

**'EXPERTS' PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH RADICALISATION IN MALTA'**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores the factors contributing to youth radicalisation in Malta, focusing on the social, psychological, and environmental influences that shape adolescent vulnerability to extremist ideologies. It seeks to understand why some youths may be attracted to radical narratives, particularly within a local context that has received limited scholarly attention. Using a qualitative design, the study draws on expert interviews with nine professionals from education, criminology, psychology, law enforcement and policymaking. Thematic analysis was employed to examine how radicalisation is understood, which push and pull factors are perceived as most influential and how experts believe vulnerable youths can be supported. As part of this research process, a conceptual mind map was developed to visually represent the core dynamics influencing radicalisation across different stages of youth development.

Findings indicate that Islamist and Far-right ideologies emerged as primary concerns among professionals, alongside rising concerns about misogyny, homophobia, and other emerging manifestations of intolerance and extremist sentiment. Participants also emphasised the influence of online content, perceived identity-based grievances, and social alienation as contributing factors. Prevention was viewed as most effective when grounded in education, early intervention, and stronger inter-agency collaboration across institutions. The research suggests that radicalisation in Malta is shaped by both individual vulnerabilities and broader systematic pressures. It concludes that addressing these challenges requires a more coordinated, youth-focused approach that reflects the specific realities of the local context. These findings have important implications for enhancing early intervention through crime prevention strategies, strengthening professional training, and informing more effective policies aimed at reducing the risk of youth radicalisation.

**KEYWORDS: YOUTH RADICALISATION, MALTA, PUSH AND PULL FACTORS, VULNERABILITY, RADICALISATION DRIVERS, COUNTER-RADICALISATION.**

## DISCLAIMER

This is to certify that Jonathan Galdies is the sole author of the Master's dissertation titled 'EXPERTS' PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH RADICALISATION IN MALTA'. This research was conducted under the supervision of Dr. Luke Buhagiar and Professor Saviour Formosa.

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Jonathan Galdies

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

**EU** – European Union

**EUROPOL** – European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation

**P/CVE** – Prevention and Counter Violent Extremism

**PNM** - Prevent Network Malta

**RAN** – Radicalisation Awareness Network

**RAN C&N** - Radicalisation Awareness Network, Communication & Narratives

**SDM** – Social Development Model

**SIT** - Social Identity Theory

**SQT** – Significance Quest Theory

**UNDOC** - United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

When this research began in late 2023, international security risks particularly those linked to on-going global conflicts provided important context for this study (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025, p.1). The Malta Security Services likewise emphasised the need for vigilance and proactive measures to counter youth radicalisation (Security Committee, 2024). Together, these global and local dynamics underscored the need and urgency of exploring the factors that render young people vulnerable to radical ideologies.

By the time interviews were conducted between November and December 2024, several significant international developments had further shaped the environment surrounding the study. These included the outbreak of the war in Gaza in October 2023, the on-going war in Ukraine, and political unrest in the aftermath of the U.S. elections and the growing influence of right-wing parties across Europe.

Moreover, public discourse during recent years was also influenced by high-profile and controversial figures, such as Elon Musk, who openly endorsed Germany's AfD, and online personalities like Andrew Tate, whose content has been criticised for promoting misogyny and polarising narratives, particularly within homosocial contexts (Haslop et al., 2024, p.2). Meanwhile, migration remained a politically charged and divisive issue across the European continent (Galantino, 2020; Moretti & Ahmed, 2024, p.91). While these developments may not directly impact Malta's geopolitical stance, their broader influence resonates even within smaller states, shaping public sentiment and discourse (Malta's Foreign Policy Strategy, 2023, p.24).

All of these conditions may contribute to a broader climate of uncertainty and social fragmentation, shaped by the interaction of multiple crises, and thus provide crucial context for this study (Krastev & Leonard, 2024, p.3). This environment closely connects to the

themes explored in this dissertation, particularly identity, psychological vulnerability, and the appeal of extremist narratives. Although Malta has not experienced large-scale incidents of youth radicalisation, these wider geopolitical and social developments raise concerns about potential vulnerabilities among Maltese adolescents. This is particularly relevant given that phenomena like polarisation and radicalisation tend to act as a contagion, both within states and across states via the internet and the globalisation of ideas (Youngblood, 2020). This study therefore explores, through expert insights, how such factors might influence the susceptibility of youths in Malta to extremist narratives.

### **1.1.1 Radicalisation in Context**

The issue of youth radicalisation has emerged as a significant concern in both academic and policy-making circles, particularly due to its growing impact of social cohesion (Lewis & Awan, 2024; Schröder et al., 2022, p.181). This dissertation focuses on understanding the push and pull factors influencing the radicalisation of adolescents in Malta, an area that remains underexplored despite the increasing global relevance of radicalisation (Ajil, 2022; Freestone, 2017). Given that youth are at critical developmental stage (Borum, 2025), understanding the socio-psychological and environmental forces that may steer them toward extremist ideologies is vital (Baxter et al., 2022; Cherney et al., 2022; Mannarini et al., 2020, p. 82; Wallner, 2021, p.3).

Theoretically, this study draws on established models such as Silber et al. (2007) NYPD Radicalisation Framework and the Significance Quest Theory with its 3N model by Da Silva et al. (2023), while also incorporating policy and practice recommendations from experts and integrating the distinct social and cultural dynamics of Malta (Meringolo, 2020). These insights have practical relevance for educators, social workers, and law enforcement professionals seeking to enhance prevention and intervention strategies (Awan et al., 2019, pp.8-9; Peels, 2024). At the policy and practical level, the findings may contribute to more effective frameworks in Malta and potentially inform further research on youth radicalisation (Brown & Marmara, 2022), by providing evidence based insights that support tailored strategies and cross-sector collaboration.

Moreover, youth radicalisation intersects with broader societal concerns such as integration, identity formation, and the influence of digital media on worldview developments (Cassam, 2022; Campello et al., 2018). This dissertation aims to demonstrate how these factors converge within the Maltese context, offering expert insights for local stakeholders and contributing to understanding of youth engagement radicalisation and extremist narratives (Adaval & Weyer, 2022).

## **1.2 DEFINING RADICALISATION**

Radicalisation is a complex and evolving processes in which individuals or groups gradually adopt extreme or radical opinions, sentiments, or behaviours, often linked to political, social, or religious ideologies. It is shaped by a range of ideological, social, and cultural factors across different contexts worldwide (Abbas, 2024). One influential model that conceptualises this process is the NYPD radicalisation framework (Silber et al., 2007), which outlines four-stage progression toward potential violent extremism, mainly within Western contexts.

Although radicalisation may sometimes stop short of violent action, as suggested by the Oxford University Press (2024) and the Stair Case model (Moghaddam, 2005; Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009), it can also escalate toward the acceptance of violence to disrupt established authority or societal norms, as highlighted by Khosrokhavar (2014). This aligns with broader understandings of radicalisation as a process involving internalisation and propagation of extremist beliefs (Roberts-Ingleson & McCann, 2023).

Defining radicalisation is crucial not only for understanding its stages but also for implementing targeted prevention strategies. As Abbas (2024) argues, a clear definition provides a framework to identify the early signs of radicalisation, enabling more precise interventions. This is especially important for youths, who are particularly susceptible to radicalisation due to their development phase, where identity formation and a sense of belonging are heightened (Borum, 2025; Strindberg et al., 2020).

Studies by Baxter et al. (2022), Galvin et al. (2023), and Hollewell & Longpre' (2022) demonstrate that factors, such as social media, peer pressure, and the search for validation, amplify youth vulnerability to radicalisation. Whittaker (2020) further underscores how online platforms serve as breeding grounds for extremist ideologies, reinforcing the role of external factors. Equally important are internal factors, that include psychological needs, and personal grievances, which when they interact with external influences may shape an individual's pathway toward radicalisation (Whittaker, 2020).

In response to these challenges, having a clear and agreed-upon definition of radicalisation allows policymakers and educators to establish focused strategies aimed at countering these influences. As Bötticher (2017) and Lucas (2023) emphasise, without such clarity, efforts to combat radicalisation can become fragmented and ineffective. Torregrosa et al. (2022) suggest, that the provision of alternative narratives and support mechanisms becomes more achievable when radicalisation is properly understood, enabling more robust measures to steer vulnerable youths away from extremism.

### **1.3 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

This research aims to explore the complex processes underlying youth radicalisation in Malta, focusing on the factors that influence adolescents' susceptibility to extremist views. It aims to identify where professionals can intervene and provide support, while offering insight to address vulnerabilities and strengthen Prevention and Countering Violent Extremism (PCV/E) strategies. To achieve this, this study pursues the following key objectives:

1. **Comprehensive Literature Review:** the first objective is to conduct an extensive review of the existing literature on youth radicalisation, highlighting global and local trends (if any), while exploring social, psychological, and environmental influences that may contribute to the radicalisation of some youths.

2. Engagement with Experts: The second objective involves consulting professionals who are actively involved in addressing and preventing radicalisation. This consultation will help gather insights into the processes that may lead to radicalisation among Maltese youth, if such dynamics exist.
3. Recommendations for P/CVE Protocols: Finally, the third objective focuses on identifying strategies based on expert feedback from semi-structured interviews. These suggest potential approaches for addressing extremist ideologies among young people, which may inform or complement existing Prevention and Counter Violent Extremism (P/CVE) protocols in ways that reflect the needs of the local context.

#### **1.4 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONCEPTS**

To explore youth radicalisation in a structured and comprehensive manner, this dissertation is guided by three research questions aligned with its overarching aims and objectives. The study seeks to uncover the push and pull factors that may influence young people toward radical ideologies. While this study begins with explanatory inquiries to understand how and why radicalisation occurs, these preliminary assumptions are critically examined, assessed, and validated throughout the relevant chapters.

This step-by-step approach ensures that various dimensions of youth radicalisation are thoroughly explored contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to lay the groundwork for more effective theoretical and practical strategies to address radicalisation.

In order to examine youth radicalisation in a comprehensive manner, this dissertation is guided by three (3) core research questions designed to explore key dimensions of the phenomenon, including characteristics of at-risk youths, the social factors shaping their pathways, the dynamics behind their potential recruitment into extremist groups, and the

role of expert recommendations in prevention and intervention. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions will be addressed:

- I. How do different social, psychological, and environmental factors shape youths' vulnerability to engage in extremism or adopt radical ideologies or behaviours?
  - i. This research question aimed to identify the profiles, traits, and attributes: demographic, psychological, and social factors that made certain youths more susceptible to radicalisation. By examining these factors and their interplay, this dissertation sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of the causes predisposing youths to various radical ideologies.
- II. In what ways are young people drawn toward particular ideologies or groups, whether and how do these factors contribute to pathways of potential recruitment?
  - ii. This research question explored how social environments, including peer groups, and family dynamics, influenced youths' attraction to specific ideologies or groups. Understanding the role of both internal and external factors was crucial in assessing their impact on recruitment processes and the development of radical behaviours.
- III. How do experts understand and recommend ways of addressing youth radicalisation in Malta?
  - iii. This research question sought expert's insights to inform evidence-based strategies, preventive measures, intervention programs, and policy frameworks addressing youth radicalisation.

## **1.5 OVERVIEW OF THE UPCOMING CHAPTERS**

Chapter 2 provides a literature review, which begins by delving into the complexity of youth radicalisation, exploring its multifaceted nature through social scientific theories and

empirical research. It defines radicalisation and examines how it manifests in social behaviour, particularly in adolescence. The chapter also introduces theoretical models, including the Significance Quest Theory and its 3N model, to provide a structured approach for understanding pathways toward extremism, while emphasising the need for empirical work within the Maltese context.

Building on this theoretical foundation, Chapter 3 outlines the methodology adopted in the study. It presents the rationale for examining the factors influencing youth radicalisation. Central to this chapter is a mind map illustrating the core concept of radicalisation as a dynamic interplay of push and pull factors, an initial idea that underpins the study's three research questions. The chapter also details the research design, including the use of qualitative methods, purposive sampling, data collection tools, and ethical considerations. Finally issues of trustworthiness and credibility are addressed to ensure methodological transparency.

Following the methodological groundwork, Chapter 4 presents the Findings and Discussion, based on data retrieved from semi-structured interviews. The data is organised into six key themes and their sub-themes, all exploring factors contributing to youth radicalisation. This chapter also relates the findings to the Significance Quest Theory and its 3N model, demonstrating how internal and external influences interact throughout the radicalisation process. These insights provide a strong foundation for deeper analysis and policy and practical recommendations.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides the Conclusion, bringing the findings into the specific context of Malta, exploring the relationship between key factors and youth involvement in extremism. By synthesising insights from expert interviews, the chapter identifies that although radicalisation can occur at any age, young people are particularly more vulnerable to radicalisation, due to their developmental stage, identity formation, and exposure to both internal and external influences. The diverse perspectives offered by the findings complement each another, offering a comprehensive understanding of the issue and highlighting the intricate connections between social, psychological, and environmental factors.

## **1.6 CONCLUSION**

This dissertation offers a comprehensive examination of youth radicalisation, uncovering the key factors that increase vulnerability among young people to extremist influences. By integrating established theoretical models with expert insights, it reveals the complex interaction of social, psychological, and environmental forces shaping these pathways. Additionally, the study provides valuable perspectives on how tailored strategies can be adapted to the Maltese context, aiming to enhance prevention and intervention efforts against the spread of extremist ideologies among youth.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This Chapter offers a comprehensive exploration of youth radicalisation, clarifying its definitions, scope, and underlying dynamics through a blend of social-scientific theory and empirical research. It establishes a working understanding of radicalisation to help experts identify related social behaviours and inform responses across various sectors, including policy, education, and security (Awan et al., 2019, pp.8-9; Peels, 2024).

The discussion then proceeds to outline types and dynamics of radicalisation, highlighting how political, religious, and social ideologies manifest in different forms. Special attention is given to adolescence, a period considered particularly vulnerable due to developmental sensitivities and heightened social pressures (Lewis & Awan, 2024; Sarnoto et al., 2024). The chapter then explores youth radicalisation in depth, focusing on the psychosocial factors that shape susceptibility during this stage of life (Schröder et al., 2022, p.179).

Next, it reviews approaches to countering youth radicalisation, drawing from educational, community-based, and security-driven strategies. This leads to an overview of theoretical models, most notably Significance Quest Theory and its 3N Model (Belanger et al., 2019; Da Silva et al., 2023; Kruglanski et al., 2022), which provides structured explanations for how individuals may be drawn into extremist ideologies and behaviours. These frameworks also emphasise the importance of empirical work to assess their relevance across different contexts (Campello et al., 2018, p.2; PISOIU, 2015, p.13).

The chapter then shifts to the local context of Malta, examining how national socio-political dynamics intersect with broader European trends (Brown & Marmara, 2022; Hafez & Mullins, 2015). This is complemented by insights from the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), and the EU Knowledge Hub, whose guidance shapes counter-radicalisation policies across Member States.

Finally, the chapter concludes by identifying gaps that inform the dissertation's empirical exploration (Da Silva et al., 2023, p.610; Schröder et al., 2022, p.178). Through this structure covering; definitions and scope, types and dynamics, youth focus, approaches to radicalisation, theoretical models, local context, RAN/EU guidance the chapter guides the reader systematically toward the study's research questions and methodological rationale.

## **2.2 RADICALISATION: DEFINITION AND SCOPE**

Radicalisation is a complex and evolving process shaped by a combination of ideological, social and cultural factors across different contexts (Abbas, 2024). Radicalisation differs from political and social polarisation, which refers to the increasing divide between opposing ideological viewpoints within mainstream society (Smith et al., 2024; Briguglio et al., 2023; Bjornsgaard & Dukic, 2023). Radicalisation involves a deeper and more personal transformation in beliefs and behaviours, often leading individuals or groups to reject established norms and advocate for significant fundamental change, sometimes through extreme measures (Abbas, 2024; Campello et al., 2018, p.1; Trip et al., 2019).

The following subsections will explore this concept further by examining various definitions of radicalisation, identifying key stages, and introducing a synthesised working definition to guide the rest of the analysis.

### **2.2.1 Overview of the General Concept**

Extremism, as described by Awan et al. (2019, pp. 7-8), involves advocating political or religious views that significantly diverge from societal norms, often rejecting democratic principles and human rights. Radicalisation is the process through which individuals or groups adopt extreme ideologies (Abbas, 2024). When radicalisation progresses towards violent extremism, individuals or groups not only hold extreme beliefs but also actively engage in or promote violence to achieve their objectives (Khosrokhavar, 2017; Peels, 2024, p.8).

Although often used interchangeably, radicalism and extremism are distinct concepts. The former is better understood as a process, a pathway by which individuals shift from moderate to more extreme ideologies, which may or may not lead to violence (Satterley, 2024). However, the boundaries between radicalism, extremism, and even mainstream political activism are not always clearly defined (Awan et al., 2019; Bötticher, 2017).

Several definitions illustrate the complexity of this concept. Oxford English Dictionary (2024) defines Radicalisation as *“the action or process of making somebody more extreme or radical in their opinions on political, social or religious issues.”* This broad framing aligns with Moghaddam’s (2005) staircase model, which conceptualises radicalisation as a gradual climb through different levels of cognitive and moral engagement. However, as Moskalenko and McCauley, (2009, p.483) argue, not all individuals who ascend this staircase ultimately resort to violence, since many may remain active at non-violent stages.

In contrast, Khosrokhavar (2014) defines radicalisation as *“a process by which an individual or group adopts violent form of action, directly linked to an extremist ideology with a social or religious political content that undermines the established political, social, or cultural order.”* This definition highlights the end point of violent radicalisation, where ideology becomes a justification for the use of force.

Roberts-Ingleson and McCann, (2023) contribute a psychological dimension, noting that radicalisation is shaped by vulnerability factors, including social exclusion and exposure to misinformation, which may reinforce cognitive biases and fuel identification with extremist narratives. Taken together, these definitions suggest that radicalisation involves a process of ideological intensification, the potential for behavioural escalation, and contextual vulnerabilities that shape its potential trajectory. To clarify the boundaries of inquiry, this dissertation adopts the following working definition (see page 71) as a guiding framework:

*“Radicalisation is best understood as a context-dependent shift toward extreme ideology that may culminate in activism or violence, justified by perceived injustice and amplified by social, political, and online influences,”* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024; Khosrokhavar, 2014; Roberts-Ingleson & McCann 2023).

To avoid conceptual overlap, it is also important to distinguish radicalisation from polarisation. While polarisation is reflected in collective behaviours, such as rallying around specific media or social platforms, which strengthens connection among like-minded individuals (Bjornsgaard and Dukic 2023; Smith et al., 2024, p.4), it does not necessarily lead to rejection of democratic values or engagement in extremist actions (Bjornsgaard & Dukic, 2023). Polarisation simplifies complex social issues into binary oppositions, narrowing dialogue and limiting meaningful debate (Pauwels & van Alstein, 2022, p.8), and may contribute to social division without the same personal transformation seen in radicalisation.

According to Abbas, (2024, p.233), radicalisation remains a contested concept, with ongoing debates about its boundaries, causes, and policy implications (Sedgwick, 2010, p. 490). Radicalisation often originates from strong ideological convictions, whether political, social, or religious (Sedgwick, 2010, p.458). Such ideologies provide a framework through which individuals and groups interpret their experiences and justify their actions. Historical movements advocating for abolition, suffrage, and civil rights demonstrate how radical ideas, while challenging prevailing norms, can also drive positive societal change. This underscores the evolving dynamic nature of radical ideas across different socio-political contexts over time (Feddes et al., 2023).

Ultimately, following this assessment, the researcher observes that radicalisation can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, reflecting its dual and often contradictory dimensions. In democratic societies it may inspire constructive activism and reform, while in non-democratic settings or under conditions of repression, it can lead individuals or groups to justify violence as a means of achieving their aims.

### **2.2.2 The Role and Impact of Ideological Radicalisation**

As noted in the previous section, radicalisation is best understood as a context-dependent process shaped by ideological shifts, vulnerability factors, and the potential for escalation. This section specifically focuses on ideological radicalisation, where individuals adopt a

belief system that challenge or reject prevailing political or social norms, sometimes justifying violence in pursuit of ideological goals.

The process of ideological radicalisation is often driven by perceptions of socio-political injustice (Emmelkamp et al., 2020). Socio-economic conditions can act as push and pull factors, influencing how individuals interpret grievances and the legitimacy of extreme responses (Madriaza & Ponsot, 2016). These conditions may exacerbate feelings of exclusion, particularly among marginalised groups, and create a sense of urgency to act against perceived systematic inequalities.

Reidy (2019) suggests that individuals with extreme ideological views are not always perceived as threats; in some cases, they are seen as catalysts for social change. This highlights the importance of context in understanding radicalisation, since not all ideological shifts are inherently violent or destructive, and some may reflect a broader desire for justice or reform.

Notable examples of ideological radicalisation include the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001 and the Norway attacks in 2011 (Horgan, 2014; Kleinfeld, 2023, p.36). These events underscore how deeply held ideological beliefs, when combined with perceived injustice and personal or collective vulnerability, can culminate in acts of violence intended to disrupt or reshape the social order.

The rise of global interconnectedness has intensified the spread of influence of radical ideologies, making ideological radicalisation a growing concern for modern societies (Ozer & Obaidi, 2022). Cassam (2022, p.3), and Peels (2024, p.2) highlight the importance of collaboration between academia and intelligence services in understanding the root causes of radicalisation, an argument echoed by Sageman (2014), who advocates for interdisciplinary approaches to threat assessments.

Pauwles and van Alstein (2022, p.10) further expand the scope of ideological radicalisation by examining contemporary polarising issues like COVID-19 vaccination and climate change (Kleinfeld, 2023). Their research demonstrates how ideologies function as belief systems

that mobilise collective action in pursuit of perceived societal transformation (Ahmad et al. 2008; Campello et al., 2018; Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p.12). These ideologies are often reinforced in online spaces, where individuals find validation, community, and narratives that justify their positions.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of ideological radicalisation and its implications for security and social cohesion, researchers must engage with a broad range of perspectives. As Cassam (2022) explains, ideologies consist of interconnected beliefs and values that shape an individual's perception of society, their place within it, and the norms they are willing to defend or reject.

### **2.3 TYPE AND DYNAMICS OF RADICALISATION**

Understanding the type and extent of radicalisation requires distinguishing it from extremism. While the two concepts are related, they are not identical (Campello et al., 2018). Radicalisation refers to the process by which individuals move from holding extreme views to potentially engaging in violent actions, as explained in Section 2.2.1 extremism, by contrast, radicalisation involves a rigid adherence to radical ideologies that oppose fundamental societal values, such as democracy and individual liberty (Vergani et al., 2018). The critical distinction lies in the action component: radicalisation represents a dynamic trajectory towards violence, whereas extremism reflects a more static ideological stance (Feddes, 2023; Khosrokhavar, 2014; Oxford University Press, 2024; Roberts-Ingleson & McCann, 2023; Trip et al., 2019; HM Government, 2015, p.9).

Gelber (2019, p.613) discusses extremism as a multifaceted issue involving hate speech and the convergence of extremist ideologies. She notes that while extremism often involves violence, it doesn't always result in terrorism (Abbas, 2024). In terms of extent, both radicalisation and extremism can have far-reaching impacts on individuals and society, creating social tensions, fuelling violence, and increasing the likelihood of further conflict (Pawles & van Alstein, 2022). These processes are not limited to any one region, as

extremist ideologies increasingly transcend national boundaries and influence diverse populations globally (Ozer & Obaidi, 2022).

### **2.3.1 Political Radicalisation**

The political radicalisation and involvement of young people represents serious risks for both individuals and society (Pauwles & van Alstein, 2022). Radicalisation is a gradual process where individuals adopt extremist political ideologies that can lead to anti-democratic actions or violence (Moghaddam, 2005; Khosrokhavar, 2014; Roberts-Ingleson & McCann, 2023). Young people, especially those facing social exclusion or ideological discontent, are particularly vulnerable to radical political movements that exploit their grievance and desire for belonging (Ajil, 2022; Balzacq & Settoul, 2022; Pisiu, 2015).

Political radicalisation is frequently characterised by a rigid stance, emerging as young people engage with extreme ideologies across the spectrum, including far-left, far-right, secular, and religious movements (e.g. Islamist) (Mannarini et al., 2020, p.8.2). These ideologies are rooted in a rejection of mainstream political system, often advocating drastic political change or the overthrow of democratic institutions (Schmid, 2013; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008). Radical political movements, such as extreme nationalists or Islamist groups, exploit grievances to draw in disaffected youths (Ajil, 2022; Balzacq & Settoul, 2022; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

### **2.3.2 Political and Ideological Influence on Youth Radicalisation**

Youth radicalisation is driven by extremist political and ideological narratives that portray mainstream political systems as corrupt, illegitimate, and unfit to govern (Emmelkamp et al., 2020). Far-right movements often manipulate themes of nationalism, xenophobia, and anti-migrant sentiment to recruit disillusioned youth (Helbling & Meierriecks, 2022), while Islamist [sic] radicalisation tends to focus on the promotion of religious governance as an alternative to secular democratic values (Schmid, 2013). These ideologies present themselves as solutions to what young people perceive as a failing system, offering a sense of purpose,

identity, and belonging at a critical stage of identity formation and social belonging (Trip et al., 2019).

Social and political isolation further amplifies these vulnerabilities (Hollewell & Longpre', 2022). Many youths, particularly from immigrant or minority communities, feel disconnected from mainstream political processes and marginalised by non-existing structures (Uba & Bosi, 2022). When political systems fail to address grievances, feelings of alienation can deepen, making them more susceptible to radical ideologies that promise systematic change (Cherney et al., 2021).

This pattern is particularly evident among some Muslim youth communities in the UK, where a perceived lack of democratic representation has led to increased attraction to Islamist radicalisation. Similarly patterns of youth alienation have also observed in broader European contexts (Uba & Bosi, 2022). As Schmid (2013), Sedgwick (2010), and Borum (2011) note, the polarisation of political discourse, particularly during periods of economic or political instability, intensifies radicalisation. This growing divide exacerbates the appeal of extremist ideologies, further undermining societal cohesion and democratic values.

### **2.3.3 The Spectrum of Political and Religious Extremism**

Cassam, (2022, p.14) raises a critical question: *"how can we define when an ideology becomes extreme?"* Cassam proposes that ideologies lie on a left-right spectrum, with extremist views occupying the far ends. These include Islamism, far-right and far-left ideologies, and religious fundamentalist ideologies, each of which may lead to distinct forms of radicalisation. Cassam, (2022, p.16), and Finaly, (2023, p.322) further introduce the 'Pro-Violence Spectrum,' which classifies political ideologies based on their endorsement of violence. The more fervently an ideology advocates violence, the more extreme it is perceived. For instance, Islamism often involves radical interpretations of Islamic [sic] principles, advocating political Islam and, in some cases, the use of violence to achieve its goals (Said, et al., 2021; Satterley, 2024).

Both far-right and far-left ideologies exploit polarising narratives around issues such as immigration and identity (Strindberg, 2020), manipulating moral and emotional sentiments to advocate for radical social or economic changes (Said et al., 2021, p.40). Koehler (2016) contrasts the perception of right-wing extremism with Islamist extremism. A notable example of the latter is Yusuf al-Qaradawi's endorsement of jihad and the creation of a society governed by Islamic law (Weimers, 2021). Weimers further emphasises the threat Islamist extremism poses to democratic societies, comparing it to fascist ideologies (Cassam, 2022, p.2; Tamir Bar-On, 2018).

Similarly, Jasko et al.'s (2022) differentiate between left-wing, right-wing, and Islamist extremism, noting that left-wing extremism often involves radical socialist or communist ideologies, while right-wing extremism is associated with nationalist or fascist beliefs. Uba & Bosi, (2022, p.137) emphasise the role of social background factors, particularly gender, in shaping ideological alignments. They argue that young men are much more likely to adopt radical right-wing views, often linked to ideals of masculinity, whereas women often gravitate toward left-wing, influenced by feminist movements and socialist values.

Religious fundamentalism, meanwhile, involves strict adherence to religious doctrines, potentially leading to radical behaviours that prioritise religious principles over secular norms (Phillips & Kitchens, 2021). The relationship between fundamentalism and radicalisation is complex, as it often reinforces collective identities and extreme beliefs within specific communities (Pollack et al. 2023, p.3).

The examination of different ideologies highlights the importance of understanding specific cases, such as Islamism and anti-migrant extremism. Helbling and Meierrieks (2022) argue that migration from Muslim-majority countries, particularly during the 2015 refugee crisis, contributed to the spread of extremist ideologies across Europe. The sudden and large arrival of refugees intensified social tensions and perceptions of cultural threat, which far-right groups quickly exploited to fuel anti-migrant sentiment, thereby posing significant challenges to social cohesion and security (Galantino, 2020; Pauwels, 2023).

Islamist radicalisation, while often linked to violent extremism, spans a broad spectrum, from non-violent ideologies to jihadist organisations (Torregrosa, et al., 2022). It is essential to distinguish between mainstream Islamist movements that work within democratic frameworks and radical groups that resort to violence (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2023).

Extremist ideologies, whether rooted in political, religious, or social grievances, can foster violence and societal divisions (Ajil, 2022). A deep understanding of these ideologies, particularly those along the left – right spectrum, is essential for addressing their impact on security and social unity (Feddes et al., 2023).

#### **2.3.4 The Intersection of Extremism and Stigma**

To fully grasp the complexities of extremism, scholars like Cassam, (2022) emphasise the importance of examining its diverse manifestation across historical and contextual boundaries (Koehler, 2016). Extremism, akin to ideology, evolves over time and varies significantly across societies. Peels (2024) suggests that understanding extremism, alongside radicalisation, deepens comprehension of how extremist ideologies take root and manifest in various forms of behaviour.

Governments increasingly acknowledge the multifaceted dimensions of extremist behaviour (Martins, 2022). Recent events in Europe, particularly in France, where divisions among young Muslims over a bill aimed at addressing extremism and promoting republican values have surfaced (Salam, 2021), exemplify this growing awareness. Recognising the drivers of radicalisation and extremism allows policymakers to develop targeted initiatives while upholding democratic principles and human rights (EUROPOL, 2023; European Commission, 2022).

Scholars like Adams et al. (2023) and Taylor (2018) highlight the stigmatisation experienced by Muslim communities' post-9/11, which contributed to the formation of "suspect communities." These are populations unfairly perceived as inherently suspicious or

predisposed to extremism by security forces and wider society (Lynch, 2015; Poole, 2005). Von Lutz et al. (2024) argues that such stigmatisation can fuel discriminatory narratives and prejudices, which in turn may contribute to feelings of exclusion and resentment that can increase vulnerability to radical influences. This emphasises the urgent need for policies that reduce stigma and improve perceptions of vulnerable populations (Schmid, 2013, p.4).

## **2.4 YOUTH RADICALISATION**

Adolescence is a critical developmental phase characterised by significant changes in identity formation, cognitive development, and evolving social dynamics (Baxter et al., 2022; Cherney et al., 2022; Mannarini et al., 2020, p. 8.2; Wallner, 2021, p.3). During this transitional period, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviours due to a combination of internal influences, such as emotional instability, and external factors like peer pressure and the need to adapt to new social environments (Abbas, 2024; Lucas, 2023; UNDOC, 2019, p.20). Such behaviours may range from delinquency to the exploration of extreme ideological viewpoints, which can offer perceived stability or purpose (Calafato, 2019, p.51). These vulnerabilities may provide insight into why some adolescents may be susceptible to radical ideologies (Schröder et al., 2022).

Baxter et al. (2022), Reuben et al. (2016), Aylwin et al. (2019, p.54), and Williamson et al. (2021, p.978) indicate that developmental shifts, (especially when combined with earlier adversities), can significantly impact life trajectories. Throughout these transitional stages, adolescents may be more susceptible to radical ideologies, as extreme viewpoints may offer a sense of purpose or community that they feel is missing in their lives (Schröder et al., 2022). According to Gonzales et al. (2022a, p.538) this heightened vulnerability is influenced by a variety of factors, including the values and beliefs adolescents develop in response to their environment.

### **2.4.1 Characteristics of Youth Radicalisation**

A defining characteristic of modern youth radicalisation is the pervasive role of the internet (Whittaker, 2023). Adolescents are deeply engaged in digital environments where radical ideologies are not only easily accessible but also actively propagated through social media and online forums (Hollewell & Longpre', 2022). According to Whittaker (2020), these platforms often create echo chambers (or online spaces, where individuals are exposed predominantly to information, opinions, and beliefs that align with their pre-existing views) where extreme views are reinforced. Individuals who feel marginalised or disconnected may find a sense of belonging or purpose within these online communities (Baxter et al., 2022; Cherney et al., 2022). The perceived safety and anonymity of online interactions reduce inhibitions and encourage young people to explore radical content with little fear of detection or immediate consequence (Whittaker, 2023).

Beyond the digital sphere, peer influence remains a significant factor in youth radicalisation (Ginges et al., 2011, p.517). Adolescents, in their search for social validation and belonging, are highly influenced by their peers (Trip et al., 2019; Da Silva et al., 2023). Peer groups can act as protective factors by offering positive social support or, conversely, foster the adoption of radical ideologies (Aylwin et al., 2019; France & Homel, 2007).

Understanding youth vulnerability to radicalisation requires a holistic approach that incorporates the Social-Development Model (SDM), which highlights the intricate interplay of social, developmental, and psychological factors (Beelman, 2021; Baxter et al., 2022, p.98). Core elements such as the need for belonging and experiences of marginalisation are central to shaping adolescent's susceptibility to radical ideologies (Al Ubaidi, 2017; Neve et al., 2020; UNDOC, 2019, p.20). Therefore, providing targeted support, education, and resources becomes crucial in mitigating these vulnerabilities and fostering a positive transition into adulthood (Burt & Paysnick, 2012).

This perspective is particularly relevant for adolescents facing socio-economic disadvantages, who may be more likely to gravitate towards extremist beliefs as a way to address personal conflicts and feelings of alienation (Uba & Bosi, 2022). Schröder et al. (2022) describe how the early stages of ideological adaptation can escalate into more extreme behaviours, including involvement in violent activities.

Addressing youth radicalisation also requires a robust legal framework (Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2023). In fact, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines any individual under the age of eighteen as a child, laying the foundation for policies, interventions and legal considerations related to age crime responsibility. This framework is critical as it ensures the protection of rights and welfare for adolescents, who are particularly vulnerable during this transition (Burt & Paysnick, 2012).

In conclusion, a comprehensive understanding of youth vulnerability to radicalisation, informed by developmental psychology and social theory, is essential for developing effective policies and interventions. By addressing both the internal vulnerabilities and external pressures that adolescents face, societies can develop more effective strategies to support young people during these critical life transitions. This, in turn, reduces their susceptibility to extremist influences and promotes healthier pathways into adulthood. These developmental and contextual influences underscore the importance of examining how adolescence itself, as a distinct life stage, shapes susceptibility to radicalisation.

#### **2.4.2 Adolescent Development and Vulnerability to Radicalisation**

Following this discussion, it becomes essential to view youth vulnerability through the lens of developmental psychopathology, which situates risk within normal adolescent growth processes. This perspective highlights adolescence as a transitional period marked by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social change (Lewis & Awan, 2024; Sarnoto et al., 2024). From a *developmental psychopathological* perspective, Borum (2025) suggests that adolescents' susceptibility to extremist engagement develops through the same psychological and social processes that shape normal development, rather than existing apart from them. His

framework examines how *adaptive and maladaptive* outcomes emerge through the interaction of individual traits, developmental responsibilities, and environmental contexts over time. Vulnerability is not a fixed trait but a developmental pathway that evolves as adolescents navigate challenges in identity, emotion, and social belonging. Depending on the supporting structures and contexts surrounding these developmental processes, the outcomes can diverge, where limited supportive developmental guidance or social isolation may lead to maladaptive responses such as susceptibility to radicalisation, while stable relationships, positive coping skills, and inclusion promote resilience and healthy adaptation. This perspective explains why some young people adapt positively under stress, while others (exposed to similar conditions) may internalise extremist world views as a way to restore coherence or control (Felitti et al., 2019).

According to Borum (2025, p.6), *identity formation* is one of the most salient developmental processes during adolescence. Borum notes that young people actively explore beliefs and affiliations to construct a coherent sense of self. When this process unfolds amid marginalisation or perceived injustice, ideological movements promising belonging and purpose can fill the void (Trip et al., 2019). This view aligns closely with Arango and Burgos (2024), who argue that identity is shaped through social affordances, (the opportunities and constraints provided by the environment), which make alienated youth particularly responsive to narratives that offer recognition and meaning. Similarly, Adams et al. (2023) found that ideology often becomes a narrative through which disconnected individuals make sense of exclusion, a pattern consistent with Borum's assertion that identity insecurity interacts with ideological appeal.

Closely related is *psychosocial maturity*, which encompass autonomy, emotional control, and sound judgement. According to Borum (2025, p.2), limited psychosocial maturity leaves adolescents more susceptible to black-and-white thinking and emotionally charged messaging. Baxter et al. (2022) and Burt and Paysnick (2012) highlight that parental engagement and structured learning environments can accelerate psychological growth, supporting reflection and resilience that protect against extremist persuasion.

Another important element of adolescent development is *temperance*, as this stage is characterised by intense emotions and heightened sensitivity to social rejection or humiliation. Borum (2025, p.7) emphasises that difficulties in emotion regulation can amplify anger and grievance, emotions that extremist recruiters deliberately exploit. Gonzales et al. (2022b) provide empirical evidence of this dynamic, showing how recruiters capitalise on psychological vulnerability to channel frustration and resentment into ideological aggression.

*Peer influence* is also integral to Borum (2025, p.9) model, as it can either antisocial behaviour. He observes that adolescents' strong need for peer validation and approval often reinforces conformity to prevailing group norms (in groups & out-groups), whether in a prosocial or extremist direction (Doosje al., 2012; Storm et al., 2020; Wittaker, 2023). This dynamic highlights how social belonging shapes moral decision-making during a stage when identity and autonomy are still developing. Supporting this view, Campello et al. (2018) found that peer dynamics frequently mediate the link between identity uncertainty and ideological commitment, particularly when online networks amplify social approval for radical ideas.

The interaction between *risk and protective factors* is another core feature of Borum's (2025, p.10) developmental model. He argues that vulnerabilities such as trauma exposure, fragile parental relationships, or community fragmentation can heighten susceptibility to radicalisation by undermining emotional stability and social belonging. Conversely, consistent support systems, such as strong family ties, positive mentorship, and opportunities for civic participation function as protective layers that promote resilience against extremist engagement (Al Ubaidi, 2017). This interactional view is supported by Emmelkamp et al. (2020) and Galvin et al. (2023), whose findings show that cumulative protective mechanisms, particularly within educational and familial contexts, significantly reduces the likelihood of violent radicalisation.

Finally, *environmental factors* play a decisive role in determining whether development vulnerabilities are amplified or diminished. Borum (2025, p.3) emphasises that elements such as school climate, neighbourhood cohesion, and digital communities shape

adolescents' trajectories toward or away from extremist pathways. Environments that promote inclusion, stability, and mutual respect reinforce developmental resilience, whereas those marked by exclusion, or social fragmentation undermine belonging and increase vulnerability to radicalisation (Baxter et al., 2022).

In summary, Borum's (2025) developmental psychopathological framework offers a valuable lens for understanding how ordinary developmental processes can, under certain conditions, evolve into pathways of vulnerability. By integrating concepts such as identity formation, psychosocial maturity, emotional regulation, peer influence, and environmental context, this perspective situates radicalisation risk within adolescents' broader developmental trajectories rather than as a distinct or isolated phenomenon. Viewing vulnerability as an adaptive or maladaptive outcome of normal development deepens understanding of its emergence and informs targeted prevention strategies.

Recognising vulnerability as a dynamic outcome of normal adolescent development, shaped by the above mentioned factors highlights the need for prevention and intervention approaches that addresses these developmental processes directly and issue explored in the following section.

## **2.5 APPROACHES TO YOUTH RADICALISATION**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, youth radicalisation is a multifaceted process (Awan et al., 2019, pp.8-9), and the approaches related to its intervention are equally complex (Peels, 2024). These approaches often centre on promoting critical thinking, fostering inclusivity, and addressing grievances that may pressure young adults towards radicalisation. The interventions aim to counter extremist ideologies by encouraging alternative narratives and addressing factors that span across individual, social, and structural levels (Campelo et al., 2018), particularly when compared to secondary prevention strategies, which focuses on identifying and intervening early with individuals or groups at risk of developing radical behaviour.

This multi-level approach recognises that no single factor alone explains youth radicalisation; rather, it emerges from the complex interplay of personal vulnerabilities, peer influences, community dynamics, and wider socio-political conditions (Campelo et al., 2018, p.11). Understanding these intricate layers is essential for devising targeted and effective strategies to prevent youth engagement with extremist ideologies.

### **2.5.1 Multi-level Factors in Youth Radicalisation**

One of the central challenges in addressing youth radicalisation lies in understanding the multi-level factors that influence individual pathways towards extremist ideologies. As Wallner (2021, p.9, 12) notes, youth radicalisation is shaped by a complex interplay of personal actions, social connections, and broader societal influences, which operate on three interconnected levels: macro, meso, and micro (Campelo et al., 2018, p.11; Moccia, 2019). These factors collectively determine the trajectory of young individuals toward or away from radicalisation (Doosje et al., 2016, p.81).

Campelo et al. (2018) present a three-level framework to dissect these influences: (1) the macro-level, encompassing societal and structural forces such as economic conditions, political systems, and social inequalities; (2) the meso-level, focusing on group dynamics and community contexts; and (3) the micro-level, highlighting individual characteristics and experiences (Cherney et al., 2021, p.409). These levels help distinguish where different factors come to play, internal factors primarily relate to the micro-level, encompassing personal traits and experiences, while external influences operate across the meso-level's social networks and the macro-level's broader societal structures. Together, this layered framework illustrates how various forces converge to shape the radicalisation process.

At the macro-level, broader societal and cultural factors play a significant role in the radicalisation process. Extremist ideologies often thrive in environments marked by economic disparity, political instability, and cultural polarisation. As noted by Calafato and Caruana (2015), the availability of extremist content on-line and off-line, coupled with structural inequalities, can fuel radicalisation by reinforcing divisions within society. Haghish

et al. (2023) argue that macro-level issues such as social inequality and economic disenfranchisement are key contributors to the development of extremist attitudes, particularly among youth. Additionally, weak social ties and cultural norms that glorify violence can exacerbate the appeal of radical ideologies.

Building upon these macro-level dynamics, the meso-level focuses on the importance of social networks, including family, friends, and peer groups, in shaping the radicalisation process. At this level, the influence of one's immediate social environment becomes paramount (Doosje et al., 2016, p.81). PISOIU (2015) notes that interactions within these networks can either mitigate or exacerbate the risk of radicalisation. Kruglanski et al. (2022, p.1055) further suggest that personal motivations are closely intertwined with group dynamics and societal expectations, emphasising how the collective experience can either amplify or suppress the appeal of extremist ideologies.

Narrowing the focus further, the micro-level zeroes in on the individual's experiences and psychological vulnerabilities, which are pivotal in determining susceptibility to radicalisation. These vulnerabilities, such as identity crises, a need for significance (Da Silva et al., 2023), or feelings of alienation can serve as triggers (Peels, 2024, p. 8). Certain life events may exacerbate these vulnerabilities, leading to internalised frustrations that manifest in extremist attitudes (Sarnoto et al., 2024 p.146; Kleinmann, 2012). Ultimately, this level of analysis underscores the importance of understanding the personal search for meaning and identity in preventing radicalisation (Moghaddam, 2005; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008).

In light of these findings, this dissertation argues that the three-level model proposed by Campelo et al. (2018) effectively captures the complex and multifaceted nature of youth radicalisation. The model systematically examines the macro-level influences of societal and cultural factors, the meso-level dynamics of social networks, and the micro-level individual vulnerabilities and interactions, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the drivers of radicalisation among European youths. It emphasises the necessity of interventions at all levels to mitigate the risks associated with radicalisation (Abbas, 2024, p.235).

However, despite the clarity of the three-level framework (Campelo et al., 2018), research by Haghish et al. (2023, p.1701) and Feddes et al., (2023) suggests that no single factor can fully predict an individual's susceptibility to extremism. Radicalisation is inherently complex, with various factors integrating across levels rather than stemming from one definitive cause. Siza (2022) further argues that pathways to radical ideologies are shaped by the interaction of these different levels and broader societal dynamics, especially the influence of digital platforms. In particular, social media has become a powerful tool for extremist organisations to recruit new members (Montasari, 2024; Satterley, 2024, p. 11).

The complexity of these interactions makes youth radicalisation a challenging phenomenon to fully comprehend and address (Satterley, 2024). Individual life trajectories are shaped by a mix of personal choices, social pressures, and broader societal conditions, underscoring the importance of emphasising the dynamic interplay between rational decision-making and personal development (France and Homel, 2007; Hausken, 2016; Galvin et al., 2023; Pisiu, 2015).

## **2.6 OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL MODELS ON RADICALISATION**

Theoretical models are essential as they provide a structured framework that enables researchers to systematically examine complex issues like youth radicalisation. These models help in formulating and testing hypotheses, forecasting outcomes, and interpreting empirical data within a consistent conceptual context. This approach not only deepens researchers' understanding but also steers future studies with scientific consistency (Meringolo, 2020), while carefully considering the best practices recommended by theoretical perspectives.

Building on this foundation, this dissertation aims to delve into specific theoretical models relevant to youth radicalisation. Arango and Burgos (2024, p.171) argue that social identities are crucial in shaping social life, fostering group cohesion, and guiding individual behaviour within societal structures. These identities help individuals interpret their environment and set expectations for their actions in various contexts. Conversely, Kruglanski et al. (2022, p.

1055) suggest that unmet needs for significance, such as the desire for dignity and respect, can lead individuals to engage in extremist activities. Additionally, Moghaddam (2005, p. 162) provides a framework for understanding the influences and motivations that drive towards radical behaviours to achieve their needs (Strindberg, 2020, p.38).

As a result, contemporary frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Significance Quest Theory (SQT) are explored to understand the dynamics of youth radicalisation. These theories examine how environmental contexts, such as group identities, and quests for personal significance interact to drive individuals towards extremist ideologies. Together, these complementary models offer a multi-dimensional lens through which to understand both group-level and individual-level factors contributing to radicalisation.

The following section provides a brief overview of two key theoretical models for comparison and contrast: Strindberg et al. (2020) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Da Silva et al. (2023) Significance Quest Theory and its 3N model. SIT posits that individuals derive a sense of identity and self-esteem from group affiliations, which extremist organisations manipulate to promote radical ideologies (Boutz et al., 2019; Strindberg et al., 2020). For example, an individual who feels marginalised in their community may seek belonging in an online or offline group promoting radical ideologies. Through SIT, the individual begins to identify strongly with this group, viewing it as the in-group (Doosje et al., 2012).

As a result, individuals may adopt the group's beliefs and attitudes, seeing outsiders as potential threats. Extremist organisations leverage this psychological process by emphasising perceived injustices against the in-group and glorifying in-group members who take action against the out-group, thereby driving the individual further down the path of radicalisation (Storm et al., 2020; Whittaker, 2023).

This manipulation of group identity highlights how SIT can explain the processes leading to radicalisation. It demonstrates the pivotal role of social dynamics in shaping individual susceptibility to extremist ideologies, supporting the argument for interventions that address both personal and group-based risk factors. Similarly, to Wikström and Bouhana

(2017), argue that SIT can also be applied to the context of youth radicalisation. Strindberg et al. (2020, p.26) suggest that youths who lack identity formation may seek out radical groups that provide a sense of belonging and purpose.

### **2.6.1 Significance Quest Theory and its 3N Model**

The dynamics of human interaction within society are influenced by the complex relationship between individual motivations and the broader collective aspirations of the community. Cornish and Clarke (2016, p.35) discuss how human behaviour is shaped by both rational and emotional drives, suggesting that decision-making is not purely logical but also deeply influenced by needs and emotions (Kruglanski et al., 2023).

In contrast, rational choice theorists like Paternoster et al. (2017) argue that individuals act strategically, pursuing self-interest based on calculated assessments of cost and benefit. Integrating this logic with psychological and emotional dimensions, the Significance Quest Theory (SQT), developed by Kruglanski et al. (2022), provides a more holistic explanation. It recognises that seemingly rational decisions are often shaped by deeper emotional drivers and a fundamental human desire for meaning and purpose.

According to SQT, individuals who experience a loss of personal significance or lack a sense of meaning may become vulnerable to ideologies or groups that offer to restore that sense of purpose. These groups or leaders often meet emotional and psychological needs by offering a sense identity, belonging, and validation (Campello et al. 2018; Givens, 2008).

Empirical studies, including those by Webber et al. (2018), demonstrate that when individuals regain a sense of significance, particularly through positive, socially connected experiences, they are more likely to engage constructively with their communities and support leaders who address their emotional and rational needs.

The Significance Quest Theory (SQT) and its 3N model offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the process that leads to radicalisation and violent extremism. At its core,

SQT posits that the need for significance (an individual's desire to feel valued, important and recognised) is a fundamental human motivation. When this need is unmet, particularly due to negative experiences such as discrimination or humiliation, individuals may seek alternative means to regain their sense of self-worth (Ellenberg & Kruglanski, 2024, pp. 2-3; Hogg, 2007; Sahin & Derin, 2023, p. 455).

According to Kruglanski et al. (2014, p.73), under conditions of insecurity, the quest for significance, defined as a "*fundamental desire*" to feel valued and recognised, can lead individuals to adopt radical beliefs and engage in extremist behaviours. This process reflects an attempt to fulfil the need to matter (Flett, 2022; Scarpa et al., 2022).

The 3N model within SQT further elaborates on how this quest for significance translates into radicalisation by identifying three key components: Need for Significance, Radical Narratives, and Radical Networks (Da Silva et al., 2023). The Need for Significance serves as the starting point of the radicalisation process, driving individuals to seek out opportunities that promise them the recognition they lack. When faced with insignificance, individuals are more likely to be drawn to Radical Narratives (simplified ideological accounts) often presented in an "us vs. them," ideological rhetoric that provides a clear framework for understanding their experiences and the world around them (Little, 2022; Pawles, 2023). These narratives offer not only a sense of purpose to marginalised individuals but also a way to achieve the significance individual's desire, often by identifying out-groups and justifying extreme actions.

Sarnoto et al. (2024), further reinforce this understanding by demonstrating that radicalisation is not merely about adopting a radical narrative; it is equally about finding a community that supports and validates this narrative. Their research highlights how individuals, particularly adolescents, are attracted to extreme ideologies while simultaneously seek out communities (often referred to as radical networks) that reinforce and legitimise these beliefs. These Radical Networks play a crucial role by providing the social validation and sense of belonging necessary to solidify one's commitment to radical ideas. Thus, Sarnoto et al. (2024) work underscores the dual nature of radicalisation, where

both the adoption of a radical narrative and the integration into a supportive community are essential components (Wallner, 2021).

Participation in such networks strengthens an individual's commitment to the radical cause, creating a reinforcing cycle where the need for significance is continually met through group dynamics and shared ideology (Belanger et al., 2019). The interplay between these three components i.e. Needs, Narratives and Network, creates a powerful mechanism that can attract individuals deeper into radicalisation (Belanger et al., 2019; Da Silva et al., 2023; Kruglanski et al., 2022; Webber et al., 2018).

Integrating the broader SQT with the detailed 3N model highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of radicalisation (Belanger et al., 2019). While the quest for significance initiates the process, it is the subsequent adoption of radical narratives and involvement in radical networks are what solidify and intensify the individual's radicalisation (Da Silva et al., 2023). This dissertation proposes that such an amalgamated approach, not only explains why individuals might initially be drawn to radical ideologies, but also how they could continue to engage with them over time.

Furthermore, research by scholars like Psoiu (2015) emphasises the importance of considering individual agency, motivations, and cultural contexts in this process (Wallner, 2021, p.3). Psoiu's work suggests that radicalisation is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon; it evolves and changes depending on the specific circumstances and contexts in which individuals find themselves (Borum, 2011, p.8; Ginges et al., 2011). This perspective compliments the SQT and 3N model by emphasising that while the need for significance is a key driver, the pathways to radicalisation are shaped by a complex interplay of personal, social, and cultural factors (Dennison, 2024).

In conclusion, the amalgamated SQT and 3N model offer a comprehensive framework for understanding radicalisation (Belanger et al., 2019, p.10). By integrating the basic human need for significance with the powerful influence of radical narratives and networks, this approach provides an in-depth and dynamic understanding of how individuals are drawn into extremist ideologies (Bäck et al., 2018). The involvement of youths is considered

indispensable for sustainability of radical movements and ideologies (Montasari, 2024), were PISOIU's research provides an in-depth understanding that supports this view.

For the purposes of this dissertation, the Significance Quest Theory will serve as the primary model for in-depth analysis. It was chosen over Social Identity Theory (SIT) due to its more holistic integration of individual psychological needs with contextual socio-environmental influences (Da Silva et al., 2023). The following section will apply this model to a comprehensive analysis conducted by Gonzalez et al. (2022), offering a detailed examination of the core elements driving the radicalisation process.

### **2.6.2 Empirical Validation of the 3N Model: Testing its Application**

Gonzalez et al., (2022a, P. 533) applied the 3N model to analyse the terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils by the 17-A cell. Their study sought to uncover the motivational factors driving these violent acts by examining reports from the National High Court and the Police to identify potential indicators of radicalisation. Utilising a deductive analytical approach, Gonzalez et al. focused their analysis on the Needs, Narratives, and Networks outlined in the 3N model, offering significant insights into the radicalisation process within the 17-A Cell (Gonzalez et al., 2022a, p. 538).

Despite the limited evidence and details regarding those responsible for the attack, Bourekba (2018, p.15) notes that the perpetrators acted in the name of the Islamic State, which subsequently claimed responsibility. The term "17-A" refers to the date of the attacks, where "17" representing the day of the month and "A" indicating August. Therefore, the 17-A cell refers to the terrorist group behind these events.

The radicalisation process of this group, as examined by Gonzales et al. (2022b), has been analysed through various psychological and sociological frameworks (Abbas, 2024; Peels, 2023), including the 3N model proposed by Kruglanski et al. (2022) and Da Silva et al. (2023). According to Bourekba (2018, p.15), the radicalisation of the 17-A cell members was driven by a combination of personal significance, extremist narratives, and strong social networks.

Thus, Gonzales et al.'s (2022b) analysis sheds light on the psychological manipulation and social influences contributing to their radicalisation, underscoring the need for targeted interventions in environments where young individuals' vulnerabilities may be exploited by radicalising agents.

In their research, Gonzales et al. (2022b) explored the relationship between the pursuit of personal significance and the impact of its loss. Their study indicates that individuals are driven by a desire for personal importance and purpose, while feelings of insignificance such as low social status, dissatisfaction, and detachment motivate them to seek alternative fulfillment. This finding highlights how a sense of insignificance can render individuals more vulnerable to radical influences as they strive to regain a sense of purpose and relevance.

Additionally, the authors identify the legitimization of violence and acceptance of illegal activities as key indicators of radicalisation. Gonzales et al. (2022b) emphasise that repeated exposure to extremist material and the normalisation of violence can significantly contribute to these indicators, showing that such exposure can lead individuals to perceive violence as a justified and increase the likelihood of their engaging in illegal activities.

Gonzales et al. (2022a, p. 537) also argue that the concept of identity fusion, where individuals closely align their identity with a group, is reinforced by factors such as kinship, friendship and shared reality. This aligns with the theoretical foundations discussed in the previous section, particularly the role of Radical Networks as outlined in the 3N model (Da Silva et al., 2023). Gonzales (2022b) further highlight that group pressure, conformity, peer reinforcement, and echo chamber effects, can compel individuals from marginalised communities to adopt and intensify extreme views. The empirical application of the 3N framework by Gonzales et al. (2022a) thus provides strong empirical validation for the theoretical mechanisms outlined in the prior analysis.

### **2.6.3 Reflections on the use of SQT**

The aim of this section is to critically reflect on the use of the Significance Quest Theory (SQT) within the broader landscape of radicalisation research by considering scholarly critiques of psychological approaches that share similar assumptions (Githens-Mazer, 2012, p. 562; Kundnani, 2012, p.5). This reflection does not seek to dismiss the value of SQT but rather acknowledge relevant academic perspectives that highlight its conceptual boundaries. In doing so, the researcher aims to approach the theoretical framework with critical awareness, as highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2019, p.595) in their emphasis on reflexive practice, thereby reducing the risk of unconscious bias and ensuring a more balanced and appropriate application of the model to the local context.

In this context, internal factors refer to individual level psychological and emotional processes that shape susceptibility to radicalisation. According to Da Silva et al. (2022), these include the need for personal significance, identity crises, perceived injustice, emotional vulnerability, and cognitive openness to radical narratives. These elements are central to the Significance Quest Theory, particularly as conceptualised through the 3N Model, which frames radicalisation as the interplay between unmet Need for significance, exposure to an ideological Narrative that legitimises violence, and access to a supportive Network that facilitates action. While this model offers valuable insight into personal motivation, it remains focused on internal dynamics. In contrast, external factors, such as widespread discrimination, socio political exclusion, or minority group grievances are often underemphasised in such frameworks, as noted by scholars like Githens-Mazer, (2012) and Kundnani, (2012).

While SQT provides a structured and empirically supported explanation for how individuals may be drawn to extremist ideologies (Kruglanski et al., 2014), its focus on internal motivational dynamics has prompted broader criticism. Githens-Mazer (2012, p.562) argues that psychological frameworks risk oversimplifying radicalisation by reducing it to purely individual or behavioural patterns. Such approaches often fail to adequately account for the influence of socio-political grievances, historical marginalisation, or systematic injustices

that can motivate engagement with radical ideologies. Similarly, Kundnani (2012, p.17) warns that psychological and behavioural models tend to individualise radicalisation by treating legitimate grievances as indicators of extremism, thereby obscuring the influence of broader political factors such as foreign policy, social marginalisation, and the securitisation of minority communities.

Although these critiques do not directly target SQT, they raise important considerations for any framework that locates radicalisation primarily within the individual sphere. Given that this study applies SQT as the primary theoretical framework to understand youth radicalisation in Malta, such reflections are essential for maintaining theoretical integrity and avoiding oversimplifies interpretations. Acknowledging these concerns allows the researcher to remain engaged and to draw on broader sociological and criminological insights where appropriate, ensuring that the analysis remains both theoretically sound and appropriate to the local context.

## **2.7 THE LOCAL CONTEXT OF MALTA**

This section delves into the ways in which individuals in Malta may develop distinct political perspectives and ideologies. It examines the formation of opinions about the local government, influenced by both historical and current political issues, as well as the factors that shape political attitudes and engagement (Aval & Weyer, 2022). Key contributors to political socialisation in Malta include family, peers, historical contexts, and Malta's insular geography, all of which collectively shape the political beliefs and behaviours of its multicultural population. These factors are particularly relevant to understanding how localised grievances or social divisions could contribute to youth disengagement or attraction to radical alternatives. Furthermore, the study examines various EU youth initiatives aimed at reducing the prevalence of certain ideologies and promoting a more inclusive political environment.

In recent years, social media platforms have become a predominant force in the process of political socialisation in Malta (Briguglio, 2016). Research by Montasari (2024) and Jeangène

Vilmer et al., (2018, p.39) underscore the growing impact of online media, especially during election campaigns, in shaping political perspectives across different age groups. Brown and Marmara (2022) further discuss how media consumption, particularly through online sources, contributes to the formation of extremist views, leading to radicalisation within certain segments of the population.

Contrastingly, the Youth Engagement Study Report 2021 found that political engagement among Maltese youths is relatively low, which could be linked to the timing of research amidst hyper-partisan electoral propaganda (Buhagiar, Mifsud Inguanez & Pulis, 2021). While Brown and Marmara (2022) highlight the impact of media consumption during electoral campaigns on citizens' political behaviours, Mannarini et al. (2021) focus on how societal groups construct and promote self-serving social representations.

Taken together, these studies provide a valuable insight into Malta's complex political landscape. They also emphasise the need to explore how shifting political attitudes, alienation, and media influence may intersect with vulnerability to youth radicalisation within the local context.

### **2.7.1 Youth Strategic Vision and Future Direction in Malta**

The *Youth Sector Strategy 2020 – 2030*, officially launched on January 23, 2020, by Ms. Marija Pejčinović Burić, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, and Ambassador Irakli Giviasgvili, President of the Ministers' Deputies, is designed to enhance youth engagement, promote civic participation, and support youth initiatives (Hujo & Carter, 2019).

Following extensive public consultation, the *National Youth Strategy* was adopted in Malta. Overseen by the Parliamentary Secretariat for Youth, Research, and Innovation, within the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, and implemented by Aġenzija Żgħażaġħ (the National Youth Agency), the strategy focuses on strategic planning and daily operations related to youth policy.

The National Youth Strategy aims to empower young individuals, foster responsible citizenship, and promote active societal contributions at both national and European levels. It focuses on eight strategic goals: listening to and supporting youth voices, conducting demographic research, facilitating their transition to adulthood, offering diverse services, promoting wellbeing and creativity, encouraging interdisciplinary initiatives, improving youth work practices, and ensuring effective policy coordination.

Targeting individuals aged thirteen to thirty, the strategy emphasises inclusivity and tailored support (Lucas, 2023). While primarily centered on youth development, it is indirectly relevant to this study's aim of understanding how social policies can mitigate factors that may leave some young people vulnerable to radicalisation. On-going amendments and upcoming policy revision planned for 2031 reflect Malta's commitment to continuously adapting and strengthening youth strategies to meet the evolving needs of its young population.

Understanding radicalisation requires attention to the broader social and economic context in which young people develop. As noted by PISOIU (2015), it is also critical to examine social and economic stressors within host communities, combined with external influences (such as public debates, etc.), can increase community tensions and foster conditions of alienation and identity crises. These pressures can create vulnerabilities and needs that, if left unaddressed may foster conditions conducive to radicalisation (Schröder et al., 2022, p.179).

Notably, Malta's *Anti-Racism strategy (2021–2023)* acknowledges the presence of systematic issues related to structural racism and emphasises the importance of addressing community tensions, fostering social cohesion, and mitigating conditions that contribute to feelings of marginalisation among minority groups.

## 2.8 RAN AND THE EU KNOWLEDGE HUB

The European Commission has implemented various initiatives through stake holders to combat radicalisation, polarisation, and extremism. One significant effort is the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), funded by the European Commission and established in 2011. RAN organises training and webinars to educate organisations on radicalisation and polarisation, focusing on online aspects (Davies, 2008; Pauwels and Van Alstein, 2021). It emphasised creating a shared identity to prevent polarisation and build resilience at the local level.

Although the Radicalisation Awareness Network webpages remain available for archival purposes, the European Commission launched a new initiative on 17 June 2024: The EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation. Building upon the foundations established by RAN, the EU Knowledge Hub has been developed to serve a broad community of stake holders, including policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. It aims to provide a collaborative space for exchanging knowledge, promoting research, and sharing effective practices in the prevention of radicalisation at the European level. The EU Knowledge Hub replaces RAN as the central European platform, providing updated resources, research, and practitioner guidance to improve early detection and prevention of radicalisation across EU Members States.

According to the handbook authored by AL-Attar (2019), the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) sought to foster a sense of belonging within communities to reduce the risks of radicalisation and extremism (Berner & Bertrand, 2023). Its legacy initiatives were designed to promote education, raise awareness, and encourage community engagement to strengthen social cohesion in diverse communities. Addressing youth radicalisation is essential, given the complex challenges posed by extremist ideologies. Developmental vulnerabilities, combined with socio-environmental factors, increase young people's susceptibility to radicalisation (Sarnoto, 2024). Push and pull factors such, as perceived

grievances, peer pressure, and compelling narratives exploit these vulnerabilities, potentially leading to detrimental outcomes (Ajil, 2022; Freestone, 2017).

A comprehensive understanding of youth radicalisation, coupled with the implementation of targeted prevention strategies and collaborative initiatives, is vital (Calafato, 2019; European Commission, 2022; France & Homel, 2007; Madriaza & Ponsot, 2016; Moccia, 2019; Sarnoto et al., 2024; UNODC, 2019). This literature review has highlighted critical factors contributing to youth susceptibility to radicalisation, ranging from developmental vulnerabilities to socio-environmental influences (Sarnoto, 2024). Ajil, (2022) and Freestone, (2017) illustrate how these push and pull factors can influence young people's vulnerabilities, resulting in significant negative consequences for both individuals and society.

Wallner (2021) analysis underscores the importance of implementing targeted intervention strategies supported by evidence from successful prevention programs. Evidence-based approaches, such as community engagement programs, youth mentorship initiatives, and educational campaigns, have proven effective in countering extremist narratives and building resilience among vulnerable youth populations.

Additionally, Wallner's (2021) explores the broad spectrum of ideological extremism, ranging from Islamist radicalisation to anti-migrant extremism. Her review highlights the varied sources and motivations behind radical beliefs and emphasises the need to understand this ideological diversity. Fostering constructive dialogue to promoting inclusive democratic principles are crucial for addressing societal tensions that arise from conflicting ideological perspectives (Awan et al., 2019).

While Malta's exposure to extremist ideologies and terrorism remains relatively low (Security Committee, 2024, p.9), recent local incidents may highlight evolving trends and the on-going need for vigilance. Despite the relatively lower risk of terrorism in Malta, the risks of radicalisation and terrorism in Malta cannot be entirely dismissed and should be taken seriously (EUROPOL, 2023). In response, the European Union's collaborative approach to counter-radicalisation, particularly addressing online influences and setting shared priorities

across Member States, has continued through the transition from the Radicalisation Awareness Network to the newly launched EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation (Moccia, 2019; Pauwels & van Alstein, 2022; Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2023).

In summary, a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes, vulnerabilities, and socio-environmental influences of youth radicalisation through targeted prevention strategies and international collaboration is critical. By proactively promoting resilience and inclusive values, societies can mitigate the risks associated with extremist ideologies, and contribute to the development of secure, democratic communities in both Malta and Europe.

## **2.9 CONCLUSION**

Chapter 2 offers an in-depth exploration of the complexities surrounding youth radicalisation, thoroughly analysing sociological theories and their relevance to understanding this phenomenon (Abbas, 2024; Peels, 2023). By integrating insights from multiple disciplines, it identifies both individual and social factors that may contribute to youth radicalisation. The discussion highlights the inherent challenges of defining radicalisation due to its evolving nature and the subjective interpretations involved, which complicate the development of effective deterrence and legal measures (Awan et al., 2019, pp.8-9; Peels, 2024). These challenges highlight the need for a shared understanding to ensure more coordinated efforts.

The primary objective behind Chapter 2 is to present a thorough and relevant review of the academic literature, shedding light on the issues associated with youth radicalisation and its potential consequences (Lewis & Awan, 2024; Wittaker, 2023). The literature review encompasses a range of theoretical perspectives, including Social Identity Theory (SIT), and Significance Quest Theory (SQT), to clarify the motivations behind youth radicalisation (Da Silva et al., 2023; Strindberg, 2020).

Among these concepts, SQT stands out as particularly well-suited to the objectives of this study, as it provides a comprehensive approach that addresses both psychological and socio-environmental factors which may drive certain individuals toward radicalisation (Belanger et al., 2019; Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011). The theory's focus on the need for significance, the adoption of radical narratives and affiliation with radical groups offers a robust and multi-dimensional framework for understanding the pathways into violent extremism (Kruglanski et al., 2022). Empirical studies, such as the analysis of the 17A cell by Gonzales et al. (2022a), further illustrate the need of culturally sensitive and multifaceted intervention strategies.

Moving forward, Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach used to examine expert perspectives on youth radicalisation, following established research frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It provides a detailed account of the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques employed to explore the personal, social, and ideological factors that may contribute to youth vulnerability and radicalisation. The study was designed specifically to address the research questions guiding this dissertation, including the examination of recruitment drivers and expert recommendations for prevention. By clearly defining the methodological process, this dissertation ensures the legitimisation of its findings, establishing a strong foundation for the subsequent empirical analysis (Formosa, et al., 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007, p.298).

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Building on the reviewed literature, which examined the complex social, psychological, and environmental forces that shaped the push and pull factors of adolescent susceptibility to radicalisation (Belanger et al., 2019), this chapter presented the research methods used in this study. It provided a structured overview of the methodological approach and its rationale. The chapter begins by explaining the justification for adopting a qualitative approach to explore the push and pull factors that influence youth radicalisation and the role of professionals in supporting at-risk youth (Awan et al., 2019, pp.8-9; Peels, 2024).

It then introduces the research aims and objectives, the significance of the study, a visual mind map illustrating key factors that potentially influenced radicalisation, including social, psychological, ideological, and developmental aspects and their connection to the research questions (Abbas, 2024). This was followed by an outline of the research instruments, research design, and data collection methods, with a focus on the thematic approach used to interpret outcomes and capture expert insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical considerations were then addressed, outlining the guidelines and principles set by the University of Malta's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) and the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). These frameworks ensured that the study upheld participant confidentiality, obtained informed consent, and adhered to ethical standards within specific research context.

According to Faria (2022, p.230), ethical reasoning is crucial in criminological research, as data collection in criminology and the broader social sciences often involves direct engagement with human participants. Finally, the chapter examined trustworthiness and credibility before concluding with a summary of the key methodological choices and a clarification of the study's objectives and anticipated findings.

## 3.2 RATIONALE FOR METHODOLOGY

An inductive (bottom up), reflexive thematic analysis approach, as described by Braun and Clarke (2022), was employed in this study to explore the complex, subjective, and context-specific factors that influenced youth radicalisation in Malta. This qualitative approach was chosen for its flexibility and suitability in capturing participants' experiences and interpretations in relation to a sensitive and under-researched phenomenon (Bronsard et al., 2022). It guided the collection, interpretation, and understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 3).

A qualitative design was prioritised over a quantitative approach, which would not have adequately captured the rich interplay of psychological social and environmental influences involved in youth radicalisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Although quantitative surveys could have offered generalisable data, they would have lacked the depth required to understand the experiences and perspectives of professionals and practitioners working closely with vulnerable youth (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Accordingly, qualitative semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate method. This technique provided participants with the flexibility to explore complex issues, sharing context-specific examples, and reflect on individual and organisational responses in detail, ensuring alignment with the research objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

This approach was particularly relevant to Malta's under-researched socio-cultural context landscape, where limited prior research on youth radicalisation existed. The qualitative design enabled a deeper examination of the push and pulls factors that increase susceptibility to radical ideologies, while also allowing space for the exploration of protective factors and intervention strategies. By drawing on expert insights, the study sought to contribute expert-informed, evidence-based recommendations to inform and strengthen P/CVE policies and protocols within the Maltese context.

### **3.2.1 Research Aim and Objectives**

This research aimed to explore the underlying mechanisms and contributing factors driving youth radicalisation, with particular emphasis on the adoption of extremist ideologies within the specific socio-cultural context of Malta. The study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex social, psychological, and environmental influences that shape this phenomenon and to identify possible pathways toward more effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Guided by these objectives, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do different social, psychological, and environmental factors shape youths' vulnerability to engage in extremism or adopt radical ideologies and behaviours?
2. In what ways are young people drawn toward particular ideologies or groups, whether and how do these factors contribute to pathways of potential recruitment?
3. How do experts understand and recommend ways of addressing youth radicalisation in Malta?

To explore these questions, a qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews to capture detailed perspectives of professionals with direct experience on the social and contextual dynamics being examined (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.1). This approach allowed for the collection of rich, context-specific data on the factors contributing to youth radicalisation and the perceived effectiveness of current prevention efforts. Furthermore, the use of reflexive thematic analysis facilitated a deeper exploration of radicalisation dynamics and supported the development of evidence-based, expert-informed strategies to counter extremist influences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to examine the root causes, motivations, and social conditions that contribute to youth radicalisation, including the appeal of

extremist ideologies and behaviours (Moghaddam, 2005; Doosje et al., 2016). By developing a holistic understanding of these drivers, this study offers important insights into why some young people may be vulnerable to adopting radical beliefs or engaging in extremist activities (Freestone, 2017).

This issue holds particular relevance within the Maltese context, where increasing exposure to diverse ideological influences have introduced new and complex social dynamics (Fenech & Seguna, 2020, p.20; Said et al., 2021). Without appropriate understanding and timely intervention, emerging trends in youth radicalisation may threaten social cohesion, security, and community resilience, highlighting the urgent need for effective, evidence-based policy responses (Doosje et al., 2016).

In this chapter, the research questions and their rationale, as outlined below in Table 1, established the conceptual basis of the study. These questions guided the research while allowing for open-ended exploration (Braun & Clarke 2019, p.592).

**TABLE 1: RESEARCH QUESTIONS & RATIONALE**

<b>RQ: Research Questions</b>	<b>R: Rationale</b>
RQ1 - How do different social, psychological, and environmental factors shape youths' vulnerability to engage in extremism or adopt radical ideologies and behaviours?	R1 - This question aims to identify the traits, and attributes: demographic, psychological, and social factors that made certain youths more susceptible to radicalisation. By exploring these factors and their interplay, this dissertation sought to provide a more detailed understanding of the causes that predisposed youths to various radical ideologies.
RQ2 – In what ways are young people drawn toward particular ideologies or groups, whether and how do these factors contribute to pathways of potential recruitment?	R2 - This question explores how social environments, including peer groups, and family dynamics, influenced youths' attraction to specific ideologies or groups. Understanding the role of these external factors was crucial in assessing their impact on the recruitment process and the development of radical behaviours.
RQ3 - How do experts understand and recommend ways of addressing youth radicalisation in Malta?	R3 - This question seeks expert's insights to inform evidence-based strategies, preventive measures, intervention programs, and/or policy frameworks that addressed youth radicalisation.

Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

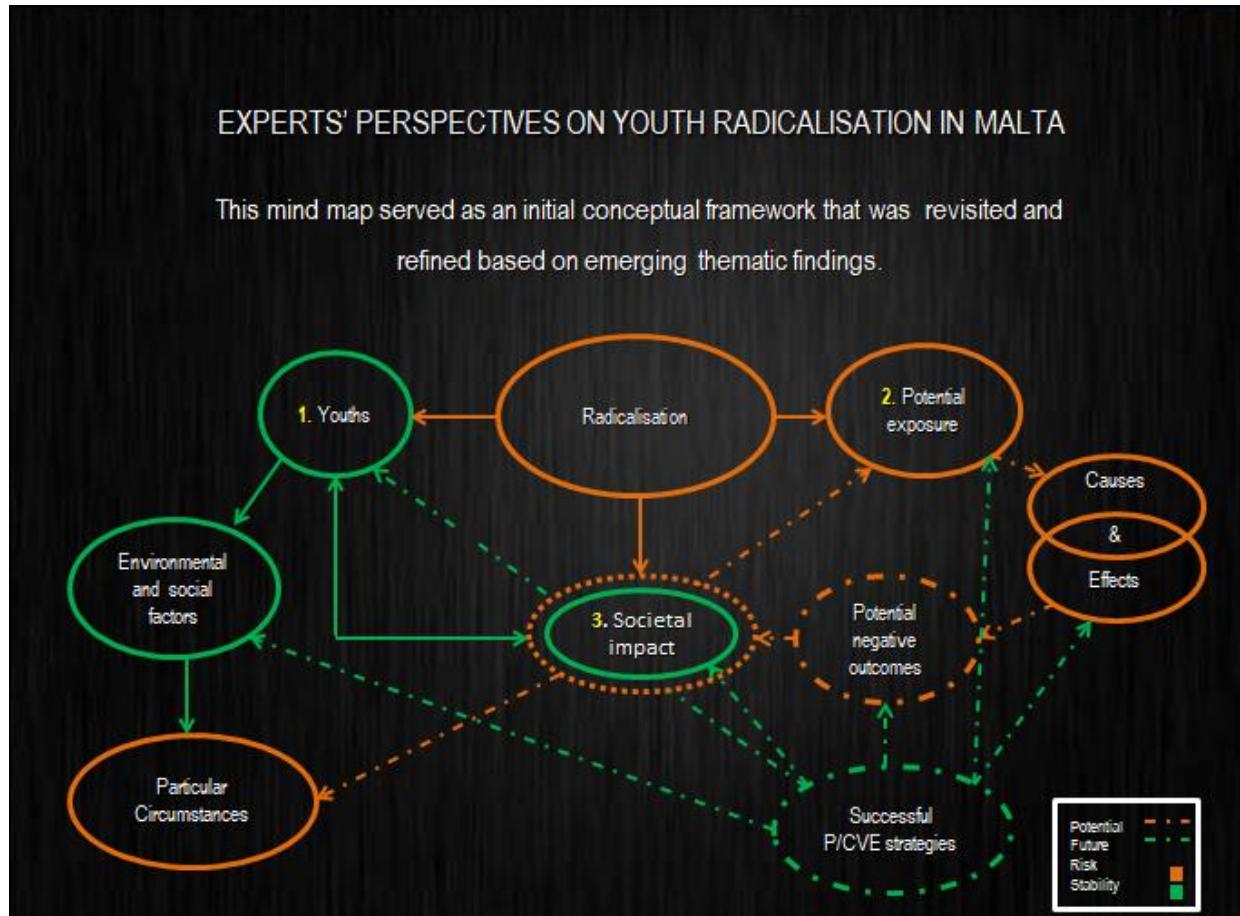
### 3.3 VISUAL MIND MAP

To further organise key ideas, a mind map was introduced as a visual tool to illustrate the core concepts and their interconnections within the study's framework (Aleksić et al., 2010). This structured approach enhanced clarity and reinforced the coherence of the study. The following illustrations highlight the interconnectedness of the research aim, objectives, and research questions, alongside a mind map outlining the main areas of interest in youth radicalisation.

Subsection 3.2.1 aligns the research questions with the overarching aims and objectives, providing a structured approach to examining the push and pull factors (such as social exclusion, identity crises, peer pressure, and online influences) that shape youth radicalisation within the local context. Studies by Ajil (2022), Cherney, et al. (2022), Freestone (2017), and PISOIU (2015) supported this perspective, emphasising the need for holistic and multidimensional approach (Hassés-Biber & Leavy, 2010, pp. 7-8). While these connections were initially proposed at the proposal and planning stage, they were critically revisited and assessed throughout the subsequent chapters based on empirical research and experts insights.

The mind map Figure (1) further supported this analysis by visually structuring the core elements into interrelated categories. Rather than imposing a fixed framework, it provided a flexible conceptual basis (Braun & Clarke 2019, p.591) that allowed themes to emerge naturally while maintaining coherence. This flexible yet systematic process aligned with the principles of qualitative research, which seeks to explore complex social phenomena through in-depth, context specific insights (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.1). By organising the mechanisms and influencing factors of radicalisation into coherent visual guide, the mind map in figure (1) offered a structured yet adaptable foundation for analysis, thereby enhancing understanding within the Maltese context (Abbas, 2024).

FIGURE 1 MIND MAP: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK & KEY AREAS OF INTEREST



Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

### **3.3.1 Mapping the Research Focus**

This mind map served as a foundational guide for this analytical protocol, providing a conceptual framework to structure the identification and organisation of potential patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.589). Its role is not only to visualise initial ideas but also to help organise evolving categories throughout the repeated cycles of coding and theme development process.

By incorporating both theoretical and expert perspectives, the study provided a contextually grounded analysis of youth radicalisation in Malta, examining external influences and the underlying mechanisms shaping radical trajectories (Hasses-Biber & Leavy, 2010, pp. 7-8).

The first branch of the mind map examined adolescence as a critical period of identity formation and social change, making youth particularly vulnerable to radicalisation while also positioning them as potential agents of societal transformation (Baxter et al., 2022; Cherney et al., 2022; Wallner, 2021; Roberts et al., 2020).

Building on this, the study applied an interpretivist and phenomenological lens to explore how adolescents internalise radicalisation, focusing on their lived experiences and subjective realities (Johannesson & Perjons, 2021).

The second branch focused on exposure to radical influences, drawing on significance Quest Theory (SQT) and its 3N model (Da Silva et al., 2023; Lobato et al., 2020). These frameworks explain how psychological vulnerabilities, social networks, and ideological narratives interact to shape radicalisation pathways.

Additionally, the three-level model further contextualised these factors by framing radicalisation processes across three interconnected dimensions: the personal level, which includes individual vulnerabilities and psychological needs; the social level, encompassing peer groups, family dynamics, and community influences; and the cultural level, addressing

wider societal narratives, norms, and political or religious ideologies that may foster or inhibit radicalisation (Al Ubaidi, 2017; Campello et al., 2018).

Finally, the third branch explored the broader societal impacts of youth radicalisation, including heightened fear of crime, social divisions, and the perceived threats to community security and societal stability (Pauwles & van Alstein, 2022; Feddes et al., 2023).

While this study acknowledges that radicalisation involves both internal (psychological) and external (social, cultural, and structural e.g. discrimination and inequality) factors, the analysis primarily focuses on internal drivers. These include needs for significance, belonging, and identity, as framed by the Significance Quest Theory and its 3N Model (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Da Silva et al., 2023). This Interpretive focus aligns with the study's orientation and it's not intended to overlook broader influences, which have been highlighted by scholars such as Kundnani (2012) and Githens-Mazer (2012) in their critiques of narrow psychological approaches.

## **3.4 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS**

### **3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews**

The interview questions were developed based on the research proposal grounded in available literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.16). Central topics identified in the mind-map informed the construction of seven semi-structured interview questions, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives while allowing flexibility for in-depth insights from participants. Table 2 provides an overview of these questions and their relevance to the research focus.

**TABLE 2: ALIGNING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS WITH THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

RQ: Research Questions	IQ: Interview Questions
<p>RQ1 - How do different social, psychological, and environmental factors shape youths' vulnerability to engage in extremism or adopt radical ideologies and behaviours?</p>	<p>IQ1 - What does radicalisation mean to you, especially in the context of young people?</p> <p>IQ3 – a) What unique factors in Malta might attract individuals towards radicalisation and violent extreme behaviours?</p> <p>IQ3 – b) What unique factors in Malta might drive individuals away from radicalisation and violent extreme behaviours?</p>
<p>RQ2 – In what ways are young people drawn toward particular ideologies or groups, whether and how do these factors contribute to pathways of potential recruitment?</p>	<p>IQ2 - What types of extreme ideologies are more common among youths in Malta?</p> <p>IQ4 - Are there specific ways or patterns through which young people in Malta are radicalised, especially towards extremist and potentially violent ideologies?</p> <p>IQ5 - How do these radicalisation processes in Malta (if any) compare to those in other European countries?</p>
<p>RQ3 – How do experts provide understand and recommend ways of addressing youth radicalisation in Malta?</p>	<p>IQ6 - What methods or programs have proven effective in preventing youth radicalisation and promoting resilience against violent extremist ideas?</p> <p>IQ7 - Based on your expertise, what recommendations can be made to improve existing efforts to prevent and counter radicalisation in Malta?</p>

Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

## **3.5 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION**

### **3.5.1 Theoretical and Methodological Foundations**

Guided by a qualitative approach, this study explored the complexities of social phenomena through expert's insights and thematic analysis (Denzin 2017, p. 18; Given, 2008, P. 8; Patton 2015, p. 109). To gain in-depth insights, semi-structured interviews with experts were chosen as the primary method, providing both flexibility and depth in exploring the social, psychological, and environmental factors influencing youth radicalisation (Formosa et al., 2011; Miles, et al., 2020). This method facilitated guided yet open-ended discussions, allowing interviewees to share their knowledge and experiences freely while ensuring alignment with the study's objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The choice of a qualitative methodology was theoretically grounded in exploring the complex, subjective, and context-specific factors that shape an individual's sense of significance and belonging, both of which are central to the radicalisation process (Da Silva et al., 2023). Furthermore, this approach aligns with an interpretivist framework, which focuses on understanding social phenomena through individuals' lived experiences, and the meanings they construct within their specific contexts (Johannesson & Perjons, 2021, p.53).

### **3.5.2 Inductive Thematic Approach**

To analyse the data, the study employed an inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which was structured into six sequential steps: (1) becoming familiar with the data set, (2) systematically coding the data, (3) generating initial themes, (4) generating and refining initial themes, (5) reviewing, defining and naming themes, and (6) presenting findings in a structured report.

This approach facilitated the identification of key patterns and themes, providing nuanced insights into the risk factors and mechanisms of radicalisation (Roberts et al., 2020, p. 2295),

including exposure to manipulative propaganda and its influence on vulnerable youths (Emmelkamp et al., 2020; Vertigans, 2013, p.68), as seen by participants in this study. The analysis was further supported by theoretical perspectives, which contextualised and interpreted the experts' views (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

To ensure a diverse expert sample, an initial recruitment target of eighteen experts was set, spanning various social science fields (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As participation was entirely voluntary and subject to participant's availability, the final number of interviewees stood at nine. To accommodate this natural variability and maintain methodological integrity, a contingency list of alternative experts was prepared, allowing the research process to continue smoothly (Archibald & Munce, 2015, p.34).

The findings aimed to identify strategies that professionals could use to support at-risk youths and develop preventive counter-radicalisation measures. These insights provided a foundation for addressing the challenges of extremist ideologies within the Maltese context and promoting a safer, more resilient society. With the expert sample finalised, the study proceeded to the data collection phase, conducting semi-structured interviews to explore the mechanisms of radicalisation (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p.593; Vertigans, 2013, p. 68).

## **3.6 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE**

### **3.6.1 Sampling and Participants Characteristics**

This study explored various forms of ideologies through discussions with subject matter experts. Data was gathered from local professionals with insights into both the local and broader European criminological and social landscape (Storm, Pavlovic, & Franc, 2020). These experts had prior experience with youth, or were actively engaged in prevention, rehabilitation, counter-terrorism, or rehabilitation initiatives (Onwuegbuzie, & Collins, 2007, p.281). The selection criteria prioritised individuals who possessed significant knowledge or direct involvement related to the field of extremism and radicalisation (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2; von Soest, 2023).

To ensure a well-rounded perspective, experts were drawn from various disciplines, including social science, psychology, education, and law enforcement (Campello et al., 2018). This diversity enhanced the study's ability to capture the complex social, psychological, and structural factors contributing to radicalisation. However, the final number of interviewees was adjusted due to practical constraints, such as expert availability.

Purposive sampling, also known as selective sampling, is a non-probability sampling method where participants are intentionally chosen based on specific characteristics, such as expertise relevant to the research (Stratton, 2023). In this study, identifying the right experts proved particularly significant, since interviews with experts in radicalisation were critical to addressing the study's research aims and objectives (Abbas, 2024; Cherney et al., 2021, p.409; Tandafir, 2023).

Due to their extensive practical experience, these experts provided the researcher with specialised knowledge across multiple sectors (von Soest, 2023). Consequently, the selection process prioritised individuals with significant expertise to ensure a comprehensive exploration of radicalisation and de-radicalisation processes in their various manifestations (Von Lautz et al., 2023).

The study adopted a multidisciplinary approach to examine youth radicalisation. Alongside qualitative research rooted in theory, it engaged professionals from diverse fields, recognising that thematic analysis is never conducted in vacuum (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p.3). These experts contributions helped bridge knowledge gaps (Abbas, 2024), offering valuable insights into risk factors and intervention strategies, and enriching understanding of the phenomenon (Schmid, 2016).

### **Field 1: Education**

Educators specialising in targeted interventions highlighted the importance of mentoring at-risk youth, building trust, and using social media to promote awareness and critical thinking against extremist narratives (Baxter et al., 2022; Schmid, 2013; von Lautz et al., 2023). Their expertise underscored how adverse social conditions can contribute to recruitment and how education can build resilience (Belanger et al., 2019; Campello et al., 2018, p. 2; Moghaddam, 2005). These insights support prevention and post-radicalisation efforts towards safer, more inclusive communities.

### **Field 2: Criminology**

Criminologists analysed radicalisation trends, extremist behaviours, and their societal impact (Abbas, 2024; Cherney, 2022). Their expertise in crime prevention complemented that of educators, reinforcing the need for proactive strategies from early intervention to long-term resilience-building.

### **Field 3: Psychology**

Psychologists examined the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural drivers of radicalisation. Their focus on trauma, identity crises, or social isolation (Da Silva, 2023; Moghaddam, 2005) highlighted the need for tailored interventions to address psychological vulnerabilities. By promoting personalised resilience strategies (Campello et al. 2018), psychology supported a holistic, cross-disciplinary counter – radicalisation framework (Strindberg, 2020, p.39).

### **Field 4: Law Enforcement and Policy Experts**

Malta Police Force experts offered insights into radicalisation pathways and youth attitudes toward xenophobia locally and across Europe (EUROPOL, 2023). They discussed definitional challenges and called for a unified approach, emphasising early intervention and cross-sector collaboration to reduce radical influences from a young age.

### 3.6.2 Research Tools

The analysis process was supported by NVivo 15, a powerful qualitative data analysis software facilitated the systematic development of codes and themes, enhancing the efficiency and structure of the thematic analysis, as per Allsop et al. (2022, p.143). Nvivo 15 was instrumental in organising, coding, and managing the dataset, enabling the systematic identification of significant sections of data that addressed the three research questions.

The coding process was carried out with careful attention to ensure accuracy and alignment with the study's objectives. Throughout this process, the researcher actively managed the analysis, remaining mindful of the potential for theoretical influence and personal bias taking deliberate steps to minimise its influence on data interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.15). This approach ensured that the research questions remained the sole focus of the analysis.

Building upon the coding process, outlined by Braun and Clarke, (2019), the data set was first examined to ensure familiarity, followed by systematic coding of the data. The distribution of codes across interview transcripts was then analysed to identify patterns and thematic significance.

Across the data set, all three research questions were represented to varying degrees, reflecting different levels of emphasis in the expert interviews. Research Question 1 emerged as the most frequently coded theme, appearing in seven transcripts and accumulating (113) references, reflecting a broad and detailed discussion on the various factors influencing susceptibility to radicalisation. Research Question 2 was coded in six transcripts and had the lowest reference count (78), suggesting that while attraction mechanisms were acknowledged, they were discussed with less depth or variability. Research Question 3 was coded in five transcripts but accumulated (110) references, indicating that expert discussions on resilience and intervention strategies were particularly detailed and substantive.

**FIGURE 2: A SCREEN SHOT FROM NVIVO15 SHOWING CODED REFERENCES**

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
(RQ1) How do different factors influence the vulnerability of youths to engag	7	113	01/02/2025 15:05	JG	22/06/2025 18:12	JG
(RQ2) How are young people drawn to different (2a) ideologies or (2b) grou	6	78	01/02/2025 15:06	JG	22/06/2025 18:12	JG
(RQ3) What recommendations do experts provide to reduce youth radicalisa	5	110	01/02/2025 15:07	JG	22/06/2025 18:13	JG

Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

This distribution of codes provided insight into the emphasis placed on different aspects of youth radicalisation by participants, setting the stage for the next phase, where codes were systematically organised into broader themes and sub-themes to construct a coherent analytical description.

This thematic structure allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors influencing youth radicalisation and its mechanisms (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.593). By categorising these themes according to the research questions, the analysis ensured a focused examination of potential vulnerabilities, ideological influences, and counter-radicalisation efforts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.14). This approach not only facilitated a clearer interpretation of the data but also provided a structured foundation for discussing the findings in relation to the literature being presented in Chapter 2.

### **3.6.3 Data Analysis Procedure**

The familiarisation phase involved listening to interview recordings and creating detailed transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.18). The thematic analysis, as outline by Braun and Clarke (2022, p.13), follows six-sequential steps. The first two steps: becoming familiar with the data and systematically coding it, enabled the initial documentation of observations and emerging patterns, enhancing the researcher's understanding of the data-set. Nvivo 15 was used to store and manage the transcripts, ensuring efficient organisation and retrieval for further analysis.

Thematic analysis, as described by Brown and Clark (2006; 2013), was employed as a flexible research method that captured both subjective and objective insights. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions aligned with the study's objectives, allowing experts to share both commonalities and unique perspectives. To systematically identify patterns and themes in the data, thematic analysis was applied, following Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2013) framework. This method provided a comprehensive understanding of potential risk factors within adolescent environments that may contribute to tendencies towards or away from radicalisation (Emmelkamp et al., 2020).

To maintain a structured and rigorous analysis, the study further divided phase 3 and 4 of the six-step inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) into a three-stage process, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) framework. This approach facilitated the systematic identification, refinement, and alignment of themes with the research questions. While some clusters contained fewer codes than others, Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasise that thematic analysis prioritises the relevance of codes to their interconnections over rigid coding uniformity.

Building on this structured approach, the following key themes and their sub-themes were identified based on their direct relevance to the research questions, ensuring a systematic analysis of youth radicalisation and preventing strategies. Table 3 presents these themes in alignment with the research questions, providing a clear framework for understanding radicalisation and counter-radicalisation measures.

### **Step 1: Familiarisation and Initial Coding**

Within the six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019; 2022), the researcher engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts to immerse in the data and began generating initial codes inductively across the dataset, rather than organising them under the research questions. As noted by Allsop et al. (2022, p.149), Nvivo 15 facilitated this process by visually organising the data within the transcripts, although it was used as a data management tool rather than as the method of analysis itself.

The first step involved coding interview data by identifying recurring ideas relevant to youth radicalisation. These codes were developed as short, sentence-style statements that captured interpretative meaning, and were grouped into early candidate themes (patterns of shared meaning with a central organising concept), such as digital influence, identity struggles, economic hardships, pathways to radicalisation, counter radicalisation efforts. Priority was given to conceptual relevance over code frequency, as emphasised by Braun and Clarke (2019), ensuring that insights from fewer participants were considered if they contribute meaningfully to the analysis.

### **Step 2: Refining and Organising Emerging Themes**

Following initial coding, candidate themes were carefully reviewed to enhance their clarity and relevance. Overlapping codes were merged into broader, more coherent themes, while others were revised to better reflect the underlying data. For instance, multiple codes addressing the impact of digital spaces on radicalisation were consolidated under the theme 'Online Influence and Misinformation.' Similarly, concepts related to identity crises, marginalisation, and emotional vulnerability were combined into the theme 'Identity and Psychological Vulnerabilities.'

Reflexive journaling and memo-writing supported this phase, allowing the researcher to remain attentive to personal assumptions and analytic decisions. Additionally, a distinct theme titled 'Understanding Radicalisation' was developed to capture how professionals in Malta define and interpret the phenomenon based on their field experiences. Themes were categorised based on their relevance to the research questions: the factors that increased youth vulnerability to radicalisation (RQ1), the pathways through which they are drawn to extremist ideologies or groups (RQ2), and the strategies experts recommended to counter such challenges (RQ3).

### **Step 3: Defining Final Themes and Sub-Themes**

The development of the final themes was informed not only by participant data but also the core characteristics of youth radicalisation identified in the literature review (Chapter 2), ensuring alignment between the study's conceptual foundation and empirical findings.

The final stage established six core analytic themes:

- (T1) Understanding Radicalisation,
- (T2) Online Influence and Misinformation,
- (T3) Identity and Psychological Vulnerabilities,
- (T4) Socio-Economic & Community Challenges
- (T5) Political and Ideological Narratives, and
- (T6) Counter-Radicalisation and Prevention Strategies.

Each theme was assigned sub-themes to provide greater contextual depth. Theme 1 (Understanding Radicalisation) addresses all three research questions by offering a conceptual foundation for the phenomenon, while the other five themes explore specific drivers and prevention strategies. The subsequent sub-themes explore a range of key factors, such as the role of digital platforms in spreading extremist content, particularly through online echo chambers (Whittaker, 2023; Hollewell & Longpre', 2022), experiences of social isolation and the interaction between internal vulnerabilities and external pressures.

Other important aspects include identity crises that increase susceptibility to radicalisation (Bleeman, 2021; Baxter et al., 2022), financial struggles, and the influence of peer and family dynamics (Ginges et al., 2011; Trip et al., 2019). Furthermore, social divisions emerge as risk factors, alongside the construction of youth identities through extremist narratives and recruitment tactics aimed at attracting vulnerable individuals. Finally, the sub-themes address the promotion of education and critical thinking skills, the importance of multi-agency-collaboration, and efforts to strengthen social cohesion resilience.

This reflexive and iterative approach, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.15: 2022), framework, ensured that themes were treated as interpretive patterns of shared meaning, grounded in both participant accounts and theoretical insights.

### 3.6.4 Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research involves being aware of how personal views may influence the analytic process, rather than striving for bias-free interpretation. As Braun and Clarke (2019, p.594) argue, bias is unavoidable; themes are not objective facts but interpretive constructs created through the interaction between the data, the researcher's subjectivity, and the analytic tools used. Reflexivity therefore requires on-going, transparent questioning of assumptions and recognition of the researcher's influence on the research process (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

In this study, that the researcher's background included long service in the Armed Forces of Malta, with operational duties in counter-terrorism and international security tasks, followed by academic background in Criminology. This combination of professional experience and academic study offered contextual awareness of security-related issues but also carried the risk of shaping how the topic of radicalisation was approached and interpreted. However, this dual perspective of also served as a strength, as the researcher's practical experience provided grounded insight into real-world security contexts, while academic engagement encouraged critical reflection and theoretical awareness. In this way, professional knowledge informed understanding, and academia provided the framework to question assumptions and keep potential biases in check.

To address potential bias, the researcher adopted a reflexive stance, which in this context according to Braun and Clarke (2019, p. 594) means approaching qualitative research, including reflexive thematic analysis with humility and openness and to be aware of being part of the process rather than outside of it. As a result, during interviews, an open and non-judgmental approach was maintained, and in the analysis stage, systematic coding and repeated engagement with transcripts was used to ground themes in participants' accounts.

When interpretations appeared to align too closely with prior knowledge, alternative explanations were actively considered to reduce confirmation bias. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance, the coding process was conducted transparently so that interpretations remained traceable, and the development of themes was discussed with the assigned supervisor to support credibility and grounding in the data.

**TABLE 3: ALIGNMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS WITH KEY THEMES AND SUB-THEMES**

Research Question	Key Themes	Sub-Themes
<p>RQ1 - How do different social, psychological, and environmental factors shape youths' vulnerability to engage in extremism or adopt radical ideologies and behaviours?</p>	(T1) Understanding Radicalisation.	Although T1 has no sub-themes, it addresses RQ1, it also supports RQ2 and RQ3 by offering a conceptual foundation for understanding pathways and evaluating expert recommendations
	(T2) Online Influence and Misinformation.	(2a) The role of digital platforms in spreading extremist content.
	(T3) Identity and Psychological Vulnerabilities.	(3a) Experiences of social isolation, (3b) The interaction between internal vulnerabilities and external pressures, and (3c) identity crises that increase susceptibility to radicalisation.
	(T4) Socio-Economic & Community Challenges.	(4a) Financial struggles, (4b) The influence of peer and family dynamics, and (4c) social divisions as risk factors.
<p>RQ2 – In what ways are young people drawn toward particular ideologies or groups, whether and how do these factors contribute to pathways of potential recruitment?</p>	(T5) Political and Ideological Narratives.	(5a) The construction of youth identities through extremist narratives, and (5b) recruitment tactics employed to attract vulnerable individuals.
<p>RQ3 – How do experts understand and recommend ways of addressing youth radicalisation in Malta?</p>	(T6) Counter-Radicalisation and Prevention Strategies.	(6a) The promotion of education and critical thinking skills, (6b) The importance of multi-agency collaboration, and (6c) Efforts to strengthen social cohesion and resilience.

Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

Aligning these themes with the research questions ensured a clear and systematic approach to understanding radicalisation and the measures needed to prevent this phenomenon. Additionally, this thematic structure guided the 'Findings Chapter', where each theme was analysed, and interpreted through expert insights, highlighting recurring trends and contextual factors linked to the research questions and further supporting the conceptual foundation set in Chapter 2.

### **3.6.5 Methodological Challenges**

During the coding process, several challenges arose, particularly in distinguishing overlapping research questions. RQ1 (youth vulnerability to extremism) and RQ3 (building resilience) frequently intersected, especially regarding social factors that both contributed to radicalisation and informed preventive strategies. Similarly, RQ1 and RQ2 (attraction mechanisms) overlapped where social influences played a dual role in vulnerability and recruitment. Another key challenge was maintaining the five-word coding limit while ensuring clarity and relevance, required careful refinement to preserve the depth of meaning within each coded segment.

## **3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Upon finalising the research framework, the researcher compiled the necessary forms for approval by the University of Malta's the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC). A key requirement was the Data Management Plan (DMP), which ensured compliance with GDPR (EU) 2016/679 and Data Protection Act (Cap 586). The DMP mandated secure management of qualitative data, safeguarding participants' rights, including access, rectification, objection, and data erasure upon request. It also ensured that all collected data was used solely for this study and remained accessible only to the researcher, supervisor, and, if necessary, the board of examiners.

Additional documents, including the combined information letter and consent form, participant invitation letter, and the semi-structured interview questions in both Maltese and English, were submitted before the research commenced.

The study received ethical approval, contingent on obtaining all necessary permissions from gatekeepers and individual participants. Approval ensured compliance with ethical guidelines before data collection began. Following approval, selected experts received participation information sheets and consent forms (see Appendix B and C) to ensure transparency and adherence to FREC guidelines. These measures mitigated potential conflicts of interest and upheld ethical research standards (von Soest, 2023).

Only individuals who provided written consent participated in the study. Interviews were conducted one-on-one, with some participants opting for written replies and online communication. Sessions typically lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With participant's consent, interviews were audio-recorded and securely stored as encrypted, password-protected files, as confirmed through signed consent forms. Pseudonymised transcripts were stored separately from personal data and were also encrypted to ensure confidentiality. To preserve anonymity, and avoid gender attribution, each of the nine participants was assigned a gender-neutral pseudonym. As a result, throughout the analysis, participants are referred to by the following gender-neutral pseudonyms: Alex (P1), Taylor (P2), Morgan (P3), Riley (P4), Casey (P5), Skyler (P6), Avery (P7), Jamie (P8), and Reese (P9).

The researcher remained neutral throughout, ensuring that personal opinions did not influence participants' responses (Givens, 2008). Confidentiality and data protection were maintained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences, reinforcing voluntary participation and ethical integrity. Given the sensitive nature of the research, additional precautions were taken to protect participants' identities and contributions. Confidentiality was paramount to encourage open discussion while safeguarding personal and professional risks. These measures ensured ethical compliance and strengthened trust between the researcher and participants (Faria, 2022; Patton, 2015, p. 497).

### **3.8 LEGITIMATION: TRUSTWORTHINESS AND CREDIBILITY**

Qualitative research explored the complexities of human experience (Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p.4). In this study, trustworthiness was ensured through carefully designed questions, developed in consultation with the research supervisor and informed by literature. This approach enabled a thorough examination of key factors such as peer networks, family dynamics, and socio-political influences (Emmelkamp et al., 2020; Denzin, 2017).

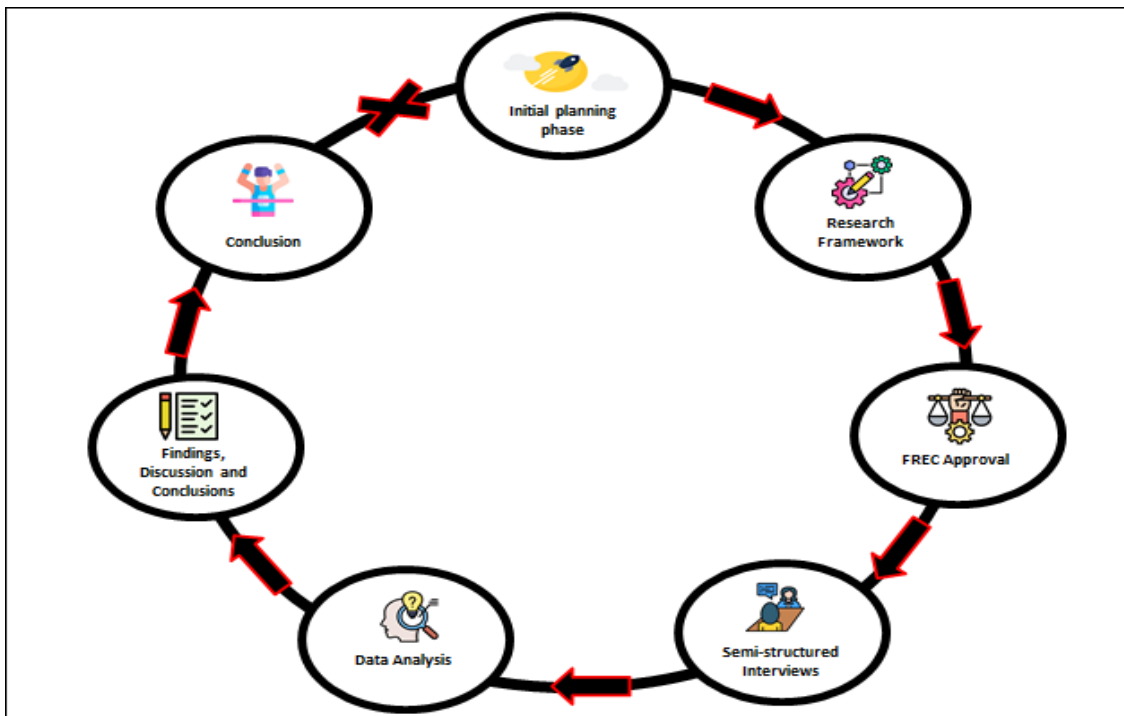
Focusing on Malta provided context-specific insights into youth radicalisation while aligning with broader theoretical frameworks (Beelmann, 2020). Credibility was reinforced through expert perspectives and methodological consistency, ensuring an accurate representation of these influences (Lewis & Awan, 2024; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007, p.298; Sarnoto et al., 2024).

To enhance trustworthiness, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) were utilised, offering a structured yet flexible approach that aligned with rigorous sampling considerations, as highlighted by Onwuegbuzie and Collins (2017, p.135). Furthermore, a systematic cross-checking process, including expert feedback, was implemented to strengthen data consistency and minimise interpretation bias (Coates et al., 2021). Collectively, these measures reinforced the methodological stability of the study but also supported the derivation of trustworthy and credible insights into youth radicalisation.

### **3.9 CONCLUSION**

Figure 3 provides a clockwise visual summary of the research methodology, outlining the key steps undertaken throughout this dissertation. The process began with the initial planning phase, followed by the development of the research framework and FREC approval. Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted, leading data analysis and the formulation of the findings, discussion, and conclusions, before reaching the final stage. This diagram highlights the core methodological steps in this chapter.

**FIGURE 3: VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY KEY STEPS**



Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

As illustrated in figure (3), this study adopted a qualitative research design to gain in-depth insights into youth radicalisation in Malta. Semi-structured interviews with professionals allowed for expert perspectives on youth radicalisation mechanisms, vulnerabilities, and prevention strategies (Vertigans, 2013, p. 68). For analysis, this study employed reflexive thematic analysis, a structured yet flexible approach to identifying and refining key themes, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019; 2022). Additionally, a mind map was also incorporated to visually organise the three main areas of interest and their relationships to each other and the research questions.

These methodological choices ensured rigorous and contextually relevant findings, laying the groundwork for understanding radicalisation risks and enhancing existing counter-radicalisation strategies. The next chapter presents the key findings, offering detailed analysis of the themes and sub-themes (summarised in table 3) that emerged from the data. This discussion situates the results within the Maltese context, providing deeper insights into the complexities of youth radicalisation and its broader implications.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents six core themes and their accompanying sub-themes, which emerged from interviews conducted with nine experts across 4 professional fields between November and December 2024. To better reflect on their professional backgrounds and thematic contributions, the participants were grouped into two main categories social science professionals and law enforcement and policy experts.

This categorisation underscores the interdisciplinary nature of the study, integrating both preventive and enforcement-based perspectives on youth radicalisation. Thematic development was closely aligned with the study's research questions and followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.15) systematic approach to thematic analysis. The expert interviews generated rich findings, revealing significant patterns and commonalities in how radicalisation in Malta unfolds. These findings are supported by references to the literature review in Chapter 2, to provide context and strengthen the interpretation of the results (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p.3).

As shown in the visual representation of emergent themes in figure (4), the findings highlight the complex interplay of digital, psychological, social, and ideological factors influencing youth radicalisation in Malta. At the centre of the illustration is the study's core focus – Expert Perspectives on Youth Radicalisation in Malta – from which six main themes (T1 – T6) extend, each reflecting key findings from the analysis. This visual representation offers a structured overview of the results, while also illustrating the practical realities and interconnections identified in the expert data.

Theme 1 (T1), Understanding Radicalisation, serves as a foundational lens through which all other themes are interpreted. It captures how radicalisation is defined and understood by experts across different sectors, providing essential context for the broader findings. The

relevance of T1 is central to the thematic proposition of this study, as it frames how the phenomenon is recognised, discussed, and most importantly, addressed within the Maltese context. In doing so, T1 directly informs all three research questions (see chapter 3, table 1), establishing not only the definitional groundwork but also the interpretive frame through which the entire analysis is understood.

In the visual representation of emergent themes, each sphere symbolises a distinct thematic domain that emerged from the expert interviews. Although visually separate, these spheres are conceptually interconnected, reflecting the complex and overlapping influences that shape youth radicalisation in Malta. For instance, online misinformation (T2) might reinforce identity struggles (T3), while effective prevention strategies (T6) must engage both psychological and ideological dimensions to achieve meaningful and lasting impact.

#### **4.1.1 Purpose and Meaning of the Visual Representation**

TP - Thematic Proposition: At the centre of the visual representation lies the core focus of this study: 'Experts Perspectives on Youth Radicalisation in Malta.' This central sphere symbolises the overarching phenomenon under exploration and serves as the reference point from which all other themes extend. Importantly, this visual framework – originally developed as a preliminary mind-map (see chapter 3, Figure 1) is being revised and refined in this chapter to reflect the emerging thematic findings derived from expert interviews. Each thematic domain connects back to this central focus, illustrating the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which experts understand and engage with youth radicalisation in the Maltese context.

T1 – Understanding Radicalisation: Theme 1 establishes the definitional groundwork for the entire study. It captures how experts from diverse sectors interpret the concept of radicalisation, offering insight into its perceived meaning within the Maltese context. Positioned closest to the thematic proposition, T1 provides interpretive clarity for understanding the pathways, influences, and interventions in subsequent subthemes. While it includes no sub-themes, it reveals the varied yet intersecting views of radicalisation -

whether understood as ideological commitment, behavioural progression, or a process of identity formation (Beelman, 2021; Baxter et al., 2022, p.98).

T2 – Online Influence and Misinformation: T2 represents the digital realm where youth often engage with radical content, both intentionally and unintentionally. It captures the external influence of social media algorithms, online communities, and misinformation, highlighting how digital spaces shape identity, belonging, and exposure (Hollewell & Longpre', 2022).

T3 – Identity and Psychological Vulnerabilities: T3 captures the micro-level internal and external dynamics that increase youths' susceptibility to radical messages. It encompasses experiences such as identity crises, feelings of isolation, and lack of belonging. These psychological vulnerabilities can act as gateways for extremist ideologies that promise purpose or community (Gonzales et al., 2022a, p.538).

T4 – Socio-Economic and Community Challenges: T4 captures both environmental and social conditions at the micro-level, including peer influences from close social networks, migration experiences, and cultural expectations. These factors can create both risk and protective dynamics that shape a young person's trajectory (Murray & Farrington, 2010, p.638). Economic challenges, highlighted in red on the thematic map, represent an additional external influence, and reflect divergent expert views regarding their role in radicalisation (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p.2).

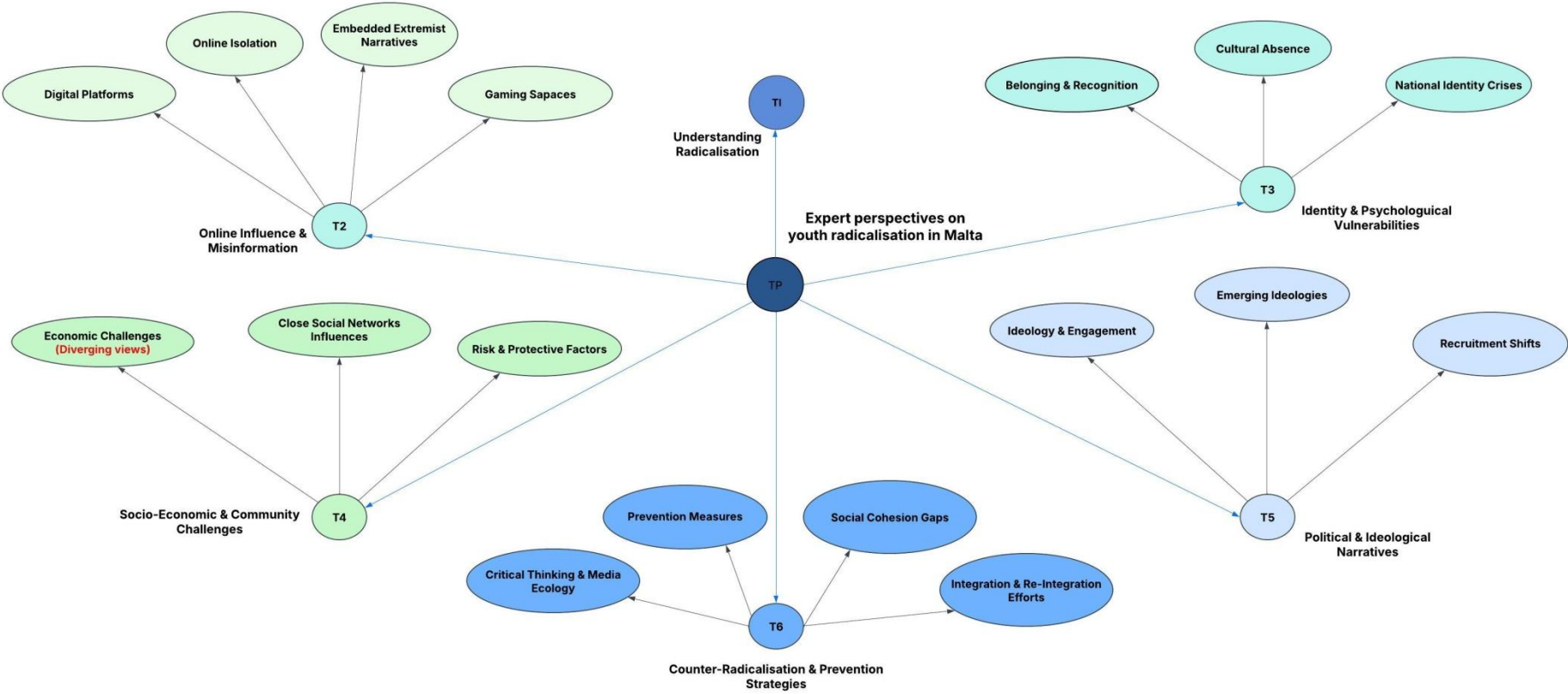
T5 – Political and Ideological Narratives: T5 reflects macro-level external influences, such as emerging political ideologies and shifts in public discourse, as well as meso-level dynamics, including community networks and institutional settings. It shows how youth may become radicalised through political dissatisfaction or ideological narratives encountered online or within their communities, or through their immediate environments (Gonzales et al., 2022a, p. 529).

T6 – Counter-Radicalisation and Prevention Strategies: The final sphere, T6 is intentionally positioned at the rear of the thematic map to reflect its strategic and responsive role in the

overall framework. Unlike the other themes, which explore the processes, underlying drivers, and vulnerabilities contributing to youth radicalisation, T6 represents intervention, prevention, and resilience-building efforts aimed at addressing those influences (Wallner, 2021).

Placing T6 at the rear symbolically conveys its role as both a response to the preceding themes and a forward-looking component of the broader understanding of radicalisation. Its position reinforces the idea that effective prevention must be grounded in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, starting with how radicalisation is conceptualised in T1 and extending across the psychological, social, digital, political, and ideological factors identified in T2 through T5. This placement also highlights its practical relevance, as T6 interacts with and seeks to mitigate the impact of each of the other themes.

Figure 4: Visual Representation of Emergent Themes



Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

## 4.2 THEME 1: UNDERSTANDING RADICALISATION

This theme directly addresses Research Question 1 by exploring how professionals in Malta define and conceptualise radicalisation, particularly in the context of youth. It reveals a range of diverse yet overlapping interpretations, illustrating that radicalisation is a complex and often contested phenomenon (Abbas, 2024). Establishing a clear definition early on in the findings is essential, as differing interpretations significantly shape how risk, vulnerability, and intervention are approached (Emmelkamp et al., 2020).

As the conceptual foundation of this study, this theme provides clarity for interpreting the psychological, social, and ideological processes discussed in subsequent sub-themes. While the literature review offered an academic overview, this chapter presents expert perspectives within the Maltese context, offering insight into how political and ideological narratives shape local understandings of radicalisation.

This ambiguity is echoed in the interview data. For example, Alex highlights the definitional challenge, stating, *“As in the same terms as terrorism, there's no such thing as a common understanding of what radicalisation is.”* This reflects the issues noted in the literature (Emmelkamp et al., 2020, p.12; Sedgwick 2010, p. 490) and reinforces the importance of context in shaping how radicalisation is interpreted and addressed.

Despite the lack of consensus (Bąkowski, 2023), several experts provided more structured definitions of radicalisation, often describing it as a phased or progressive process. For instance, Taylor references the EU Knowledge Hub, a platform that succeeded the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), which defines radicalisation as *“a phased and complex process in which an individual or a group embraces a radical ideology or belief that accepts, uses or condones violence, including acts of terrorism, to achieve a specific political or ideological purpose.”* This definition is echoed by Jamie, Casey, and Alex, who also describe radicalisation as *“the process”* of adopting such ideologies. Jamie elaborates further, stating:

*“Radicalisation, for me, is a process whereby someone is influenced in such a way that it changes their attitudes and behavior towards an ideology, religion, or political stance. Most of the time, radicalisation is - but not exclusively - linked to violent behavior.”*

Alex similarly adds that radicalisation represents a developmental shift *“from being an ordinary individual and progresses toward radicalisation, then extremism, and eventually to jihadisation or accelerationism.”* Accelerationism, as defined by Hardy and Henschke (2024, p.201), refers to the belief that liberal and capitalist systems are inherently unsustainable, and therefore, violent actions are seen as justified means to accelerate their collapse. By contrast, the majority of experts framed radicalisation in broader or more flexible terms, highlighting its context-dependent nature, ideological variability, or behavioural outcomes (Reidy, 2019). These interpretative perspectives are explored in the following sections.

Skyler, for instance, underscores the definitional ambiguity by noting that the term *“radical”* originates from the Latin *‘radicalis,’* meaning *‘from the roots.’* This expert explains that radicalisation *“very much depends on who is defining it, and what views get to be associated with it.”* Asserting that *“there is, nor there ever was, a static definition of radicalisation.”* For Skyler, political radicalisation involves views calling for absolute change, typically through violent means, particularly in the context of youth, where the presence of violent ideologies is a defining characteristic. Riley shares a similar pragmatic view, stating:

*“Radicalisation means that when someone takes up extreme views and that includes use of violence to get their point across. And to me, it's usually associated with a certain religious belief - whether it's Catholic, whether it's Muslim or a certain school of thought.”*

Reese offers a behavioural lens, suggesting that radicalisation may not stem from the ideology itself but rather *“the behaviour towards an ideology, the way they act, the way they think,”* which can make it radical. This expert notes, that *“their ideologies wouldn't be particularly extreme,”* but the mindset and conduct surrounding those beliefs may drive individuals into more radicalised pathways. Reese further describes radicalisation in youth as a form of identity construction:

*“Especially in the context of young people, I see it as them taking particular side or adopting an ideology they are forming, whether that ideology makes sense or not. It's kind of like they're trying to find their place, trying to have a position in society, either by forming an ideology they believe is good enough or one that, perhaps, defines them.”*

Casey supports this view, adding that *“Youth radicalisation, for me, implies the attraction of young people towards very radical and extreme ideas - be they political, possibly associated with religious ideas, or even extreme social ideas.”* For example, this may include *“the attraction of young people towards radical Islam or even radical political beliefs, such as extreme right-wing beliefs.”* Similarly, Avery frames radicalisation as broadly encompassing any form of extremist ideology, noting that:

*“Radicalisation, I would assume, implies any form of extremist ideology, or thinking or attitude. That is my take on radicalisation - any form of extreme thinking, extreme attitudes, or extreme beliefs. I don't make a distinction between youths and adults in this regard; I would assume radicalisation applies regardless the age spectrum.”*

Morgan adds a psychological dimension, linking radicalisation to mental vulnerability stating that:

*“Radicalisation, I would say, is basically a type of brainwashing. I'd link it to vulnerability of the mind, because it's very hard for a stable mind, so to speak – one who has the usual support structures – to fall into it.”*

This vulnerability, they argue, can be exploited by political and ideological narratives that *“manipulate individuals by exploiting the vulnerabilities”* in their identity, group dynamics, or world view. This perspective is supported by wider literature, where such narratives shape how individuals interpret social, political, and historical realities (Adams et al., 2023, p.652). According to Cherney et al. (2021), these narratives can often mobilise individuals by providing simplified explanations, identifying enemies (such as us vs. them mentality), and calling for action. These dynamics suggest that radicalisation is not typically a sudden shift

but rather a gradual evolution rooted in identity formation, dissatisfaction, and group pressures (Roberts-Ingleson & McCann, 2023).

As ideological divides deepen, they may contribute to social fragmentation, making individuals, especially youths, more susceptible to extremist influences. Consequently, the polarisation of ideological and political discourse, can fuel radicalisation, amplify extremist ideologies, and weaken social cohesion (Borum, 2011; Schmid, 2013; Sedgwick, 2010).

These findings demonstrate that while expert perspectives on radicalisation vary, they converge around the interplay between belief, behaviour, and context. Whether described as a structured trajectory, or as a context-driven shift in attitude and actions, radicalisation is consistently understood as involving the adoption of ideologies that support violence or justify violence in response to perceived injustice, identity crises, or socio-political grievance (Belanger et al., 2019; Da Silva et al., 2023).

Importantly, the data shows strong alignment with the working definition of radicalisation adopted in this study (see sub-section 2.2.1). Experts consistently described radicalisation as a phased, context-sensitive process shaped by ideological shifts, vulnerability, and perceived injustice, core components of the theoretical framing by Oxford English Dictionary, (2024), Khosrokhavar, (2014), and Roberts-Ingleson and McCann, (2023).

As several experts observed, radicalisation in youth often stems from identity confusion, emotional fragility, and the vulnerability of the mind, reflecting how individuals seek belonging and validation when feeling disconnected or marginalised. These expert interpretations align closely with contemporary theoretical perspectives that view radicalisation as a dynamic interaction between psychological needs and social context. According to the Significance Quest Theory (SQT), the process of radicalisation is often initiated when individuals experience a loss of personal meaning or significance, motivating them to seek purpose and validation through ideological or group affiliation (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Da Silva et al., 2023). Within this framework, the 3N Model emphasises three interlinked dimensions: Need for Significance, Narrative, and Network, which together explain how vulnerability can evolve into ideological commitment.

Borum (2025, p.6) highlights that radicalisation is a complex, non-linear process driven by a fluid search for identity, meaning, and belonging. Personal grievances and social narratives interact dynamically, shaping pathways into extremism. These mechanisms reflect the broader understanding within this study that radicalisation involves evolving psychological and social processes shaped by emotional and situational factors. Within this context, the insights offered by experts not only support Borum’s theoretical interpretation but also provide an opportunity to examine how these processes align with structured frameworks such as the NYPD Four Stage Model, which is discussed in the following section.

The following table presents expert-derived perspectives on the meaning of radicalisation, directly addressing Research Question 1. A second table maps these insights on to the NYPD Four-Stage Model (Silber et al., 2007, p.19), originally developed to analyse jihadist radicalisation but adaptable to broader extremist contexts. Although Stage 4 is labelled “Jihadisation,” it may also reflect ideologically, politically, or socially motivated violence (Cassam, 2022). In this study, the model is used as a neutral tool to explore how expert views align with broader progression, from emotional and identity-based vulnerabilities to ideological engagement and, potentially, to the justification or use of violence. This dual presentation supports a structured comparison between conceptual interpretations and theoretical models.

**TABLE 4: EXPERT DEFINITIONS OF RADICALISATION AND THEIR CONCEPTUAL FOCUSES**

<b>Expert</b>	<b>Summarised Experts Key Perspectives</b>	<b>Conceptual Focus</b>
Alex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radicalisation as a progressive journey from ordinary individual to extremism.</li> <li>• Ends in jihadisation or accelerationism.</li> </ul>	Escalation as a radicalisation process
Taylor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radicalisation is a phased via a complex process.</li> <li>• Involves embracing violent ideologies for political or ideological goals.</li> </ul>	Violence as an ideology or political tool
Morgan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radicalisation viewed as a form of brainwashing.</li> <li>• Tied to mental vulnerability and weak support structures.</li> </ul>	Emotional vulnerability and identity search
Riley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extreme views often tied to religious beliefs.</li> <li>• Violence used to express or impose ideologies.</li> </ul>	Religious and violent extremism
Casey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth are drawn to radical, political, religious, or social ideas.</li> <li>• Examples include radical Islam or right-wing ideologies.</li> </ul>	Youth attraction to ideology
Skyler	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No fixed definition of radicalisation – context and interpretation matter.</li> <li>• Political radicalisation involves calls for absolute change, often through violence.</li> </ul>	Context-specific radicalisation and legitimised violence
Avery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radicalisation as any form of extremist thinking or belief.</li> <li>• Applies across all ages.</li> </ul>	General ideological extremism across age groups
Jamie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radicalisation changes attitudes and behaviours</li> <li>• Often, but not always, linked to violence.</li> </ul>	Influence and behaviour transformation
Reese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radicalisation tied to identity formation.</li> <li>• Ideologies serve as a means of self-identification or belonging.</li> </ul>	Search for belonging and identity and self-definition

Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

**TABLE 5: MAPPING INSIGHTS ONTO THE NYPD RADICALISATION FRAMEWORK**

<b>Expert</b>	<b>Conceptual Focus</b>	<b>Mapped NYPD Stages</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
Reese	Search for belonging and self-definition	Stage 1: Pre-Radicalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on identity formation and social belonging – common markers of the early-stage vulnerability.</li> </ul>
Morgan	Emotional vulnerability and identity search	Stage 1: Pre-Radicalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasises emotional instability and the search for meaning that characterise the pre-radicalisation phase.</li> </ul>
Casey	Youth attraction to ideology	Stage 2: Self-Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlights the points at which young people begin engaging with radical ideas – whether religious, political, or social.</li> </ul>
Avery	General ideological extremism across age groups	Stage 2: Self-Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognises broader ideological shifts and normalisation of extreme viewpoints, not limited to youth.</li> </ul>
Jamie	Influence and behaviour transformation	Stage 3: Indoctrination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indicates deeper level of commitment accompanied by noticeable behavioural changes linked to radical beliefs.</li> </ul>
Skyler	Context-specific radicalisation and legitimised violence	Stage 3: Indoctrination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frames radicalisation as shaped by ideology, with violence viewed as acceptable within certain belief systems.</li> </ul>
Riley	Religious and violent extremism	Stage 4: “Jihadisation” (contextualised)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Jihadisation” is used in a broader sense to include violence driven by ideological, political, or social motives.</li> </ul>
Taylor	Violence as an ideological or political tool	Stage 4: “Jihadisation” (contextualised)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasises the use of violence to serve ideological or political objectives, not confined to Jihadist movements.</li> </ul>
Alex	Escalation as a radicalisation process	Stages 1-4 (Full progression)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outlines the full progression from ordinary individual to potential violent radicalisation, encompassing all stages.</li> </ul>

Table 5, adopted from Silber et al. (2007) NYPD Radicalisation Framework

As illustrated in table 5, expert interpretations of radicalisation reflect a progression that aligns with the NYPD model's sequential stages, supporting its relevance within the Maltese context. This mapping not only demonstrates how radicalisation is perceived as a progression, but also enhances understanding of the varied paths youth may take, from identity struggles to ideological commitment and, in some cases, violent expression.

While the NYPD model provides a useful structure, its linear design may not fully capture the fluid and individualised nature of radicalisation revealed in this study. In this regard, a complementary framework such as the Significance Quest Theory and its 3N model (Da Silva et al. 2023; Kruglanski et al. 2022) adds important psychological and social dimensions. These models help explain why certain individuals move from one stage to another by highlighting unmet needs, identity threats, and the appeal of alternative narratives.

Together, these models deepen the understanding of youth radicalisation by bridging structural, ideological, and psychological perspectives, emphasising the importance of integrated, multi-layered prevention strategies tailored to Malta's unique socio-cultural context.

### **4.3 THEME 2: ONLINE INFLUENCE AND MISINFORMATION**

This theme explores how false, misleading or manipulative information spreads through digital platforms, shaping the consumers' perceptions and behaviours while acting as a pull mechanism by drawing individuals toward extremist narratives (Horgan, 2008, p.92; Said, et al., 2021, p.36). However, not all experts agree that radicalisation is primarily a youth phenomenon. Since extremist tendencies can emerge at any age. Although youth are particularly vulnerable during their formative years, and this is also backed by Yao-li and D'Orsogna (2019, p.5), research illustrating that radicalisation is most common during adolescence and early adulthood (Europol, 2023).

This theme directly addresses Research Question 1, which enquires, "*How do different factors influence the vulnerability of youths to engage in extremism or adopt radical ideologies or behaviours?*" Specifically, question 4 of the semi-structured interviews,

examines whether young people in Malta follow identifiable pathways toward radicalisation, particularly those leading to extremist and violent ideologies.

Experts broadly agreed that digital environments play a crucial role in shaping youth radicalisation. Skyler questioned, “which are the channels and media through which radicalisation is happening?” and highlighted *“the transformative role of social media,”* in this process. Similarly, Alex and Taylor shared the same thoughts and argued that radicalisation can take place *“through the internet or social media to a certain extent, and even by messages on platforms like Telegram, Messenger, and WhatsApp.”*

They highlighted the impact of platforms such as *“Facebook, TikTok and YouTube,”* pointing to how videos and other content contribute to the spread of extremist messages and influence vulnerable individuals. Whittaker, (2023, p.5) further notes how the impact of digital exposure has intensified over time, particularly during and after COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a sharp rise in online activity due to lockdowns and social distancing measures.

Alex explained that *“radicalisation is taking place from the internet,”* where the visibility of certain content may *“attract or push certain people.”* Riley echoes this, and states that *“a lot of our teen’s lives happen online,”* while Casey stressed the pervasive role of *“social media, the internet and technology in general.”* Skyler and Taylor described a case from 2023 in which young individuals in Malta were arrested for possessing Jihadist propaganda, later shared on TikTok and Instagram<sup>1</sup>. P6 also referenced a 2024 incident involving a “self-radicalised Maltese youth who allegedly placed a bomb outside the Labour Party HQ, which ultimately exploded.” This was an act reportedly linked to exposure to extremist online content<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court\\_and\\_police/122901/live\\_syrian\\_men\\_in\\_court\\_for\\_terrorism\\_charges](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/court_and_police/122901/live_syrian_men_in_court_for_terrorism_charges)

<sup>2</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/article/teen-suspected-placing-bomb-near-labour-hq-arraigned.1093619>

Conversely, Jamie emphasised that radicalisation can occur not only through the internet, where *“certain forums allow you to find people with similar beliefs, reinforcing those views,”* but also in places of worship. As Jamie notes, *“synagogues, mosques, and churches, where you have a preacher delivering a hard-line message to the audience,”* can influence individuals who *“take that narrative, go home, and then explore the internet,”* as a medium to further reinforce their views. While the initial exposure may occur offline, this quote highlights how individuals turn to internet to deepen or reinforce those ideologies, emphasising the amplifying role of online platforms in the radicalisation process.

Jamie pointed out that due to the more lenient nature of the Maltese society when it comes to social media interactions, *“I do not exempt Maltese from falling in this trap or being radicalised. It so easy, and if you are vulnerable enough, and targeted enough, you are at risk of being radicalised.”* This concern is echoed by Hollewell and Longpre’ (2022, p.1), and Whittaker, (2023, p.4), who argue that the rise of social media has accelerated radicalisation, placing younger generations at greater risk (Hollewell & Longpre’ 2022, p.7).

Morgan reinforces this concern by highlighting adolescence as a critical stage for identity formation vulnerability. The expert notes that many young individuals *“have no idea what’s happening, including some who are eligible to vote, but have no idea how to vote,”* making them particularly susceptible to manipulation. As Morgan further notes, *“any type of manipulation will end up harming a person,”* underscoring the dangers of misinformation and the deliberate distortion of facts on online spaces.

Abbas (2024) observes that while young people may be particularly vulnerable to radicalisation due to their developmental stage and significant online presence, the process is not confined to any specific age group. Taylor suggests that *“the radicalisation process in Malta often mirrors transnational patterns,”* such as the *“dissemination of propaganda through various platforms to share extremist material, impacting individuals and potentially bypassing local influences.”*

The findings of this theme show that online platforms play a crucial role in youth radicalisation by spreading extremist content and misinformation. Social media, forums, and

messaging apps amplify radical ideas, particularly among vulnerable individuals (Abbas 2024, p.233). While online influence is significant, offline factors like religious settings also contribute. Overall, the researcher concludes that digital exposure, combined with social media and psychological vulnerabilities, increases the risk of radicalisation. However, efforts to promote digital literacy may help to mitigate these dangers.

The findings indicate that online environments do more than circulate extremist messages; they also respond to deeper psychosocial needs among young people (Schröder et al., 2022, p.179). Through the lens of the Significance Quest Theory (SQT) and its 3N Model, this process can be interpreted as the interplay between unmet “Need for Significance,” exposure to persuasive “Narratives,” and recognition within digital communities where extremist content circulates. In these spaces, misinformation operates not merely as false information but as a medium that reinforces emotionally charged grievances and reshapes personal world views (Hollewell & Longpre’, 2022).

This resonates with Borum’s (2025) account of cognitive development and grievance-based learning, in which exposure to manipulative narratives gradually normalises hostility toward perceived out-groups. As Avery pointed out, social-media discourse reinforces identity-based narratives that shape how people see themselves and others, suggesting that online radicalisation in Malta stems as much from emotional and identity-driven vulnerabilities as from ideological persuasion. Consequently, strategies that combine critical-thinking education with digital-literacy and inclusive engagement are vital to counter the psychosocial pull to extremist narratives among Maltese youth. The following sub-theme examines more closely how digital platforms facilitate this process by enabling the circulation and amplification of extremist material.

#### **4.3.1. The Role of Digital Platforms in Spreading Extremist Content**

A key aspect of this sub-theme is the role of digital platforms in spreading extremist content. Certain online platforms facilitate the rapid spread of radicalised material and propaganda, amplifying extremist ideologies among vulnerable individuals (Hollewell & Longpre’, 2022, p.7). As Skyler observes, these platforms create *“a cauldron of political*

*messages that can veer towards radicalisation, potentially breeding conspiracy theories or views, not just conspiracy theories or shaping views on issues such as gender and race, acting as an attractive factor.*" Algorithms and echo chambers, as noted by Whittaker, (2020), further reinforce these narratives, exposing users to increasingly extreme content.

Correspondingly, Avery emphasised that *"social media influences people a lot,"* particularly in reinforcing *"certain misogynistic beliefs, and racial theories,"* which, as this expert note, *"exist even in mainstream society."* Avery further explains that *"the discourse, the narratives would influence the way people interact."* Morgan further highlights the role of *"echo chambers of social media,"* reinforcing Whittaker's (2020) argument that these spaces isolate individuals from opposing views, fostering engagement with like-minded people, and normalise justifications for such ideologies (Whittaker, 2020, p.131), thereby contributing to the radicalisation process.

Jamie argues that isolation plays a major role, stating: *"it's very easy nowadays to be locked up in a room somewhere. You're still communicating, but it becomes easier to develop darker thoughts."* Jamie adds that being alone in online doesn't create the same sense of social restraint as being in public. Alex and Taylor observe that online platforms like social media and gaming have enabled connections between *"Right-Wing Violent Extremists (RWVE) and Jihadists, particularly through games like Minecraft."* Taylor describes an incident in Belgium, *"where a man was arrested for sending propaganda material to a minor."* Highlighting how *"Right-Wing Extremist (RWE) actors exploit platforms like Steam, Stadia, Twitch, and Discord to create RWE utopias within popular video games,"* often featuring *"neo-Nazi content and propagating anti-Semitic and LGBTQ+ themes,"* (EUROPOL, 2023). Reese describes gaming as a gateway to broader social interactions, exposing individuals to diverse *"cultures or subcultures beyond Malta."*

Reese notes that, while exposure *"was once limited to films, gaming now offers a more immersive experience, allowing individuals to engage directly and fostering curiosity through active participation."* Taylor also highlights Terrorgram as an example, describing it as *"an online network of neo-fascist terrorists that produces and disseminates violent propaganda to encourage terrorist activity among its audience."* Despite these concerns, Whittaker

(2023, p. 21) argues that increased law enforcement monitoring has restricted extremists' freedom on mainstream platforms.

This illustrates that while the internet remains a fluid space, some extremists have shifted their *modus operandi* to end-to-end encrypted or alternative platforms to evade detection (Whittaker, 2023, p.15). Alex noted that local security services continuously monitor online activities, even when threats are disguised in "*innocent posts, pictures, songs etc...*" Alex stresses that authorities are actively watching: "*we're here, we're seeing it, and we're listening to it, and we know what you're doing.*"

One of the most striking findings of this sub-theme is how radicalisation is taking place within familiar and widely used digital platforms, including popular gaming spaces and social media (Brown & Marmara, 2022). Experts highlight how extremists are strategically using immersive environment like Minecraft, Discord, and Twitch to spread propaganda, normalising violent ideologies within platforms frequented by youths (Collision-Randall et al., 2024).

Another important insight is the role of isolation, especially among youths, where spending long periods alone online creates vulnerability to harmful content. Jamie's comment about developing "*darker thoughts*" reinforces how isolation reduces the protective effects of social interactions (Whittaker, 2023).

Another salient finding is how extremist's messages in Malta are often disguised within everyday content, such as music, memes, or images, making them harder to recognise and more easily accepted (Whittaker, 2020). As a result, the findings derived from this sub-theme show that the threat lays not just in the content itself, but in how extremist actors adapt to young people's digital habits, making their messages blend into the online spaces youth already engage with often undetected.

#### **4.4 THEME 3: IDENTITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITIES**

This theme explores the crucial role of individual and social identity in the radicalisation process. As Arango and Burgos (2024, p. 163) explain, identity encompasses both subjective and objective aspects: the subjective refers to how individuals perceive themselves, while the objective concerns how others perceive them based on group membership.

As Casey notes, identity “*creates a sense of distinctiveness.*” Strindberg (2020, p. 39) further argues that struggling with one’s identity can lead to vulnerability, resulting in psychological challenges like confusion, isolation, and emotional distress. As noted by Lewis and Awan, (2024) and Sarnoto et al. (2024) in the introduction to Chapter 2, social and psychological factors are particularly influential during adolescence; a stage characterised by sensitive identity formation and increased vulnerability to external influences. These vulnerabilities can lead to identity crises, which, as Peels (2024, p. 8) suggests, may act as a catalyst for radicalisation.

Casey argues that a weakened sense of the self may lead individuals to “*present such extreme ideas as being the way of establishing those identities.*” Casey further highlights that “*economic hardships and social exclusion, as seen in Germany and other European countries, could intensify these vulnerabilities,*” pushing individuals toward “*extreme radical ideas*” in their search for identity, belonging, and purpose. Specifically, Casey points out those economic stressors like “*unemployment and inflation*” can increase frustration and alienation, making extremist narratives more appealing, as noted by Emmelkamp et al. (2020).

Skyler highlights that one key factor influencing radicalisation is “*the marginalisation of specific groups, such as migrants, Third Country Nationals (TCNs), or those facing issues with documentation.*” Skyler notes that this “*lack of social inclusion,*” coupled with living in isolated communities, can significantly contribute to the issue. As Skyler explains, people often “*live in silos at the community level due to various reasons, including reluctance to integrate or barriers to forming connections.*” This exclusion, Skyler argues, can lead individuals to feel “*cut off from the mainstream,*” which, in turn, makes radical views more appealing, as they offer an alternative to the isolation they experience (Cherney et al., 2021).

Morgan further explains that *“if one lacks safeguarding structures, he or she may be in a vulnerable state; chances are you will search for some type of meaning, especially at a young age, when meaning is crucial in one's journey.”* Morgan adds that during this vulnerable stage of *“searching for meaning, which is crucial in one's journey,”* individuals might be manipulated or drawn into adopting someone else's version of meaning, regardless of its consequences.

In response to question 3 of the semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) about ‘What unique factors in Malta might attract or drive individuals away from radicalisation,’ Morgan emphasised, *“I would say the search for meaning. I emphasise it; it is not just in Malta, it is everywhere. But in Malta, I think it's even more pronounced because we lack a clear national identity.”* As mentioned in Chapter 2.3, unless adolescents find a sense of identity, purpose or meaning they may turn to extremist groups that offer a sense of belonging, ultimately shaping their life trajectories (Baxter et al. 2022; Schröder et al., 2022).

What stands out most in this theme is the way identity becomes a sort of struggle, vulnerability, and manipulation, particularly for youth navigating exclusion and uncertainty (Peels, 2024, p. 8). The notion that young people might adopt extreme ideologies to construct or reclaim a sense of self, not out of hate, but out of need is especially revealing. Casey's insights that economic hardship and social marginalisation do not just fuel frustration but erode personal identity, making radicalism appear as a pathway to recognition, is deeply unsettling.

Morgan's assertion that Malta's lack of a clear national identity may exacerbate the search for meaning adds a local layer to this dynamic, suggesting that radicalisation is not only imported but may be shaped by internal cultural and structural gaps. These findings collectively challenge the assumption that radicalisation is simply ideological; instead, they reveal it is a psychological response to disconnection, lack of significance and unmet needs.

This connection aligns closely with the Significance Quest Theory (SQT), which interprets radicalisation as a quest to restore personal meaning and recognition when significance is

lost (Kruglanski et al., 2014). Insights from experts such as Morgan, Casey, and Riley align closely with SQT's first component, the "Need for Significance," as individuals experiencing exclusion or identity confusion may seek validation through radical ideologies. Similarly Borum (2025, p.9) explains that such vulnerabilities reflect a motivational process where the need for identity, moral justification, and a sense of control drive behaviour. From this view, the pull towards something such as ideology, movement, or group offering belonging and purpose that promises validation and significance becomes an attempt to regain self-worth and moral direction (Ellenberg & Kruglanski, 2024, pp. 2-3; Hogg, 2007; Sahin & Derin, 2023, p. 455). In the Maltese context, as several experts observed, weekend identity structures and limited social recognition may therefore create like conditions where alternative sources of belonging and meaning seem more credible and fulfilling.

#### **4.4.1 Experiences of Social Isolation**

This sub-theme examines experiences of social isolation as a form of external and structural disconnection, where lack of belonging contributes to psychological vulnerability and increases susceptibility to radicalisation. Isolation can intensify feelings of detachment and exclusion, further deepening the emotional conditions that make individuals more prone to extremist influences (Hollewell & Longpre', 2022, p.4). Avery suggests that *"feeling disconnected from society and one's community can create a breeding ground for radicalised beliefs, with alienation often stemming from family dynamics or unmet life milestones."*

This sense of isolation can be particularly pronounced in prisons, where inmates may experience heightened detachment, making them more vulnerable to radical influences (Cherney et al., 2021). However, Avery also argues that *"if individuals facing detachment find good avenues, such as employment, or successful reintegration, after incarceration,"* they may be less vulnerable. Conversely, the absence of such opportunities, Avery warn, *"would definitely, be push factors in terms of more radicalised beliefs."*

Similarly, Riley asserts that *"what attracts individuals to extremist groups is lack of belonging, as these groups, provide a sense of belonging."* Strong family support, Riley adds,

plays a crucial role in fostering belonging and guiding individuals towards positive choices. Casey, on the other hand, links social isolation to the absence of effective integration policies. Casey argues that:

*“The capacity to integrate is there, but there needs to be a stronger integration policy, whereby it is easier for incoming communities to establish themselves and develop a sense of belonging, where Malta becomes a crucial part of their identity and self-definition.”*

The most striking finding from this sub-theme is that radicalisation may be driven by unmet social needs (Kruglanski et al., 2022, p. 1055), particularly the desire to feel part of a group where institutional support is lacking. Findings suggest that isolation, whether due to incarceration, social marginalisation, or weak integrations systems, creates gaps in social support that extremist groups can exploit through structured and seemingly supportive networks. As Riley notes, the appeal of such groups lies in their ability to simulate belonging, filling the emotional and relational voids left by dysfunctional families, and weak integration systems.

#### **4.4.2 The Interaction between Internal Vulnerabilities and External Pressures**

This sub-theme focuses on internal coping and emotional responses, such as identity struggles and exclusion that interact with social stressors to heighten vulnerability to extremist ideologies. According to Baxter et al. (2022, p.98), psychological factors play a central role in the radicalisation process, in shaping individual traits, perceptions of personal threats, identity, belonging, and their overall worldview (Abbas, 2024, p.233). This aligns with Interview Question 3, which examines the specific influences that may pull individuals towards or push them away from radicalisation and violent extremist behaviours in Malta.

Recognising the distinct factors that lead to radicalisation is crucial, as they can increase vulnerability to extremist ideologies (Baxter et al., 2022). Emmelkamp et al. (2020, p.12) emphasise the need for a multifaceted approach, recognising that radicalisation stems from

a complex interplay of social, developmental, and psychological influences, which will be further explored through expert perspectives in the following sections.

All experts identified a range of pull factors contributing to radicalisation, including individualisation, self-identification, internet and social media. The search for personal purpose, recognition, and stability, especially when combined with emotional distress or identity confusion, was also seen as significant factor by several experts. The findings highlight both psychological and social factors elements at play in the radicalisation process (Moghaddam, 2005).

Psychologically, factors such as individualisation and self-identification were emphasised by Alex, who noted that young individuals struggling with their sense of self are more susceptible to extremist ideologies (Trip et al., 2019, p.3). The search for meaning and validation, along with feelings of exclusion and alienation, were identified as significant factors by some participants (Morgan, Riley, Avery, and Reese). Additionally, experts highlighted that individuals experiencing these challenges often seek purpose and belonging in extremist groups (Trip et al., 2019, p.3). Psychological burdens, such as past trauma or emotional struggles, were also identified by Jamie as key vulnerabilities that increase susceptibility to radicalisation (Emmelkamp et al., 2020, p.7).

Additionally, Reese pointed to family dysfunction as a psychological push factor; arguing that unstable family dynamics often foster feelings of rejection or neglect, “*which can shape behaviour,*” hence increase the risk of radicalisation (Al Ubaidi 2017). Moreover, while peer influence and financial difficulties are primarily social factors, they also carry psychological implications. Indeed, Reese noted that peer pressures and financial difficulties can drive individuals toward “certain behaviours as a means of securing financial stability and survival.”

From a social perspective, integration and social inclusion were identified by Casey and Skyler as critical factors, with experts noting that individuals who feel excluded from mainstream society are more likely to turn to radical ideologies (Bäck et al., 2018, p.32).

Similarly, Taylor highlighted internet and social media as key influences, as these platforms facilitate isolation and spread extremist content, further reinforcing feelings of alienation.

Considering such findings, the researcher argues that while psychological and social factors can be categorised separately, they are deeply interconnected. Their complex interplay means that they frequently overlap and reinforce one another, collectively shaping pathways to radicalisation, as outlined in the theoretical models discussed in chapter 2 (Campello et al., 2018).

#### **4.4.3 Identity Crises that Increase Susceptibility to Radicalisation**

The sub-theme explores cultural fragmentation and the loss of collective or national identity, showing how identity confusion among Maltese youths can create openings for radicalisation (Hogg, 2007, p.73). While this topic was briefly mentioned under the broader theme of *“identity and psychological vulnerabilities,”* this section explores it in greater depth.

As examined in chapter 2 (sub-section 2.3.1.), literature on youth radicalisation at the micro-level highlights how identity crises and feelings of alienation can act as early triggers in the radicalisation process. Scholars such as Kleinmann (2012), Moghaddam (2005), McCauley and Moskaleiko (2008), Peels (2024), Sarnoto et al. (2024) emphasise that these vulnerabilities become especially potent when coupled with adverse life experiences. This further supports the researcher argument that psychological and social factors are deeply interconnected in shaping susceptibility to radicalisation.

In the context of identity crises, Riley argued that *“there needs to be a stronger Maltese identity, because I don't feel there is one.”* Similarly, Morgan reflects on Maltese heritage, stating that, as Maltese, *“we have always been part of that empire, part of that kingdom. So, we were never truly Maltese.”* He further explains that this connection has led to an *“Island*

mentality,” where the *“Maltese identity has often been shaped by external influences,”* leaving their sense of self *“constantly defined by others.”*

As a result, Morgan suggests that the Maltese identity has been continuously shaped and defined by external factors, rather than being self-determined. This highlights how these dynamics can lead to a fragmented sense of identity, where individual youths struggle with self-definition and feel disconnected from their cultural roots (Strindberg, 2020, p.21).

Morgan continued, *“As a society, we do not have an identity.”* They added that young people *“constantly searching for that identity”* are especially affected by global digital connectivity. They argued that *“even the few elements of the Maltese identity are not fully their own,”* as youths are *“more influenced by American culture than Maltese culture.”* This is evident not only in language dominance (English over Maltese) but also in the increasing cultural shift away from local traditions.

This cultural shift may result in youths feeling disconnected from Maltese heritage (Abbas, 2024). As identity uncertainty and cultural misalignment grow, traditional Maltese values lose relevance, creating a gap in which extremist ideologies can find traction.

Morgan linked the *“rise in anti-immigration sentiments and racist comments directed at foreigners”* to the strong sense of identity that some Maltese perceive among immigrants in Malta. Riley adds that *“Maltese people get frightened when new ideas emerge,”* suggesting that, because of this fear, some Maltese people struggle *“to support people coming from different countries to feel like they belong here.”*

Morgan argues that this unsettling situation may create a *“perfect recipe for angst and anguish, leading to a search for meaning.”* This analysis underscores how identity crises and cultural disconnection contribute to a heightened vulnerability to radicalisation among Maltese youths.

The most striking finding in this sub-theme is that radicalisation in the Maltese context may be driven less by cultural conflict and more by cultural absence, according to some

interviewees. Morgan's admission of feeling like a foreigner in their own country, especially when compared to the perceived strong sense of identity among migrant communities, potentially exposes a profound crisis of national self-definition.

The researcher concludes that radicalisation may not simply result from foreign influence but from internal uncertainty: a lack of clarity around what it means to be Maltese. In this identity vacuum, extremist ideologies may provide the belonging that national culture fails to offer, positioning culture disorientation as a key, often an overlooked driver of youth vulnerability.

## **4.5 THEME 4: SOCIO-ECONOMIC & COMMUNITY CHALLENGES**

Socio-economic challenges refer to difficulties from the interaction of social and economic factors, affecting certain individuals and communities (Madriaza & Ponsot, 2016, p.14). These challenges include poverty, unemployment, and limited education, which drive inequality and social exclusion (Cherney et al., 2021, 408). Further creating barriers, limiting opportunities and contributing to feelings of marginalisation thus shaping behaviours and life choices (Kaya & Bee, 2024, p.606) as discussed in sub-section 2.1.2.

This theme explores the relationship between socio-economic difficulties and inequality, particularly how financial hardships can lead to a sense of marginalisation from mainstream society, thereby making some individuals, especially youths, more susceptible to isolation.

### **4.5.1 Financial Struggles**

The researcher notes that none of the expert participants actively engaged in discussing financial struggles, except for participant Reese, who indirectly suggested that financial difficulties can significantly impact young people. Reese noted that financial pressures may push youths to engage in certain behaviours to secure money for survival or to sustain habits and addictions. These challenges, they added, may stem from family struggles or

other external factors such as poverty, influencing decision-making during vulnerable periods.

Within the Maltese context, this limited engagement with economic issues may reflect the country's relative economic stability, where strong employment rates and equitable wealth distribution (Deguara & Borg, 2024, p.93) reduce the salience of poverty-related vulnerabilities. Consequently, other psychological and ideological factors may play a more dominant role in shaping radicalisation risks (Bäck et al., 2018, p.25). This observation is revisited in Section 4.10 (*Reflective commentary*)

#### **4.5.2 The Influence of Peer and Family Dynamics**

Cornish and Clarke (2016, p.35) note that social influences, including personality, upbringing, and personal pressures, shapes individual behaviour. Among these peer and family networks are especially impactful on youth development (Cornish & Clarke, 2016, p.3; France & Homel, 2007).

Reese observed that influences from, *“the family household and external social settings, can either promote positive development and support or contribute to negative - deviant and risky behaviours.”* Reese adds that *“family grounding is very important, as it is where we are nurtured, and if the family doesn't provide a solid foundation for the youngster, unfortunately, it can affect their behaviour.”* This is especially true if *“anything within the family or household is accepted, and if even extreme ideologies are present, it can foster an environment where violence and certain attitudes are accepted.”* Reese concludes, *“It becomes a norm and, automatically, reinforces their behaviour.”*

In light of this the researcher argues that, such exposures could be significant in the context of youth radicalisation. Beyond the digital realm, peer and family influence play a central role, with adolescents seeking validation and belonging, making them highly susceptible to the ideas and extreme behaviours promoted by their close peers and family members, both

online and in the physical world (Da Silva et al., 2023; Ginges et al., 2011, p.517; Trip et al., 2017).

While peer and family can offer positive guidance, they can also contribute to the development of radical views, shaping youth's perspectives and life choices, particularly in the context of political, religious, or ideological radicalisation (Aylwin et al., 2019), as discussed in 2.3.1.

Four out of nine experts discussed how they interpret certain attractors that stem from peer and family influence in the context of Malta. These experts highlighted various local factors that could foster radicalisation among Maltese youths. Starting with Alex, this participant argued that, *"migration increased a certain level of nationalism and conservatism, fostering an 'us vs. them' mentality among certain youths in our community."* According to Alex, this shift is often influenced by *"hearing their parents or other adults speak negatively about immigrants – referred to as that black guy, that immigrant, or that foreigner, and expressing concerns about these migrants are taking our jobs,"* which contributes to the growing social divide.

At the same time, Alex argues that challenges are emerging within some Muslim majority migrant communities in Malta, noting divisions based on nationality, religious branch, or political alignment. He argued that groups from *"Syria, Libya, and Tunisia, whether they are of Salafi, Sufi, or Shia origin,"* often remain socially and religiously separate, and that these internal and intercultural divisions can extend to political loyalties, such as being pro- or anti-Assad, or pro- or anti-Kurdish. According to Alex, these tensions may contribute to form *"home-grown" extremism, which is often passed down to children, who are "influenced by the actions and attitudes of adults in their daily lives."*

This sub-theme introduced how peer and family influence play a crucial role in shaping youth development. Alex highlighted how certain attitudes and discourse can affect youths, while Reese strongly supports this view, adding that *"ideology that youths form stems from their families, and community."* However, Reese also argues that, while not always directly *"related to the family, youths often surround themselves with different peer groups, which*

*can instill certain behaviours, sometimes leading them down the wrong path.” Riley echoes this perspective, adding that “peer groups that encourage others to engage in certain activities make teens, more likely to participate, as they influence each other.”*

These activities, as Emmelkamp et al. (2020, p.6) describe, may include legal, non-violent ideologically motivated acts such as participating in demonstrations or engaging in online advocacy, which are also core aspects of democratic life. While not inherently radical or violent, such behaviours are identified by Emmelkamp et al. as strong risk factor for radicalisation, and it is in the context that they are mentioned here. Jamie argued that *“the typical Maltese person still lives with their parents until late adulthood,”* According to this expert, *“close ties with families and friends make it very difficult for young individuals to change the way they behave,”* highlighting the powerful role of family and community cohesion in Maltese society. This perspective is echoed by Baxter et al. (2022), who argue that family dynamics can have a significant impact on individuals, both positively and negatively.

The findings highlight the significant role that peer and family influence play in shaping youth development, particularly in the context of Malta. Some of the experts emphasised that both positive and negative influences within these close social networks can have a profound impact on youths’ attitudes, behaviours and life choices (Cornish & Clarke, 2016, p.3; France & Homel, 2007).

The Maltese context, with its strong family cohesion creates an environment certain where negative sentiments are especially pronounced. This sub-theme suggests that negative attitudes and ideologies, often transmitted through family discourse or peer groups, can contribute to the radicalisation of young individuals.

#### **4.5.3 Social Divisions as Risk Factors**

This subtheme explores social divisions within the Maltese communities, shaped by migration and cultural dynamics. It also examines how these factors influence youth perspectives and social interactions within Malta, potentially leading to cultural tensions

and an 'us vs. them' mentality (Radu & De Vita, 2020, p.274). As Radu and De Vita (2020, p.280) highlight, these divisions, along with stigma reinforced by family and peer influence, may contribute to polarised perceptions.

Alex argues that despite a negative "*mentality*," migrants are increasingly participating in Maltese through "*marrying Maltese, working with them, and living with them.*" While Alex and Casey acknowledge that some migrant communities are more visible in localities like "*Birżebbuġa, Ħamrun, Marsa, or San Ġwann,*" they note that Malta lacks the spatial segregation seen in other European cities, which may help reduce the risk of extreme polarisation (Pauwels & van Alstein, 2022, p.10). This may suggest that while some Maltese individuals may be drawn to radicalisation, others, particularly migrants, may be steered away from it due to their efforts to assimilate and integrate into Maltese society (Doosje et al., 2016, p.81).

Casey describes Maltese culture as historically assimilative, with a continued "*capacity for assimilating different cultures.*" However, Avery highlights that the "*social alienation is a key factor underlying radicalisation,*" especially in the contexts of "*economic deprivation.*" In other European contexts, Avery notes, "*migrants – often the most economically vulnerable - are disproportionately affected by economic challenges, leading to increased susceptibility to radicalisation.*"

Skyler also stresses that "*radicalisation is an important aspect of integration policy, especially given the mix of different religions, cultures, and backgrounds.*" They note that Malta's "*small Island dynamics make this situation quite unique,*" and while the Malta aligns with EU definitions and guidelines on radicalisation, they express uncertainty about how seriously these issues are reflected in local policies and programs, stating, "*I'm not certain about how seriously these issues are addressed here.*"

For migrants in Malta, the fear of deportation may deter engagement in radical behaviour, especially as it risks their jobs, businesses, or family stability. From a sociological perspective, Casey argues that integration efforts and strong societal ties can function as a "*preventative factor against radicalisation.*"

Alex views successful acculturation as a positive *“push factor”* for integration, particularly among youth. They explain that *“the first generation of migrants in Malta is still relatively young and often under the influence of their parents,”* who have generally integrated well. As a result, these youths are positively *“influenced by their parents to integrate into the Maltese community.”* This reflects what Berry et al. (2006) describes as the integration strategy within acculturation framework, where individuals retain aspects of their original culture while actively engaging with the host society.

However, Alex also acknowledges that integration is not always straightforward. They noted that individuals who were *“seven, eight, or eleven at the time,”* of exposure to conflict may have lived in environments where extreme ideologies were prevalent. As a result, such youths may face difficulty adapting to European culture norms, often expecting what Alex described as *“culture shock.”* They emphasised that *“changing one’s upbringing is challenging, as core values remain deeply ingrained,”* continuing to influence individuals despite sincere efforts to adjust.

Alex further emphasises the importance of Maltese authorities maintaining communication when it comes to *“Interreligious relations with the Islamic community in Malta,”* including efforts to *“identify key community figures and places of worships while fostering positive communication.”* Alex emphasises that *“migrants do not want issues within their community,”* as even *“a small problem could lead the entire Maltese population to turn against them.”*

Consequently, Alex notes that *“migrants actively work to prevent individuals from being pushed down problematic pathways,”* referring to their efforts to engage in lawful employment and contribute meaningfully to society as a stabilising influence.

Alex contrasts Malta’s integration with other European cities, such as Brussels, where migrant segregation led to cases of isolation and identity-driven radicalisation. They argue that Malta’s lack of such segregation helps reduce risk, noting that in *“Malta, migrants are not segregated in specific areas,”* which may *“prevent the formation of isolated groups to self-identify,”* in opposition to the broader society.

The findings suggest that social divisions in Malta, shaped by migration, cultural dynamics, and economic pressures, can produce both risk and protective factors for radicalisation (Murray & Farrington, 2010, p.638). While issues like social alienation, stigma, and economic inequality may increase vulnerability, the integration efforts of migrants, paired with inclusive policies and open community relationships, function as important protective elements. This integration, fosters connection, reduces isolation, and plays a key role in steering migrants away from radicalisation.

The overall pattern observed in this theme aligns with the Significance Quest Theory (SQT) and its 3N Model, where the interaction between social exclusion, inequality, and belonging reflects once again the “Need for Significance.” As several experts noted, financial stability and social inclusion are essential to maintaining a sense of value and belonging, while their absence may heighten receptivity to alternate forms of recognition (Kruglanski et al., 2014; Da Silva et al., 2023). Within the Maltese context, this suggest that vulnerability to radicalisation stems less from economic hardship and more from weekend social belonging, where disconnection rather than deprivation becomes the defining risk.

This interpretation also aligns with Borum’s (2025, pp. 13, 15) theoretical perspective, which views radicalisation as emerging from cumulative social and psychological tensions rather than isolated events. Borum emphasises that when individuals perceive limited control over their environment and diminished social worth, they may gravitate towards ideologies or groups that appear to restore a sense of control and collective purpose. Thus, according to this research, socio-economic stability alone does not eliminate the risk in Malta; the real determinant lies in the strength of community relationships and inclusive social structures. As several experts observed, when integration policies are weak or family and peer ties become strained, young people may feel excluded from collective belonging, making alternative identities or groups appear more meaningful and validating, ultimately shaping whether they are drawn toward or steered away from radical influences.

## **4.6 THEME 5: POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES**

This theme directly engages with Research Question 2, addressing both the ideological and group-based influences that may draw young people toward potential recruitment. It explores how Maltese youth navigate and make sense of the political and ideological dimensions within extremist narratives, as well as the meanings they attach to these messages. Drawing on the perspectives of professionals, it considers how such narratives are interpreted and internalised within the context of broader socio-political dynamics, transitional influences, and the evolving online cultures (Said et al., 2021, p.40).

The first sub-theme, 'The Construction of Youth Identities through Extremist Narratives,' explores how ideological messages intersect with young people's identity development, shaping how they see themselves, form beliefs, and understand their place in society (Schmid, 2013, p.4). The second sub-theme, *Recruitment Tactics*, explores how young people may be drawn towards extremist ideologies or groups in Malta, how this process is understood by professionals, and the specific forms it takes in local context.

### **4.6.1 The Construction of Youth Identities through Extremist Narratives**

This subtheme explores how radicalisation is shaped by the adoption of specific ideological narratives, which lead individuals to adopt increasingly extreme views or behaviours. Awan et al. (2019, p. 7-8) highlight the gradual nature of this process, while Kruglanski et al. (2022, p. 1055) argue that individuals may not only develop extreme views but also engage in extremist activities (Satterley 2024).

Building on this theoretical framing, insights from experts in Malta contextualise these findings, pointing to the influence of social media, political dynamics, and transnational factors as key contributors to the spread of extremist narratives among youth. These perspectives expand on previous themes, offering a deeper understanding of how ideologies take root locally.

A crucial aspect of this discussion involves identifying which extremist ideologies are more commonly encountered among youths in Malta. This key interview question guided expert's insights, helping to assess whether ideological leanings, such as religious, political, or social extremism are more prevalent, and how they manifest in the Maltese context.

In response, Taylor described a case in which a self-radicalised Maltese youth who allegedly placed a bomb outside the Labour Party HQ in 2024, and mentioned the presence of Jihadist propaganda online which can be accessed by youth, including in Malta. Yet, Taylor maintained that *"to date, there is no data or intelligence that suggests that youths in Malta are subject to extreme ideologies."* Rather than a contradiction, this may reflect how professionals interpret radicalisation as a gradual and evolving process. This suggests that while individual cases may raise concern, they may not be seen as indicative of a broader trend, highlighting the interpretive thresholds used by professionals when assessing extremism among youth.

Despite Taylor's cautious view, none of the experts were aware of each other's statements, yet contrasting views emerged. While Taylor downplays the presence of extremist ideologies, the majority of experts suggest that such views may be subtly influencing youth.

Casey supports this view, by arguing that Malta's increasing ideological diversity may play a role; *"one cannot discount the possibility of young people from different ethnic background or religious backgrounds becoming attracted to extreme religious views, such as radical Islamic views."*

Jamie echoes this, describing radicalisation as a process that shifts ones attitudes toward ideologies or political stances. They stress that even without violence; these narratives can promote extreme views, such as the belief that migrants are *"invaders,"* who may pose a threat. Casey reinforces the role of narrative transmission, suggesting that exposure to such ideas, whether through social media, peers, or the home, may lead youth to identify with specific sub groups, further deepening ideological alignment.

Experts Morgan and Riley similarly observed that youth often express extremist ideologies openly. Riley highlighted the presence of Islamist narratives among some students at a local college and also pointed to the presence of extreme masculinity narratives, influenced by social media figures like Andrew Tate, a controversial influencer known for promoting *“misogynistic views - which has impacted youths, leading to possessive and controlling attitudes towards women.”*

Morgan recounts an incident involving a youth who admired Tate, suggesting *“external influence,”* shaped his misogynistic beliefs. Morgan adds that *“some girls have expresses feeling pressured to conform to the image of women that Tate promotes, believing they must meet certain expectations to be considered worthy.”* Additionally, Morgan reported an increase of *“homophobic attitudes among the youths they work with, particularly in the South of Malta, where such attitudes are described as being deeply ingrained in the local culture and often accompanied by bullying.”*

Avery emphasises that *“misogyny,”* is the most commonly observed extremist ideology among Maltese youth. This aligns with O’Hanlon et al. (2024), who describe misogynistic extremism as a male-supremacist ideology that legitimises coercion and violence against women. Avery also points to the presence of racism and broader radical beliefs, noting that these are often shaped by ideology rather than traditional radical dislike.

Skyler asserts that *“the question of xenophobia in Malta is real,”* noting that *“there are prevailing views on the nature of intercultural relations and how they should be.”* Skyler further points out that, *“Within the local context, the murder<sup>3</sup> of Lassana Cisse is often cited as an example of radicalised behaviour involving violence.”* In Skyler’s view, this case serves as an example of xenophobia manifesting in violence<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/article/migrant-in-drive-by-shooting-was-shot-in-the-penis.763587>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/mt/4364-pr-unhcr-deeply-perturbed-that-the-murder-was-racially-motivated.html>

Jamie adds that Malta's demographic changes have complicated the ideological landscape: *"A few years ago, the biggest threat was right-wing opposition to illegal immigration...now, the influx of people from abroad, has brought diverse mind-sets, cultures, and experiences."*

Jamie reflects on how historical narratives are co-opted by extremists. They mention Andreas Behring Breivik, a far-right extremist who viewed Malta as a symbolic stronghold of Christianity against Islam, and the Christchurch attacker<sup>5</sup>, who inscribed "1565" on his firearm, a reference to Malta's history. These examples show how historical symbolism is used to justify and reinforce extremist ideologies.

Jamie recalls the rise of *"Imperium Europa,"* led by Norman Lowell, stressing that the concern lay not only on the extremist messages but the "audience that was listening," as *"even one or two individuals who are triggered by that discourse and then deepen their involvement."* This underscores the power of rhetoric and narrative in radicalisation, even in the absence of direct recruitment.

Taken together, these accounts reveal a web of interlinked narratives, religious, political, and social that intersects to shape youth identities. This sub-theme reveals the presence of extremist narratives among Maltese youth, shaped by online content, identity struggles, and socio-political shifts (Campelo et al., 2018). While a minority of experts downplay the extent of radicalisation, the majority point to concrete examples and recurring ideological patterns – religious extremism, nationalism, misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia – and this suggests that these narratives are present among Malta's youth.

These insights reflect how narrative influence operates even in the absence of overt violence, contributing to broader concerns about youth radicalisation in the local context. They underline how extremist narratives can function as identity constructs, offering youth a sense of purpose, belonging, or opposition, that over time, may intensify and shape their behaviours and worldviews (Lewis & Awan, 2024; Sarnoto et al., 2024).

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/world/93647/40-killed-in-new-zealand-after-gunmen-attack-mosques>

Crucially, the findings show that peer and online networks do not merely exist but actively shape how youth in Malta are drawn toward radical ideologies. This insight (see 4.9.2.3 Radical Networks) directly responds to the second research question by revealing how social validation, digital exposure, and interpersonal reinforcement form a key part of the radicalisation pathway.

#### **4.6.2 Recruitment Tactics Employed to Attract Vulnerable Individuals**

This sub-theme explores how recruitment into extremist ideologies occurs in Malta, with particular focus on whether such efforts are happening locally and how they manifest. Drawing from expert interviews, the analysis identifies shifting recruitment strategies, underlying vulnerabilities, and how digital environments play a growing role in radicalisation processes (Baxter et al., 2022; Kruglanski et al., 2016; Martins, 2022; Pauwels, 2023).

Alex explains that radicalisation in Malta tends to manifest within two main spectrums: *“One is radical politics, which in poor words, is linked to Islamic [sic] terrorism, and the other is right-wing extremism.”* Alex argues that migration-related politics may indirectly shape recruitment, especially in view of the polarisation around this topic. *“This has, to some extent, fuelled xenophobia among the population.”*

At the global level, Alex notes a shift in recruitment over the years from *“physical camps to online platforms, where extremist content like Inspire magazine is shared peer-to-peer.”* By physical camps, Alex refers to overseas terrorist training sites (such as historically linked with al-Qaeda) and not locations in Malta (Inspire, is a magazine published by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and includes detailed instructions for carrying out attacks, such as those used in the *“Boston Marathon bombing.”*)

Similarly, Skyler highlights the spread of such material, *“from magazines to video clips,”* asserting that they are of *“high quality, professionally made to target people.”* Alex emphasises that globally, the media plays a crucial role in amplifying these extremist messages across countries, helping to spread fear and influence vulnerable individuals.

Casey similarly highlights that extremist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda actively target youths through social media, across the globe, framing messages and themes of belonging and masculinity to attract recruits (a phenomenon also mentioned by Kruglanski et al., 2022, p.1057). Whilst these global online recruitment strategies and dynamics are not particular to Malta or any specific country, they shed light on the global contexts involved in radicalisation and recruitment.

Casey argues that the online presence of these groups is *“ubiquitous and omnipresent,”* making it difficult for *“young people, searching for answers to questions about their identity, distinctiveness, or experiences of discrimination in their host community, to avoid encountering radical content.”*

Shifting to the Maltese scenario, Jamie supports Alex’s statement about evolving recruitment methods, noting that local far-right groups like Imperium Europa once held meetings in informal local venues and adapted their strategies over time. Today, according to Skyler, similar ideologies are spread both online and through in-person interactions across Europe. Similarly, Jamie references a *“series of arson attacks<sup>6</sup> against individuals supporting illegal immigrants [sic], including lawyers, social workers, and support services,”* which had taken place by far-right actors years ago<sup>7</sup>.

These acts, Jamie says, reflect *“the potential for radicalisation towards extreme far-right ideologies in Malta.”* The attacks suggest exposure alone can trigger radicalisation, even without formal recruitment. Past arson attacks serve as a case study for how radicalisation can escalate into violence.

Avery notes that among the incarcerated population in Malta, there have been *“two instances of far-right radicalisation and nine cases related to Islamic [sic] radicalisation,”* though none of the individuals were under twenty-one. While no young inmates were fully radicalised, Avery acknowledged *“the potential for radicalisation in some individuals, having met a few who showed early signs of vulnerability.”*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/eur330012006en.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/article/norman-lowell-loses-libel-cases.587056>

Alex described radicalisation as a process that may begin with an individual as an *“ordinary person,”* and evolve into Jihadism or accelerationism, involving *“revolutionary and reactionary ideas across left-wing and right-wing ideologies.”* However, other experts did not highlight these cases, suggesting that left-wing radicalisation may be less prominent in the Maltese context. Jamie, meanwhile, challenges the notion that radicalisation is always gradual, citing cases where individuals shifted rapidly towards radicalisation extremist beliefs.

Alex concludes that *“while individuals may progress through the stages of radicalisation, they do not always engage in extremist acts.”* Some, Alex argues, may not commit certain acts themselves but may still justify or support them. Additionally, Alex clarifies that radicalisation is not necessarily linked to mental instability. Moreover, he clarifies that, in many cases, those who undergo this process are ordinary, well-educated, middle-class individuals. Expert Jamie perspective suggests that *“no one is entirely resistant to radicalisation.”*

In previous themes, experts have consistently pointed out that influence can be transmitted in various forms, including through online platforms, peer networks, and political and ideological narratives, in line with the findings of Adams et al. (2023, p.652). In this context, Riley adds that radicalisation can emerge from *“any school of thought,”* highlighting that extremist ideologies are not confined to a single belief system.

Reese and Jamie both emphasise that *“while radicalisation can affect adults, youths are particularly vulnerable.”* Reese notes that *“since young people are still in the process of forming their beliefs, their ideas can sometimes be extreme or exaggerated.”* Jamie adds that their *“inexperience and ongoing development of ideologies make them more susceptible to higher levels of radicalisation.”*

Reviewing the experts’ insights, the researcher concludes that youth radicalisation in Malta is influenced by a blend of right-wing extremism and Islamist radicalisation, driven by tensions surrounding the politics of migration, historical narratives, and the spread of online propaganda (Said, et al., 2021; Satterley, 2024).

While no single recruitment method dominates, experts agree that radicalisation has shifted from traditional gatherings to digital platforms across the globe, where extremist content is easily accessible and widely shared. Social media plays a key role, fostering a sense of belonging, identity, and masculinity narratives among vulnerable youths, making them more susceptible to radical influences.

The patterns identified in this theme strongly reflect the second component of the 3N Model, “Radical Narratives,” which explains how political and ideological narratives provide emotionally charged messages that simplify complex realities into polarised “us versus them,” frames (Da Silva et al., 2023). Riley, Avery, Morgan, Skyler and Casey observations about misogyny, xenophobia, nationalism show how such narratives resonate with youths who experience disconnection or seek belonging, confirming that ideological appeal is often emotional before it is ideological.

This interpretation aligns with Borum’s (2025, pp.5-6) perspective, which frames ideology as a cognitive framework that provides meaning and moral justification in response to perceived exclusion or uncertainty. For adolescents, ideological systems can supply coherence and validation where identity and belonging are fragile, transforming complex social realities into clear narratives of purpose and opposition. Within this view, ideological attraction stems less from ideological content and more from the sense of understanding and significance it offers to those seeking direction in an uncertain world.

In the Maltese context, as noted by experts such as Skyler, Casey, and Jamie, this dynamic is evident in how online communities and political rhetoric reinforce identity boundaries and offer validation through opposition to perceived outsiders. According to this research, such ideological narratives act not merely as belief systems but as mediums of psychological compensation, offering youths belonging, certainty, and moral purpose in environments where mainstream identities feel unstable or unacknowledged.

## 4.7 THEME 6: COUNTER-RADICALISATION AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Building on the insights into the key push and pull factors that shape youth radicalisation in Malta, the focus now shifts to the strategies that experts recommend or discuss in relation to prevention and intervention. This directly addresses Research Question 3 (RQ3): How do experts understand and recommend ways of addressing youth radicalisation?

The following sub-themes explore how such insights can inform targeted interventions aimed at mitigating radicalisation risks and fostering long-term resilience and social inclusion (Wallner, 2021). These strategies are presented across three key areas: the role of education, critical thinking, and the prevention of radicalisation; the importance of multi-agency collaboration in identifying and responding to early warning signs; and broader social cohesion efforts that promote inclusion and community engagement.

The researcher argues that, to be effective, interventions must address the full spectrum of ideological extremism, from Islamist radicalisation to far right-wing extremism, while remaining responsive to the specific needs of vulnerable youths. As Wallner (2021, p.31) stresses, empowering young people as active partners in such efforts is essential, reinforcing the view that there is no-one-size-fits-all solution.

### 4.7.1 The Promotion of Education and Critical Thinking Skills

Building on the discussion of counter-radicalisation and prevention strategies, this sub-theme explores the role of education as critical thinking, particularly as a defense against extremist ideologies, misinformation, and biased narratives (Poinsot, 2023, p. 8; Wallner, 2021, p.59). Expanding on the role of education in fostering integration, Casey argues that *“breaking down the ‘us vs. them’ mentality between different nationalities, religions, and ethnic backgrounds is essential.”* This expert stresses the importance of creating encounters that promote cultural understanding, dismantling the fear of the ‘other’ and highlighting commonalities between people.

However, Casey acknowledges that *“without the requisite policy direction, and adequate support structures, there is a risk of youth radicalisation, particularly concerning extreme radical ideas.”* As Casey states, *“the key is all about integration and, education, which is something I always advocate.”* Furthermore, Casey suggests that combating the spread of *“misinformation and/or disinformation,”* through education is one of the most effective ways to prevent radicalisation (AL-Attar, 2019).

Morgan also emphasises the importance of media ecology, understanding the effects of media theory and practice (Scolari, 2012, p.205). They argue that *“students should engage hands-on learning that helps them realise there is no single truth,”* promoting critical thinking and challenging simplistic world views (Poinsot, 2023, p. 8).

This, according to Morgan, is essential for *“discerning news and consuming information responsibly,”* particularly in a complex digital environment where youth may encounter exposure to manipulation, conspiracy theories, and polarised ideologies. However, Morgan highlights *“a gap in the Maltese education system,”* suggesting that students are not adequately equipped or trained to develop these skills.

Casey concurs, noting *“the prevalence of social media, the internet, and technology today.”* Both experts agree that *“strategies from 5 or 10 years ago must be rethought,”* as the impact of COVID-19 and the shift in digital culture have fundamentally altered younger generations (Pauwles and van Alstein, 2022, p.10). Morgan underscores *“the education system as a critical push factor, helping youths engage in dialogue and critical discussions.”*

Skyler also emphasises the role of education and argues that *“school staff should be equipped to navigate discussions on sensitive topics, such as gender, nationality, and racism, especially when issues provoke strong emotional reactions in the classroom.”* They stress that this training should align with the *“National Educational Policy in Malta, which supports schools as spaces where diversity is celebrated, rather than assuming that everyone is the same.”* Ensuring that educators are prepared to facilitate these discussions effectively is crucial to fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Morgan further supports the idea of opening youth to new experiences “*through exchanges,*” not limited to Erasmus programs. Morgan argues that being placed in a new context “*challenges them in powerful ways,*” forcing them “*to confront and reassess their beliefs, values, and world views.*” For a small Island like Malta, these exchanges are especially impactful, encouraging young people to broaden their perspectives.

Despite education being a key tool in countering radicalisation, education initiatives must be reinforced by strong support structures. Morgan argues that “*it is very difficult for someone to become radicalised without support structures noticing.*” They highlight the role of family, schools, and mentorship programs in providing stability, adding that “*if a caring support system is in place, I would expect it to act as a safeguard against radicalisation.*” This aligns with Campelo et al. (2018), who similarly emphasise that strong societal networks serve as protective factors.

Riley underscores the importance of “*providing youths with healthy outlets to express their feelings of injustice.*” Many teenagers they encounter feel disillusioned by the world’s injustices, and without an outlet, may be drawn to radicalisation. According to Riley, offering constructive avenues for change is crucial to prevent destructive behaviours.

When assessing this perspective, the researcher observes that it aligns with principles of critical education, which promote engagement with social and political issues through dialogue, reflection, and transformative action. By creating spaces where youths can develop responses, education can play a preventative role against radicalisation (Sieckelink & Stephens, 2023, p.421).

Reese highlights that youth behaviour is also shaped by factors such as “*financial stability, family dynamics, and substance use, often coinciding with an experimentation phase.*” In this context, Reese underscores the role of education in equipping young people with critical thinking skills needed to navigate such risks and resist potentially destructive behaviours.

Casey continues to emphasise the importance of fostering *“an open democratic society, where myths are dismantled, critical thinking is encouraged, and extreme ideas are challenged through education, logical reasoning, and informed debate.”* The goal, according to Casey, is to cultivate *“a generation of young individuals who are not only logical and critical thinkers but also well-informed enough to understand historical consequences of radical and extreme ideologies.”* Rather than ostracising or demonising such voices, which can increase their appeal, Casey stresses the value of *“examining the damage caused by such ideologies throughout history, including events like the genocide during WWII and in the Balkans.”* According to Casey, critical thinking serves not only as an academic tool, but a way to build emotional and cognitive resilience. It equips individuals to challenge ideological manipulation by offering alternative narratives that dismantle extremist rhetoric (Poinsot, 2023, p. 8).

After critically assessing these experts’ insights, the researcher posits that while fostering critical thinking and media literacy is essential, it is not sufficient on its own. Experts consistently emphasise the importance of family, schools, and mentorship programs in safeguarding at-risk youths (Burt & Paysnick, 2012). These findings highlight the need for a holistic prevention strategy that combines educational interventions with robust societal support systems, particularly in light of the growing influence of social media (Sarnoto et al., 2024; Wallner, 2021).

#### **4.7.2 The Importance of Multi-Agency Collaboration**

As discussed in the previous sub-theme, education and critical thinking are essential in countering radicalisation (Sieckelinck & Stephens, 2023). However, their impact is significantly enhanced when supported by robust structures that integrate the coordinated efforts of professionals (Stephens et al., 2019, p.348).

In 2018, the Maltese government established the Prevent Network Malta (PNM), a national initiative coordinated by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The network brings together

representatives from various governmental departments and agencies to promote a unified approach to countering radicalisation and extremism (Poinsot, 2023, p. 14).

In this context, multi-agency collaboration plays a central role in Malta's prevention strategy, involving structured cooperation between key sectors such as law enforcement, education, mental health, and social services (Security Committee, 2024). This model emphasises timely information-sharing, early intervention, and consistent inter-institutional support to ensure that no single entity operates in isolation (Poinsot, 2023, p. 19). Particularly, in small-state settings like Malta, where resources are limited, inter-agency coordination is essential to safeguarding vulnerable youths and delivering a unified national response (Security Committee, 2024).

Alex highlights that Malta's approach is highly regarded internationally: *"we have one of the best programs in Europe"* Coordinated through the Prevent Network Malta (PNM); Taylor argues that *"this program plays a central role in connecting and coordinating efforts of multiple sectors."* Alex further adds that the PNM serves as a liaison between key entities, forming the backbone of the country's multi-agency strategy aimed to safeguard vulnerable youths from extremism. This reflects Malta's broader commitment to resilience-building initiatives.

While the PNM primarily operates within education and social services, experts also highlight its broader function in national security operations. Alex explains that the network is *"also activated during the processing of rescued migrants,"* where trained personnel assess arrivals for *"signs of concern,"* including potential *"foreign fighters or returnees from conflict areas attempting to infiltrate migration flows,"* an extension of the network's preventative role beyond youth-specific radicalisation settings.

According to Taylor, although the PNM does not issue formal recommendations, it strengthens collaborative networks, raises awareness of transnational radicalisation trends, and encourages enhanced monitoring of social media and online gaming platforms.

After assessing this expert response, the researcher recognises the PNM's pivotal role in enhancing security and resilience through a three-tier approach. This framework integrates efforts across education, national security, and cyberspace to address radicalisation from multiple angles, ensuring both proactive intervention and long-term prevention (Von Lautz et al., 2024). Malta's approach reflects the principles of broader EU-level initiatives, such as those supported by the EU Knowledge Hub on Prevention of Radicalisation, which aim to equip professionals with the tools for early intervention and across-sector collaboration (Poinsot, 2023, p. 4).

Riley reinforces Alex's observations, by noting that *"each college has a psycho-social team and counsellors to assist with anti-substance and anti-bullying initiatives, aiming to reach as many students as possible."* Riley also describes joint efforts with the police, who have intervened in cases where students were flagged as being *"at risk of radicalisation."* These collaborative actions enabled timely support, redirecting students toward more constructive paths.

Despite these coordinated measures, Riley emphasises that *"more needs to be done,"* particularly around the integration of students from immigrant backgrounds (Poinsot, 2023, p. 4.). Fostering a sense of belonging is vital, they argue, in reducing the risk of alienation and the development of *"destructive behaviours."*

Jamie supports this view, emphasising the importance of *"engaging with youths, particularly those who feel isolated, a concern regularly observed locally."* To prevent youths from falling into radicalisation, Jamie stresses the *"need to engage with them and raise awareness,"* and praises both local and EU-level initiatives, such as the EU Knowledge Hub, whose dual mission is: *"to develop and strengthen the capacity of professionals to engage with young people effectively,"* and second, to *"promote a multi-agency approach to preventing radicalisation, rather than relying solely on intelligence and law enforcement agencies."*

The findings of this sub-theme reveal that Malta's multi-agency approach to combating radicalisation centered on education, national security, and online surveillance, is generally viewed as effective, particularly through initiatives like the PNM and EU-level collaborations.

These efforts facilitate early detection and promote cross-sector coordination. However, experts consistently highlight a critical shortcoming: the lack of sufficient integration measures, especially for immigrant youths. Without a strong sense of belonging, these young people remain vulnerable to extremist influences due to marginalisation (Storm et al., 2020; Whittaker, 2023). To address the root causes of radicalisation, the current approach must be reinforced with more inclusive strategies that go beyond service coordination to ensure that all youths, especially those from diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds, feel genuinely supported within Maltese society.

#### **4.7.3 Efforts to Strengthen Social Cohesion and Resilience**

Social cohesion is a crucial component of broader strategies aimed at preventing radicalisation (Galantino, 2020; Pauwels, 2023). Building on earlier discussions of educational and multi-agency resilience efforts, this section examines how these initiatives operate in Malta to strengthen community ties, promote long-term integration, and foster belonging. Berner and Bertrand (2023, p.75) describe social cohesion as fostering solidarity within communities by actively including individuals from diverse backgrounds. Such initiatives promote education, raise awareness, and foster civic engagement, key actions that help reduce the risks of radicalisation.

In this context, Morgan highlights the foundational role of *“parents and the family,”* in fostering cohesion, calling for *“parental training to help identify behavioural changes that may signal deeper issues, such as radicalisation or mental health struggles.”* They argue that *“pedagogy should go beyond information delivery and instead foster personal growth and social cohesion, helping students become more resilient and connected individuals.”* While family-based support is essential, the role of educators and professionals is equally vital in identifying and addressing emerging risks among youth (Sieckelink & Stephens, 2023, p.422).

Skyler supports the need for open dialogue, stressing *“the duty of professionals to engage in difficult conversations.”* Without such engagement, *“we risk not knowing what young people are hearing or internalising.”* They add that without these conversations *“professionals*

would not know what is festering in people's minds, and just because these views don't make their way in classrooms or in mainstream channels doesn't mean they're not being discussed." Skyler emphasises the importance of addressing "views about other communities or nationalities, which often stem from lack of exposure to diversity."

They argue that "bringing people together through shared experiences and dialogues is an effective tactic to prevent radicalisation." Additionally, Skyler points to "gender as an area often overlooked in discussions on radical views, noting that the growing influence of online narratives that deny the existence of gender identities." These perspectives, they suggest, are increasingly surfacing in Malta.

Skyler concludes by recommending strengthened community ties, education, digital literacy, and social services as part of a broader welfare strategy. They argue that "ensuring basic welfare is essential for allowing individuals to live with dignity. When people face systematic inequality or marginalisation, the appeal of radicalisation can increase." Radicalisation, they suggest, often "stems from rejection of a social order perceived as unjust," placing responsibility on political institutions to prevent social disengagement.

The researcher reflects that these perspectives underscore a vital point: social cohesion is tightly linked to inclusion and the equitable distribution of resources. When these are lacking, alienation can follow, aligning with Significance Quest Theory and the 3N model (Da Silva et al., 2023), which emphasise how unmet psychological needs and alternative narratives can lead individuals toward radicalisation.

Riley emphasises the importance of "belonging," particularly in Malta's culturally diverse environment. Integration, they argue, "does not occur naturally," and requires active support. Riley warns that Malta's historical experiences have sometimes created a sense of wariness of the "other," which, if unaddressed, may give rise to fear, anger, and resentment, all of which increase vulnerability to radicalisation. To counter this, they argue, integration efforts should begin early, particularly within schools, where a strong sense of belonging can serve as a "push factor." They call for "a more coordinated, nationwide approach," stressing

that *“integration is much like a relationship; it requires effort, adjustment, and genuine engagement from all sides.”*

Casey introduces a structured, multi-level prevention framework, drawing on approaches used to manage complex social risks (Sarnoto et al., 2024, p.142). Their *“three-fold preventative measures approach”* - Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary - targeting different stages of youth (Hebberecht & Baillergeau, 2012, p.4).

They further emphasise the importance of primary prevention through education campaigns targeting specific adolescents groups, particularly at the *“secondary level,”* an age where young people begin forming opinions. This expert advocates for *“pedagogical and conducive approaches rather than demonisation, promoting critical thinking, ethical behaviour, and the deconstruction of harmful stereotypes.”*

Secondary prevention, they argue, should focus on *“at-risk youths by addressing underlying feelings of resentment, which are often linked to radicalisation and violent behavior.”* On the other hand Tertiary prevention aims to *“dissuade individuals who are already radicalised from further engagement, supporting efforts towards de-radicalisation and reducing their inclination towards extremist ideologies and actions.”* However, this expert concludes that such an approach requires investment across the security services, including the adoption of best practices from other countries, while ensuring these are carefully adapted to Malta’s unique cultural context.

Avery supports Casey’s model but argues for *“a broader shift in philosophy and approach is needed,”* especially regarding *“harmful discourse and narratives that continue despite existing laws.”* They identify a critical gap between prison and community reintegration, citing *“long waiting lists, complex applications processes, and limited access to essential services, making it difficult for inmates to regain stability.”* Avery concludes that a *“structured aftercare service could significantly reduce, reduce the likelihood of radicalisation.”*

Jamie, shifts focus to the local level, acknowledging *“ongoing efforts at the national level among various stakeholders, but criticising the lack of engagement at local council level.”* Localities like *“St. Paul’s Bay, Ħamrun, Birżebbuġia, Marsa have become increasingly culturally diverse,”* yet visible engagement efforts for more inclusion remain limited.

Jamie adds that fostering social cohesion requires coordinated action *“not only from local councils but also from key community and religious institutions.”* Given their strong presence in society, these places of worship play a vital role in engaging youth and building inclusive spaces. Jamie argues that *“these institutions share a responsibility to promote awareness and recognise early signs of social fragmentation,”* as without awareness, meaningful engagement and prevention becomes impossible.

The researcher identified a recurring tension between how social cohesion is portrayed in literature versus how it unfolds in practice (Moustakas, 2023; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2016). While literature portrays such efforts as structured and effective, expert accounts reveal a more fragmented and consistent reality, especially in local engagement and post-incarceration support, both of which are areas of heightened vulnerability to radicalisation.

Skyler’s remarks about the invisibility of radical views within institutions are especially significant. Their emphasis on unaddressed online ideologies and the need for uncomfortable yet necessary conversations reveals a pressing gap in institutional awareness and response.

Collectively, these insights suggest that gaps remain in Malta’s approach to social cohesion. If unaddressed, these shortcomings may limit the effectiveness of national strategies aimed at preventing youth radicalisation. Enhancing social cohesion remains a cornerstone not only to prevent radicalisation, but also to build an inclusive, sustainable, and responsive national prevention strategy that reflects the realities of Maltese youths.

As reflected throughout this chapter 4.7, the effectiveness of Malta’s prevention strategies relies on addressing the social, psychological, and environmental dimensions of radicalisation. The insights discussed in section 4.9 demonstrate how the Significance Quest

Theory (SQT) and its 3N Model help explain the interaction between the Need for significance, Radical Narratives, and Radical Networks, dynamics that also underpin the prevention efforts analysed here. These perspectives emphasise that counter-radicalisation must extend beyond ideological resistance to meet the emotional and social needs of young people seeking meaning and recognition. Borum (2025, p. 17) similarly argues that sustainable prevention depends on restoring a young person's sense of autonomy, fairness, and social connectedness, rather than relying solely on crime prevention strategies or risk management.

This perspective reinforces expert calls for education, early intervention, and multi-agency collaboration as pathways for resilience-building. By linking the theoretical insights of section 4.9 with applied strategies explored in this chapter, the analysis underscores that prevention in Malta must operate not only at the institutional level but also within communities, families, and schools; spaces where inclusion, empathy, and participation can restore significance and belonging for vulnerable youths.

#### **4.8 SUMMARY OF THEMES**

In sum, this research demonstrates that youth radicalisation in Malta is not the result of a single cause, but emerges from a web of intersecting vulnerabilities. Among the most prominently cited concerns by professionals were Islamist and far-right ideologies, reflecting the varied forms that radicalisation may take within the local context. Addressing this issue requires more than education and surveillance alone; it calls for sustained political will and a genuinely integrated approach.

Such a response must encompass emotional support, cultural inclusion, meaningful community engagement, and a commitment to ensuring that everyday life remains fair and manageable for all members of society. Promoting critical thinking education, particularly in relation to online misinformation, was also seen as essential for building resilience against extremist narratives. Consistent with these findings, national security authorities have emphasised the need to prioritise the prevention of online radicalisation as a core element of Malta's broader counter-radicalisation strategy.

Before concluding this chapter, the next section will critically examine how these findings align with established theoretical frameworks on radicalisation, specifically the Significance Quest Theory and the 3N Model. This will provide additional context and depth to understanding how the Maltese experience fits within the wider scholarly discourse on youth radicalisation.

## **4.9 INTERPRETING FINDINGS: SQT AND 3N MODEL**

All experts interviewed for this study acknowledged that radicalisation is shaped by a combination of psychological and social influences, broadly understood as internal and external factors. Psychological elements such as the search for identity, personal significance, and emotional stability were frequently highlighted, alongside external influences including peer pressure, family dysfunction, and the role of digital media (Jasko et al., 2019).

However, the following interpretive analysis focuses primarily on the Significance Quest Theory (SQT) including its 3N model, which offers a psychological framework for understanding how internal vulnerabilities contribute to radicalisation (Da Silva et al., 2023; Belanger et al., 2019; Kruglanski et al., 2014). This approach is not intended to downplay the relevance of broader social or structural influences, as discussed by critical scholars such as Kundnani (2012) and Githens-Mazer (2012), who argue that radicalisation must also be viewed through political and broader social lenses. Rather, this section applies SQT as a hand rail to explore how individual needs such as the pursuit of meaning; validation, recognition, and belonging emerge from the data.

### **4.9.1 The Search for Significance**

Several experts in this study emphasised a range of psychological drivers that may increase a young person's vulnerability to radicalisation. These included individualisation, self-identification struggles, the search for purpose, recognition emotional instability, and a broader need for meaning and validation. According to Significance Quest Theory (SQT),

such experiences reflect a deeper (what Kruglanski et al. (2014) describe as the Need for Significance) fundamental human desire to feel valued, respected, and important.

Alex, for instance, described how identity confusion and issues with self-identification can heighten susceptibility to extremist ideologies, especially among youth lacking a clear and coherent sense of self (Trip et al., 2019, p.3). Jamie similarly pointed to how psychological burdens (such as unresolved trauma and emotional fragility) can create vulnerabilities that extremist groups are adept at exploiting (Campelo et al., 2018, p.2). This view is echoed by Morgan, Riley, Avery, and Reese who collectively observed that the search for meaning and validation becomes particularly intensified when individuals experience exclusion or alienated from their communities. In such a case, feelings of social disconnection may intensify internal desires for purpose and belonging, needs that radical ideologies may appear to satisfy.

Despite differences in terminology and emphasis, a common thread emerged across expert accounts: that vulnerabilities tied to identity, purpose, and belonging are central to understanding how some young people may be drawn into radical pathways. Although Significance Quest Theory was not introduced as part of the semi-structured interviews, the professionals' insights nevertheless underscore its core position. While they did not explicitly reference the theory, their observations align closely with its central claim: that the search for meaning, identity, and validation can increase vulnerability to radicalisation.

However, while SQT offers a psychological lens, it is not without critique. Scholars like Githens-Mazer (2012) and Kundnani (2012) caution that overly individualised models risk obscuring the broader context in which radicalisation occurs. They argue that psychological explanations can downplay or ignore structural issues such as socio-political grievances, historical marginalisation, and systematic injustice, thereby framing radicalisation narrowly as a behavioural or cognitive issue rather than a complex socio-political process.

#### **4.9.2 The 3N Model**

The 3N Model an extension of the Significance Quest Theory, proposes that radicalisation results from the interaction of three interconnected elements: Need for Significance, Radical Narratives, and Radical Networks (Da Silva et al., 2023). The purpose of this section is to critically assess how well these theoretical components reflect the insights provided by the experts interviewed in in this study. By using the 3N Model as an interpretative framework the goal is to explore whether the processes outlined by the model are present in the Maltese context. The following sub-sections examine expert perspectives in relation to each component of the model.

#### **4.9.2.1 Need for Significance**

The first component of the 3N Model is the Need for significance, which proposes that individuals experiencing rejection, exclusion, or marginalisation may seek purpose and belonging within radical groups (Da Silva et al., 2023). Expert's insights from this study showed that social exclusion and disconnection from community structures were consistently viewed as important precursors to radicalisation in Malta.

Several participants highlighted how migrants, Third Country Nationals (TCN'S), and individuals facing legal or documentation challenges often experience marginalisation and reduced social inclusion. Skyler explained that this leads to individuals *"living in silos at the community level,"* which limits connection and integration, and can leave people feeling *"cut off from the mainstream."* This lack of belonging creates conditions in which radical groups may appeal by offering alternative forms of identity and support.

Casey also pointed to Malta's weak integration policies as a factor that increases the sense of exclusion. They argued that although *"the capacity to integrate is there,"* the lack of effective policy creates social friction, especially for new members of the community who struggle to feel accepted or establish community ties.

Overall, the expert data indicates that the Need for Significance, as defined in the 3N Model, is clearly present in the Maltese context, with lack of belonging and social exclusion acting as critical vulnerabilities contributing to youth radicalisation.

#### 4.9.2.2 Radical Narratives

The second element of the 3N Model, Radical Narratives explains how extremist ideologies offer simplified explanations for complex social realities, often framed as “us versus them” narratives to justify hostility towards others (Da Silva et al., 2023). The findings from expert interviews in Malta strongly indicated that exposure to radical narratives is an important factor contributing to youth radicalisation.

Experts highlighted several ideological patterns evident within the Maltese context. Islamist extremism and far-right nationalism were consistently mentioned as the most active ideological forms, reflecting trends observed in broader European research. However participants also noted the growing influence of narratives rooted in misogyny, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, particularly within online environments. These narratives while ideologically diverse, share a common emotional pull factor by validating personal grievances and providing young people with a sense of purpose or identity.

Experts stressed that young people are often drawn to radical ideologies not purely for ideological reasons but because these narratives offer a sense of identity and purpose that they struggle to find elsewhere. Experts suggested that these groups offer not just ideas but a sense of belonging and empowerment for individuals who feel disconnected or marginalised. Gonzales et al. (2022a, p.537) similarly argue that emotional connections and identity fusion often outweigh ideological content itself in driving radicalisation.

Participants also discussed the role of digital spaces in the spread of radical narratives. Whittaker (2023) describes how online platforms allow for rapid dissemination and normalisation of extreme views, a pattern that participants confirmed is occurring in Malta, especially among youth. Experts expressed concern that these online echo chambers reinforce polarised thinking and reduce opportunities for constructive dialogue.

In summary, the findings indicate that the Radical Narratives element of the 3N Model is clearly present within Maltese context, with expert’s insights confirming that diverse

ideological content and emotionally resonant narratives act as key pathways into radicalisation.

#### **4.9.2.3 Radical Networks**

The third element of the 3N Model, Radical Networks, describes the role of the peer groups and social environments in supporting and reinforcing radical beliefs and behaviours (Da Silva et al., 2023). The findings from expert interviews in Malta confirmed the presence of such dynamics, particularly within online spaces, which experts identified as central to youth radicalisation processes.

Participants repeatedly highlighted how digital platforms and social media offer young people immediate access to global extremist content. Riley and Avery noted that youth who feel excluded from mainstream social spaces often turn to online communities where they can connect with others who share or promote extreme views. These online networks act as echo chambers, normalising radical ideas and strengthening ideological commitment over time.

One participant referred to the subtle ways in which extremist groups exploit popular platforms and even gaming communities to target vulnerable youth. Experts described how algorithms and anonymity allow radical actors to embed themselves in digital spaces with minimal detection, making prevention and early intervention particularly difficult. These concerns align with Said et al. (2021, p.20), who report that Malta has one of the highest rates of daily social media use in Europe, further amplifying the potential influence of online radical networks.

Participants also raised the issue of how online radicalisation often overlaps with offline peer influences. Participants noted that young people attracted to extremist ideologies often engage with peers who reinforce and normalise these beliefs. The findings support previous research showing that both digital and face-to-face interactions play a role in the radicalisation process (Whittaker, 2023).

The dangers of this combination are evident in the case of the 17-A cell members (see 2.6.2), whose radicalisation was driven by a convergence of personal significance loss, extremist narratives, and strong social networks. Gonzales et al. (2022b) highlight how psychological manipulation and peer influences contribute to their pathway into violent extremism. This example underscores the urgency for Malta to strengthen early interventions and safeguard vulnerable young people before similar conditions can emerge locally.

In conclusion, expert insights confirm that all three components of the 3N Model (Need for Significance, Radical Narratives, and Radical Networks) are present within the Maltese context. Both online and offline social connections were identified as key contributors to youth radicalisation. While no official national data is publicly available to quantify its scale, experts consistently expressed concern about emerging risk factors and highlighted the urgent need for proactive prevention strategies to safeguard vulnerable young people.

#### **4.9.3 Theory in Practice: Implication for Prevention**

This final section reflects on how the theoretical models applied in this study, namely the Significant Quest Theory (SQT) and its 3N Model, can inform practical prevention efforts in Malta. While the expert's interviewed were not asked to apply these models directly, their insights revealed patterns that align with the frameworks, particularly the 3N Model's components: Need for Significance, Narrative, and Network. These elements help interpret the psychological, ideological, and social processes that emerged in the findings, offering guidance for future prevention strategies and research.

The models were used during analysis as interpretive tools, helping to make sense of the patterns observed in expert perspectives as well as emergent themes. Rather than determining the structure of the analysis, they served as guiding frameworks enabling expert insights to be contextualised within wider academic discourse on radicalisation.

This included understanding how feelings of national identity loss, attraction to emotionally resonant ideologies like the far-right and Islamist narratives, and the influence of peer and online validation aligned with the psychological, ideological, and social mechanisms described in the models. These dynamics directly relate to the second research question, which explored how young people are drawn toward radical groups or ideologies, and support findings related to the first research question on how various factors contribute to radicalisation vulnerability.

For example, the data suggests that young people in Malta experiencing identity confusion, social exclusion, or cultural detachment may be especially vulnerable to radicalisation. This aligns with the core concept of significance loss within SQT and corresponds with the 3N Model's first element, the Need for personal meaning and belonging. As highlighted in section 4.9.2.1, several participants pointed out to Malta's shifting identity landscape and a lack of inclusive national belonging as critical vulnerabilities. Targeted interventions to foster inclusion and purpose may therefore help reduce susceptibility to radical ideologies.

The role of emotionally charged ideological content was strongly evident across participant accounts. Casey argued that combating the spread of *"misinformation and disinformation"* through education is one of the most effective ways to prevent radicalisation (AL-Attar, 2019). While this underscores the importance of media literacy, the findings suggest that prevention must also address the emotional and social appeal of extremist content. As discussed in section 4.9.2.2, radical narratives provide simplified explanations and emotional validation, often resonating with individuals who feel personally or culturally disconnected.

Morgan added a psychological perspective, describing radicalisation as *"a type of brain washing"* that exploits emotional and cognitive vulnerabilities. They noted that *"it's very hard for a mind... to fall in to it,"* highlighting how the absence of support structures (also mentioned by Casey), leaves individuals more open to ideological manipulation. When mainstream system fails to meet these emotional needs, radical groups may fill that gap with identity, belonging, and recognition.

Finally, the role of peer influence and digital platforms featured prominently in expert interviews. As outlined in section 4.9.2.3, several participants described how youth are drawn into online spaces or social circles where radical content is normalised and reinforced. This aligns with the 3N Model's Network component, which highlights how social environments validate and amplify extremist belief.

These findings reinforce how radicalisation pathways are shaped through digital exposure and interpersonal influence, directly informing the second research question. While the Need for Significance emerged most clearly in the findings, the influence of emotionally charged Narratives and the role of social Networks were also evident. This reinforces the relevance of the 3N Model as a whole, even if the three components appeared with different levels of emphasis.

In conclusion, although the theoretical models did not shape the data collection process, they proved valuable in interpreting and contextualising expert insights. The alignment with the findings suggests that Malta's counter-radicalisation strategy could benefit from interventions that not only address ideological content, but also respond to the emotional and social needs that drive people toward extremist pathways.

#### **4.10 Reflective Commentary**

While interpreting the data, the researcher noted that certain aspects, such as financial hardship, were rarely emphasised by participants. This prompted reflexive consideration of whether such limited attention reflected contextual realities, including Malta's relative economic stability, or prevailing professional perspectives that tend to emphasise psychological and ideological explanations over socio-economic ones. Recognising these unexplored areas helped the researcher to remain aware of how professional perspectives and the researcher's own interpretive lens may shape how data is understood (Braun & Clarke, 2022). These reflections informed, rather than replaced, the inductive process by guiding my reading of the data while ensuring that theme development remained grounded in participants' accounts (Clarke & Braun, 2018).

Beyond this example, reflexivity was integrated throughout the interpretive process. As themes developed, the researcher remained mindful of how professional experience could influence interpretive focus, ensuring that attention to certain factors did not obscure relevant dimensions of participants' accounts. Regular memo writing and supervisor discussions supported awareness of this dynamic, ensuring that the final thematic structure represented participants' voices while acknowledging the researchers' interpretive role. In this way reflexivity functioned as a continuous, transparent dialogue between data and interpretation rather than separate evaluative exercise.

#### **4.11 CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented and analysed the key findings from expert interviews on youth radicalisation in Malta. Drawing on insights from professionals across, education, criminology, psychology, law enforcement and policy experts, six interconnected themes were identified. These covered definitions of radicalisation, the role of digital platforms and misinformation, identity and psychological vulnerabilities, socio-economic & community challenges, political and ideological narratives, and counter-radicalisation and prevention strategies. Together, they offered a layered understanding of how radicalisation may unfold within Malta's social and cultural context.

To add theoretical depth, the findings were interpreted through the lens of the Significance Quest Theory and its 3N model. This reflection demonstrated that the need for personal significance, the emotional pull of radical narratives, and validation through peer and online networks were evident in the local context. This included understanding how feelings of national identity loss, attraction to emotionally charged ideologies such as far-right and Islamist narratives, and the influence of peer online validation, including the spread of xenophobic, misogynistic, and homophobic content, aligned with the psychological, ideological, and social mechanisms described in the models. The theoretical interpretation was integrated within each theme to strengthen coherence between empirical data and conceptual analysis, ensuring a more unified and interpretative approach throughout the chapter.

The analysis engaged with the study's research questions while remaining open to theoretical interpretation, ensuring that findings were not constrained solely by predefined aims. It identified key factors that increase vulnerability to radical ideologies and by outlining the pathways through which young people in Malta may be drawn toward extremist narratives or groups. Through expert's insights, it also highlighted specific gaps, including a lack of definitional clarity, the neglect of gendered narratives such as misogyny and homophobia in prevention efforts, limited digital literacy and critical thinking among youth, and insufficient early detection and intervention within educational settings.

Overall, the findings underscore the importance of early, inclusive, and multi-layered responses to radicalisation. The next chapter turns to the broader implications of this study, offering policy and practice recommendations, reflections on limitations, and directions for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This research set out to explore expert perspectives on youth radicalisation in Malta. Chapter 4 presented the main findings from the semi-structured interviews, conducted with professionals from sectors including law enforcement, education, psychology, and criminology. These findings were analysed alongside existing literature to address the three core research questions. Together, they offered an understanding of the complex social, psychological, and environmental factors shaping youth radicalisation within the local context of Malta, a country characterised by a rapidly changing multicultural and multi-ideological society (Said et al., 2021).

Chapter 5 presents the final stage of this research by presenting key recommendations to strengthen prevention efforts across all age groups. Although this study primarily focused on youth, the findings made it clear that radicalisation is not confined to a single age bracket (Bronsard et al., 2022) and that wider community influences play a critical role (Wallner, 2021, p.9, 12). These recommendations are grounded in the analysis of three core research questions:

- (1) How do different social, psychological, and environmental factors shape youths' vulnerability to engage in extremism or adopt radical ideologies and behaviours?
- (2) In what ways are young people drawn toward particular ideologies or groups, whether and how do these factors contribute to pathways of potential recruitment? and,
- (3) How do experts understand and recommend ways of addressing youth radicalisation in Malta?

The concise recommendations presented in Table (7) are derived from expert insights and are intended to offer practical and adaptable guidance. They aim to inform flexible intervention strategies, avoiding reliance on a one-size-fits-all approach (Pisoiu, 2015).

## 5.2 OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

Although opinions differed regarding the context and visibility of radicalisation influences in Malta, most experts acknowledged their presence, a position supported by this study's findings. One participant argued the existence of two active for a, Islamist and far-right highlighting the diverse forms radicalisation can take within the local context, operating across multiple communications channels. When combined with insights into psychological, social and ideological dynamics, the data suggest that youth radicalisation in Malta is shaped by a complex interplay of interrelated factors.

The thematic analysis produced six core themes, and associated sub-themes each offering a layered understanding of how radicalisation may unfold among Maltese youth. These themes reflect both participant observations and broader academic discussions surrounding radicalisation and extremist ideologies.

The First Theme, Understanding Radicalisation, explores how professionals in Malta define and conceptualise the phenomenon, particularly in relation to youth. The findings reveal a diversity of views, with expert interpretations ranging from structured, process-oriented definitions to broader, context-dependent views. Some participants framed radicalisation as a phased progression involving ideological commitment and behavioural change, often culminating in the justification or use of violence. Others adopted more fluid understandings, focusing on identity struggles, behavioural expression, or emotional vulnerabilities rather than ideological influence. This definitional diversity reflects broader academic debates on the nature of radicalisation and underscores the importance of context in shaping how risk and vulnerability are perceived and addressed (Sedgwick, 2010; Belanger et al., 2019).

The Second Theme, Online Influence and Misinformation, emerged as particularly dominant. Experts identified digital platforms, online isolation, embedded extremist narratives, and even gaming spaces as key environments exploited by radical actors to disseminate propaganda. These actors leverage algorithms and anonymity to spread ideologies in subtle and highly targeted ways, often evading detection. Such findings are

consistent with global research highlighting the role of online environments in shaping radical trajectories, particularly among digitally native youth populations. This aligns with research by Said et al. (2021), which reported that, at the time of their study, 79% of Malta's population used social media use daily, significantly higher than the 56% European average. Said et al. argue that such widespread social media use contributes to the spread of "*fake news, hate speech, and extremist content,*" making digital platforms a key space for youth expression, particularly in contexts perceived as socially restrictive.

The Third Theme, Identity and Psychological Vulnerabilities, explores how radicalisation is often driven more by unmet emotional and psychological needs than by ideological conviction. Participants stressed that feelings of alienation, marginalisation, and identity confusion were cited as underlying risk factors. Rather than pointing to a single cause, they described a broader sense of cultural dislocation, suggesting that identity instability can increase vulnerability. This study therefore argues that fostering multiculturalism understanding and inclusion could help alleviate these identity-related tensions and promote social cohesion.

This observation aligns with the analysis of Arango and Burgos (2024), who emphasise that social identities are deeply embedded within and shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts. While their work does not address radicalisation directly, it highlights how disruptions or ambiguities in identity formation may contribute to wider psychological vulnerabilities. Freestone, (2017) similarly notes that extremist groups often exploit this psychological and cultural vacuum by offering a compelling (although ultimately deceptive) sense of purpose, belonging, and identity that wider society fails to provide.

The Fourth Theme, Socio-Economic and Community Challenges, while less dominant in terms of data, nonetheless yielded valuable insights. Some participants noted that limited economic opportunities or educational disengagement could serve as background stressors. More significantly, close social networks within Malta's tightly knit communities were seen as major influencers. These networks can function as protective buffers or, conversely, as spaces where for polarising views are reinforced and challenged.

These insights echo the findings of Doosje et al. (2016, p.81), who emphasise that family and peer dynamics play a central role to shaping ideological leanings and behavioural outcomes. Moreover, experts suggested that localities with a higher percentage of migrants may amplify perceived injustices or exclusion, further intensifying radicalisation risks. While Said et al. (2021, p.22) adopts a broad understanding of radicalisation, their research highlights how such tensions can strain social cohesion and contribute to a sense of marginalisation.

The Fifth Theme, Political and Ideological Narratives, explores the types of ideologies young people may encounter and the emotional impact these narratives can have. Experts identified forms of extremism in Malta ranging from religious fundamentalism to far-right nationalism, misogyny, racism / xenophobia and homophobia. Notably, the findings show that it is not the ideological content alone that poses a risk, but the emotional connection individuals form with such narratives that can lead to radicalisation. Participants suggested that youths are often drawn to ideologies that validate personal grievances or offer identity.

This view aligns with Gonzales et al. (2022a, p.537) who demonstrates that emotional connections, such as 'identity fusion' and close social bonds, are often more influential than strict ideological beliefs in driving the radicalisation of youths, highlighting how ideologies that validate personal grievances and provide a sense of identity resonate deeply within such groups. The migration of recruitment tactics to digital platforms was also highlighted, with online exposure now serving as the primary medium through which young people encounter and engage with extremist ideas. A trend explored by Whittaker, (2023) work, which discusses the growing significance of online spaces in shaping radical engagement.

Finally, the Sixth Theme, Counter-radicalisation and Prevention Strategies, focused on institutional responses. While critical thinking and media literacy were deemed essential by participants, there was consensus that these must be embedded with broader psychological support systems. Experts stressed the need for holistic and multi-layered approach that integrates emotional, social and educational interventions. This aligns with contemporary P/CVE models advocating early intervention, community engagement, and inter-agency collaboration. For instance, Von Lautz et al. (2024) discuss how prevention strategies benefit

from coordinated efforts that address not only ideological dimensions but also underlying psychological vulnerabilities.

Although the Prevent Network Malta (PNM) strategy, supported by the EU knowledge Hub and key stakeholders, plays a central role in coordinating, national efforts, participants identified several gaps in its implementation. These included limited support for integration, inadequate post-incarceration care, and weak involvement by local councils in culturally diverse areas, precisely where community-level interventions are most needed.

### **5.3 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON EXPERT FINDINGS**

The following is a summary of the key policy and practice gaps identified through expert interviews, each mapped to the thematic areas in which they emerged.

#### **Policy Gaps Overview:**

1. Lack of definitional clarity surrounding radicalisation.
2. Gendered narratives, especially those rooted in misogyny and homophobia; remain largely overlooked in counter-radicalisation efforts.

#### **Practice Gaps Overview:**

1. Limited digital literacy and critical thinking skills among young people
2. Inadequate early detection and intervention capacity within schools

#### **Justification for the Selected Recommendations:**

Given the gaps identified by the experts during the course of this study, it was necessary to prioritise recommendations considered most critical for informing effective policy and practice interventions.

The prioritisation was guided by three main criteria:

1. Consensus and emphasis among experts: gaps consistently highlighted by multiple experts, or unanimously recognised, were prioritised to reflect a broad agreement on their significance.
2. Potential impact on prevention efforts: priority was given to gaps that directly affect early prevention and systematic resilience, where timely intervention could significantly reduce youth vulnerability to radicalisation.
3. Support from existing research: the four selected gaps namely, lack of definitional clarity, the insufficient attention to ideological narratives, the limited digital literacy and critical thinking skills among young people, and the lack of early detection and intervention capacity within schools - are strongly reinforced by key studies discussed in the literature review.

Da Silva et al. (2023) and Emmelkamp et al. (2020) stressed the influence of ideological narratives and social networks in shaping youth vulnerability reinforcing the need to address neglected dimensions such as gender within radicalisation prevention strategies.

Whittaker (2023) highlighted the crucial role of digital literacy and critical thinking in countering online radicalisation. Similarly, AL-Attar (2019, p.7) underlined the psychological and social drivers, highlighting the need for early detection mechanisms within key institutions and schools. This alignment ensures that the findings are both locally grounded and internationally validated.

In line with these criteria, the researcher narrowed the focus to two policy gaps and two practice gaps. The selected policy gaps are the lack of definitional clarity and the insufficient attention to gendered ideological narratives, both strongly supported by expert insights and the literature. For practice gaps, priority was given to the need to strengthen digital literacy and critical thinking among young people and improving early detection and intervention capacity within schools, both critical for enhancing early and effective prevention efforts.

Table (6) represents how each gap aligns with the study's research questions and objectives (see chapter 3). This alignment was data-driven rather than being pre-determined, reinforcing the rationale for their inclusion in the final recommendations. Building on this, Table (7) outlines targeted recommendations for each gap, translating the findings into actionable steps to strengthen prevention and counter-radicalisation efforts. Each recommendation is categorised within the primary, secondary, or tertiary prevention framework, offering a structured approach to addressing radicalisation across different stages of risk and intervention.

**TABLE 6: ALIGNMENT OF KEY GAPS WITH RESEARCH QUESTIONS & OBJECTIVES**

Selected Gap	Matches Research Questions?	Matches Aims/Objectives
Lack of definitional clarity	Yes – directly linked to RQ1, as unclear definitions hinder understanding of factors influencing youth vulnerability to extremism or radical ideologies / behaviours	Yes – Supports clearer conceptual foundations for assessing risk and improving prevention frameworks
Gendered narratives, especially those rooted in misogyny and homophobia, remain largely overlooked in counter-radicalisation efforts	Yes – relates to RQ2 by highlighting how gendered narratives within ideologies or groups can influence youth recruitment and appeal	Yes – identifies a neglected ideological factor that may inform more inclusive and effective prevention strategies
Digital literacy and critical thinking among young people	Yes – relevant to RQ2 (online influence and exposure to radical content) and RQ3 (expert recommendations for prevention)	Yes – directly support resilience-building and expert-endorsed educational strategies for P/CVE
Lack of early detection and intervention in schools	Yes – relates to RQ2 (early vulnerabilities and school influence) and RQ3 (expert suggestions for institutional responses)	Yes – Strengthens early intervention capacity and promotes expert-informed, multi-agency collaboration

Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

**TABLE 7: POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING THE KEY GAPS IN YOUTH RADICALISATION PREVENTION**

Selected Gap	Short Recommendations	Prevention Level
Lack of definitional clarity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Standardise the definition of radicalisation across national strategies to ensure clarity and consistency in prevention efforts.</li> </ul>	Primary – supports awareness
Gendered narratives, especially those rooted in misogyny and homophobia; remain largely overlooked in counter-radicalisation efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrate gender-sensitive analysis into radicalisation risk assessments, training, and prevention programmes.</li> <li>Additionally, follow best practices from other EU Member States by strengthening regulations that limit young people’s access to certain social media platforms.</li> </ul>	Primary / Secondary – addresses ideological messaging and targets early signs of identity-based vulnerability
Digital literacy and critical thinking among young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement mandatory digital literacy and critical thinking modules within secondary education to strengthen youth resilience against extremist content</li> </ul>	Primary – builds broad-based resilience across the youth population
Lack of early detection and intervention in schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Train educators and school staff to recognise early signs of radicalisation and establish clear referral diversions to specialised support services</li> </ul>	Secondary / Tertiary – enables early response and supports disengagement where needed

Source: Jonathan Galdies, (2025).

## 5.4 LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

As with many qualitative studies, this research encountered several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. Four key limitations were identified and are discussed in this section:

1. Achieving meaningful insights despite partial participation:

Had all eighteen experts who initially agreed to participate followed through, the results may have differed from those presented and discussed. However, as participation was entirely voluntary, the study had no control over this outcome. Consequently, the research proceeded with a sample size of nine participants (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022, p.8). Despite the 50% acceptance rate, the study maintained its data integrity, generating valuable insights and demonstrating that meaningful findings can still emerge even in the face of such limitations.

2. Constrains in participation selection and size:

A second limitation identified in this research was that interviews were conducted with experienced professionals rather than directly with youths. The knowledge gathered is therefore second-hand, experts reported, based on their professional experiences, rather than their personal emotions or direct encounters with radicalisation and extremism (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.594).

However, Braun and Clarke (2006, p.5) emphasise the importance of preserving flexibility within thematic analysis, ensuring that the method remains adaptable rather than rigid or overly restrictive. With this in mind, the limitation of interviewing only experts was mitigated by the fact that the selected participants were deeply embedded in the local context, many of whom currently work with young people, including those who have either been exposed to, or are at-risk of, radicalisation. Additionally, although the study drew on a modest number of participants, this limitation was addressed

through a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating participants from diverse fields (see Section 3.6.2.).

### 3. The potential for social desirability bias in participants' self-reported responses:

This highlights a common challenge in qualitative research known as *social desirability bias*, where participants may respond in ways they believe are socially, morally, or democratically acceptable, rather than sharing their genuine thoughts or experiences.

As Tavory (2020, p.451) notes, similar tendencies are especially pronounced when discussing sensitive topics such as social and psychological issues. In such cases, participants may downplay their true opinions in order to present themselves in a more favourable light, or conversely over-emphasise aspects that they deem important over others. As a result, this tendency can compromise the accuracy of the data collected. However, while it is difficult to determine whether this occurred in specific instances, the possibility cannot be discounted, and it may affect the overall accuracy and authenticity of the data.

### 4. Contextual scope and generalisability constraints:

The decision to focus exclusively on Malta provided valuable, context-specific insights, but it also limited the generalisability of the findings to other regions or broader populations. That said the research did include a specific inquiry (interview question 5) aimed at exploring perceived similarities between radicalisation processes in Malta and those observed on other European countries. Nonetheless, time limitations typical of in-depth, small sample research affected the extent to which data could be fully explored and analysed.

In summary, while this qualitative research provides valuable insights into the complex issues surrounding radicalisation in Malta, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. Nonetheless, these limitations also present opportunities for future research to build upon and deepen the understanding of radicalisation processes.

## **5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

In addition to the policy and practice recommendations outlined earlier, this study has also identified two specific areas where further exploration is being suggested to strengthen the evidence base for more effective prevention strategies within the Maltese context: firstly, exploring the influence of economic hardship in radicalisation processes; and secondly, examining whether the factors influencing adult radicalisation differ from those affecting youths.

### **5.5.1 Economic Hardship in the Maltese Context**

While the theme Socio-Economic and Community Challenges generated strong insights into the influence of close social networks, migration, and cultural dynamics (factors that may act as both risks and protective influences) it produced inconclusive findings regarding the role of economic hardship in the Maltese context.

This appears to reflect a common perception among experts that economic issues are not a primary driver of radicalisation in Malta; hence, leading them to prioritise other, more influential drivers (Emmelkamp et al., 2020, p.6). However, this dissertation argues that such an assumption warrants re-examination, especially in light of on-going economic fluctuations. Emmelkamp et al. (2020) similarly observed that economic hardship was not highlighted as a key contributor in their study, yet they argue that financial stressors may become significant when combined with other vulnerabilities.

The influence of economic stressors may therefore be underestimated in relatively stable contexts. Future research could explore whether economic hardship plays a supporting role in youth radicalisation by adding pressures to other existing problems, such as social exclusion or identity issues.

### **5.5.2 Age Differences in Radicalisation Processes**

While the findings of this study indicated that radicalisation is not confined to a single age bracket, a finding also supported by Bronsard et al. (2022), this study did not determine whether the influencing factors for adults mirror those affecting youth within the local context. Building on this observation, future studies are encouraged to examine potential differences between the pathways, risks, and vulnerabilities associated with adult and adolescent radicalisation, since their needs, pressures, motivations and cognitive development occur at distinct stages (Baxter et al., 2022; Wallner, 2021, p.3).

It is important to recognise that young people involved in ideological extremism differ from adults in psychological development, social network, and environmental influences (Campelo et al., 2018). Accordingly, this study presents targeted recommendations aimed at addressing the identified gaps in policy and practice relating to the prevention of youth radicalisation. In addition, further research should explore these differences to inform the development of adult-specific prevention and rehabilitation programs, which may require distinct approaches compared to those designed for adolescents.

## **5.6 CONCLUSION**

Through a critical analysis of the literature and in-depth interviews with experts from various fields, this study offered deeper insight into the social, psychological, and environmental factors that contribute to youth radicalisation in Malta. The findings highlight vulnerabilities, including identity struggles, ideological influences, online exposure, and limited institutional capacity, particularly within schools, to recognise and respond to early signs of radicalisation. Experts, not only acknowledged the presence of extremist patterns, including far-right and Islamist narratives, but also underscored the neglect of gendered and misogynistic ideologies within current frameworks.

Additionally, participants identified areas that could represent significant gaps in both policy and practice. These include a lack of definitional clarity on radicalisation, insufficient

integration of gendered narratives (especially those rooted in misogyny and homophobia), limited digital literacy and critical thinking among youth, and the need for stronger early detection and intervention mechanisms within educational settings. Since these are perceived gaps based on experts insights, not from a direct policy analysis, they should be seen as informed observations that highlight areas for potential development and closer examination in future strategic planning.

Regrettably, the researcher found that youth radicalisation in Malta remains significantly under-researched. This presented challenges in establishing a robust local evidence base and necessitated a greater reliance on expert insight and international literature to contextualise the findings. These insights underscore the need for targeted prevention efforts that go beyond general awareness-raising and instead prioritise systematic resilience building, critical education, and multi-agency collaboration. The study also reinforces the importance of adapting local strategies in line with international best practices, while remaining responsive to the unique characteristics of the Maltese context.

Conclusively, this research demonstrates that a more coordinated, informed and proactive approach is essential to protect vulnerable youth and reduce the risk of radicalisation. The recommendations presented, grounded in academic literature and expert insight, provide a practical foundation for enhancing Malta's counter-radicalisation efforts moving forward.

Future research should continue to explore the lived experiences of young people and how local initiatives like youth programmes and community outreach, alongside digital and educational strategies, can help prevent radicalisation. This is not only a matter of national security but also a broader societal responsibility, one that requires sustained engagement across all level of the community.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (ENGLISH)**

#### **'Experts' Perspectives on Youth Radicalisation in Malta'**

1. What does radicalisation mean to you, especially in the context of young people?
2. What types of extreme ideologies are more common among youths in Malta?
3. What unique factors in Malta might attract individuals towards radicalisation and violent extreme behaviours? And which unique factors in Malta might drive individuals away from radicalisation and violent extreme behaviours?
4. Are there specific ways or patterns through which young people in Malta are radicalised, especially towards extremist and potentially violent ideologies?
5. How do these radicalisation processes in Malta (if any) compare to those in other European countries?
6. What methods or programs have proven effective in preventing youth radicalisation and promoting resilience against violent extremist ideas?
7. Based on your expertise, what recommendations can be made to improve existing efforts to prevent and counter radicalisation in Malta?

## APPENDIX A: MISTOQSIIJET TA' INTERVISTI SEMI-STRUTTURATI (MALTESE)

### 'Perspettivi minn Esperti' dwar ir-Radikalizzazzjoni taż-Żgħażaġh f'Malta'

1. Xi tfisser għalik ir-radikalizzazzjoni, speċjalment fil-kuntest taż-żgħażaġh?
2. Liema tipi ta' ideoloġiji estremi huma laktar komuni fost iż-żgħażaġh f'Malta?
3. Liema fatturi uniċi f'Malta jistgħu jattiraw individwi lejn ir-radikalizzazzjoni u mgħiba estrema vjolenti? U liema fatturi uniċi f'Malta jistgħu jbiegħdu lill-individwi mir-radikalizzazzjoni u mgħiba estrema vjolenti?
4. Hemm modi, jew mudelli speċifiċi li permezz tagħhom iż-żgħażaġh f'Malta jiġu radikalizzati, speċjalment lejn ideoloġiji estremisti u potenzjalment vjolenti?
5. Kif jitqabblu dawn il-proċessi ta' radikalizzazzjoni f'Malta (jekk hemm) ma' dawk f'pajjiżi oħra Ewropej?
6. Liema metodi, jew programmi wrew li huma effettivi fil-prevenzjoni tar-radikalizzazzjoni taż-żgħażaġh u l-promozzjoni tar-reżiljenza kontra ideat estremisti vjolenti?
7. Abbażi tal-kompetenza tiegħek, x'rakkomandazzjonijiet jistgħu jsiru biex jittejbu l-isforzi eżistenti għall-prevenzjoni u l-ġlieda kontra r-radikalizzazzjoni f'Malta?

## APPENDIX B: PRELIMINARY PARTICIPANT'S INVITATION REQUEST

10/23/24, 5:14 PM

University of Malta Mail - Invitation to Participate in Research on Youth Radicalisation in Malta



Jonathan Galdies <jonathan.galdies.20@um.edu.mt>

### Invitation to Participate in Research on Youth Radicalisation in Malta

Jonathan Galdies <jonathan.galdies.20@um.edu.mt>

16 October 2024 at 19:01

Attention: [REDACTED] Gatekeeper

Dear Sir/Mam,

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Jonathan Galdies, and I am currently conducting research on "Youth Radicalisation in Malta," as part of my Master's degree (by research) with the Department of Criminology at the University of Malta.

Given [REDACTED] significant role in shaping [REDACTED] and supporting [REDACTED] [REDACTED] I believe that your [REDACTED] insights are crucial to understanding the complexities of youth radicalisation in Malta. Your expertise in engaging with [REDACTED] young people offers invaluable perspectives that could greatly enhance the depth of my research. Specifically, understanding how [REDACTED] promotes [REDACTED] and counters the factors that may lead to radicalisation is key to my study.

I would like to formally invite an expert representative [REDACTED] to participate in this research through an interview. Attached to this email, you will find an information letter and consent form, which provide further details on the study and the process for participation, in line with the guidelines of the Research Ethics Committee. If you are willing to participate, kindly return the signed consent form at your earliest convenience.

Your participation would be greatly appreciated and would contribute significantly to the success of this research. If you have any questions or need more information before making a decision, please don't hesitate to contact me directly.

I would like to formally invite you to participate in an interview for this research study.

Your time and consideration are greatly appreciated, and I look forward to your response.

Warm regards,

Jonathan Galdies

Email address: [jonathan.galdies.20@um.edu.mt](mailto:jonathan.galdies.20@um.edu.mt)



## **APPENDIX C: COMBINED INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM (ENGLISH)**

My name is Jonathan Galdies and I am a post graduate student at the University of Malta, reading for a Master of Arts (by research) in Criminology with an interest in exploring youth radicalisation. I am presently conducting research as part of my dissertation titled, “Expert perspectives on youth radicalisation in Malta”. This is being supervised by Dr. Luke Buhagiar (principle supervisor) and Professor Saviour Formosa (co-supervisor). This study aims to comprehensively explore the views on youth radicalisation in Malta according to experts from various backgrounds, as well as to explore how professionals in the field can best approach young individuals who may hold extremist views. This understanding may contribute to address the various forms of radicalisation within the local context.

### **Your participation**

Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study. Your views and involvement would significantly contribute to a better understanding of the research topic. It is important to note that any data collected will be exclusively used for this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview conducted by the undersigned. The interview is expected to last approximately 45 minutes. If you wish, the interview questions can be provided to you in advance to help you prepare for the topic. Additionally, if you prefer to participate virtually, that option is available without any objection from the undersigned. Given the semi-structured nature of the interview, the interview questions are meant as a guide, so that you may be able to elaborate on the aspects you wish to discuss concerning the topic at hand.

Data collected will be stored securely, in a file only accessible to the undersigned; recordings and transcripts shall be stored on a password-protected computer, and only my supervisors and the undersigned will have access to this data.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason.

You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from you will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is pseudonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an pseudonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. While there are no known or anticipated risks associated with your participation, participants' identities will be pseudonymised in my dissertation and any related publications, to protect your true identity. No participant will identify in the dissertation and any related publications, and so, quotes that may be used to illustrate the results will be presented entirely in pseudonymised format.

### **Data Management**

The data collected will be stored securely, in a file only accessible to the undersigned; recordings and transcripts shall be stored on a password-protected computer, and only my supervisors and the undersigned will have access to this data.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased.

All personal data collected will be treated as confidential and shall be erased on completion of the study and following publication of results (June 2025). In addition, unless you indicate otherwise below, the interview will be recorded to facilitate data collection and will later be transcribed during the analysis phase. Your name will not appear in the dissertation or in any other publications resulting from this study. Only, pseudonymised quotations may be used at the researcher's discretion to illustrate the findings.

**Participant's consent**

- I hereby declare to have read the information about the nature of the study, my involvement and data management.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and my questions have been satisfactorily answered.
- I declare that I am 18 years or older.
- I understand that should I have any further queries, I can contact [Mr. Jonathan Galdies on [REDACTED] or via email: [REDACTED] and/or his supervisor Dr. Luke Buhagiar on [REDACTED] or via email: [REDACTED]
- I agree to participate in this research study.

**MARK ONLY IF APPLICABLE**

- I agree to be identified in the research records.

---

Participant's name (in block)

Researcher's (name in block)

---

Participant's signature

Researcher's signature

---

Date

## **APPENDIX C: COMBINED INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM (MALTESE)**

### **Informazzjoni dwar l-istudju**

Jisimni Jonathan Galdies u jien student post-gradwat fl-Università ta' Malta, naqra għal Master of Arts (b'riċerka) fil-Kriminologija b'interess li nesplora r radikalizzazzjoni taż-żgħażaġh. Bħalissa qed nagħmel riċerka bħala parti mid dissertazzjoni tiegħi bit-titlu, 'Perspettivi minn esperti dwar ir-radikalizzazzjoni taż-żgħażaġh f'Malta.' Dan qed jiġi sorveljat minn Dr Luke Buhagiar (prinċipal supervisor) u l-Professor Saviour Formosa (ko-supervisor). Dan l-istudju għandu l-għan li jesplora b'mod komprensiv il-fehmiet dwar ir-radikalizzazzjoni taż-żgħażaġh f'Malta skont esperti minn diversi sfondi, kif ukoll li jesplora kif il-professionisti fil-qasam jistgħu javvicinaw bl-aħjar mod individwi żgħażaġh li jista' jkollhom fehmiet estremisti. Dan il-fehim jista' jikkontribwixxi biex jiġu indirizzati d-diversi forom ta' radikalizzazzjoni fil-kuntest lokali.

### **Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek**

Kwalunkwe data miġbura minn din ir-riċerka se tintuża biss għall-finijiet ta' dan l istudju. L-opinjoni u l-involviment tiegħek jikkontribwixxu b'mod sinifikanti għal fehim aħjar tas-sugġett tar-riċerka. Huwa importanti li wieħed jinnota li kwalunkwe data miġbura se tintuża esklussivament għal dan l-istudju. Jekk tagħzel li tipparteċipa, tinalab tiegħu sehem f'intervista mmexxija minn hawn taħt iffirmit. L-intervista mistennija ddum madwar ħamsa u erbgħin minuta. Jekk tixtieq, il mistoqsijiet tal-intervista jistgħu jiġu pprovduti lilek minn qabel biex jgħinuk tipprepara għas-sugġett. Barra minn hekk, jekk tippreferi tipparteċipa virtwalment, dik l-għażla hija disponibbli mingħajr ebda oġġezzjoni minn hawn taħt iffirmit. Minħabba n-natura semi-strutturata tal-intervista, il-mistoqsijiet tal-intervista huma maħsuba bħala gwida, sabiex tkun tista' telabora fuq l-aspetti li tixtieq tiddiskuti dwar is-sugġett ikkonċernat.

Id-dejta miġbura tinħażen b'mod sigur, f'fajl aċċessibbli biss għal min iffirmit hawn taħt; ir-registrazzjonijiet u t-traskrizzjonijiet għandhom jinħażnu fuq kompjuter protett bil-

password, u s-superviżuri tiegħi u s-sottoskritti biss ikollhom aċċess għal din id-dejta. Il-partecipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija għal kollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tipparteċipa, mingħajr ma jkollok bżonn tagħti raġuni.

Int liberu/a wkoll li tirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe ħin, mingħajr ma jkollok bżonn tipprovdi ebda spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjonijiet negattivi għalik. Jekk tagħzel li tirtira, kwalunkwe data miġbura mingħandek titħassar sakemm dan ikun teknikament possibbli (pereżempju, qabel ma tiġi psewdonimizzata), sakemm it tħassir tad-data ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka, liema każ għandu jinżamm f'forma psewdonimizzata.

Jekk tagħzel li tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li m'hemmx benefiċċji diretti għalik. Filwaqt li m'hemm l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat assoċjat mal-partecipazzjoni tiegħek, l-identitajiet tal-partecipanti se jiġu psewdonimizzati fid-dissertazzjoni tiegħi u kwalunkwe pubblikazzjoni relatata, biex tiġi protetta l-identità vera tiegħek. L-ebda partecipant mhu se jidentifika fid-dissertazzjoni u f'xi pubblikazzjonijiet relatati, u għalhekk, kwotazzjonijiet li jistgħu jintużaw biex juru r-riżultati se jiġu pprezentati kompletament f'format psewdonimizzati.

## **Ġestjoni tad-Data**

Id-dejta miġbura tinhażen b'mod sigur, f'fajl aċċessibbli biss għal min iffirmit hawn taħt; ir-registrazzjonijiet u t-traskrizzjonijiet għandhom jinhażnu fuq kompjuter protett bil-password, u s-superviżuri tiegħi u s-sottoskritti biss ikollhom aċċess għal din id-dejta. Jekk jogħġbok innota wkoll li, bħala partecipant, għandek id-dritt taħt il- *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR) u l-legiżlazzjoni nazzjonali li taċċessa, tirrettifika u fejn applikabbli titlob li titħassar id-data li tikkonċernak.

Id-dejta personali kollha miġbura se tiġi ttrattata bħala kunfidenzjali u għandha titħassar mat-tlestija tal-istudju u wara l-pubblikazzjoni tar-riżultati (Ġunju 2025). Barra minn hekk, sakemm ma tindikax mod ieħor hawn taħt, l-intervista tiġi rreġistrata biex tiffaċilita l-ġbir tad-dejta u aktar tard tiġi traskritta matul il-fażi tal-analiżi. Ismek mhux se jidher fid-dissertazzjoni jew fi kwalunkwe pubblikazzjoni oħra li tirriżulta minn dan l-istudju. Jistgħu jintużaw biss kwotazzjonijiet psewdonimi fid-diskrezzjoni tar-riċerkatur biex juru s-sejbiet.

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Kunsens tal-partecipant

B'dan niddikjara li qrajt l-informazzjoni dwar in-natura tal-istudju, l-involvement tiegħi u l-ġestjoni tad-dejta.

Kelli l-opportunità li nagħmel mistoqsijiet dwar l-istudju u l-mistoqsijiet tiegħi ġew imwiegħba b'mod sodisfaċenti.

Niddikjara li għandi 18-il sena jew aktar.

Nifhem li jekk ikolli xi mistoqsijiet oħra, nista' nikkuntattja lil Mr. Jonathan Galdies fuq [REDACTED] jew permezz ta' email: [REDACTED] u/jew is-supervizur tiegħu Dr Luke Buhagiar fuq [REDACTED] jew permezz ta' email: [REDACTED]

Naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju ta' riċerka.

**IMMARKA BISS JEKK APPLIKABBLI**

Naqbel li nkun identifikat fir-rekords tar-riċerka.

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Isem il-partecipant (ittri kapitali)

Isem ir-riċerkatur (ittri kapitali)

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Firma tal- partecipant

Firma tar – Riċerkatur Data

## APPENDIX D: RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

10/29/24, 3:58 PM

University of Malta Mail - Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed



Jonathan Galdies <jonathan.galdies.20@um.edu.mt>

### Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed

SWB FREC <research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt>

29 October 2024 at 14:09

REDP Application ID: SWB-2024-00599

Dear Jonathan Galdies,

Since your supervisor has confirmed that the changes have been carried out AND/OR the gatekeepers' permissions have been obtained and uploaded (as per email below), your ethics application regarding your research titled *Expert perspectives on youth radicalisation in Malta* has been **approved**.

Faculty Research Ethics Committees are authorised to review and approve research ethics applications on behalf of the University of Malta, except in the case of sensitive personal data. In this regard, your ethics proposal **does not need to be sent to UREC-DP**. Hence, **you may now start your research**.

**Disclaimer:** The research team should note that only the English versions of the documents submitted have been reviewed by FREC. It is the duty of the research team to ensure that all documents in Maltese (or any other language) are faithful translations of the English version.

Regards,



Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Faculty for Social Wellbeing  
Room 113, Humanities A Building  
+356 2340 2237 / 3220 / 3625

10/29/24, 3:58 PM

University of Malta Mail - The status of your REDP form (SWB-2024-00599) has been updated to Approved



Jonathan Galdies <jonathan.galdies.20@um.edu.mt>

### The status of your REDP form (SWB-2024-00599) has been updated to Approved

form.urec@um.edu.mt <form.urec@um.edu.mt>

29 October 2024 at 14:09

To: jonathan.galdies.20@um.edu.mt

Dear Jonathan Galdies,

Please note that the status of your REDP form (SWB-2024-00599) has been set to *Approved*.

This status change was accompanied by the following explanation/justification: *Dear Jonathan Galdies, Since the supervisor has confirmed via email that the minor changes have been carried out AND/OR all the gatekeeper's permissions have been obtained and uploaded, this application is Approved. Kindly check your UM inbox for an email with FREC's approval. Thanks and regards, SWB FREC*

You can keep track of your applications by visiting: <https://www.um.edu.mt/research/ethics/redp-form/frontEnd/>.

**\*\*This email has been automatically generated by URECA. Please do not reply. If you wish to communicate with your F/REC please use the respective email address.\*\***

## **APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROCEDURE**

Following the approval of each participant's interview invitation, a combined information and consent form (available in both English and Maltese) was sent via email to all individuals who had accepted or expressed willingness to participate in the study. This allowed participants to familiarise themselves with the research aims, scope, how their participation would help the study, and their role prior to the scheduled interview.

Interviews were arranged at a location of the participant's choosing to ensure comfort and convenience. If the consent form had not been signed beforehand, participants were asked to sign it immediately before the interview commenced, in line with ethical standards.

To create a comfortable setting and ease any initial tension, the researcher made efforts to engage in informal conversation with each participant before beginning the formal interview. However, due to time constraints, this was not always feasible. Nonetheless, this brief interaction often helped support a smoother transition into the interview questions.

Before starting, the researcher asked whether the participant was comfortable conducting the interview in English. The decision aimed to ensure consistency and accuracy in the data process, as translation between languages or dialects could introduce errors and affect the reliability of the transcriptions. Conducting interviews in English allowed for more direct and coherent dictation and transcription.

Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes to one hour. All participants were asked the same open-ended questions, and the interviews were audio recorded with their consent. Occasionally, before moving on to a new topic, the researcher asked whether the participant had anything further to add, even if their body language did not indicate so. This ensured participants had full opportunity to contribute any additional insights. Once the interview concluded and the participant confirmed they had nothing more to add, the audio recording was formally stopped.