to test the relationship between the variables. We expected that subjective alienation would be explained by poor social integration and perceived discrimination. We also expected that subjective alienation would be the main mediator in explaining propensity, exposure, and political violence, whereas we expected propensity and exposure to have a direct impact on political violence. The best fitting model is shown in figure 13. The observed data are in line with our theoretical model. We found strong evidence that propensity and exposure form the direct causes of political violence, whereas poor social integration, perceived discrimination, and subjective alienation form the causes of the causes that influence political violence through propensity and exposure.

The connections between the variables show the direct significant effects. The effects of perceived discrimination, low social integration, and overall distrust on overall propensity and the effect of overall propensity on overall exposure should be interpreted as Beta coefficients⁷⁹. (Overall distrust, overall propensity, and overall exposure as dependent variables are metrical). The effects of overall propensity and overall exposure on political violence should be interpreted as log

⁷⁹ See note 74.

odds⁸⁰. (Political violence toward persons and property as dependent variables are dichotomous).

The findings show that individuals who perceive higher levels of discrimination also experience higher levels of alienation from society (Beta = 0.39). Likewise, we also see a positive but less strong effect of poor social integration on subjective alienation (Beta = 0.18). This means that individuals who are less anchored in society, experience higher levels of subjective alienation. The results thus endorse our first hypothesis (H1). Second, the findings show a direct, moderate, positive effect of subjective alienation on propensity (Beta = 0.27), meaning that individuals who experience higher levels of alienation from society will also be more inclined toward violent extremism. This confirms our second hypotheses (H2 and H2a). However, we also see a, although rather small, positive effects of poor social integration and perceived discrimination on propensity. This means that poor social integration and perceived discrimination not only have an effect on propensity through subjective alienation but also directly influence propensity. Individuals experiencing higher levels of low social integration (Beta = 0.13) and/or perceived discrimination (0.18) are more inclined toward violent extremism compared with individuals who perceive low levels of discrimination or poor social integration.

Third, the results show no direct effect of subjective alienation on overall exposure. Thus, our results do not endorse our third hypotheses (H3 and H3a). On the other hand, we see direct positive effect of propensity on exposure (Beta = 0.18) but not the other way around. This means higher levels of extremist propensity will lead to higher levels of exposure to extremist content through NSM. These results reconfirm the theoretical suspicion that the search for extremist information is predated by the formation of an extremist propensity instead of extremist propensity being formed under the influence of extremist exposure. Put differently, it is unlikely that individuals that have no interest in violent extremism will develop extremist attitudes (leading to political violence) under the influence of exposure to violent

⁸⁰ Log odds reflect the increase in the change in the dependent variable (commit political violence vs not commit political violence) with respect to the value of the independent variable. The higher the value of the log odds, the larger the effect. A positive value indicates a positive effect, while a negative value indicates a negative effect. For example, the value of the effect of overall propensity on political violence is 0.32 for every unit rise (1 std) in overall distrust, and the change to commit political violence versus not to commit political violence rises with 0.27.

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extremism through NSM. Furthermore, low social integration and perceived discrimination have an effect on exposure through propensity instead of through subjective alienation. Fourth, the results indicate that both propensity (log odds = 0.32) and exposure (log odds = 0.21) have moderate, positive effects on political violence toward persons. The same can be said for political violence toward property (log odds propensity = 0.23; log odds exposure = 0.25). This means that individuals with higher levels of extremist propensity and/or higher levels of exposure to violent extremism through NSM are more at risk of committing acts of political violence than individuals with low levels of propensity and/or exposure. Thus, our fourth hypotheses are endorsed by our data (H4, H4a, and H4b).

In summary, the three variables measuring “emergence” indeed only have indirect positive effects on political violence through propensity. In other words, the model largely confirms our theoretical model. It thus also confirms that 1) the direct causes of political violence are propensity and exposure and 2) the other variables defined as risk factors in the preface of violent radicalization are not causes of political violence, but causes of the causes, exerting their influence through propensity and exposure.

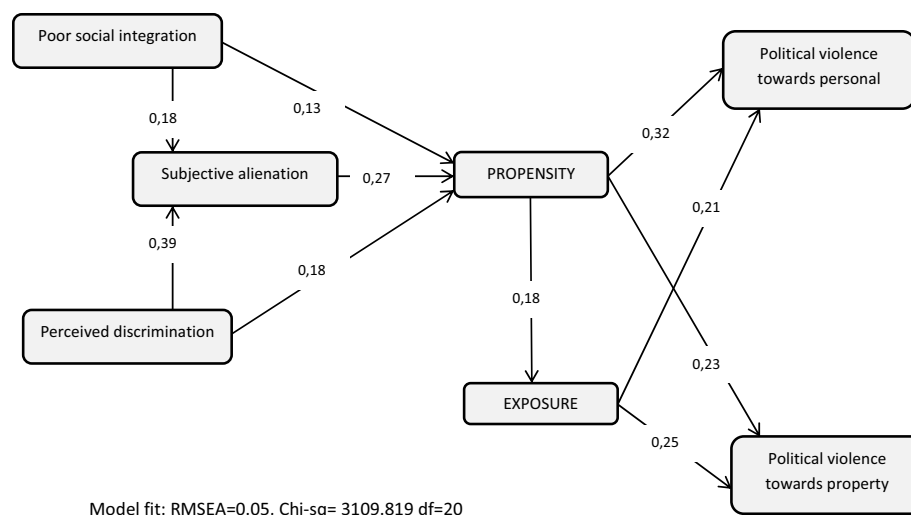


Figure 13: Path model of political violence

8.3.6. Summary of results

These results can be summarized as follows:

1. *It must be kept in mind that next to ENSM, real-world/offline exposure (e.g., peers) is equally important.*
2. *Especially active ENSM is of importance. The effect of deliberately sought after extremist information and propaganda is much stronger than the effect of the same information and propaganda that one encounter accidentally.*
3. *The effect of ENSM rises exponentially for very high rates of exposure. This means that the biggest danger lies with repeated and constant ENSM compared with low or medium rates of exposure.*
4. *There is an interaction between individual propensity to violent extremism and exposure to violent extremism through NSM. ENSM will have a much stronger effect on individuals with an already strong extremist attitude compared with individuals with only a low or medium extremist attitude.*
5. *Until a certain level, the effect of ENSM is not problematic, irrespective of the level of propensity and exposure. However, after a certain breakpoint, this effect rises exponentially. This means that although ENSM always has an influence on individuals, it is not worth panicking over small levels of ENSM (even when active) because they only result in a very small rise in political violence. Of course, the challenge is to determine where the breakpoint lies in reality.*

8.4. Conclusion

The idea that exposure is something static has to be abandoned. Exposure and, more specifically, **exposure through NSM differ in intensity, frequency, and self-selection**. This means exposure is not the same for everybody. In other words, given equal propensity (or extremist attitudes), the effect of NSM exposure differs depending on its nature. This is shown in figure 14. Figure 14 also shows that the group that is sporadically, at a low intensity, exposed to violent extremism is much bigger than the group that looks deliberately for certain information and is frequently, at a high intensity, exposed to violent extremism through NSM. It seems logical that especially this last, very small group is at a danger for violent radicalization, violent extremism, and political violence.

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Figure 14: Exposure according to intensity, frequency, and self-selection

The effect of ENSM is not a linear effect. Traditional research into the effects of media exposure on behavior and attitudes is too static. It assumes that exposure, e.g., violent television shows, is followed by a process of social learning, leading directly and invariably to certain behavior such as violence. Our results show that the interaction between the individual and its already existing propensity toward certain behavior, in this case violent extremism, has to be taken into account. In case of equal exposure, the effect of exposure differs according to propensity. Individuals already displaying a strong acceptance of violent extremism/political violence will experience a stronger influence of ENSM, both active and passive. Furthermore, the aspect of self-selection is also important. Images, propaganda, information, etc., that are deliberately sought after will have a stronger effect than the same information one encounters accidentally. This means that the same ENSM (the same content with the same intensity and frequency) will have a different effect on different individuals depending on self-selection and the level of propensity to violent extremism. This is shown in figure 15.

Based on the criteria discussed in the previous section, self-selection and propensity to violent extremism, **the “danger” of ENSM can be ranked.** This is shown in figure 16. For individuals with a low propensity to violent extremism, the risks of ENSM, both passive and active, are relatively low, and are no cause of concern. On the contrary, ENSM might hold a risk for individuals with an already high propensity toward violent extremism. This risk rises exponentially in

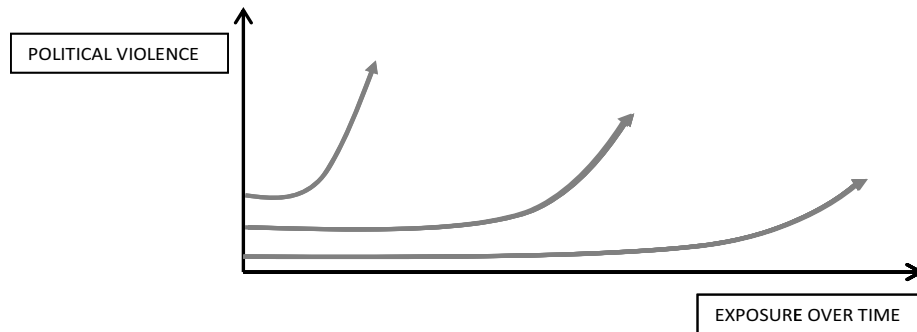


Figure 15: Effects of exposure dependent on propensity and self-selection

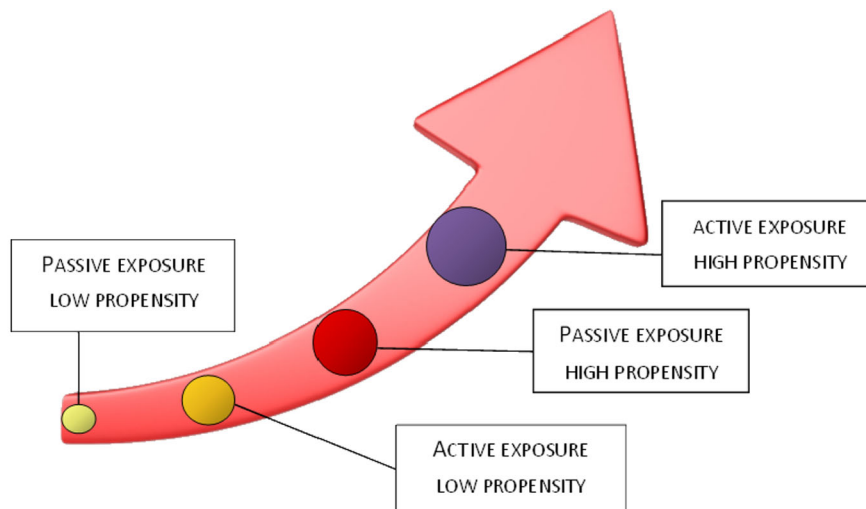


Figure 16: Classification of exposure

the case of active ENSM. Thus, individuals most at risk of further radicalization into violent extremism are those holding high propensity toward violent extremism and actively seeking out extremist content through NSM.

Different virtual settings give access to different levels of exposure and determine the kind of exposure individuals undergo. This makes **virtual exposure part of the virtual lifestyle of youth**. Propensity and self-selection determine the kind of websites and virtual spaces that individuals visit and these in turn determine the intensity, frequency,

and nature of the exposure they undergo. We can make a distinction between passive virtual settings and active virtual settings. Passive virtual settings are formed by websites that target a certain population; e.g., youth of Moroccan descend, but who are not extremist in nature or intention. However, these populations can be of interest for extremist groups and it is possible that they will be present on these websites by posting videos, participating in discussions, etc. This way, the youth visiting these websites are at risk of being exposed to extremist content. However, because this would be passive exposure, aimed at youth with a probably low or medium propensity to violent extremism, it is unlikely to have much effect.

Active virtual settings are formed by websites and forums that are extremist in nature. Often they are secured and not freely accessible. Young people visiting these websites probably already have strong extremist attitudes and have actively looked for this information and access to these websites. In this case, the effect of exposure would be much bigger.

The present study has some limitations that need to be taken into account (Singer, 2009). First of all, there still remain some attributes or markers that show a significant effect on political violence both toward property and persons. This means that not all underlying mechanisms explaining violent extremism are incorporated in this study. Second, the present study is based on an analysis of cross-sectional data and these data do not allow addressing questions of causal ordering. This is an important limitation as there are competing explanations for the existence of a relationship between online exposure to violent extremism and offline differential associations with extremist groups, on the one hand, and political violence, on the other hand. Recent research on adolescent offending seems to find that selection effects are stronger than socialization effects (Weerman, 2011). The selection hypothesis suggests that population heterogeneity is responsible for the observed correlation, i.e., extremist youth select extremist peers in the real and virtual worlds and are therefore selectively exposed to extremist content online. Proponents of self-control theory (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) would argue that low self-control is responsible for the observed correlation between exposure and political violence, yet the relationship exists even when controlling for self-control and other individual characteristics.

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In the past decade, we have witnessed a growing body of longitudinal studies of offending under the impulse of life-course criminology. Studies of political violence would definitely contribute to the field as they are able to unfold the development of individuals' involvement in political violence. Developmental studies could unravel questions such as how people become exposed to extremist moral settings and how they develop certain propensities to political violence (such as moral support for extremist violence and religious authoritarianism).

9. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF NSM IN RADICALIZATION TOWARD VIOLENT EXTREMISM

9.1. Introduction

The qualitative part of the RADIMED research aims at exploring the experiences of (young) adults who are engaged in a radicalization process in order to gain a larger scope on what could explain why some people engage in political violence and why some others do not. One of our concerns is to reveal the conditions under which radicalization (into violent extremism) may have been influenced by the use of the internet and especially NSM. In order to map the associated psychological and social processes, we articulated our research via the following questions:

What is the level of violence acceptance?

How does it differ between individuals?

What could explain this difference?

Is the internet a factor of radicalization?

Qualitative research methods are appropriate for particular types of research. They can convey richness and intensity of details (answering questions of meaning, who is affected (by the issue) and why, what factors are involved, etc.) in a way that quantitative research cannot. In a way, qualitative data is responding to a “bottom-up” logic of *understanding* a specific issue. Qualitative methods serve to provide a bigger picture of a situation or an issue and can inform our understanding of that issue in an accessible way. Qualitative research usefully completes a quantitative approach that treats the same issue in a “top-down” logic. Each method can compensate for the other’s weaknesses and complement each other’s strengths.

9.2. Methodology

In order to reveal the psychological and social processes associated with (violent) radicalization, the life story interview was deemed a good fit for this qualitative, exploratory study. The life story interview is a methodological approach to understand not only people’s general

biography but also experiences specific to the domain in their lives (Lawthom, Clough & Moore, 2004). Accordingly, our aim is to explore, via life narratives, the extent to which technological applications, such as the internet and NSM, impinge upon people's radicalization process, more specifically, upon the lives of individuals who are willing to engage in violent political actions.

As part of this research, the method of analysis recommended to treat qualitative data is the **grounded theory** developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This inductive method seeks to bring out "*empirically based theories from social phenomena about which few analysis has been articulated*" (Laperriere, 1997, p. 310). The analytical approach is therefore a theoretical interpretation, rather than a descriptive approach. This leads to a theoretical understanding of a phenomenon.

In order for a theory based on empiricism to be applicable to other situations, it must meet certain criteria to remain true to the everyday reality of a specific area before claiming to explain wider areas, be understandable to those involved in the phenomenon, and be sufficiently abstract (Strauss & Corbin, 1991, p 23). This precaution is common practice for any future application of this grounded theory and requires an adaptation to the context or rework it so that its explanatory power can be extended.

That being said, we point out that the grounded theory is used here as a *method* to analyze the interviews conducted for this research. The theoretical model previously developed by the research team was then confronted with the analysis of these qualitative data. Therefore, the general analysis is at the intersection of the inductive approach (*grounded method*) and deductive approach. Empirical evidence is used to further support and develop the theoretical model to make it as relevant as possible (supremacy of field data).

9.3. Data research

Identification of respondents by the target profile was conducted over a period from March 2013 to November 2013. After this period, a total of 14 interviews (6 conducted in Wallonia and Brussels and 8 conducted in Flanders) were deemed relevant and used for research purposes. Certain difficulties, both scientific and practical, have been encountered by the research team (*see below*).

9.3.1. *Profile of target group*

The three extremist trends discussed in this research are left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism, and religious extremism (Muslim). Within these trends, the profile of the target group was originally drafted as follows: **preferably young people between 16 and 25 years (or more) who have radical to extremist convictions and are involved online and/or offline in a radical or extremist group (or not).**

Actually, it is rather difficult to determine who is “extremist enough” and who is not, as it is a subjective approach. In order to find respondents, the research’s main focus is on young people who are active in movements other than the dominant political trends, and holding potential for violent extremism. For left-wing extremists, these are, e.g., Marxist or anarchist movements. For right-wing extremists, those are, among others, movements known as “White Power” movements. For religious extremism (Muslim), these are movements that want to establish the Shariah law, etc. However, a young person active in one of those movements and/or defending some strong political views that deviate from mainstream ones is not necessarily an “extremist.” Thus, different profiles ranging from radicals through genuine extremists have been incorporated in this study. This allowed to study different pathways of radicalization and to compare the role of NSM within them. Having different profiles is therefore not a problem, since the purpose of the qualitative part is to develop a more nuanced understanding of the whole process of radicalization.

9.3.2. *Means*

The main means used to find people matching our profile were as follows.

- Websites, forums, Facebook pages, blogs, etc.⁸¹
- Word of mouth
- Call for candidates via the listing collected during the online survey
- Letters sent to mosques in Wallonia and Flanders

⁸¹ These various websites, forums, etc., were not limited to platforms that have been set up by an extremist person or a group. They also comprised general forums with the objective of being a place for expressing political (radical) ideas, but without extremist intent.

- Using key contacts, who facilitate contact with respondents
- Snowball effect

Most respondents were contacted through key contacts. Only three respondents were successfully contacted on forums or websites online. Attempts led through the online survey yielded two additional interviews.

9.3.3. *Difficulties*

The research team encountered some difficulties during the search for respondents. These are mentioned below in no specific order.

- For the purpose of the research, which is related to a particularly sensitive subject for some people, it would have been preferable to perform long-term field work in order to increase the chances of interviewing significant individuals. In addition, the political context has not always allowed a neutral approach regarding issues of violent extremism or even radicalization. The recent events regarding young Belgian fighters in Syria has created an atmosphere of suspicion and fear among some Muslim people who were approached during this search. Relations between the Muslim community and the non-Muslim community have been regularly stretched in recent years and this has not facilitated the research process when it came to establishing a relationship of trust.
- This often went hand in hand with some suspicion about the scientific approach in itself. People did not always see their “direct interest” in participating in our project. It was therefore not easy to convince them of the benefits of taking part in it.
- Contacts found online via websites or Facebook pages are not always inclined to switch to “offline” mode to participate in an interview. Some are very reluctant to the idea. This is mainly explained by the anonymity guaranteed by online interaction, which would not be present in case of face to face interaction.
- Using the internet and social media as a tool to find respondents is time consuming. Consulting the multitude of potential sources is a very long-term process and would require a whole team dedicated to this task alone. The Facebook platform only offers quick easy service and free accessibility to all. The number of pages available online is virtually impossible to review in its entirety.

9.4. Interviewing method

The main research technique used to obtain the data necessary to develop the theory was the **semi-structured interview** technique. Using interview techniques, we were able to focus on the subjective experiences of the respondents to determine their definitions of their situations of radicalization and concrete elements that may explain this process. Respondents were asked to discuss various topics and encouraged to tell their stories in their own words. Using a topic list, the interviewer guided the interview to ensure that relevant research topics were well-covered during the conversation.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face (except for one interview conducted online by means of a Facebook account created for research purposes and two interviews “enriched” by e-mail) and have been recorded on a dictaphone before being transcribed. On average, the interviews took one hour and a half. Each respondent was reminded of the objectives of the research process, the practicalities of the interview, and their right to anonymity.

There were no major difficulties during the interviews. These were conducted on a voluntary basis, where the respondents were cooperative and willing to answer the questions. Some insisted that their remarks would not get outside the scope of the research, but agreed to have their names listed, while others had no such restriction. Some respondents (mainly RWE) insisted that their anonymity should be well-respected. Others (also RWE) insisted that the interview should take place online because of the convenience and in order to avoid complications related to making face-to-face appointments.

9.5. Sample size

Research projects using qualitative measures have smaller sample sizes than quantitative studies. This in itself leads to a different approach when it comes to utilizing the data collected. As Gifford (1996 p. 59) points out in her paper on qualitative research: *“While the computer has greater assisted investigators in managing large volumes of data, the core of qualitative analysis is interpretation.”* An overview of the distribution of the respondents according to different criteria can be found in table 16.

Table 16: Distribution of respondents according to different criteria (gender, residence, age)

	Men	Women	Flanders	Wallonia	Brussels	<30 y.o.	>30 y.o.
<i>Left-wing extremism</i>	4	2	4	-	2	6	-
<i>Right-wing extremism</i>	6	-	4	1	1	4	2
<i>Religious extremism</i>	2	-	-	1	1	-	2
TOTAL	12	2	8	2	4	10	4

The larger sampling available to quantitative research methods enables findings to be generalized from the research sample to the entire population. In qualitative research, such generalizability is not a relevant criterion. Qualitative research seeks to deal with human experience and as such is more concerned with transferability as a way of validating findings. For this research, a relevant sample is that which includes persons involved in different degrees and oriented toward left-wing extremism (LWE), right-wing extremism (RWE), and religious extremism (RE), mainly Muslim.

9.6. Strategic variables

The core strategic variable of this research divides our sample on the axis of political and ideological orientations. A second strategic variable, the level of involvement, was taken into account in order to contrast the analysis.

9.6.1. Ideological orientation

In order to obtain a broad view on the radicalization process into violence, the qualitative research has embodied three ideological orientations: left-wing extremism, right-wing extremism, and religious extremism. Those three orientations were chosen in order to avoid the risk of partitioning data explaining the process of radicalization to one specific ideological trend.

As we said earlier, not all respondents can be considered as “extremists.” The aim is to compare different degrees of radicalism within the same ideological trends and transversely between different

ideological trends in order to understand the mechanisms of the violent radicalization process.

Left-wing extremists are understood as individuals who seek to abolish all forms of hierarchy, particularly the unequal distribution of wealth and power, and support the use of violent measures in order to pursue their goal. They strive for a society in which everyone is provided equal economic and social opportunities, and no one has excessive wealth or power over others (Woshinsky, 2008).

Right-wing extremists are understood as individuals with political positions or activities that accept or support social hierarchy and/or social inequality and support the use of violent measures in order to pursue their goal. Those affiliated with the right-wing extremism consider social hierarchy and social inequality as either inevitable, natural, normal, or desirable, typically justifying this position on the basis of natural law or tradition (Carlisle, 2005). They usually involve support for social inequality and social hierarchy, elements of social conservatism, and opposition to most forms of liberalism and socialism. Both terms are commonly used to describe fascist, neo-fascist, or other ideologies and organizations that feature extreme nationalist, xenophobic, racist, or reactionary views (Carlisle, 2005). The interviews conducted in this research with respondents from LWE and RWE beliefs seemed to both confirm and adhere to these descriptions.

Religious extremists are understood as individuals who promote, impede, or direct social, political or economic change within a set of religion-orientated doctrines and support the use of violent measures to pursue their goal. However, it must be noted that in this study, individuals trying to advance religion-oriented ideas within the democratic system have also been interviewed. Therefore, two types of activism have been observed: 1) activism within the system, using it in order to enhance Muslim right recognition and equality of rights between Muslim and non-Muslim people and 2) activism outside the system, by struggling against it in order to impose a certain view of Islam.

9.6.2. *Level of involvement*

We choose to distinguish four different profiles considering the level of commitment in an organized group: leader, subaltern, executive, isolated⁸². Table 17 below makes a distinction between respondents according to their levels of involvement in or out of a group. It does not concern the degree of violent extremism.

Table 17: *Distribution of respondents according to the level of group involvement*

	Orientation		
	<i>Left-wing extremism (LWE)</i>	<i>Right-wing extremism (RWE)</i>	<i>Religious extremism (RE)</i>
Level of engagement in a group	Leader	Leader (1)	Leader (2)
	Subaltern (3)	Subaltern (1)	Subaltern
	Executive (3)	Executive (2)	Executive
Not involved	Isolated	Isolated (2)	Isolated

“Leader” is understood as a person in charge of the decision-making process within the group.

A “subaltern” is a person in charge of great responsibilities within the group, but not part of the decision-making process. “Executives” do not have many significant responsibilities but take part in the group activities. Respondents who have claimed not being involved in any organized group have been qualified as “isolated.”

As the data analysis shows us, the level of involvement of an individual in an organized group depends on several elements of morality (the degree of willingness to pursue a change in the status quo) and practicality (availability)), the opportunity structure within the group, and learning engagement techniques). Moreover, the desire to pursue a change in the status quo is high, combined with a high level of availability, timeliness, and learning. The degree of commitment is high as well.

All of the respondents were not necessarily embedded in an organized movement. These people do not necessarily have weak social ties (both

⁸² Each interview has been coded to ensure anonymity of respondents. Coding of interviews: L = left; R = right; M = Muslim; L = leader; S = subaltern; E = executive; I = isolated; M = male; F = female; + identification number. Thus, a code RSH3 is to be read as this person is right-wing-oriented, a subaltern in the movement, and a man. This distinction has been developed for the specific needs of this research.

scenarios were observed). Several hypotheses may explain why an individual with radical or even extremist beliefs would not have joined a movement.

- The person did not find an appropriate movement, either because it does not exist or because he/she is not (yet) aware of such a movement.
- The person prefers to develop an organized movement for him/herself (as a guarantee that it will match his/her beliefs).
- The person does not wish to be actively involved in a movement (refusal to align behind a “flag” for the sake of independent spirit, or the satisfaction to only discuss his/her beliefs).

These assumptions do not take into account the possibility of active engagement outside of any organized group (lone wolves), but we emphasize that this case does not appear in our database.

9.7. Data analysis

For the most part, inductive analyses focused on the contents of the interview transcripts. The word of respondents is the empirical material on which theoretical proposals will be anchored, allowing us to debate the theoretical model previously constructed.

9.7.1. Stages

9.7.1.1. Vertical analysis

Each interview was the subject of several in-depth readings and codifications of relevant extracts. Through the codifications, extracts were grouped into themes and conceptual categories. The latter, of more interpretive order, highlight underlying logics and/or elements reflecting an interesting aspect. For this purpose, we used memos⁸³ to keep track. The coding was done in a completely open way, starting from the empirical data. The progressive categorization of the data resulted in a first form of interpreting the interviews, which were reread in turn. The data were aggregated gradually to be compared and contrasted.

⁸³ These are not included in their entirety in the appendix, given the private nature of the data they contain.

9.7.1.2. Horizontal analysis

Following these vertical analyzes, the themes and categories were compiled, allowing the transversal comparison of data. It was then possible to refine the conceptual categories and merge or divide subcategories to maintain a close connection to the data. While doing this, links between categories, their properties, and dimensions were continually proposed and verified to assure that they were supported in the data. Categories could then be connected together in theoretical propositions and then used to discuss our theoretical model. This step of linking categories also implies a certain selection and/or reduction to achieve an integration of analytical developments in narrative logic (Laperrière, 1997).

9.7.1.3. Limitations

As Mark Mason has underlined (Mason, 2010), samples for qualitative studies are generally much smaller than those used in quantitative studies. Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003) provide reasons for this. There is a point of diminishing return to a qualitative sample. As the study progresses, more data does not necessarily lead to more information. This is because one occurrence of a piece of data, or a code, is all that is necessary to ensure that it becomes part of the analysis framework. Frequencies are rarely important in qualitative research, as one occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic. This is because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements (see also Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The quality of analysis is therefore not based on a high number of interviews, but on a diversity that has not failed here to reveal interesting elements for this search.

9.8. Transversal analysis/General perception

A certain number of categories were identified and grouped into general themes on their own, thus facilitating the understanding of the different mechanisms at work (see Appendix 9). The aim being to answer the question "For what reasons do individuals engage in a (violent) radicalization process?," these categories were gradually distinguished. However, this categorization is neither linear nor static but rather characterized by complex and integrated relationships. Each

of these categories is supported by extracts from interviews. In order not to overburden this report, we refer to Appendix 10 for a complete overview of all relevant extracts regarding the description of each category. Given our main variable of diversification, we made a synthesis of the particularities of each ideological trend in the various categories. An overview can be found in table 18.

Left-Wing Extremism

- Level of violence acceptance: exclusion and instrumentalization.
- Indirect negative experiences towards a wide reference group (human beings): feeling of general inequality and unfairness.
- Vague and difficult to identify opponent: the “Great Capital”.
- Family usually involved.
- Conventional confrontations with authorities (police).
- Feeling of social injustice based on information and speeches rather than on personal experience.
- Feeling of indignation regarding failure of the authorities to carry out their mission to restore equality and reduce inequalities.
- Strong social diversity.

Right-Wing Extremism

- Level of violence acceptance: instrumentalization and resignation.
- Direct and indirect negative experiences toward a specific reference group: perceived discrimination from authorities toward non-natives.
- Opponent identified and identifiable: non-natives “who abuse the system,” and the authorities that “allow” this injustice.
- Family less involved.
- Conflicting confrontations with authority figures (police, justice, traditional parties, media).
- Perceived procedural injustice (in comparison to non-natives).
- Perceived discrimination toward the individual and the group (“natives”).
- Feeling of indignation regarding the failure of the authorities to carry out their mission: to restore equality and reduce inequalities.
- Weak social diversity.

Religious Extremism (focus on Muslim respondents)

- Level of violence acceptance: instrumentalization (thrill seeking) and resignation.
- Direct and indirect negative experiences toward a specific reference group: perceived discrimination from authorities toward non-Muslims.
- Opponent identified and identifiable: Islamophobic persons “who discriminate Muslim people,” and the authorities who “allow” this discrimination; opponents to a specific “Muslim cause”.
- Strong foundation of definitions based on social setting, community, and belonging (Muslims).
- Conflicting confrontations with authorities (police, justice, traditional parties).
- Perceived procedural injustice (in comparison to non-Muslims).
- Perceived discrimination toward the own community (Muslims).
- Feeling of indignation regarding the failure of the authorities to carry out their mission: to restore equality and reduce inequalities.
- Either strong or weak social diversity.

Table 18: Features of ideological trends regarding the main categories of data

	LWE	RWE	RE
Violence acceptance	Exclusion & instrumentalization	Instrumentalization & resignation	Instrumentalization & resignation
Experiences	Indirect; wide group	In/direct; small group	In/direct; small group
Adversary	Diffuse	Identified & Identifiable	Identified & Identifiable
Confrontation	Conventional	Conflicting	Conflicting
(Perceived) injustice	Social	Procedural	Procedural
(Perceived) discrimination	Indirect	Direct	Direct
Legitimacy of authorities	Strong/neutral	Neutral/weak	Neutral/weak
Social diversity	Strong	Weak	Strong or weak
Model group	Community > individual	Individual > community	Individual = community
Internet use	Information/Action	Information/Action	Information/Action

9.9. Discussion of the theoretical model

Based on significant criminological theories explaining crime (strain theory (Agnew, 2006), procedural justice theory (Tyler, 2006), social bonds theory (Hirschi, 1969), and social learning theory (Akers, 1998; Sutherland, 1947)) and using SAT as an integrating framework (Bouhana & Wikström, 2008), we developed an integrated model explaining violent extremism. This model was tested in the previous chapter. We will now review the meaning of the qualitative results for our integrated model. What can they tell us in terms of the process leading to political violence and more specifically about the formation of attitudes (propensity), the emergence of extremist settings (exposure), and the development of the perception choice process? Our findings are illustrated by extracts from the interview. These extracts are translated to English. The original quotes, in Dutch or French, can be found in Appendix 12.

The conceptual model of SAT distinguishes between direct causes and causes of the causes within the process leading to political violence. The direct causes are those factors that determine the perception-choice process as the causal mechanism explaining political violence. In other words, the causes of political violence determine which action alternatives an individual perceives in a certain situation, whether or not one of the alternatives is violent, and which choice will be made. SAT identifies the direct causes as the propensity to violent extremism and the exposure to violent extremist moral settings. Propensity entails 1) the morality of a person (moral beliefs and emotions) and 2) elements of self-control. Exposure entails 1) the moral rules of the environment and 2) the level of control on those moral rules. Since the focus of our research lies on the influence of NSM, we primarily paid attention to exposure to extremist content through NSM. However, we established earlier that peer delinquency can also play a major role.

Factors which may have an influence over propensity and exposure are here understood as “the causes of the causes.” More specifically, we formerly identified them as 1) poor social integration, 2) subjective alienation, and 3) perceived discrimination.

9.9.1. *Level of violence acceptance*

We observed a difference in the degree of violence acceptance. Three scenarios were presented in the interviews, and in a transversal manner:

- **Exclusion:** *violence is not accepted under any circumstances.*
- **Instrumentalization:** *violence is a way “as good as any” to achieve a goal.*
- **Resignation:** *violence is the only alternative when all other non-violent means fail to achieve a goal.*

Resignation and instrumentalization differ from exclusion in the fact that they actually use violence, and they both strive to achieve a goal, which is defined as essential. This consideration starts from the requirement that the abandonment of the cause is not an option.

9.9.1.1. **Exclusion**

Violence is not seen as an action alternative because it does not conform to the values of the individual and because “the end does not justify the means.” This happens especially when moral discomfort is low or absent (see below).

“You have to realize that it has no use to always stir up trouble and break things. It is possible to stir things up without causing damage to anyone else.” (LEF8)

9.9.1.2. **Instrumentalization**

There is no moral imperative that prohibits the use of violence. It is simply a means to an end. There are several possible explanations:

- a. **Thrill seeking behavior.** The need to show force, the importance of impact, and the excitement provided by the reprehensible actions take over. One of our RWE respondents raised this issue as a part of his willingness to engage: he calls it being part of the “bad ones.” He spoke of this as a “romantic” attraction to be part of the “bad ones” and not of the “care bears.”

“But well,... when I started I was only 17 years old, and there was an atmosphere eum,... Already the media portrayed people like me as... As being part of evil, the big Satan, as they said. And I, I was only 17, so....

There was this romantic side of the whole thing, like 'So, ok, I'm part of the bad guys but that's alright, at least they are an efficient group of anti-communists.' (RLM4)

This "thrill seeking" behavior seems to be boosted by the way the group is perceived and defined by society. In other words, the more a group is considered "dangerous," the more it becomes attractive to some individuals. We cannot exclude the scenario of an individual making use of violence "just to use violence." That said, this case does not appear in our data mainly because this feature is not specific to extremist political commitment. An individual focused on violence will justify its use in a movement or elsewhere. This is not a cause of violent radicalization, but rather an attribute.

- b. The penalization of actions is not a problem for the individual (punishment is not a deterrent) because the consequences are not seen as an excess of disadvantages compared to the benefits of not being penalized.

"The goal is to defy them, provoke them, make them mad and drive them crazy! A good Muslim is either a dead or imprisoned Muslim, or a future prisoner. There are only 3 pathways in life to choose from. There is no third option." (MIM2)

- c. The individual has not benefited from learning moral rules, according to which "the use of violence is not acceptable."

9.9.1.3. Resignation

At first, violence is not a morally acceptable action alternative, but can become a last resort when non-violent alternatives have been depleted. These non-violent alternatives are conventional orders: petitions, demonstrations, organized political actions, involvement in a political party to defend ideas, etc. When these conventional alternatives have been depleted, the individuals may resign themselves to use violence, but this requires that moral barriers fall.

As we will see later on, this will happen only after finding that the conventional means used to achieve a primary goal are not enough to achieve the goal; the individual finds himself in an unbearable tension between the impossibility of reaching its goal and the urge to reach it.

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The more pressing this tension becomes, the more the risk of weakening and breaking down moral barriers becomes eminent. Ultimately this tension can lead to the perception of violence as a legitimate possibility. As we shall see, this tension is increased by negative experiences that will increase the frustration felt by the individual who relied on conventional means to meet its goals (e.g., disappointment in a traditional political party, disappointment compared to expectations of the police, etc.). (see below: *Experiences*).

As table 19 shows these three forms of violence acceptance differ in the presence or absence of **moral barriers** (see below: *Moral barriers*) and the presence or absence of more or less moral discomfort (see below: *Moral discomfort*).

“(You say violence always has to be avoided but that sometimes it is necessary. Has this always been your opinion?) *No, I don’t think so. I used to adhere to the opinion of my mother and grandmother. Don’t act out and everything will be all right. So when something happens, keep your head down and pretend as if nothing is wrong. (What made you change your mind?) Reading, but mostly the film ‘V for Vendetta’. And also the live of Gandhi, and his live and philosophy. (Didn’t Gandhi oppose to the use of violence?) He was completely against the use of violence, but he also said... He also said that sometimes violence is really is necessary to achieve peace. (Have you ever been in a specific situation that confirmed this?) Not me myself, but if someone in power, a suppressor, if he starts to put people in an inferior position, and starts to do inhuman things to them, than it is... Of course, first you have to try by reasoning, but in that case violence can be necessary. But first try to boycott and only then use violence. (Can you give me examples of specific events that made you use violence?) To use violence myself, absolutely not. (To support violence in certain situations?) Yes, police violence, that makes me... For example, my friend was standing at the head of the march but was not allowed to continue and then the police starts beating him with their batons, which is completely out of line. Of course, they are allowed to use batons, but that’s an ethical question! But in that case I completely understand, in the moment, they are using violence against me, so I will use violence against them. I completely understand.*”(LEM10)

Table 19: Features of the different levels of violence acceptance

	Moral barriers	Moral discomfort
Exclusion	✓	×
Instrumentalization	×	✓
Resignation	✓	✓

As described in the above table, LWE respondents mentioned mostly exclusion of using violence (although resignation is also mentioned), and RWE and RE respondents mentioned resignation and instrumentalization. This is therefore not specific to a particular ideological orientation. The case of “resignation” is particularly interesting in that it reflects a trend that can be explained by the particular experiences of an individual. These may influence moral barriers of the individual or his moral discomfort and may therefore have an influence on the degree of acceptance of the use of violence.

9.9.2. *Moral barriers*

Moral barriers prohibiting the use of (political) violence are obtained through an individual learning process. If such learning does not take place, or alternative, violent, moral values are learned, the moral imperative will not be able, by definition, to hinder the use of violence (instrumentalization). If such a learning process takes place, the individual will not resort to violence (exclusion) or violence will be perceived as a resource under certain conditions (resignation).

The main context of learning is provided by the family (immediate environment) and, in a broader sense, by society as a whole (large environment). A society or community excluding the use of violence and condemning wrongdoing creates an environment favorable to this moral imperative. This is, however, not sufficient. The close environment of the individual should also help establish this moral imperative for the individual.

In case of resignation, we see that the moral imperative can be circumvented. Indeed, if the individual finds that the conventional means used to achieve a primary goal are not enough, the individual finds himself/herself in an uncomfortable tension between the impossibility of achieving his/her goal and needs. This is amplified by

negative experiences perceived as discriminatory: that is to say, when the individual is the subject of a perceived unfair or illegitimate discrimination. This uncomfortable tension is understood as “*moral discomfort*.”

9.9.3. *Moral discomfort*

Moral discomfort may be defined as the tension between the status quo or life situation as it is and basic needs or the life situation that the individual wishes to have. The goal of the individual will therefore be to change the balance of power so that it is more favorable to him and his group. This tension will cause reaction mechanisms likely to change the balance of power to meet the interests of an individual or group, thus alleviating this tension. These basic needs differ from one individual to another or from one community to another, but are often related to the needs of recognition and appreciation. For LWE, it is to continue the enhancement of human interest (equal distribution of wealth); for RWE, it is in the interest of “deserving” versus “profiteers” (unequal distribution of wealth and rights); and for RE, it is sometimes recognition of the rights of Muslims (equal rights) and sometimes the imposition of an interpretation of Islam without concessions.

The tension in the balance of power relates to different reference groups based on ideological trends: LWE relates to a wide reference group (human beings), unlike RWE (national deservings) and RE (Muslim community). The more various this tension is, the less the need to achieve its objective will be seen as a prime necessity. When this moral discomfort is too high, change of the status quo becomes a necessity for the individual or the community. It is precisely this need for change that may weaken the moral barriers and push individuals to “resign” for the use of political violence in order to achieve their goal.

“But you see, in the past, islamophobia, I would have accepted to discuss this but if I had needed to create the organization, I would have said ‘no, because it would be perceived as an communitarian organization etc. I thought change had to occur through the engagement of militants as members of political parties. But today, I say to myself ‘no’. One has the impression that some pressure is needed in society, to create a more favorable balance of power in social debates. (Yes.) And this is violent, since in some way, we have been forced to engage in politics. If we would

have had equal rights, I would have put my energy in other things. But today, I realize that I have needed to put a large part of my engagement into politics because this gave me the keys to understand societal challenges and information, contacts with those who take the decisions, and suddenly I saw all these inconsistencies. Sometimes it is really just business: I give you this, if you give me that, and then you ask yourself, why shouldn't we do the same for our own issues? The issues that are important to us?" (MLM1)

Moral discomfort is primarily shaped by the experiences of individuals, particularly perceived negative experiences (see below). We found direct negative experiences, mainly in RWE and RE respondents. Indeed, LWE respondents mentioned rather indirect experiences illustrating perceived discrimination against the broad reference group with which they identify. As far as RWE and RE respondents are concerned, the perceived tension can be increased as a result of discriminatory experiences creating a sense of injustice and inequality between the group membership of the individual and the group he/she sees as an "adversary" (see below *Ideological adversaries*).

It is the outline of these two dimensions (learning moral barriers against the use of violence and the imperious need to change the balance of power to be more favorable) that may lead to violent radicalization. The more the balance of power will be perceived as negative by an individual or a group, the more the moral barriers of an individual or a group on the use of violence will be undermined.

9.9.4. *Experiences*

As mentioned above, the experiences recounted by respondents during interviews have an impact on the process of radicalization. These experiences are of different types: direct or indirect, positive or negative.

In case of **direct experiences** (events experienced firsthand by the individual), the way these are perceived and defined by the individual will be decisive whether or not the event will contribute to a feeling of moral discomfort. For example, in case of a violent assault perpetrated by an individual of foreign descent, whether the victim make an association between elements of "foreign descent" and "violent aggression" or not will have an impact on the perception of the event, on the indi-

vidual beliefs, and subsequently on the definition of the status quo. If such an association is not made, beliefs will be affected differently.

"(...) before, well, I was attacked on a regular basis, one time, two times, three times, always North Africans. You tell yourself maybe there is a problem with them after all. Next, you hear; North Africans, security problems, immigration etc. You listen to the media, mostly radio, television etc. So I already had a vague idea of what the FN stood for, or not, in general: against immigration (...). And further, violent attacks, you can no longer go out in the evening, drugs etc. So evidently, this provokes feelings of resentment against the population of North-African descent so I found myself already in an ideal context, so to say. (Hmm.) It was inevitable, I would say, I would end up in that kind of setting (the FN)." (RSM3)

In the event of **indirect experiences**, they can also have different but well established influences on the development of beliefs, especially if the subject in question is a significant other of the interviewee (for example, negative experiences of a parent with an immigrant) or belongs to a wider reference group to which the individual can relate to (e.g., inequalities between human beings, discrimination against the Muslim community). Negative experiences by a broad, general, reference group (e.g., "males", "youth", "immigrants") will be less likely to cause tension in the moral discomfort of an individual, because the perceived injustices or discrimination will be more diffuse.

"Some months ago, my father was the victim of yet another theft by an intern/assistant of Turkish origin. Each time, she took several banknotes from the cash register, to buy clothes, magazines etc. during her lunch break. About 2000 euros have disappeared that way. Eventually she could be busted by the police by using marked banknotes. My father asked to pay back 500 euros, in which case he would drop charges. She never did, and we never heard back." (RIM6).

The interviews revealed mostly negative experiences to explain the nature of the beliefs, reactions, behavior as a result, etc. More precisely, these experiences evoked various situations of discrimination that have a direct impact on individuals. In this regard, it is important to remember that this is a matter of perception: whatever the true nature of the facts may be, it is the perception of the individual that matters and determines the impact of an experience. In other words, it is useless

to try to influence the factual nature of an experience while it is the perception of an individual, with all subjectivity it entails, which will come into play.

It should also be noted that some experiences have been evoked to explain the emergence of beliefs of individuals and others to explain the evolution of the radical beliefs of individuals. It is clear that experiences explaining the origin of convictions are rare and often “redefined” afterward in order to “stick” with one’s beliefs in a consistent manner. Those experiences therefore have an impact on the degree of extremism, but a lesser impact on the nature of the convictions of the individual.

The impact of those experiences on an individual’s beliefs contributes to a disillusioned, disenchanted worldview, where he/she has a wrong idea of the standards. The tension between the status quo and basic needs (recognition and appreciation) may increase as these experiences destabilize the individual. As mentioned above, weakening of moral barriers may then be a consequence of those negative experiences, which could adversely lead an individual to use violence to achieve his/her ends.

9.9.4.1. Ideological adversaries

In order to better understand why experiences have an impact on individuals, it is necessary to understand the actors involved in those experiences. In other words, what are the ideological adversaries listed in the various ideological trends in the study?

For LWE respondents, the adversary to fight is the “Great Capital” accountable for all inequalities that determine an unacceptable status quo. The authorities here are not accomplices, since they are the enemy to fight. The confrontation is therefore logical or *conventional* (see below).

For RWE respondents, the adversary is the one who is held responsible for the discomfort felt by the individual. In this case, not only the immigrants who take unfair advantages of the system but also the authorities that allow such a situation, either because they implement those advantages that cause frustration or because they do not favor national “deserving” versus immigrant “profiteers.” These accomplice authorities therefore also generate frustration.

For RE respondents, their different profiles revealed different ideological adversaries: Islamophobic people and authorities that “allow” injustice (e.g., unaddressed complaint) and/or individuals and authorities who do not defend the same interests as literalist Muslims who want to impose Islam and Shariah uncompromisingly.

Therefore, experiences featuring these adversaries are most likely to have a significant impact on the perception of the status quo, and therefore on the moral discomfort, and finally on the degree of radicalism. More specifically, negative experiences with different forms of authority are particularly interesting to understand the mechanisms of radicalization of an individual.

9.9.4.2. Subjective alienation

According to Procedural Justice Theory of Tyler “public trust depends on perception of procedural fairness and justice (authorities’ performance or effectiveness)”.

a) *Perceived procedural justice*

Several RWE and RE respondents referred to experiences with different forms of authority (e.g., police, justice, traditional political parties, media) during which they felt they had been treated unfairly. According to them, it is this lack of consideration that would have caused a shift to a greater level of violent extremism in their speech and/or their actions. RWE and RE respondents evoke direct negative experiences with the police, justice, and the traditional political parties (see below *Conflicting confrontation*). They mention unfair treatment or “double standards” toward them and/or their community. This perceived injustice is indeed a driving force of radicalization.

Respondent DSH3 illustrates this as follows.

“My doubts have been confirmed when the District Attorney decided to enforce legal mediation on me, resulting in me, being obliged to compensate the leader of my attackers, the agitator of the gang, who had to wear glasses, or so he claimed, as a consequence of the effects of the pepper spray I used. Knowing that, according to our justice system, I had attacked, on my own, 10 young Turks, in broad daylight, in City 2, only 500 meters from my secondary school, and thus should be considered as the aggressive perpetrator and my attackers as the victims, I have really

perceived the Belgian justice system as dysfunctional This has greatly motivated me to join the Front National.” (RSM3)

In fact, the respondent mentions not only the aggression as a motivation to join the FN but also the perception of a “great failure in the Belgian judicial system.” The same goes for an RE respondent: discrimination and breach of trust in the political party he was involved in led him to radicalize his engagement in order to defend interests considered as fundamental (the recognition of Muslims rights and equality of rights).

As explained above, LWE respondents essentially mention experiences with the police in their role of maintaining order during demonstrations (see below *Conventional confrontation*). Such experiences, when negative, do have consequences: they question the police legitimacy as their role does not correspond to the expectations of individuals. Those experiences have no direct impact on the degree of violent extremism or on the political involvement of LWE respondents.

b) Perceived legitimacy of authorities

The perceived legitimacy of the authorities is questioned throughout our interviews, mainly when a breach of “duty” is observed. Respondents forged their opinion on roles and tasks of the authorities, before any encounters, and they question the legitimacy of those authorities if reality does not support the prior definition they made of it. The respondents’ first reaction to this ‘disappointment’ is not to question their expectations but to question the legitimacy of the authorities. If, for example, an individual believes that the police “don’t do their jobs”, he will first question the legitimacy of the police before questioning what he thinks police’s job is. Questions were asked about several forms of authority during the interviews: the police, the judiciary, and the traditional political parties. However, there are two types of confrontation: conventional confrontation and conflicting confrontation.

- Conventional confrontation corresponds to friction between individuals and authority within an agreed framework (demonstrations, for example). LWE respondents who questioned the role of the police and potential overtopping discussed situations of conventional confrontation that tends to make them perceive the police as doing their job even if they disagree with the methods used.

- Conflicting confrontation is different in that it puts an individual in conflict with a form of authority that does not act in accordance with the definition that the individual has of its role: police injustice, a judicial decision perceived as unfair, etc. Or the individual does not recognize authorities as legitimate from the outset. RWE and RE respondents mentioned experiences of conflicting confrontations with different forms of authority.

"It's simple: Islam as a lifestyle. From the moment you wake up in the morning to the moment you go to bed at night. (Yes, but you are also a Belgian citizen. And being a Belgian citizen, what can you do in that case?) Forget these boundaries, forget national flags. My nationality? Muslim, I am a Muslim, that's my nationality. I only follow Sharia law, and all others things, I don't care about all other laws. It's like this (...) Can you change a system, using the laws of that same system? No? So what do you do? For starters, total rejection, that's the first step." (MLM2)

Expectations that individuals have of the authorities are of various kinds: people expect the police to protect them, justice to protect their interests in a fair way, political parties to allow the exercise of democracy, etc. When these expectations perceived as legitimate are not met, individuals face disillusionment and loss of confidence. However, more importantly, if the expectation was required to achieve a primary goal (to mitigate moral discomfort), the fact that this expectation is not met will force the individual to turn to other options to achieve his/her goal.

9.9.4.3. Perceived discrimination

a) *Perceived personal discrimination*

Personal discrimination seems to be relevant only if it can be reclaimed in a discourse reflecting a broader discrimination. For example, a Muslim discriminated because of his religion will retrieve that discrimination for the cause of the group (the Muslim community). This is particularly observed among RWE and RE respondents. Indeed, LWE respondents did not report personal discrimination but mainly perceived injustice to a wider group.

b) Perceived group discrimination

Regarding discrimination against a specific community, it is primarily for RWE and RE respondents that this dimension is of importance because the reference group is identified and identifiable (as opposed to a diffuse model group of LWE respondents).

Regarding RWE respondents, the reference community consists of “deserving” natives who suffer from (perceived) discrimination by their various “adversaries”: immigrant “profiteers” and accomplices (in this situation, authorities).

For RE respondents, the religious community is affected by discrimination by the experiences of the individuals who compose it (headscarf, etc.). However, as we have seen, several scenarios were shown: individuals evolving within the system and trying to fight discrimination with system tools (and thus do not qualify as extremists), and those who consider themselves outside the system and its rules. For this second category of individuals, perceived discrimination is rather sought by provocation in order to establish their marginality and position themselves permanently in opposition to the authority: no willingness to integrate.

In addition to perceived discrimination, respondents demonstrated a need for recognition and consideration for their beliefs (especially, RWE and RE). Disrespect for radical beliefs defended by individuals contributes to marginalize this group of individuals and can lead to further (violent) radicalization of the group. Of all the experiences, those reflecting (perceived) discrimination are the ones who had the greatest impact on the degree of radicalness, increasing moral discomfort.

9.9.5. Exposure

Exposure to extremist content takes place on multiple moments: during the formation of beliefs, during the engagement (making contact), and throughout the further process of violent radicalisation.

- a. During the formation of beliefs, searching for information is one way to enhance, refine by comparison, and validate beliefs in a dynamic process.

- b. During the period of involvement, information is practical and can help an individual to get in touch with an organized movement (e.g., to learn about the beliefs defended by an organized movement and/or to look for the coordinates of an organized movement).
- c. During the period of involvement in a movement, the individual may continue to learn, based on the framework provided by the extremist movement and then producing an enhancing effect nourished back and forth between beliefs and information

An important aspect to be noted is that the boundary between a spontaneous search for information and an induced access to information is sometimes blurred. Both modes seem to intersect in a “snowball effect” (e.g., a student following a history lesson on communism—induced access—and then learning more by himself on the internet—spontaneous research). However, we observe in the interviews that the search for extremist information is initiated only if the individual is already in a process of forming (violent extremist) beliefs.

Several information sources are used by the interviewees: school, family, and friends (lessons, discussions) traditional “official” media (press, television, radio), the internet (Wikipedia, etc.), social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Following the history of technology development, we see that the media currently most often used to search for alternative information is the internet (either websites found via search engine or discussion forums, or social media like Facebook). This can be explained, according to the interviewees, by a concern for critical information, and the mistrust developed against traditional media and “mainstream” information. Our data shows that even when faced with uncertainty about the reliability of information on the internet, it seems nevertheless preferable for interviewees to use this information to compare and criticize the “official” information.

9.9.5.1. Active exposure

a) Online communication

The importance of active exposure to violent extremist content is supported by our data, and we have seen that respondents deliberately sought out violent extremist content online and less frequently offline. This active exposure is facilitated by the quick, easy, and anonymous

access to online content on violent extremist websites, forums, Facebook pages, etc.

The online communication related to political activity is of different types:

- *The individual seeks information but does not want to chat with other people.* Several factors may explain why an individual would not want to chat with other people: protection of his/her privacy and anonymity; the fear of having to undergo some adverse consequences of posts that he/she would have posted; the comfort not to get personally involved (no registration to a forum, but just consulting it), and the satisfaction of having what he/she wanted.
- *The individual seeks information and wants to exchange ideas with other people:* the need to be in a “like-minded” environment (this is the case when the individual is not yet in this kind of environment).

Both cases were observed among respondents in the three ideological trends. Learning logics show relative similarities regarding the use of the internet and NSM. We also note that individuals actively seeking online communication with other people who share similar ideas are those who do not perceive the opportunity to meet this need in their offline environment (see below *Social setting*).

b) Searching for extremist contact

Regarding the search for extremist contacts, some respondents have actively searched to communicate online with others who share the same ideas. When the goal is to join an organised group, the Internet and NSM are useful to find an organized group, regardless whether the person has access to a strong offline like-minded environment or not. The use of the internet and NSM is a quick and easy way, in this case, a “gateway.” However, the internet and NSM are not particularly privileged means to that end: other respondents said that they were in contact by means other than the internet (meetings, events, by word of mouth, etc.). In the first stage of making contact with a group, individuals have no preference between the use of online or offline access. However, when it comes to joining and actively being involved in a group, this requires an offline meeting. The respondents said that the offline meeting is a guarantee of trust and good faith that the Internet does not provide.

c) Self-selection

In the search for information (online or offline), individuals select information of interest for themselves. This does not mean that the selected information will defend their viewpoint. Some respondents claim to have looked for information on ideological trends other than their own. That being said, a self-selection (or targeting) from the individual will inevitably tighten the fields of accessible information. This concerns LWE, RWE, and RE respondents.

It is particularly difficult to determine what information is likely to bring about a change in the beliefs of an individual. However, we did not observe a case in which the respondent made a dramatic volte-face of his opinions after any “counter-speech” information. This, together with the process of self-selection as a whole, leads us to think **that the emergence of violent extremist beliefs is a prerequisite for more advanced information search and commitment in a group** (which does not subsequently prevent that beliefs evolve within this group).

This self-selection creates dynamics of considerable “restriction” both within and outside an organized group (in case of an isolated individual, the formation of beliefs will be mainly fueled by independently searched information). It works by amplifying effect (echo effect): the various dimensions will influence each other exponentially (as long as they concur). This echo effect is then accompanied by a homogenizing effect (e.g., by rejecting other beliefs qualified as invalid, an individual confirms his/her convictions and differentiates the “ingroup” from the “outgroup”).

- **Beliefs** will thus be validated by the group and nourished through data processing.
- Extremist **speech** echoes the beliefs and allows them to get in a structured and organized frame, also giving them a recognized and accepted value.

The **processing of information** occurs here as “water to the mill,” feeding the dynamics. The more information is provided, the more contrast occurs in the individual’s beliefs, either in a logical opposition (our beliefs/their beliefs) or in a reflective process on the beliefs of the group. Figure 17 illustrates the dynamics that will gradually lead to a homogeneity between the beliefs of an individual, the speech of the

group in which it engages (if applicable), and the focus of his/her search for information.

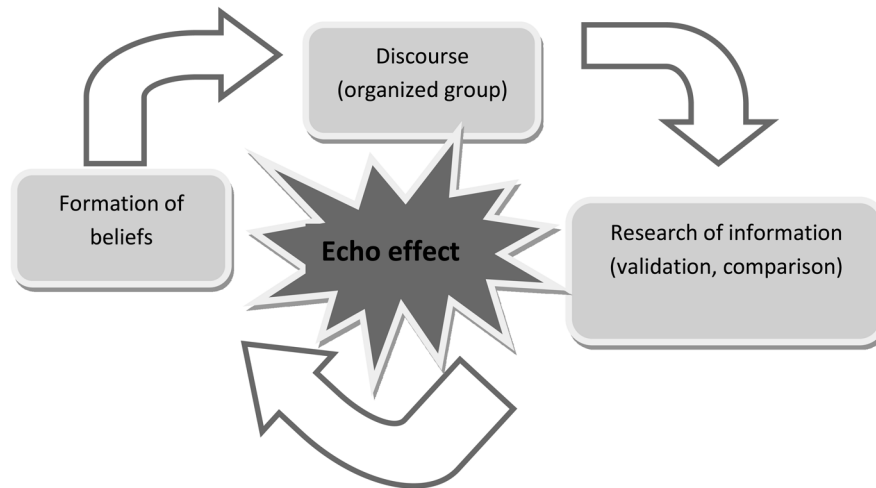


Figure 17: Homogenization of beliefs (closure of speech)—reinforcement dynamics

In the event of an individual engaged in a group, if the different dimensions, with the exception of information processing, do not agree, then we could get into confrontational rather than exponential dynamics, forcing the individual to take a stand. For example, if the affective environment contradicts the beliefs and/or actions of the individual, the latter will either consider the elements of the environment as elements going from the ingroup to the outgroup or change the nature of his beliefs and/or actions. He/she will choose, depending on his/her degree of moral discomfort, the situation that will disadvantage the individual the least. Another example: if the individual can no longer agree with the beliefs and/or actions of the movement, he/she will seek to reduce this discomfort either by modifying his/her definitions or by taking distance with this movement.

9.9.5.2. Passive exposure

Some respondents said that they had been accidentally in contact with people defending extremist ideas at events or meetings. These moments are an opportunity to be passively submitted to extremist speech, possibly more extremist in nature than the initial attitudes of

the individual. The individual will have opportunities to compare different environments and possibly choose an environment that will better satisfy the need to mitigate moral discomfort.

None of the respondents testified that he/she was passively subjected to extremist speech without any voluntary initiative prior to this situation. We cannot support the hypothesis that a non-predisposed person exposed to online extremist content would be influenced by the content. **For the extremist content to have an impact on an individual, this content must be supported by the extremist propensity of the individual.**

We have not distinguished differences between the three ideological trends regarding the use of the internet and NSM. These are used for the purposes explained above, regardless of ideological orientation. In addition, given the interviews, we cannot support the hypothesis that the internet and NSM would be a triggering element of violent extremism (at most a facilitator, as a privileged means of communication and exchange of information)⁸⁴.

9.9.6. *Moral rules from the environment*

We found that some respondents who did not have the satisfaction of being in a like-minded ideological environment have preferred to search a new, better matching environment. That said, this does not concern correspondence of moral rules but rather ideological convictions.

Concerning moral rules of the environment, an individual evolving in an environment where moral rules are shared will not seek another more extremist environment unless the individual himself/herself is in tension with the primary environment. This raises the question whether an individual approaches an environment sharing the same moral rules by affinity, or if the connection with the environment will

⁸⁴ An interesting question should be raised about the impact of the internet and NSM use as part of the search for political information. As we see, the ease and speed of use makes the internet almost unavoidable as a means of communication. But another use of the internet is raised here. The possibility to (quick and easy) get in touch with other like-minded individuals acts as a safety valve and allows individuals to diffuse frustration due to the feeling of being misunderstood or isolated. This does not mean that individuals meeting other “like-minded” people could prevent a violent radicalization process, but this area of expression the internet provides is an opportunity to offload some frustration. Too much censorship is likely to increase frustration.

build this affinity. Once again, it is the moral discomfort that will be driving this dynamics. The higher the moral discomfort of an individual, the more moral barriers (use of violence) will be weakened and the more the individual will be inclined to turn to an environment with low moral barriers. When the moral discomfort is low or non-existent (as we observe in LWE respondents), the individual will seek a satisfactory environment rather than a homogeneous one.

In the case of an individual living at first in an environment with different moral rules of his own, he/she will try to find an environment with moral rules closer to his/her own (as well as for ideological convictions).

As far as RE respondents are concerned, a very important core of definitions determined by the religion is the moral discourse that may influence beliefs and/or involvement of these respondents. More precisely, it is not the substance of this moral discourse that matters here, but the recognition of the existence of this moral discourse.

9.9.7. *Social setting*

9.9.7.1. *Social integration*

Social integration is based on participation in prosocial activities (leisure, activities, etc.), integration within the family sphere, integration within a group of friends, and integration in a conventional institution (studies, work, etc.). These factors are evaluated at different degrees of importance and are not necessarily compartmentalized.

The data tell us that social anchorage does not influence the likelihood of an individual to engage in an extremist movement. In addition, the social isolation of an individual can be an incentive to join a movement. This obviously requires that the convictions of one and the discourse of the other have common bases (ideological recognition). Profiles of our interviewees are very diverse. However, we did not identify any particularly isolated case (absence of social ties), except for an RWE respondent who expressed a link between social isolation and his engagement process. He said that being part of an excluded group was a kind of response to his personal feeling of exclusion:

"It is because I, ever since I was little, don't abide society or other children or adolescents anymore, that I didn't had any worries about my

social image when engaging in this sort of political party. Even worse, I found the image that the FN reflected, as an anti-system party, a public enemy, matched perfectly the image society itself had of me.” (RSM3).

Nevertheless, we observed people with strong or weak social ties in each of our group’s diversification. **We cannot support the hypothesis that low social integration leads to violent extremism or that a strong social integration prevents violent extremism.**

9.9.7.2. Social diversity

That being said, criticism regarding the theoretical model should be noted: social integration cannot be understood here too restrictively. Indeed, we found that “socially integrated” individuals nevertheless followed a process of radicalization into violent extremism. It should be noted that theoretical variables must be nuanced by another dimension of “social diversity.” In fact, although an individual can claim to be socially integrated, it does not specify if he is integrated in a highly homogeneous community or not. And a strong homogeneity of moral discourse within the social environment can affect the learning of moral barriers and have homogeneous beliefs as a consequence.

We have observed through the data that, in some cases, the circle of friends and the organized group could partially overlap in a more or less intense way. This has the effect of reducing the scope and standardizing the definitions of the status quo by an effect of compliance. What individuals perceive as a big picture in this case is actually defined by certain comprehension keys passed on in an almost closed circuit by the members of the group.

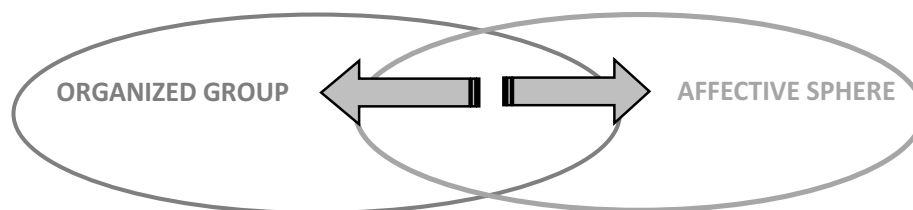


Figure 18: Homogenization of people—Overlapping dynamics

Concerning the family sphere, its impact can be of three types: either it agrees with the beliefs and then provides positive reinforcement of their validity, or it places itself in opposition and can also enhance the validity of convictions by a reaction effect⁸⁵ or it positions itself in a neutral way without much impact on the nature of beliefs (e.g., when parents only care to know that the person will have no trouble relating to his activist engagement).

The **ideological base** then refers to the possibility for an individual to meet with others who share similar beliefs. As we said above, the collected data suggest to distinguish the ideological base of the social base to nuance the mechanisms and avoid simplistic determinism. See figure 18 for this. Thus, an individual deeply socially rooted in an environment carrying homogeneous beliefs can evolve differently from an individual who is also deeply socially rooted in a heterogeneous environment. A degree of ideological anchorage is of importance in this process, and not necessarily associated with a social anchorage (and vice versa).

One of the issues with a strong ideological anchorage in a movement is that the individual risks to reduce the number of times and places where he can confront his beliefs to other frameworks, worldviews, and different discourses. This homogenization has an impact on the evolution of one individual's beliefs.

9.9.7.3. Political engagement of the environment

As suggested by the interviews, the family circle plays an important role in the construction of beliefs. Several scenarios are offered to us in the interviews and are transversal to the different trends:

- The family environment conveys an engaged opinion, but is not politically engaged. The individual is positioned in line or in opposition. When an individual evolves in a family environment that promotes an engaged discourse, the environment can influence the beliefs of the individual. However, it does not necessarily mean that the environment defends the same ideas. The case of an LWE respondent who grew up in an RWE family environment tells us

⁸⁵ It is understood that a person not taking a reactive attitude to his parents' opinion then enters the first category of "positive reinforcement," because convictions would then de facto be from the same register.

that other learning referents can influence an individual's beliefs. In his case, it was school. This does not explain why this individual was more sensitive to LWE speeches in school rather than RWE speeches within the family. Part of the answer lies in the feeling of not having, according to him, the opportunity to question the father's opinion and to express his own ideas.

- a. The family environment conveys an engaged opinion and is politically engaged. The majority of respondents are consistent with the ideas of their family environment.

9.10. Conclusion

In summary, we have seen a central element on which the process of violent radicalization is based: the moral discomfort experienced and/or perceived by an individual. This moral discomfort may collide with the moral barriers of the individual, creating an excess of unfavorable definitions toward respect of moral rules in relation to favorable definitions, which could lead to political violence.

Moral discomfort occurs when a person experiences too great a difference between what he considers to be a "satisfactory balance" between his basic needs (social and professional integration, recognition of self and/or community, respect for individual freedoms, fair and equal treatment, etc.) and the life he actually lives and/or the perception of it. Each individual defines for himself what his basic needs are. They can be of personal order (need for recognition, promotion, respect) and/or of group order (need for recognition, promotion, respect). Non-compliance with these basic needs crystallizes in the experiences of perceived discrimination and (perceived) injustice that amplify the moral discomfort perceived by the individual, especially in the case of RWE and RE respondents). Discrimination or injustices perpetrated against an individual by a form of authority will be experienced more strongly by the individuals who have a high esteem of these forms of authority (cf. Legitimacy of Authorities).

The main difference we can observe between the three ideological trends is that this moral discomfort does not seem prominent among the LWE respondents, unlike the RWE and RE ones. In terms of group of belonging, the LWE respondents identify with a very diffuse

community, unlike the RWE and RE respondents. Similarly, the main adversary identified by LWE respondents is diffuse ("Great Capital"), while it is identifiable for the RWE ("non-native") and RE ones ("non-Muslims"). That being said, we see individuals with low moral discomfort and others with a high moral discomfort within the three ideological trends; this means that the elements that could lead to a process of radicalization are not specific to an ideological trend but rely on broader structural causes (causes of causes).

Although **the internet and NSM facilitate** the exchange of information and making contact, the internet and social media are not the starting point of the violent radicalization process. They serve as a facilitator that will be involved when the radicalization process has already begun. In addition, their use, although easy and fast, has limitations in terms of confidentiality and reliability of exchanges. Let us add that the possibility to discuss political (extremist) beliefs online may also have a positive side because it provides an area for expressing frustrations, without leading to an actual radicalization process.

The perception of authorities as legitimate is crucial. Discriminant experiences (direct or indirect) perpetrated by the authorities toward an individual and/or a community have a very important impact on the perception of individuals. In this regard, it should be noted that a significant element that we observed for both RE and RWE respondents is the idea of the adversary that crystallizes into an injustice to fight against (for RWE, "immigrants who abuse the system and solidarity to their advantage"; for RE, "Islamophobic persons who discriminate Muslims"). In addition, a crucial aspect to be noted is that it is not the direct opponent that will have an impact on the degree of violent extremism, but the feeling that the authorities maintain a situation of injustice between the individual and his adversary. In other words, "facing an adversary is not perceived as a problematic situation, what is problematic and frustrating is that the authorities are perceived as not allowing a fair and equitable fight against this adversary." The extremist group is then a response to this failure of the authorities, as they claim to provide the means to restore a more equitable balance of force into this struggle.

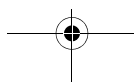
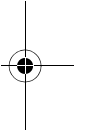
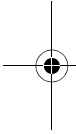
Furthermore, we must make a distinction between individuals who confront with the authorities while respecting the "rules of the game" of the existing system, and individuals who do not recognize the

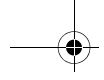
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legitimacy of the authorities or even the system itself. It is useless to put a sustainable and preventive fight within the frame of the system against individuals who do not recognize this very system.

Finally, we have seen that the **social environment** of violent extremist individuals can help define the moral rules of an individual. They will leave this environment if their fundamental needs require the adoption of another set of moral rules. More than social integration, it seems more effective to focus on meeting those basic needs, rather than trying to influence the social environment of an individual. In this context, **a counter narrative approach would be relevant only if they aim to provide an alternative to meet those needs and not just an alternative deconstructing discourse** (cf. Recommendations).

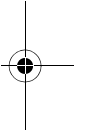
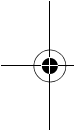
This analysis is based on interviews with respondents who defend radical or extremist convictions, with various degrees of violence acceptance. Given the above elements explaining why some people follow the path of violent extremism, we believe it is the moral discomfort that is the most appropriate to act on in order to reduce the propensity to (violent) radicalization.

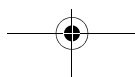
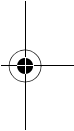
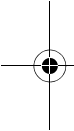




PART 4

Conclusion





10. GENERAL CONCLUSION

Early on in our research, it was clear that extremists are not mentally insane or delusional when committing acts of political violence. On the contrary, during the interviews it became clear that violence was perceived and used as an efficient (and often last) resource to achieve a, in their eyes, reasonable and necessary goal. By acting and reacting to a situation that is perceived as highly problematic, extremists are able to resolve a tension between the current (problematic) political and social situation and what they perceive is needed to fulfill some essential and fundamental needs. The more urgent and prominent this tension is, the more likely these individuals will resort to political violence, as an immediate and effective means to an end. This implies that violent extremism and political violence can better be understood as a part of a deliberate strategy to reach a goal toward one is strongly morally engaged (Braeckman, 2006). This idea is backed up by Wikström and his Situational Action Theory (Bouhana and Wikström, 2008) which clearly states that actions, including political violence, are ultimately the outcome of a perception-choice process, where an individual perceives certain action alternatives (based on the setting he or she is in and the own propensity) and then chooses, deliberately or out of habit, one of those alternatives, taking both moral rules and social controls into account.

It also became clear that there are numerous motives and reasons that supposedly tell us why a certain act of political violence is committed and that at the same time are used to justify and legitimize these acts for those that commit them. These motives are mostly ideological or religious in nature. For example political violence can be committed to install the Sharia in Europe, to establish a white nationalist state, to overthrow the capitalist elite, to demand equal rights, to liberate test animals, to save unborn children, to get rid of immigrants, to safeguard the own culture, etc. Such justifications cannot be causes of political violence because they are provided after the facts. Still, motives like these are often central in media reports on acts of violent extremism, especially in the case of religious (Muslim) extremism, contributing to an image of irrational and mentally ill perpetrators. Even some scholars and terrorism and violent extremism experts place ideology and religion central in their assessment of political violence and explanation of

why some individuals radicalize into violent extremism. This is problematic because motives are not and cannot be causes of political violence. Motives explain why it is important to reach a certain goal but they do not explain why a specific action, out of several possibilities is chosen to achieve this goal. They are necessary but insufficient conditions to explain action (Davidson, 1963). What is needed for extremist motives to become causes is the contributing role of situational exposure and violent extremist propensity. The literature review already indicated that ideology is fully learned and incorporated only after joining an extremist group and thus is not a primary factor leading to radicalization into violent extremism.

Instead of focusing on motivations and ideology, attention should go to structural issues, group processes and perceived individual strains as the breeding ground of violent radicalization. The real (compelling) reasons (Davidson, 1963) to join extremist groups are often social in nature and based on feelings of indignation and being lost (Bjørge, 2002). Especially individuals searching for social inclusion, searching for identity/meaning and experiencing injustice are susceptible for violent extremism. Extremist groups offer individuals a simple, logical, and hands-on answer to their grievances. More specific, extremist groups answer to the individual's need by offering them 1) a strong sense of identity, 2) a political activist answer to injustice and 3) a warm home and sense of belonging (Fermin, 2009). If these things can be found in the rest of society (or society fails to offer them) extremist groups can become very attractive to the individual. The fact that this has, initially, nothing to do with ideology is also indicated by research that shows that in areas where individuals have easy access to organized crime, offering them the same things, violent extremism is absent (Roy, 2008).

A huge problem in the research on violent extremism and political violence is the excess of risk factors, and confusions about which of these factors can be seen as causal and which one are mere correlates. To address this problem, an integrated theory based model for the explanation of violent extremism (political violence) was developed based on Wikström's (2014) SAT, by building on key elements from theories explaining (youth) offending in general as causes of the causes. This was possible because, similar to general acts of crime, political violence can be defined as 'the breaching of moral rules as defined in

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law' (Bouhana & Wikström, 2008). This definition circumvents conceptual discussions and makes it possible to reach a general explanation of political violence by applying the logic of SAT to the explanation of political violence. Our analysis confirmed the applicability of this model on the explanation of violent extremism (political violence). This means that

1. *a difference has to be made between the direct causes of political violence and the causes of the causes (emergence) and*
2. *individual extremist propensity and exposure to extremist settings form the direct causes of political violence in interaction with each other.*

Given the focus of our study we mainly studied exposure to extremist content through NSM. It appeared to be fundamental to make a distinction between active exposure, or deliberately searching for certain information and communication, and passive exposure, or encountering certain content by accident while doing other things online. The result of the qualitative interviews clearly showed that extremists do not simply refer to NSM as causes. NSM are mainly used as a useful resource or instrumental tool to pursue offline developed interests online by looking for information and communication with like-minded individuals. They are used to stay up-to-date with the movement and to organize networks. It is very unlikely that an individual will radicalize only by using NSM. Further, our results clearly showed that the "danger" that lies not only online but also in offline exposure to violent extremism must be taken into account. Especially exposure to delinquent and or extremist peers can influence the radicalization process.

On the other hand, our analysis did show that the active use of NSM for extremist goals does have a major impact on the likelihood of committing political violence. Individuals deliberately seeking out other extremist groups and individuals for communication are indeed at higher risk of violent extremism and in the end using political violence. This effect is amplified by propensity. It was very clear that those adolescents having a high propensity toward violent extremism were influenced the most by ENSM. The effects, and subsequently, the danger of exposure, even active exposure, for individuals with only low propensities toward violent extremism are negligible. This means that the danger lies not with NSM themselves, but in adolescents wanting to visit certain sites and wanting to communicate with extrem-

ists. In other words, in the prevention of violent radicalization, it is crucial to prevent adolescents to become interested in violent extremism. To do this attention should be paid to the structural causes of violent extremism or, in other words, those factors determining exposure and propensity, the causes of the causes.

According to SAT, some by research and literature identified risk factors are in fact (elements of) causes of the causes. In this regard, our analysis identified several elements of perceived strain/injustice that contribute to the breeding ground for violent extremism. This indicates that more attention should go to elements of perceived injustice and strain instead of to relative deprivation and poverty as structural root causes in the explanation of violent extremism and political violence. In studies addressing general offending this is already recognized. So far, the latter has received a lot of attention without much result. Research trying to discover socio-demographic profiles of extremists only found mixed and contradicting results. Some individuals come from a wealthy background, while others are poor and some are highly educated, while others are illiterate. Focusing on perceived injustice can put these results in perspective. Feelings of injustice can be present among all social groups and layers of society and hold strong explanatory power when addressing political violence. When developing prevention policies this should be kept in mind and efforts should be made to address the (structural) problems that are at the base of these perceptions.

Elements of perceived injustice can be found in different aspects of individual lives. Potential elements of perceived injustice can be found in the own personal situation (eg. family situation, career opportunities etc.), regarding general social, political and economic aspects of life (eg. discrimination on the house or job market, being refused a loan at the bank etc.) and when coming in contact with the authorities (eg. feeling singled out during police controls etc.). More specifically our research identified poor social integration, elements of perceived discrimination and elements of procedural justice as elements of injustice that form the causes of the causes, influencing extremist propensity and exposure. Our results clearly showed that elements of 1) poor social integration, 2) both perceived group discrimination and perceived personal discrimination and 3) the perception of the authorities as being unjust and subsequently illegitimate greatly contribute to political violence.

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Zooming in on one of these elements, perceived procedural justice, the results clearly show the importance of trust for the authorities in the prevention of violent extremism and subsequently the need to restore this trust among the at risk populations⁸⁶. All respondents clearly indicated having negative perceptions of the authorities and the police and not perceiving them as legitimate. Further, measures of procedural justice are clearly related to political violence, even controlling for other risk factors. Perceived alienation (including measures of perceived injustice) was found to be a ground cause of violent extremism, influencing individual extremist propensity and extremist exposure. This is problematic, not only because perceived injustice forms a ground for violent extremism but also because cooperation of populations at risk is necessary to identify extremist groups and prevent radicalization. This means that strict enforcement of the law without attention to cultural and local sensitivities and/or harsh actions by the police may, in fact, increase the risk of violent extremism because it creates cynicism regarding the law among the singled out minority groups. The same is true for polices and specific measures focussing on a particular group (eg. a ban on headscarves instead of a ban of all religious symbols). This undermines the willingness to cooperate with the police and participate in civic actions aimed at reducing deviant behavior. Consequently, policy should pay attention to this problem and work on enhancing general perceptions of trust and legitimacy of the authorities and, more specifically address (perceptions of) unjust and biased police actions.

⁸⁶ Previous research already showed that minorities attach the same importance to procedural justice and use the same criteria for its assessment as majority groups do (Tyler, 1994, 2001). Both in the UK and the US (Huq, Tyler, & Schulhofer, 2011; Tyler, Schulhofer, & Huq, 2010) empirical research has shown that the perceived fairness of the criminal justice system, and especially the police, police intervention and manners highly predict legitimacy and cooperation. However, research also showed that minorities have the most negative image of the authorities as unjust and unfair. They feel singled out by authorities based on prejudice and stereotypes (Tyler & Waksalak, 2004). This is confirmed by our study.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

General remarks

Based on the results of both the quantitative and qualitative research and the conclusions linked to them, some recommendations can be made regarding the prevention of violent radicalization among adolescents and, more specifically, the prevention of violent extremism. Before lining out our recommendations, it is important to stress four remarks.

(1) It has to be kept in mind what it is one wants to achieve. There is a difference between measures aiming at the prevention of violent extremism and political violence and strategies aiming at deradicalization. They each address a different population and they each ask for a specific approach. Our study only allows to make recommendations regarding the prevention of radicalization. In order to do so for deradicalization, further research is needed.

(2) Also the position of the government has to be taken into account. This is challenging because two different and conflicting signals have to be given. First it must be clear that violent extremism will not be tolerated. Second it is crucial not to push movements and individuals underground. With this in mind policy makers have to be careful not to develop strategies that contribute to the problem. In this regard it is problematic that so far, only a few projects are scientifically evaluated. However, research into projects aimed at reducing youth violence in general show that only those projects starting with prevention from a very early stage, are effective on the long term (see also Christmann, 2012).

(3) The main concern of practitioners and field workers is on how to recognize individuals at risk in order to focus prevention. We like to stress that general structural problems are at the base of radicalization and violent extremism. This can be seen a “bad news” because it makes it difficult to aim prevention strategies specifically at violent extremism. On the other hand, it also means that we can learn from what is already known from the prevention of youth offending as well as general resilience and youth programs. Although it is difficult and not always possible to solve structural problems, where possible they

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have to be addressed in order to prevent violent extremism in the long term. Structural problems can influence the perceptions of individuals, possibly guiding them towards certain extremist settings and in the end political violence. Whether or not these perceptions are one hundred percent objectively justified, they are at least partially based on problems of inequality and discrimination (causes of the causes). On the short term, youth can be made more resilient to violent extremism by training on how to deal with problems and difficult situations. Resilience-training addresses first of all propensity as the direct cause of extremism by learning youth how to control their impulses and develop positive non-violent attitudes. Second, this will also reduce the need for (active) extremist exposure. These kinds of strategies can be useful for a broad range of groups and do not need to be aimed specifically at youth at risk of radicalization. By addressing general groups and offering positive skills, individuals at risk are also reached out without stigmatizing and at the same time benefitting youth in general.

(4) In order to put our recommendations into practice it should be clear who should take on which responsibility. However, although theoretically relatively easy to answer, in practice this is a difficult task, especially since we are dealing with federal, regional and local levels of government. Inevitably, there will be overlapping action domains and shared responsibilities. The main issue is coordination. When not accurately coordinated this could cause certain issues to be overlooked or ignored while others will be addressed by different actors, leading to confusion. Based on these concerns and on the need for information present in the field, we repeat our suggestion for the formation of a knowledge and information centre on radicalization and extremism, grouping relevant actors and knowledge and supported by research (see Noppe et al., 2011). Several actors are concerned about violent radicalization into violent extremism on both the short and the long term. Several actors also already take initiatives to tackle this (violent) radicalization. What is missing, is a central and neutral partner that can bring existing knowledge together, advise in the development of an integrated prevention policy, coordinate responsibilities, give concrete information on how to recognize and tackle radicalization and support and evaluate existing initiatives. All of our proposed recommendations could be organized by or would benefit from such a centre.

Specific recommendations

Following the recommendations made by Noppe et al. (2011) we maintain that it is important to develop a prevention policy based on two axes. First existing social policy and initiatives should be reinforced, especially in the domains of education, employment and integration. Our results showed that poor social integration and perceived discrimination and perceived injustice are important elements of the breeding ground for violent extremism. It is important that structural grounds for these strains are tackled. Second, regional and local work packages have to be developed. Extremism is often tied to personal experiences and local circumstances and can thus best be recognized and addressed on this local level. Our recommendations refer to these local initiatives.

First, in the **prevention of online radicalization** into violent extremism, the virtual lifestyle of adolescents must be taken into account. The kind of websites adolescents visit, differ in frequency, nature and persuasiveness of extremist messages. As already explained there are different virtual settings giving access to extremist content but not all of them pose the same danger for violent radicalization. Although **extremism** might be present on passive mainstream virtual settings⁸⁷, these settings are not extremist in nature causing possible extremist comments and narratives to be countered by other users. This can result in discussions on different social and political issues and how to interpret them. In other words, passive virtual settings can give rise to a bottom-up and pluralistic discourse and offer alternatives to the extremist narratives. Youth in the prephase of radicalization might visit these websites in search for answers, before ending up in more active extremist virtual settings. The alternatives they encounter here might put the extremist discourse in another perspective and keep them from further radicalizing. Our results further indicate that for some adolescents being able to ventilate on these websites fulfills an important social function, keeping them from further radicalizing into violent extremism. If this possibility would be taken, it is likely that these adolescents will end up in active extremist virtual settings being at risk of further violent radicalization into violent extremism. Finally, the interactions on these

⁸⁷ Mainstream passive virtual settings refer to websites and fora that are not extremist in nature but that do aim at a target audience that also can be attractive for extremist groups. So extremist will be present on these websites, trying to recruit new members.

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websites and forums reflect interaction in real life. Thus, censoring and controlling them would be a waste of time and resources. As already noted, peers and offline social contacts remain crucial in the process of radicalization.

Therefore we recommend to support these kind of websites and forums instead of censoring them and closing them down. This can be done by helping these websites to ensure their continuation (financially or logistically) and/or make them more effective in recognizing and countering extremist propaganda and recognizing and responding to individuals at risk of violent extremism. Most of these websites do not welcome extremist content but do not know how to react. So a possibility would be to offer support and training to existing moderators of these websites.

Furthermore, this does not exclude, and even provides further opportunities for the monitoring of these websites. The presence of extremist and their activities and networks can provide valuable information for police and security services. Concerning active extremist settings⁸⁸ or genuine extremist websites and forums, the only option might be to close them down. However, it is questionable whether the closing down of these websites would be very effective since they most likely will reappear under another name or format. Still, consequently closing them down could form a clear signal that such content is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. However, it is unlikely that youth will repeatedly end up on these websites by accident, implying a more dangerous active exposure. Furthermore, adolescents visiting these websites are expected to already have a certain propensity toward violent extremism. Therefore, prevention strategies targeting these websites are probably not effective since their audience has already bypassed the preface or radicalization and entered the process of radicalization. This means that de-radicalization rather than prevention would be needed. Previous studies showed that deradicalization strategies are only effective when personal and face to face; therefore, it is unlikely that the necessary bonds of trust can be established through these websites. As already mentioned, further research on deradicalization is needed, both in terms of understanding the processes of deradicalization in general and to determine the role of the internet and NSM in this process. NSM can provide unique opportunities to reach extremists and facilitate

⁸⁸ Active extremist virtual settings are websites and forums that are extremist in nature and intention.

deradicalization, but on the other hand, elements of online influence and online social ties can prevent deradicalization. Further research is needed to address [this question](#).

Second, there has been a lot of debate about the use of **counter narratives** for the prevention of online radicalization (see also Leuprecht, Hataley, Moskalenko, & McCauley, 2010a, 2010b). We think counter narratives can only be useful in a passive virtual setting. In these settings, individuals with a low or medium propensity to violent extremism can be found to be still looking for “the right answer” on the questions they are struggling with. It could be useful to offer clear and positive messages that counter the narrative of the extremist groups. However, one has to be careful not to elapse into an ideological battle for the one and only right answer. The most effective would be to freely offer some strong and positive arguments (Weilnböck, 2005). Often this is already done by the other non-extremist members of these websites and forums. For active virtual settings, it is unlikely that counter narratives would have any effect. Individuals active in these settings already have found their (extremist) answer and would not be open for counter arguments. It is more likely that counter narrative attempts will be interpreted as confirming the extremist narrative of a deceiving and untrustworthy government. As already said, what is needed here is not prevention but deradicalization.

Third, actions should be taken to **restore the trust in the authorities**. This is not an easy task. What is expected from the authorities differs for different groups and these visions can contradict each other. For example what the politically right orientated population expects from the government on the subject of immigration is probably not the same as what people of foreign descent will expect. Further, the objective situation and treatment by the authorities might not respond to the perception among the population or the individuals involved. We believe that the most effective way is to sensitize public servants and especially the police.

Thus we recommend that they are made aware of the existence of perceptions of distrust and injustice, how their actions contribute to these perceptions and how best to react in certain situations. Research already showed that it is not so much the outcome of interactions with the police that determines whether are not they are trusted and seen as legitimate. On the contrary it has repeatedly been shown that the

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perception of being treated fairly and respectfully by a neutral police during encounters more strongly contributes to the perception of the police as being legitimate, even in case of negative personal outcome (Tyler, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2001; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Tyler & Lind, 1992). With this in mind it is also important that police are trained in how to interact with different populations, to recognize possible sensitive situations, and how best to handle these. It is important for police to stay neutral in their daily encounters with populations at risk and not let their actions be guided by political sentiments (Deflem, 2004a). We expect this to be equally true for other public servants.

We do repeat that perceptions of injustice are not only a consequence of encounters with the authorities, but can also be a consequence of the personal situation (poor social integration) and more general social, economic and political situations (perceived discrimination). Our focus on strengthening trust in the authorities does not mean that other elements leading to feelings of injustice should be disregarded.

Fourth it is crucial to avoid youth joining extremist groups. Therefore **youth have to be made more resilient** to extremist thoughts and hate discourses and made more adept in coping with difficult situations. As part of this, youth must be educated on *what exactly constitutes a hate discourse*, how it can be recognized, and what alternatives are available. Especially, minors might not always have the necessary social knowledge on politics and social issues to accurately judge the content of certain propaganda. In other words, more attention should go to critical reflection (Braeckman, 2006). Second, **youth have to be educated into confident and intellectual autonomous individuals with a strong democratic consciousness**. There should be more focus on the acquisition of values related to respectful and peaceful coexistence. From a young age this can already be, partially, achieved by showing them how to work together, solve problems together, communicate, reach compromises and handle differences in daily live. Third, **knowledge and understanding of our political system and how society works should be increased**. Often, youth have no idea of how the political decision making process works, what the historical roots are of certain trends or laws in our society (eg. migration, devision state and religion etc.) or how to understand different cultural, political and social attitudes in society. This can also help youth in recognizing injustice and learn them how to react and change their situation.

Fourth, **there should be more focus on internet literacy.** It is often difficult to recognize legitimate from false information on the internet, especially in case of well designed websites. Here can lie an important task for schools, youth workers and other youth organizations. It is important for youth to feel included and valued in society. Once again it has to be kept in mind that extremist exposure does not only occur online but can also, and sometimes mainly, occur offline through peers and other offline social ties.

Following the two previous remarks, it is important to note that international research (PIDOP-project) has shown that the place where youth feel the most treated unfairly is the school environment. This can be by teachers, but also by other personal, other students, perceived opportunities etc. This confirms the importance of the two previous recommendations and the important role schools play. After all, youth spend 35 hours a week in the school environment. In case of increasing resilience towards extremism, it is also important to start at an early age because 1) extremist groups target individuals as young as 13 or 14 years old and 2) individuals at risk are more likely to drop out of school after a certain age. Further, teachers, but also other professionals in the field like youth workers, social workers etc. often do not know how to recognize radicalization, when it becomes a problem and how to handle it. However, because of their close contact with youth they are extremely valuable for prevention. So, a specific training improving their skills regarding radicalization and extremism could be very useful.

Finally, when developing a prevention strategy, it should be kept in mind that **friends and family** have to be made aware that they are essential for prevention and deradicalization. Social support and contact **are** crucial in keeping youth from radicalizing into extremism. It does mean that radicalizing persons are in need of extra support from their environments, especially when they want to leave. Lack of social ties and having no place to go often inhibit youth to return on their steps. (Bjørge, 2002) In this regard, families have to be given the right information and tools to handle situations of radicalization and to facilitate prevention and deradicalization. ~~In that regard,~~ it is also important to keep communicating and talking with both the individuals at risk and extremists. Open communication can be an important tool in preventing violence.

APPENDIX

The following appendixes can be found on the website of Belspo more specifically on the project-Radimed [webpage](#).

Appendix 1: French survey

Appendix 2: Dutch survey

Appendix 3: Measurement of constructs

Appendix 4: Frequency tables and bar charts

Appendix 5: Crosstabs

Appendix 6: Regression analysis

Appendix 7: Interaction-effects

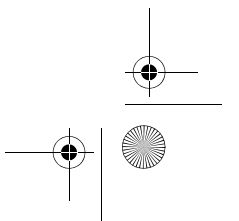
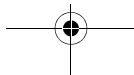
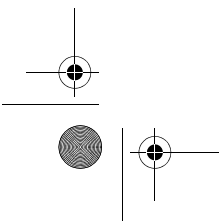
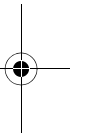
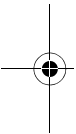
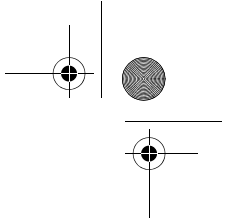
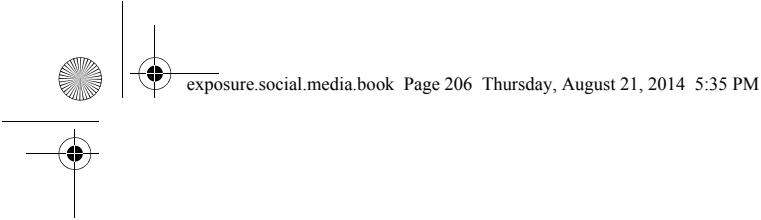
Appendix 8: Correlation matrix

Appendix 9: Categories qualitative analysis

Appendix 10: Interview extracts

Appendix 11: Topic list interviews

Appendix 12: Original interview extracts chapter 9



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