

ONLINE ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION AND SELF-ESTEEM OF ETHNIC MAJORITY: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ETHNIC ONLINE ORIENTATION

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Этническая дискриминация в сети и самооценка представителей этнического большинства: медиативная роль этнической ориентации в сети

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Abstract

Online experiences of ethnic discrimination may constitute major stressors not only for self-esteem of ethnic minority, but also for the self-esteem of ethnic majority, with the growing involvement of the planet's population in information and communication technologies. Today, research has increasingly begun to raise the question that discrimination, acculturation and intercultural orientation of ethnic majorities have hardly been studied, since almost all attention was directed to the study of these phenomena among ethnic minorities. This study fills this gap by examining the association between online ethnic discrimination and self-esteem of Russian majority members, taking into account the potential medi-

Резюме

Опыт этнической дискриминации в сети может стать серьезным вызовом не только для самооценки этнического меньшинства, но и для самооценки этнического большинства по мере роста вовлеченности населения планеты в информационно-коммуникационные технологии. Сегодня в исследованиях все чаще стал подниматься вопрос о том, что дискриминация, аккультурация, межкультурные ориентации этнического большинства мало изучены, поскольку практически все внимание было направлено на изучение данных феноменов у этнических меньшинств. В настоящем исследовании данный пробел восполняется путем изучения связи между этнической дискриминацией в онлайн-среде и самооценкой представителей русского большинства России с учетом потенциального опосредующего фактора этнической

The study was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, project N 19-18-00169, <https://rscf.ru/project/19-18-00169>

Исследование выполнено при поддержке Российского научного фонда, проект № 19-18-00169, <https://rscf.ru/project/19-18-00169>

ing factor of ethnic online orientation expressed in involvement in ethnic online networks and the manifestation of ethnic online activism. A cross-sectional study was undertaken among 229 ethnic majority members based in the Moscow region of Russia. The research included methods designed to identify the level of online ethnic discrimination, self-esteem, involvement in online ethnic networks and online ethnic activism. The path analysis shows that perceiving online ethnic discrimination is associated with the preference of ethnic online orientation, which in turn results in the growth of self-esteem. At the same time, the negative direct effect of online discrimination on self-esteem remains. The results of the study are discussed through the prism of the acculturation of the ethnic majority in the online environment.

Keywords: online ethnic discrimination, ethnic online orientation, involvement in ethnic online networks, online ethnic activism, self-esteem, ethnic majority, ethnic Russians.

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ориентации в Интернете, выражающейся в вовлеченности в этнические онлайн-сети и проявлении этнической активности в онлайн-среде. Кросс-секционное исследование было проведено среди 229 представителей русского этнического большинства, проживающих в Московском регионе. В исследовании применялись методики, предназначенные для выявления уровня этнической дискриминации в онлайн-среде, самооценки, вовлеченности в этнические онлайн-сети и этнического онлайн-активизма. Результаты путевого анализа показали, что восприятие этнической дискриминации в онлайн-среде связано с ростом предпочтения этнической ориентации в сети, что, в свою очередь, приводит к росту самооценки. В то же время негативное прямое влияние этнической дискриминации в онлайн-среде на самооценку сохраняется. Результаты исследования обсуждаются через призму аккультурации и адаптации этнического большинства в онлайн-среде.

Ключевые слова: этническая дискриминация в онлайн-среде, этническая ориентация в сети, вовлеченность в этнические онлайн-сети, этническая активность в сети, самооценка, этническое большинство, русские

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Following intercultural contact, there is much evidence that the experience of ethnic discrimination is associated with psychological stress (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009) and with a low level of psychological well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014). In addition, ethnic discrimination has long been recognized as a key factor in promoting the growth of ethnic identity (Branscombe et al., 1999), and a factor motivating individual and collective actions for social change (Wright & Tropp, 2002). It has also promoted the desire to seek support from a co-ethnic group (Arat & Bilgili, 2021), often by choosing a separation strategy in intercultural interaction (Berry & Sabatier, 2010). However, all of these results have been found mostly in samples in ethnic minorities and immigrants (Verkuyten, 1998; Berry et al., 2006; Lepshokova

et al., 2018) but rarely studied at all among members of the ethnic majority. Despite the fact that ethnic majority has a considerable impact on intercultural interaction in plural societies (Brown & Zagefka, 2011), little is known about the acculturation orientations and psychological well-being of majority-group members and the factors influencing them (Kunst et al., 2021; Zagefka et al., 2022). One exception is the international study (Berry, 2017) that included majority samples in the examination of the impact of the experience of discrimination on their wellbeing. In addition to the effect of discrimination on wellbeing, there is also evidence that discrimination affects the acculturation strategies of members of non-dominant groups and the acculturation expectations of dominant group members (Berry, 2017).

Most intercultural contact has traditionally been face-to-face (in person). However, with the growing involvement of many populations in information and communication technologies (Tynes et al., 2016), it has become clear that ethnic discrimination can take place virtually (online) and possibly affect everyone, regardless of ethnic status. This is mainly due to the fact that there are a large number of international open, latent, low-level, potential and other types of conflicts in the world that affect the communication of people of different nationalities with different ethnic status in online networks. At the present time, online hate and abuse is a major social and psychological problem, especially for those in minority or marginalized communities (Waldron, 2014).

Since online ethnic discrimination directed toward an ethnic majority has not yet been studied, it is not clear whether it leads to the same psychological and social consequences as ethnic discrimination of an ethnic minority in offline and online contexts. Because of this lack, the focus of our study is the role of online ethnic discrimination in the levels of psychological well-being, in particular in the self-esteem of members of an ethnic majority.

As we noted above, ethnic discrimination is associated with negative effects on psychological well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014), in particular on self-esteem (Verkuyten, 1998). Furthermore, according to the multiculturalism hypothesis, perceived discrimination is an indicator of threat and insecurity and it negatively affects the psychological and intercultural adaptation of both members of the ethnic minority and the ethnic majority (Berry et al., 2022).

This study focuses on the Russian ethnic majority members living in Moscow. The Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences has examined the problem of interethnic harmony in Moscow. They found that about 60% of Muscovites spoke in favor of limiting the arrival of people from the Russian republics in their city for permanent residence or earnings. More than a third of the city's residents did not feel safe. In this insecure and threatening situation, negative attitudes towards immigrants of other ethnicities are likely to form.

However, there are different coping mechanisms helping individuals to deal with the negative impacts of discrimination on their well-being (Goreis et al., 2020; Arat & Bilgili, 2021), such as increased identification with one's in-group (Branscombe et al., 1999). In-group identification was postulated to be an important factor that potentially mitigates the consequences of ethnic discrimination (Mewes et al., 2015), high levels thereof can provide people with the resources to counteract the harm caused by

discrimination. The rejection-identification model (Branscombe et al., 1999) depicts this buffering process as mediation and states that although perceived discrimination is negatively related to psychological well-being, it may also enhance in-group identification, in turn having a positive effect on psychological well-being (Jetten et al., 2017). At the same time, perceived discrimination can lead to the choice of a separation strategy in intercultural interaction, which in turn is often associated with low psychological well-being (Berry et al., 2006; Berry & Sabatier, 2010).

In this study, we consider that an ethnic orientation in an online network will be manifested through online ethnic activism that advocates the upholding of the rights of one's ethnic group, as well as in involvement in ethnic online networks (Johnson, 2010). This variable may be considered as closely related to the separation acculturation orientation. Therefore, this study has explored the mediating role of ethnic online orientation in the relationship between online discrimination and self-esteem among members of an ethnic majority.

Study Hypotheses

We hypothesized that:

H1: Online ethnic discrimination is negatively associated with the self-esteem among members of the ethnic majority.

H2: Online ethnic discrimination is positively associated with ethnic online orientation among members of the ethnic majority.

H3: Ethnic online orientation is positively associated with self-esteem among members of the ethnic majority.

Research question:

Does ethnic online orientation mediate the relationship between online ethnic discrimination and self-esteem?

The tested model is presented in Figure 1.

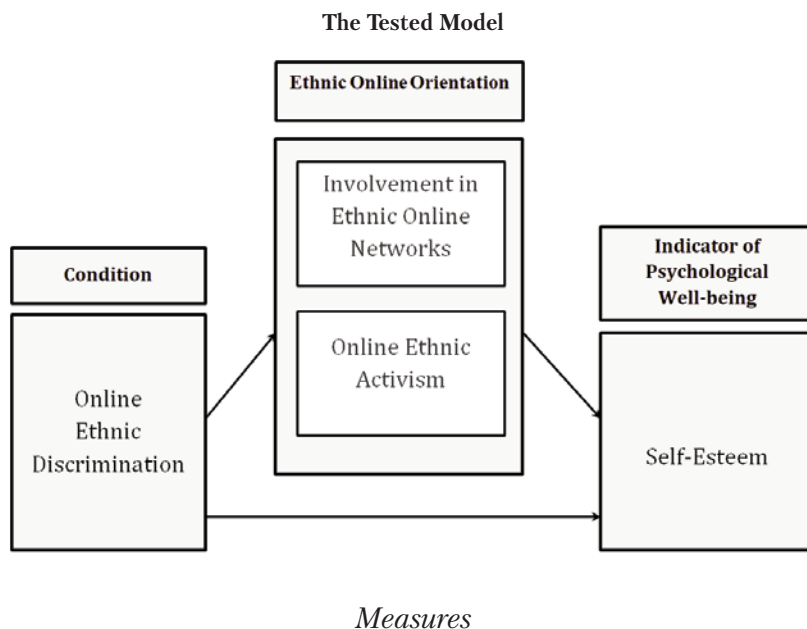
Method

Participants

We conducted our study in the Moscow region of Russia (Moscow and Moscow area), employing a research design that includes members of the Russian ethnic majority only. Participants of the study were recruited using a special online platform *anketolog.ru* for conducting surveys. Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary.

The study involved 229 ethnic Russians aging between 19 and 72 years ($M = 38$, $SD = 11.02$, 65% female); 33.6% of participants had complete secondary or specialized secondary education; 66.4% of participants had higher education, (i.e., a bachelor's or master's degree). Evaluating their income, 43% of participants had an income below average, 31% of participants had an average income, 15% of participants had above average income.

Figure 1



All measures were rated on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert scale.

Online Ethnic Discrimination, measured by six items, assessed to what extent participants felt they were discriminated against during communication in online networks. For instance, “Some people in the comments to the posts were rude me because of my nationality”, ($\alpha = .91$). The items were averaged to constitute a single online ethnic discrimination score.

Ethnic online orientation was measured using scale of *Involvement in Ethnic Online Networks* consisting of three items ($\alpha = .88$), for instance: “I subscribe to web pages that post information about my ethnic group or its representatives” and scale of *Online Ethnic Activism* consisting of five items ($\alpha = .90$), for instance: “I could post on my web page a political slogan in defense of the rights of my ethnic group”.

Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). This scale consisted of four items ($\alpha = .80$) from Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”, “I am able to do things as well as most other people”).

Sociodemographic data (gender, age, level of education, income, religious affiliation) were self-reported.

Statistical analyses

We used linear regression analyses for controlling sociodemographic variables. For testing the specific predictions, we used structural equation modeling with AMOS version 22. Maximum-Likelihood estimation was used to model the direct and indirect effects of online ethnic discrimination on self-esteem using 5,000 bootstrapped samples.

Results

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the measures of the variables. Table 1 shows that the level of online ethnic discrimination is weak, the level of involvement in ethnic online networks is slightly more pronounced, and the level of online ethnic activism is rather pronounced. The level of self-esteem is quite high.

The possible effects of demographic variables on involvement in ethnic online networks, online ethnic activism and self-esteem were examined using linear regression to test the need to control for them in subsequent analyses. Gender ($\beta = -.17$; $p < .05$) and income ($\beta = 0.14$; $p < .05$) were the most salient predictors that is why they were statistically controlled for in subsequent analyses.

At the next stage of our analysis, we tested associations between online ethnic discrimination, ethnic online orientation and self-esteem using structural equation modeling (Figure 2).

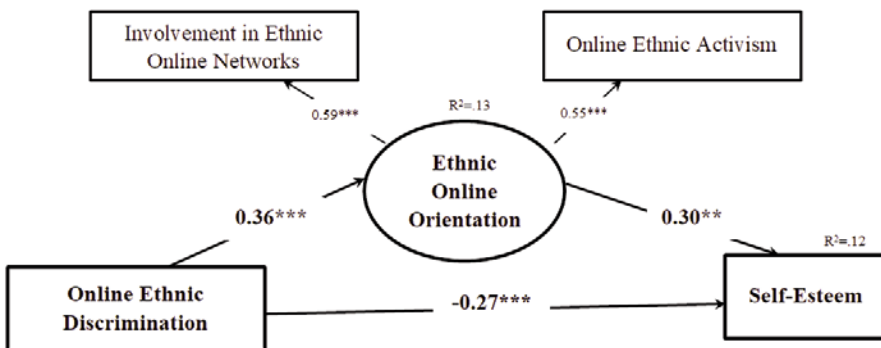
Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of the Target Variables

Target variables	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Online Ethnic Discrimination	1.00	5.00	1.19	0.50
Involvement in Ethnic Online Networks	1.00	5.00	1.92	0.99
Online Ethnic Activism	1.00	5.00	2.74	0.98
Self-Esteem	1.00	5.00	3.94	0.70

Figure 2

Path Model of Associations between Online Ethnic Discrimination, Ethnic Online Orientation and Self-Esteem



** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Note. The parameters represent standardized coefficients. The model fit indicators were acceptable: CMIN/df = 1.13, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .02, PCLOSE = .76, sRMR = .05.

As can be seen, online ethnic discrimination was negatively related to self-esteem ($\beta = -.27, p < .001$). Online ethnic discrimination was positively related to ethnic online orientation ($\beta = .36, p < .001$). The relationship between ethnic online orientation and self-esteem was positive and significant ($\beta = .30, p < .01$). Then we evaluated the significance of indirect effects of online ethnic discrimination on self-esteem, using Maximum-Likelihood estimation and 5,000 bootstrapped samples. The analysis shows that there was a significant positive indirect effect of online ethnic discrimination on self-esteem through ethnic online orientation ($\beta = .11, p < .05$), but the direct link was negative and significant ($\beta = -.27, p < .001$).

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the associations between online ethnic discrimination, ethnic online orientation (involvement in ethnic online networks and online ethnic activism) and self-esteem in a sample of ethnic majority members living in Russia. We also explored the stress-buffering effect of in-group identification in the relationship between online ethnic discrimination and self-esteem through ethnic online orientation.

The first hypothesis of this study about the negative relationship between online ethnic discrimination and self-esteem among members of the ethnic majority was fully confirmed: the experience of ethnic discrimination in online communication has a negative effect on the self-esteem of ethnic Russians. Previous studies have also found a direct negative effect of discrimination on self-esteem (Verkuyten, 1998; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). However, most of these results were obtained with samples of an ethnic minority, and were in an offline context. Our result shows that the online context of discrimination negatively affects the self-esteem of members of an ethnic majority, which indicates the universality of this pattern of relationship for both the ethnic minority and the majority.

The second hypothesis of this study about a positive relationship between online ethnic discrimination and ethnic online orientation measured by involvement in ethnic online networks and online ethnic activism among members of the ethnic majority was fully confirmed: the more ethnic Russians experience ethnic discrimination in online communication, the more they prefer an ethnic orientation in the online environment. In other words, involvement in the online networks of their ethnic group allows them to increase their sense of belonging with their ethnic group and to receive support from co-ethnics. Previous studies have found that when ethnic minorities in offline context are faced with discrimination, they may feel excluded from the majority group and turn more towards their ethnic group for support (Berry et al., 2006; Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Arat & Bilgili, 2021).

The Rejection-Identification Model (RIM) argues that feelings of threat towards one's ingroup (e.g. discrimination) can strengthen an individual's identification with their ingroup and, relatedly, increase their social relationships with their co-ethnics (Branscombe et al., 1999). Our results indicate that in the online context, the experience of ethnic discrimination by members of the ethnic majority leads to the involvement of co-ethnic online networks. Moreover, the more ethnic

Russians experience ethnic discrimination in online communication, the more they are ready to demonstrate ethnic activism on the Internet, which is associated with protecting the rights of their ethnic group. Overall, previous studies show that discrimination is positively associated with activism in the form of collective action (Uluğ & Tropp, 2021). For example, in a study of the reaction of White people to racial discrimination against Black people, it was found that White participants who watch a brief video depicting discriminatory incidents targeting Black people tended to show greater motivation to engage in collective action for racial justice (Uluğ & Tropp, 2021). The results of the present study indicate that the personal experience of discrimination in the online context by members of the ethnic majority leads to the manifestation of ethnic activism on the Internet, which is expressed by the desire to participate in collective and individual actions aimed at protecting the rights of one's ethnic group.

Our third hypothesis of a positive relationship of ethnic online orientation and self-esteem among members of the ethnic majority was fully confirmed. Similar results were obtained in samples of immigrant youth in 13 countries (Berry et al., 2006).

In our study, we tested possible mediation in the relationship between online ethnic discrimination and self-esteem through ethnic online orientation (involvement in ethnic online networks and online ethnic activism). The relationship between online ethnic discrimination and self-esteem was partially mediated by ethnic online orientation. This means that the more ethnic Russians in the virtual environment feel discriminated against, the more they prefer ethnic orientation on the Internet, which in turn increases their self-esteem. It should be noted that the direct negative effect of online ethnic discrimination on self-esteem also persists. Our results indicate that ethnic online orientation, expressed in involvement in ethnic online networks and the manifestation of online ethnic activism, acts as a strategy for coping with discrimination on the Internet, which makes it possible to increase self-esteem in a situation of discrimination. In this regard, it resembles the separation strategy, where an ethnic orientation has been shown to promote psychological adaptation in immigrant youth (Berry et al., 2006).

Conclusion

Our study may be seen as part of the current effort to examine the acculturation and adaptation of majority populations (Kunst et al., 2021; Zagefka et al., 2022). It gives us a perspective on the acculturation of the majority group in a virtual environment, where the process of acculturation also takes place. Just as for minority group members, the majority also experiences ethnic discrimination. One of the main ideas of the study is that while the ethnic majority in their countries does not face much discrimination offline, this is not the case on the Internet. On the Internet, "everyone is equal" and national status does not play any protective role. The results of this study show that the experience of online ethnic discrimination among the ethnic majority lowers their self-esteem and increases their ethnic identity manifestations through such online of the ethnic online orientation by their involvement in ethnic online networks and online ethnic activism. At the same

time, ethnic online orientation can help members of the ethnic majority cope with the negative impact of online ethnic discrimination on their self-esteem. From a theoretical point of view this study expands the scope of ideas about the acculturation orientations of the majority, in particular in the online context. From a practical point of view these findings support the need for psychologists to assess and provide people with strategies for coping with the effects of online ethnic discrimination.

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