

Abstract-English

Title	Virtual construction of the ethnic self: An analysis of the visual framing of in-/out-group perceptions (of Sinhalese) on social media in Sri Lanka (2009-2018)
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This study examines the determinants of Sinhalese ethnic self-image in the post-2009 Sri Lanka utilizing the conceptual framework of ethnocentrism — scaling both in- and out-group/s based on in-group folkways/culture/beliefs. Psychological theories of ethnocentrism assume that between-person variability (individual personality traits) determines one's level of ethnocentrism, while sociological theories advocate various social, structural, and situational factors (i.e., resource-based competition, perceived threat, education, income). Variables like religiosity have been vaguely treated in many studies, while a few predict spurious relationship between religiosity and ethnocentrism. Given that, the present study explores the question, 'to what extent religiosity characterizes ethnic self-image, and predicts out-group antipathy' using publicly available images (N=2033, coded and quantified using visual-content analysis tools) on social media produced mainly by Sinhalese communities online. The present study operationalizes ethnocentrism in a three-choice multinomial logit model — ethnic pride, intolerance or neither — and employs perceived threat (material/symbolic), religiosity (own/perceived out-group) and conspiracy theories as explanatory variables. The results show, first, that Sinhalese are ethnically proud, but none of the three independent variables significantly correlate with ethnic pride. Secondly, while perceived threat accounts for the largest variance of intolerance, the other two variables show a relatively weaker (but statistically significant) effect. Thirdly, although religiosity weakly predicts intolerance, when the interaction between any two independent variables is tested, religiosity increases the salience of the other variables. However, the above findings are drawn from the images produced by communities online, and the present study acknowledges the possible gap between the ontology of online and the offline world. The study concludes that the self-image constructed by Sinhalese is not merely a 'religious Sinhaleanness,' and religiosity is not the primary predictor of their out-group intolerance. Instead, material and symbolic threat perceptions strongly affect Sinhalese ethnic self-image, particularly their out-group intolerance.