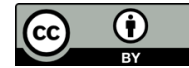


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The Connection Between State Boredom and Authoritarian Attitudes: The Moderating Role of Search for Meaning

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Abstract: The present study examined whether state boredom predicts authoritarian attitudes and whether this link is moderated by individuals' search for meaning. Based on theories describing boredom as an aversive state (accompanied by a feeling of meaninglessness that motivates efforts to restore structure and significance) and that the search for meaning can lead to authoritarian attitudes, we expected higher boredom to be associated with stronger authoritarian orientations, particularly when search for meaning is high. In a cross-sectional online survey (N = 350), participants reported their state boredom, search for meaning, and authoritarian attitudes. Boredom showed a positive correlation with authoritarian attitudes, and regression results confirmed a small but significant effect. Crucially, search for meaning moderated this association. When meaning search was low, boredom did not predict authoritarian attitudes. At average levels, the link was significant, and at high levels of search for meaning, it was strongest. These findings suggest that boredom relates to a preference for order, clarity, and authority but primarily among individuals who are already motivated to find meaning. Although the study's cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions, the results highlight boredom as a psychologically mundane yet politically relevant experience, especially for people high in searching for meaning in life.

Keywords: state boredom; search for meaning; meaning in life; worldview defense; authoritarian attitudes.

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1. Introduction

Authoritarian attitudes have once again become a topic of public focus, as large-scale polls report rising endorsement of rigid and exclusionary worldviews (Decker et al., 2024; Zick et al., 2023). Such orientations often intensify in periods of uncertainty and crisis when people seek order, control, and clear guidance (Hogg et al., 2010; Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019).

According to system justification theory, conservative, religious, and status quo-maintaining ideologies are especially attractive to people who have higher epistemic, existential, and relational motives (Jost et al., 2018). These fundamental human needs—namely, to understand the world, to avoid existential threats and to experience fulfilling interpersonal relationships can lead to the adoption of political beliefs—which an individual usually regards as the result of rational processes—to satisfy these human needs (Jost et al., 2008). The system justification theory shows that a turn towards radical ideologies does not necessarily result from a weighing up of arguments, but can be triggered by the fulfilment of other, mostly unconscious needs. Beyond classic threat accounts, everyday experiential states may also shape citizens' receptivity to authoritarian ideas. One factor for such a state is boredom, which signals low perceived meaning and insufficient engagement, and which can prompt efforts to restore purpose and direction (Eastwood et al., 2012; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012; Westgate & Wilson, 2018). Despite many opportunities for distraction, boredom remains a socially relevant topic in communication or interaction and has been linked to polarized judgments, harsher evaluations of outgroups (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011, 2016), and shifts toward rigid norms (Anderson, 2021; Heller et al., 2022a; Wolff et al., 2020).

Building on this perspective, we focused on state boredom as an antecedent of authoritarian attitudes. When people feel bored, they experience a lack of meaningful stimulation that can heighten the appeal of clear rules, firm hierarchy, and stable authority.

We further expected that the link differs in strength between people: individual difference in the search of meaning might interact with state boredom. In general, search for meaning reflects an active motivation to restore coherence and significance (Steger et al., 2008). Individuals who are strongly engaged in seeking meaning may be especially sensitive to the aversive signal of boredom (Elpidorou, 2018). In such cases, boredom may more readily translate into a desire for order and certainty and thereby providing stronger support for authoritarian ideas. The aim of the present study was therefore to test whether state boredom predicts authoritarian attitudes and whether individuals' search for meaning affects this association.

Guided by this framework, we hypothesized two relationships: (a) that higher levels of state boredom are positively associated with authoritarian attitudes, and (b) that this association is moderated by the search for meaning.

1.1. Boredom as an Aversive State

Boredom is widely understood as a negative emotional experience with high everyday relevance, yet the literature offers no single definition that fully captures all of its contours (Danckert & Eastwood, 2020; Finkielstein, 2024; Vodanovich & Watt, 2016). A highly cited definition describes boredom as the aversive feeling of wanting to act while failing to find a satisfying activity, accompanied by an unoccupied mind and the sense that cognitive resources remain

unused (Eastwood et al., 2012; Eastwood & Gorelik, 2019). People often report reduced attention, a perceived loss of meaning (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012), and a feeling of time moving slowly during a state of boredom (Westgate & Wilson, 2018). Physiologically, low and high arousal patterns are observed in bored persons, thus, it is yet unclear what actually drives the changes in mental states (Bench & Lench, 2013; Merrifield & Danckert, 2014).

In addition, psychological literature on boredom distinguishes situational experiences of boredom from dispositional tendencies (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986; Vodanovich, 2003). State boredom is brief and context dependent and can affect anyone in under-stimulating or incoherent settings, while trait boredom reflects a relatively stable individual proneness to experience boredom across many situations.

Further, recent models treat boredom as a regulatory signal that emerges when environmental demands fail to match the need for cognitive stimulation (Westgate & Wilson, 2018). Behavioral responses to boredom vary widely and can be adaptive or maladaptive, from prosocial giving (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2017) and creativity (Mann & Cadman, 2014) to substance abuse (LePera, 2011), gambling (Mercer & Eastwood, 2010), binge eating (Abramson & Stinson, 1977), or shifts toward more rigid political positions depending on the person and context (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2016).

1.2. Search for Meaning and Preference for Rigid Ideologies

Searching for meaning refers to the strength and activity of people's efforts to build a sense of purpose, significance, and direction in life (Steger et al., 2006). As a result, this search is dynamic and individualized (Delle Fave & Fava, 2011; Wong & Fry, 1998), and it can intensify or weaken in response to major life events (Vötter, 2019), cultural context (Yang et al., 2024), or mental health conditions (Wittchen & Hoyer, 2011). Krog (2014) was able to demonstrate that a sense of meaning is a key factor in psychological well-being. Furthermore, Schnell et al. (2010) divide the experience of meaning into two dimensions: meaningfulness and crisis of meaning. Schnell et al. (2018) used crisis in the experience of meaning as a basis for developing a scale for use in preventive work. They also argued that a crisis of meaningfulness should be distinguished from depression even though the two share similarities and both cause distress. It thus becomes apparent that a life without meaning entails aversive consequences, prompting individuals to imbue their existence with personal meaning. Basically, the search for meaning is meant to be a fundamental human motive and experienced meaninglessness is treated as a risk factor for health and adjustment (Frankl, 2006). System justification theory provides a striking illustration of how fundamental human motivations can foster specific—indeed radical—attitudes, even when doing so does not actually benefit one's own group (Jost et al., 2017). In addition, two aspects are of relevance here: The existence of meaning refers to the perceived availability of coherence and purpose, whereas the search for meaning refers to the active effort to gather meaning (Li et al., 2021; Steger et al., 2006). Greater presence of meaning relates to higher well-being and less depression. In contrast, strong efforts to search for meaning have diverse effects. These efforts can co-occur with distress and lower life satisfaction. Outcomes depend on moderating factors and whether the search is frustrating or empowering (Barbalet, 1999; He et al., 2023; Park et al., 2020; Steger et al., 2006, 2009).

For example, meaning is one of the five core components of the PERMA-Model and it relates to domains such as family, community, work, justice, knowledge, politics, or spirituality (Seligman, 2011, 2018). PERMA is an acronym standing for P = Positive Emotions, E = Engagement (Flow), R = Relationships, M = Meaning, A = Accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). With the PERMA model, Martin Seligmann, a leading figure in positive psychology, has created a framework that provides the building blocks for a successful, fulfilling life. As is customary in positive psychology, the focus is not on deficits or on measuring performance metrics alone; rather, it is about well-being, which in turn can have a positive impact on other aspects of life. The PERMA-Theory demonstrates that finding meaning is also a fundamental human need. As mentioned earlier, the fulfilment of human needs can also influence political attitudes (Jost et al., 2017).

People tend to search for meaning when they experience threats to perceived meaning or overall coherence. When a direct and active reaction of repair is difficult to implement or even impossible, people may then reaffirm belief systems that promise order or desired values (He et al., 2023; Womick et al., 2019, 2022), and which are triggered by accounts of social exclusion, loss of structure, role loss, uncertainty, boredom, and perceived incoherence (Greenberg et al., 1992; Heine et al., 2006; Landau et al., 2015; Thill et al., 2020; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012). This compensatory tendency helps to explain why search for meaning can increase receptivity to ideological frameworks that promise structure—such as authoritarian worldviews—especially under states of less meaningful stimulation, i.e. boredom (Van Tilburg & Igou, 2016). In other words, the search for meaning represents a key psychological mechanism through which boredom may translate into a preference for rigid norms, firm authority, and clear societal rules.

1.3. Authority as an Attractive Outcome

Authoritarian attitudes are commonly understood as relatively stable ideological orientations that privilege collective security, social order, and clear rules even when such order limits individual autonomy (Duckitt, 2006; Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013). Contemporary work summarizes three recurring facets: submission to legitimate authority, aggressive enforcement of norms, and conventionalism (Altemeyer, 1981). These orientations predict outgroup derogation and support for punitive policies, and they frequently coincide with sympathy for radical right offerings, though they are not identical to right wing extremism (Conway et al., 2018; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Lilly et al., 2025). Evidence for different facets of authoritarian attitudes shows that authoritarian aggression correlates with support for harsh punishment and prejudice, whereas conventionalism associated with value conservatism tends to show weaker direct links to prejudice (Dunwoody & Funke, 2016). Authoritarianism also overlaps with religious fundamentalism, which reveals its appeal to communities in which rigid moral orders provide identity and guidance (Pollack et al., 2024; Womick et al., 2022). Such orientations are shaped by experience and social influence, and they intensify under perceived danger and uncertainty. There are two orientations of this kind: a ‘dangerous-world-view’ is closely linked to security and order motives, while competitive dominance motives are linked to a social dominance orientation (Asbrock et al., 2010; Duckitt, 2001, 2006). Experiences of loss of meaning and control further raise the appeal of clear norms and firm hierarchy by promising coherence and guidance (Heine et al., 2006; Heller et al., 2022a, 2022b; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2011, 2016).

Perceived meaninglessness is typical for boredom and mediates for example the connection between boredom and impulsiveness (Moynihan et al., 2017), so boredom regulation is a potential route from everyday disengagement to ideological rigidity (Moynihan et al., 2017; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2016; Wolff et al., 2020), boredom might influence political self-placement and a search of meaning motivation links such boredom to more extreme political positions. At the same time, authoritarianism addresses the search for meaning by offering stable norms and unambiguous role prescriptions. Exposure to authoritarian values increases the subjective sense of meaning, which helps explain sustained appeal when personal significance feels threatened (Womick et al., 2019, 2021). In many contexts the promises of order, certainty and shared identity are tightly linked to authority and conventional order (Greenberg et al., 1992; Hogg, 2007; Hogg et al., 2010).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and based on a convenience sample of the German-speaking general population. Inclusion criteria required participants to be of legal age and have sufficient German language skills. 359 participants completed the questionnaire in full. Nine responses were excluded because participants did not meet the inclusion criteria, yielding a final sample of $N = 350$. The sample consisted of 49% men and 51% women, with a mean age of 23.25 years ($SD = 1.26$). The largest age group comprised participants aged 21–29 years (46%), followed by those aged 18–20 years (28%), 30–39 years (9%), 40–49 years (6%), 50–59 years (6%), and 60 years or older (3%). Regarding educational background, 43% of participants reported holding a general university entrance qualification (Abitur or equivalent), 22% held an academic degree (Bachelor's, Master's, or Doctorate), 13% had completed vocational training, 13% reported an intermediate secondary qualification, and 7% held a lower secondary school certificate. Geographically, the majority of respondents were located in North Rhine-Westphalia (74%), with smaller proportions from Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Hessen, and other federal states.

2.2. Questionnaires

State boredom was assessed using the German Multidimensional State Boredom Scale (MSBS; Zerr et al., 2024). The 29-item self-report instrument measures disengagement, arousal, inattention, time perception, and need for stimulation (e.g., 'I feel bored', 'My thoughts wander'). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = completely true), with higher scores indicating greater boredom. Internal consistency was $\alpha = .95$.

The search for meaning was measured using the German Search for Meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Pfeifer et al., 2024). The subscale includes five items (e.g., 'I am looking for a purpose or mission in life') rated on a 7-point scale (1 = absolutely untrue, 7 = absolutely true). Internal consistency was $\alpha = .87$.

Authoritarian Attitudes was assessed with the Balanced Right-wing Authoritarianism Scale (B-RWA-6; Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2015). The six-item scale captures authoritarian submission, aggression, and conventionalism (e.g., 'We should be grateful for leaders who tell

us what to do'). Responses were given on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree). After reverse coding, higher values indicate stronger authoritarian attitudes ($\alpha = .62$).

The questionnaire was online available between June 27 and July 31, 2025, via the platform Unipark (www.unipark.com).

2.3. Analyses

Accordingly, two hypotheses were derived:

H1 State boredom predicts authoritarian attitudes.

H1 Search for meaning moderates this relationship, such that the positive correlation between state boredom and authoritarian attitudes becomes higher as measures of search for meaning increase.

To examine the association between state boredom, search for meaning, and authoritarian attitudes, a series of regression-based analyses was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30.0; IBM Corp., 2020). Prior to analysis, total scores according to each scale's specifications were calculated and scale scores were z-standardized afterwards.

First, descriptive statistics, reliability estimates, and correlations were calculated. Next, simple linear and moderated regression models were run using the PROCESS macro (Model 1; Hayes, 2022). Outcomes and predictors were centered and scaled (i.e., transformed into z-scores) to facilitate interpretation of the coefficients in standard deviation units, thus as standardized effect sizes. Robust HC3 standard errors were used whenever heteroskedasticity was indicated by the Breusch–Pagan test (Hayes & Cai, 2007). Significant interactions were probed using simple slopes at (–1 SD), M, and (+1 SD) of the moderator. Further, a Johnson-Neyman technique was used to probe the interaction between state boredom and search for meaning on authoritarian attitudes. Assumptions of linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and independence were evaluated through standard diagnostics and were considered adequately met.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and correlations are presented in Table 1. Overall, the reliabilities of the measures were good to excellent and closely matched those reported in the respective validation studies (Aichholzer & Zeglovits, 2015; Cohen, 1988; Pfeifer et al., 2024; Zerr et al., 2024). Participants reported relatively high levels of state boredom ($M = 106.63$, $SD = 36.20$), closely mirroring the German validation study on experimentally induced boredom ($M = 106.22$, $SD = 35.84$). The Search for Meaning subscale also showed mean values comparable to the German validation sample ($M = 20.31$, $SD = 8.86$). Notably, the standard deviation was a bit higher, suggesting greater heterogeneity in meaning-seeking within the present sample. Authoritarian attitudes were moderate on average ($M = 18.49$, $SD = 4.32$), and correlations were largely consistent with previous research. State boredom correlated strongly and positively with search for meaning ($r = .64$, $p < .001$), which is in line with prior findings demonstrating a robust link between boredom and search for meaning (Chan et al., 2018; Igou et al., 2024; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012; Van Tilburg et al., 2013; Westgate & Wilson, 2018). The association between state boredom and authoritarian attitudes was positive and of moderate size ($r = .28$, $p < .001$).

The smallest correlation found described the relation between search for meaning and authoritarian attitudes, which was positive but weak ($r = .17, p < .001$).

Table 1. Reliabilities, Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product–Moment Correlations

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3
1 State Boredom	106.63	36.20	0.96	-		
2 Search for Meaning	20.31	8.86	0.94	0.64**	-	
3 RWA	18.49	4.32	0.66	0.284**	0.172**	-

Note. $N = 350$; $\alpha =$ Cronbachs Alpha.; ** $p < 0.001$; RWA = Right-Wing-Authoritarianism.

3.1. Regression Analyses

A simple regression with state boredom as predictor and authoritarian attitudes as outcome explained 6.0% of the total variance ($R^2 = .064$; $F(1, 349) = 23.630$; $p < .001$). Higher boredom predicted higher authoritarian attitudes ($\beta = .252$; $SE = .053$; $t = 4.861$; $p < .001$). Next, we tested whether search for meaning moderates the association between boredom and authoritarian attitudes (for details, see Table 2): the overall model explained 8.9% of the total variance ($R^2 = .089$; $F(3, 346) = 7.726$; $p < .001$; note, HC3-robust standard errors were used). The main effect of boredom was positive and significant ($\beta = .252$; $SE = .063$; $t = 4.014$; $p < .001$), while the main effect of meaning search was not ($\beta = .003$; $SE = .066$; $t = 0.496$; $p = .960$). The interaction between boredom and search of meaning was significant, even though the effect size was small ($\beta = .159$; $SE = .059$; $t = 2.682$; $p < .01$). Further, testing for multicollinearity showed low overall values for State Boredom (VIF: 1.606; Tolerance: 0.623), Search for Meaning (VIF: 1.656; Tolerance: 0.604) and the interaction of both (VIF: 1.053; Tolerance: 0.949).

Table 2. Regression Analysis Predicting Authoritarian Attitudes with Search for Meaning as Moderator

Variable	β	SE	t	p	95% CI	
					LL	UL
Constant	-.078	.058	-1.35	.179	-0.194	0.036
State Boredom (A)	.252	.063	4.014	.001	0.129	0.376
Meaning (B)	.003	.066	0.496	.960	-0.128	0.135
State Boredom x Meaning	.159	.059	2.682	.007	0.042	0.275

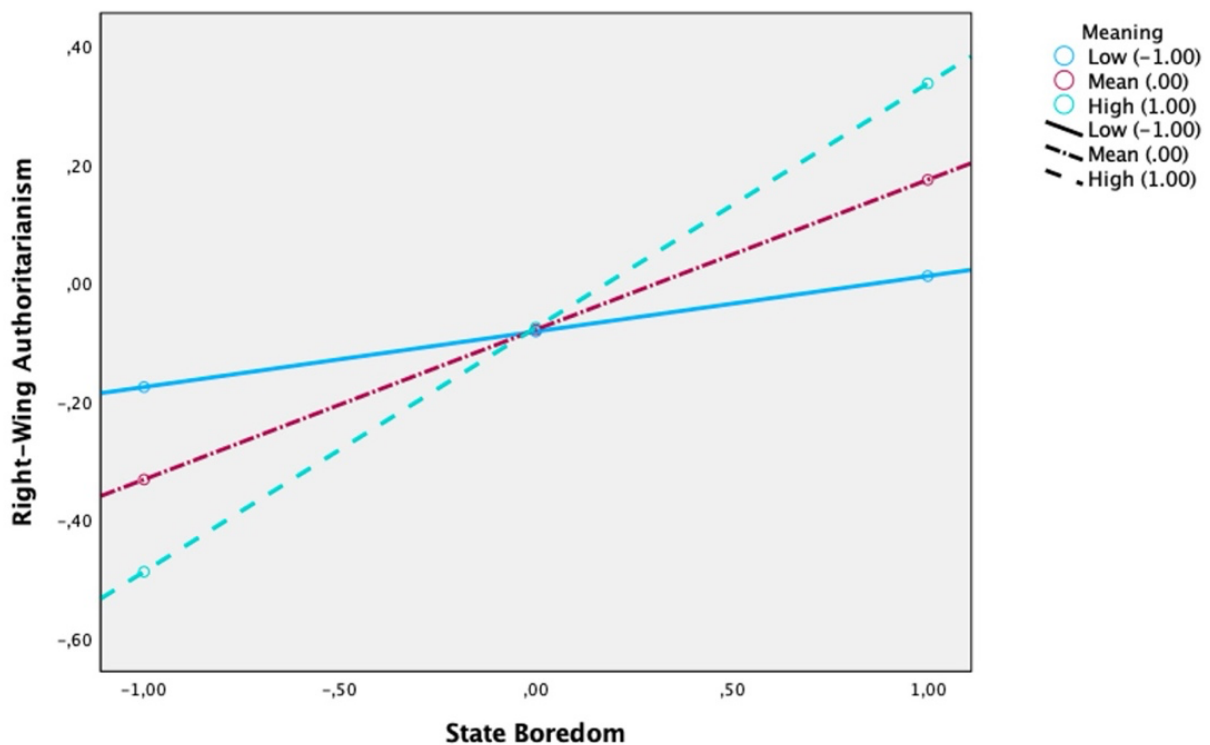
Note. $N = 350$; Standardized coefficients were reported; $R^2 = .089$; $F(3, 346) = 7.726$, $p < .001$.; CI = confidence interval.

Simple slope analyses indicated that the boredom–authoritarianism link increased with search for meaning (see Figure 1). At small values for search for meaning (-1 SD) the slope was not significant ($\beta = .093$; $SE = .082$; $t = 1.135$; $p = .257$, while it was for average search of meaning values ($\beta = .252$; $SE = .063$; $t = 4.014$; $p < .001$). At largest values of search for meaning ($+1$ SD) the slope was steepest ($\beta = .412$; $SE = .090$; $t = 4.562$; $p < .001$). This pattern supports the hypothesis that search for meaning amplifies the positive association between boredom and authoritarian attitudes. Last but not least, a Johnson-Neyman technique was used to probe the interaction between state boredom and search for meaning: the effect of state boredom on

authoritarian attitudes was non-significant within search for meaning values below -0.63. The effect was statistically significant ($p < .05$) only when the search for meaning reaches values of -0.63 and higher, showing that about 30% of our observation (ranging lower than half a standard deviation below the average of search for meaning values) showed not significant moderator effect, while about 70% did.

Taken together, these findings provide robust empirical support for both hypotheses.

Figure 1. Conditional Effect of State Boredom on Authoritarian Attitudes as a Function of Individuals' Search for Meaning



4. Discussion

The present study examined the relation between boredom, authoritarian attitudes and search for meaning. Moreover, we demonstrated in a German sample, that the individual search for meaning significantly moderated the positive link between boredom and authoritarian attitude; the boredom–authoritarianism relation was negligible at low values for search for meaning and strongest at high values of search for meaning. Thus, boredom related to authoritarian attitudes most clearly among participants striving intensively for meaning.

These findings align with accounts that see boredom as an aversive signal for lack of meaning that intensify needs for structure, clarity, and control (Eastwood et al., 2012; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2012; Westgate & Wilson, 2018). Further, experiences that undermine coherence or control are meant to activate security motives and norm enforcement (Duckitt, 2001). These latter ideas and theoretical perspectives are supported by the present study results: when search for meaning is intensified, boredom is more readily channeled into ideational order, rendering

authority and clear rules comparatively attractive. This interpretation dovetails with evidence that authoritarian belief systems supply meaning by themselves and offer to sustain appeal under felt significance deficits (Womick et al., 2019, 2021). In addition, boredom is linked to polarized judgments and more rigid positions via meaning-regulation processes (Moynihan et al., 2017; Van Tilburg & Igou, 2016; Wolff et al., 2020).

4.1. Limitations and Future Directions

Causal claims are prohibited by the cross-sectional design of the study, therefore the temporal order of effects of third variables are equally likely in explaining all observed relations (Bortz & Schuster, 2011; Cook et al., 2002).

We also used established instruments for boredom, search for meaning, and authoritarianism, all being self-report scales (mono-method biases are likely). The balanced format of the RWA scale reduces acquiescence but typically lowers internal consistency, which was modest here and likely attenuates effects rather than exaggerates them (Schriesheim et al., 1991).

A post hoc power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) showed that the regression analyses were run with high statistical power (=R1-Power= .999 and R2-power=0.898, respectively). Future research might clarify whether changes in boredom precede shifts in ideology in daily life contexts (Gana et al., 2019). Experimental inductions of boredom through monotony or underload, combined with manipulations of meaning affordances, might establish causal links and test boundary conditions.

Although state boredom and search for meaning were strongly correlated ($r = .64$), multicollinearity diagnostics remained well below critical thresholds (all VIFs < 2). The overlap between both constructs is theoretically plausible because contemporary boredom theories conceptualize boredom as a state closely tied to perceived meaninglessness and insufficiently meaningful engagement. Previous research further suggests that perceived meaninglessness represents a central mechanism linking boredom to other psychological outcomes such as impulsiveness (Moynihan et al., 2017).

4.2. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that state boredom is associated with stronger authoritarian attitudes, and that this relationship is pronounced among individuals with a heightened search for meaning. Boredom appears to signal a lack of meaningful stimulation and, for those highly involved in search for meaning is more readily translated into a preference for order, clarity, and hierarchy. This pattern aligns with accounts that link aversive states to efforts toward restoring coherence, thereby potentially explaining why disengagement spills over into ideological rigidity. Being of correlational nature, the present data nevertheless highlights that boredom as a psychologically mundane yet politically, relevant state and that interventions that build tolerance for ambiguity or strengthen reflective coping with boredom, might reduce the pull of authoritarian solutions, when seeking for meaning in life.

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