

Intergroup Conflict and National Identity:

The Role of Exposure to Verbal Assault, Media Influences, and Desire for Self-Reliance

Azzam Amin, Mohamed Abdelrahman, Youssef Hasan, & Jasper Van Assche

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This study examined the roles of perceived influence of the media, exposure to verbal assault, and desire for self-reliance on the national identity. Using an online self-reported questionnaire from Qatari college students ($N = 293$). Mediation analysis revealed that both perceived media influence and desire for self-reliance fully mediated the effects of exposure to verbal assault on the national identity. The findings support the efficacy of strategies which targeted the development and implementation of media and economic programs fostering the construction and/or strengthening of the sense of national identity.

Keywords: Gulf crisis, blockade, national identity, self-reliance, media influence.

Introduction

Historically, Qatar had a political dispute with Bahrain and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). For example, after many years of dispute between Qatar and Bahrain on the Hawar Islands since 1936, the International Court of Justice resolved this dispute in 2001. Similarly, there was a political tension between Qatar and KSA on who has the sovereignty on the border in 1992 (Weigand, 2012; Okruhlik & Conge, 1999). Moreover, the diplomatic atmosphere between Qatar and KSA, Bahrain, and the United Arab of Emirates (UAE) was tense since Qatar adopted a strong political attitude towards certain Arab issues. For example, Qatar supported the Arab spring movements in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, while the other Gulf countries countries were dissatisfied with this political support of Qatar. As a conclusion, Qatar's political attitudes were not in line with those of its regional counterparts (KSA, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt).

In June 2017, three Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) (Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Bahrain), along with Egypt, announced that they were severing all ties with Qatar, issued a 13-point list of demands, and asked Qatar to comply with all of them; these demands included, for example, closing of Qatari-run media such as Al Jazeera, ceasing military cooperation with Turkey, scaling down diplomatic ties with Iran and closing the Iranian diplomatic missions in Qatar. The Qatari government and citizens considered the 13 demands as a flagrant violation of national sovereignty. Therefore, the government in Qatar urged citizens to support their ruler and defend their country (Government Communication Office [GCO], 2017).

Furthermore, national appeals by local citizens of Qatar emerged, urging for independence from the other Gulf states. A national survey conducted by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute in Qatar (2017) revealed that around 62% of Qataris believed that Qatar should be completely independent of regional alliances, which is a strong indicator of the average national identity in the country. Since this announcement, some individuals of the blockade countries displayed aggression against Qatari citizens on different

platforms. For example, television programs were dedicated to attacking Qatar—accusing them of supporting terrorism (Allagui & Akdenizli, 2019). On television, Qataris were threatened that they will no longer be supplied with daily needs such as food and other basics. New accounts have been created on social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) that were clearly dedicated to attacking Qatar and Qatari citizens (Mitchell, 2019). During this crisis, and in reaction to the situation, Qatar’s social and political atmosphere called to support the ruler and stay united in defending the country (Mitchell & Allagui, 2019; Ulrichsen, 2018). Moreover, local television channels dedicated a substantial number of programs to the crisis and how citizens and expatriates should handle it socially, economically, and psychologically (Bayoumy, 2018). For instance, the GCO (2017) issued a press release urging Qatari citizens to not respond aggressively to the verbal assaults on social media platforms. Additionally, social media platforms listed several supportive slogans related to Qatar, such as “Our tribe is Qatar,” “Qatar is not alone,” and “Raise your head, you are a Qatari” (Oruc, 2019). Such actions potentially further increased Qataris’ sense of national identity.

Qatar, historically, consists of different autonomous tribes, and the current political context in the region and bellicose attitude of its immediate neighboring countries, created an urgent need to develop a robust sense of national identity, the main instrument enabling Qatar to thwart the political pressures it suffered at the time. Seminal studies in social sciences have shown that some of factors interact to influence the construction and/or strengthening of the sense of national identity, for example, verbal assault, and tailored media strategies (Meeus et al., 2010; Kim, 2016; Wojcieszak, M., & Garrett, 2018; Valera-Ordaz, 2018). However, desire of self-reliance is a new factor that, to our knowledge, has not been investigated. We expect that it will play a significant role in enhancing people’s national identity, because as we mentioned earlier, Qatar received their daily needs from KSA and UAE, and when blockade has taken place, they found the need to depend on themselves in developing national manufactures to save their needs. For example, they started to establish facilities aimed to

achieve national sufficiency of diaries and vegetables. Moreover, the Qatari government has given privileges to Qatari youth in an attempt to encourage them to start small business and depend on themselves. Meanwhile and during the blockade, there were calls from Qatari citizens to depend on themselves in producing their daily needs of food and become independent from their neighbors (KSA and UAE). Moreover, national self-reliance, where the dimension refers to the desire for self-reliance at the national level to achieve economic and political autonomy and decrease one's dependence on others in the GCC region, aims at prioritizing the development of national resources to promote local production and foster welfare among local citizens. Moreover, the demands for self-reliance usually emerge during or after a conflict/aversive event (e.g., Fraile, 2013; Hébert & Mincyte, 2014; Sarukkai, 2020). Therefore, to date, there is scarce empirical evidence demonstrating that these factors influence the construction and/or strengthening of the sense of national identity. The principal aim of the current study is to confirm this hypothesis.

Accordingly, we investigated the role of verbal assault, the desire for autonomy (i.e., self-reliance), and the perceived influence of local television and social media platforms in promoting national identity among Qatari youth.

National Identity

National identity refers to shared values, ideals, beliefs, historical and cultural traditions, and national sovereignty of a country's citizens (Liu & Turner, 2018). According to Triandafyllidou (1998), the concept of national identity becomes meaningful through the presence of others who belong to different groups. Since Tajfel and Turner (1979) demonstrated that members who develop a sense of belonging to their ingroup are more inclined to perceive outgroup members as divergent, the desire to set up boundaries between insiders and outsiders as proof of citizenship is linked to national identity (Joppke & MacGilvray, 2005).

An individual's national identity is established when they share the same language with others, are governed by national symbols, have a national history, develop family ties through affinity, and are exposed to the national media (László, 2013). Guibernau (2004) demonstrated that national identity has five dimensions: (1) a psychological dimension, in which individuals are aware of forming a group based on feelings of closeness and patriotism; (2) a cultural dimension, which refers to shared values, beliefs, customs and habits, languages and behaviors, and traditions that are passed on to members who absorb a nation's culture; (3) a historical dimension, in which members of a nation are proud of their ancient origins and view them as a symbol of endurance, power, and even dominance; (4) a territorial dimension, in which people are intensely interested in events that take place in their nation; and (5) a political dimension, which refers to a nation-state that shapes the cultural and linguistic homogenization of an otherwise diverse citizenry since its inception.

A substantial body of research has investigated the link between national identity and related variables. For example, according to Čorkalo and Kamenov (2003), national identity is linked to national pride, sense of belonging, and loyalty to the country or state. National identity building is linked to national media influence (e.g., national television; Polonska-Kimunguyi & Kimunguyi, 2011). Moreover, national identity is positively correlated with social cohesion (Holtug, 2017).

Intergroup Conflict and National Identity

Intergroup conflict refers to disagreement between two groups or more in relation to, for example, political views. This conflict may cause physical, verbal, or psychological violence between the groups (Hewstone & Greenland, 2000; Tropp, 2012). Below, we highlight the origins of the intergroup conflict in the Gulf area, which started out peacefully and with benevolent, solidarity-based intentions (Amin, Van Assche, Abdelrahman, McCashin, Al-Adwan, & Hasan, 2022). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is composed of six Arab states (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the United

Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Oman) and has been formed in 1981. The aim of constituting such council is to deepen the political, economic, and cultural ties among the six Arab countries. Social ties between GCC countries were very strong as there were extended families derived from different areas of the GCC. For example, members of the Al-Murrah tribe lived across Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and United Arab of Emirates (Alshawhi, 1994). This GCC coalition enabled people in all six Arab states in this particular region to develop a shared identity known as “Khaleeji’ identity” (Al-Misned, 2016).

Although the GCC is believed to be a cohesive entity with a shared identity (i.e., “Khaleej identity”), the conflict between the three states (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain) against Qatar and the following aggressive behaviors among citizens of the blockade states were not surprising. According to Gartzke and Gleditsch (2006), conflict and violence are more likely to exist between similar groups rather than different ones. They noted that Arab states share many similarities. Therefore, it seems warranted to examine the predictors of national identity among Qatari citizens.

Walters (2020) argued that in a time of geopolitical conflict, citizens display a great deal of social cohesion that enhances their national identity. During a conflict, superordinate identities (e.g., ethnic and religious) usually combine with each other to form a shared identity for a common ingroup (Van Dommelen, Schmid, Hewstone, Gonsalkorale, & Brewer, 2015). In addition, Jones and Hynie (2017) found that when a conflict arises between multiple identities, individuals tend to manage this conflict by prioritizing the order of these identities and utilizing the appropriate identity for the appropriate context. Accordingly, and in the context of the Gulf crisis, tribal identities of Qataris integrated with each other, forming a common national identity at the expense of the “Khaleej identity.”

Further, in the context of conflict, and in accordance with social identity theory, individuals identify with their group and feel they share the same destiny (Ferguson,

Muldoon, & McKeown, 2014). They develop the concept of “we” and “them” and demonstrate solidarity by supporting each other, thus perceiving themselves as a cohesive group with a sense of identity (Jandt, 2007). Consequently, a shared identity may become salient among ingroup members, especially when they are confronted with hostile behaviors by outgroup members.

One prime example of such hostile behaviors is verbal assault. In times of conflict, verbal assault is more likely to escalate among conflicting groups (Karner & Kopytowska, 2017). The violent actions displayed by the citizens of the blockade states (such as verbal assault on social media platforms or at the actual locations where Qatari citizens live and interact with the blockade citizens) might have encouraged Qataris to identify with their country and develop a salient national identity. Verbal assault refers to oral or written words that intend to develop fears and cause mental or physical harm to individuals (Gagliardone, 2019). Prior research has found that national identity is positively linked to the exposure to violence. For example, in the context of political conflict, experiencing aversive actions or violence was positively and significantly correlated with national identification (Muldoon, Schmid, & Downes, 2009; Schmid & Muldoon, 2015). Therefore, we posited that being exposed to verbal assaults by citizens of blockade states would be associated with the promotion of national identity among Qataris. Our next hypothesis investigated the processes that aid in explaining this relationship between verbal assault and national identity. Specifically, we claim that perceived media influence on the one hand; and desire for self-reliance on the other, serve as crucial mediators in the abovementioned association.

Desire for Self-reliance as a first mediator

The term self-reliance was first used by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1841; however, he did not provide a clear definition of the concept. The term has been widely used within economic and political frameworks (e.g., Ilcan, Oliver, & Connoy, 2015; Keigh, 1983; Matthies, 1979) and comprises individual and collective levels. Schaumberg and Flynn (2017)

defined self-reliance as the degree to which individuals depend on themselves to achieve their personal needs. This reasoning, however, can also be applied at the group level. Keigh (1983) used the concept to refer to the desire to depend on national efforts (e.g., local labor), prioritize the utilization and management of national resources to achieve independence, and developing the local market before relying on the international market. In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly, the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping (1974) defined self-reliance as follows: “a country should mainly rely on the strength and wisdom of its own people, control its own economic lifelines, make full use of its own resources, strive hard to increase food production and develop its national economy step by step and in a planned way” (para. 22). Mostly, the demand for self-reliance emerges when people as well as the political regime express concerns about the economy and social wellbeing, and the desire for independence from external political forces (Hébert & Mincyte, 2014). According to Tickner (1986), self-reliance has three dimensions: individual, national, and collective. During the blockade, a voice raised by the Qatari government and citizens that they should depend on themselves in producing their food and substantial needs for daily life and to give support and encouragement to Qatari youth to contribute to the renaissance of the country.

Exposure to antagonistic actions, violence, verbal assaults, or occupation by other nations pushes individuals to advocate for independence and self-reliance. Therefore, we proposed that there would be an association between the exposure to aggressive actions by outgroup members, such as verbal assault, and the desire for self-reliance. To our knowledge, no empirical studies have assessed the relationship between self-reliance and national identity, but based on the abovementioned studies, we predicted a positive relationship. Even further, we hypothesized that self-reliance would mediate the assault-identification association.

Media Influences as a second mediator

Referring to the political and economic relationship between Qatar and the Gulf states prior to the blockade, Qatar was dependent on the Gulf states for exporting essential goods

such as food, medicine, and construction materials. Over one-quarter (27.4%) of Qatar's food and 60% of their dairy products come from Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Hassen, Bilali, & Al-Maadeed, 2020). Following the blockade, the Emir of Qatar gave a speech on July 21, 2017, urging Qatari citizens and residents to work hard to develop self-reliance (Al Jazeera, 2017). After the speech, all local media as well as social media platforms in Qatar called for self-reliance and encouraged citizens and residents of Qatar to bond together. Consequently, we expected that local media (such as local television and social media platforms) played a key role in the increased desire for self-reliance among Qataris.

Moreover, since the blockade states announced closing their borders and severing all ties with Qatar in 2017, Qatar launched an alternative plan based on self-reliance to secure its people's needs to handle the situation, particularly in the food supply and medical services sectors (Albasoos, Hassan, & Al Zadjali, 2021). This plan yielded considerable changes in their self-sufficiency strategy; the Ministry of Municipality in Qatar announced in 2020 that Qatar achieved self-sufficiency in some commodities. For example, the production of dairy products and fresh poultry increased from 28% to 106% and 50% to 124%, respectively, from 2017 to 2020 (Gulf Times, 2020).

A substantial body of research has demonstrated that national media play a crucial role in creating and promoting a shared national identity. For instance, Shields (1996) stressed that media, particularly television, can have a central role in promoting or reversing national identity. Television that provides political content, often in reaction to negative or hostile outgroup behaviors, has a significant impact on building national identity (Castelló, 2007). Smith and Phillips (2006) further demonstrated that exposure to national television programs formulates and strengthens national identity (see also Patrick & Samson, 2013); however, the Internet influences individuals' national identity more significantly than national television. It thus seems essential to consider how both 'old' and 'new' types of media can have impacted Qatari's national identity, via heightened support for self-reliance.

How did social media become pivotal platforms in constructing and shaping national identity? Wang (2017) argues that they provide users an adequate space to select the type of information (e.g., political content) that matches their interests and enables them to restructure and evaluate their identity (Holbert, Garrett, & Gleason, 2010). Yadlin-Segal (2017) found that using Twitter and reacting with political hashtags related to national issues enabled Iranians to reformulate and strengthen their identity. WhatsApp (Dar et al., 2017; Karapanos, Teixeira, & Gouveia, 2016) has also been found to play a significant role in political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Casero-Ripollés, 2021) and in promoting a sense of belonging and national identity among its users (Udenze & Ugoala, 2019). Moreover, on social media platforms, ingroup members engage in political activities and promote solidarity among each other, as such even further enhancing national identity (Boichak & Jackson, 2020; Ershov, 2015).

According to Dennis, Martin, and Hassan (2019), who examined traditional and social media use in Qatar, there was a significant rise in citizens watching television at least once a day (from 39% to 68%) between 2017 and 2019. Furthermore, print newspaper readership declined by more than 50%. WhatsApp was the most popular platform used by Qataris (approximately 70% of Qataris used the application), followed by Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Moreover, 81% of Qataris were more likely to obtain news and information from social media influencers.

As soon as the blockade states announced their severed ties with Qatar, several Twitter accounts were used to attack citizens and the Qatari regime, as well as spread fake news about Qatar (Allagui & Akdenizli, 2019; Jones, 2019). The reaction of Qatari citizens to the citizens of the blockade states' attacks through social media platforms was remarkable, with many Qatari youth explicitly seeking news and info that boosted their confidence, national self-reliance, national pride, and support for the leadership of the country (Al-Muftah, 2019).

According to De Dreu and colleagues (2016), when ingroup members are aggressively attacked by outgroup members, they take offense and become highly coordinated and cooperative. Accordingly, in the context of the current study, we expected that exposure to aggression on social media platforms by outgroup members (citizens of the blockade states) would encourage Qataris to stay united and strengthen their national identity, by (1) actively seeking identity-promoting info and by (2) an increased desire to become self-dependent.

To summarize, we explored the role of exposure to verbal assault, perceived influence of the media, and desire for self-reliance as predictors of national identity among Qatari youth. Moreover, using mediation analysis, we investigated the mediating roles of the perceived influence of the media and desire for self-reliance on the relationship of exposure to verbal assault with national identity. We proposed the following hypotheses: (1) national identity will be positively associated with a) exposure to verbal assault, b) perceived influence of the media, and c) desire for self-reliance; (2) exposure to verbal assault will exhibit a total effect on national identity, as well as an indirect effect via perceived influence of the media and desire for self-reliance on national identity. Likewise, we hypothesized a mediation effect of perceived media influence on national identity via the desire for self-reliance, as such proposing a serial mediation model.

Method

Sample Size and Participants

G* Power software was used (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) to calculate the required sample size with a medium effect size, 80% power, and $\alpha = .05$ for multiple linear regression analyses. The suggested sample sizes were $N = 199$ and $N = 43$. Furthermore, to calculate the sample size required to test the proposed mediation model (Model 6), we used the Monte Carlo Power Analysis tool developed by Schoemann, Boulton, and Short (2017). The estimation of a sample size adequate to test relationships of the model

with power of .80 and 95% confidence intervals revealed that a sample size of $N = 190$ was needed.

Data were collected through online self-report questionnaires (Qualtrics website) between November 2019 and February 2020. Eligible participants had to be Qatari citizens and university students in Qatar. A sample of 318 participants was recruited using convenience sampling, and 25 incomplete responses were excluded as they only completed the demographics section. The final sample with no missing data included 293 participants, of which 24.2% were men ($M_{age} = 25.10$ years, $SD = 7.64$).

Measures

Exposure to verbal assault by citizens of the blockade states

As the borders were closed because of the blockade, direct contact between Qataris and the citizens of the four other Gulf countries was very rare. Therefore, the only forms of communication were phone calls or interactions on social media platforms. Negative actions were carried out by some individuals from the blockade states against Qatari citizens, and the aggressive behavior manifested verbally through these platforms. Accordingly, a two-item scale was developed by the authors to assess this verbal assault. The responses were rated on a binary response format (1 = *no*, 2 = *yes*). The two items were “I was insulted by citizens of the blockade states” and “I was mocked by citizens of the blockade states.” The items’ correlation was .64, and the Spearman-Brown coefficient was .78.

Perceived influence of local television and social media

A two-item scale was developed by the authors to assess how Qatari youth perceive the influence of both local television and social media on their national identity. The two items were used because Meeds (2015) demonstrated that, although local television was a strong preference for local news for Qataris, the dependence on social media platforms was rising rapidly. According to El Gazzar (2015), Qatari youth spent a significant amount of time on social media platforms during the crisis. The items were “During the blockade, I believe

that watching local Qatari television promoted my national identity” and “During the blockade, I believe that social media platforms promoted my national identity.” Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The items’ correlation was .63, and the Spearman-Brown coefficient was .69.

Desire for self-reliance

We developed two items to assess the desire of Qatari students to depend on themselves at the country level. The items were, “We must achieve self-sufficiency and depend on ourselves in managing our resources and developing our industries” and “We must be independent in making our own decisions and maintaining our national sovereignty.” Participants’ responses were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The items’ correlation was .67, and the Spearman-Brown coefficient was .80.

National identity

We selected four items from the national identity scale developed by Al Rabaani (2017) for Omani students. We replaced the word “Omani” with “Qatari.” The scale has good internal consistency ($\alpha = .84$). Participants were asked to rate the items on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* (e.g., “I am proud of being Qatari”).

Statistical Analysis

SPSS 27.0 (SPSS; IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) was used to analyze the collected data. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to explore the relationships among the variables.

Multiple regression analyses were performed to examine whether the independent variables (verbally assaulted by citizens of the blockade states, desire for self-reliance at the country level, and perceived influence of local television and social media) predicted the dependent variable (national identity). The regression assumptions were checked and multicollinearity was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF), indicating that the

assumption of multicollinearity was not problematic (exposure to verbal assault, tolerance = .94, VIF = 1.05; desire for self-reliance at the country level, tolerance = .96, VIF = 1.04; and perceived influence of local television and social media, tolerance = .94, VIF = 1.06). To explore data outliers, standard residuals results indicated the presence of outliers (min = - 3.15, max = 2.19). However, Stevens (1984) showed that standard residuals indicated outliers with no influential effect on the regression model. He stated that Cook's distances test illustrates whether these outliers have an influential effect, where values greater than 1.0 imply that the outliers are influential and negatively associated with the regression models; therefore, Cook's distance (D) was conducted, indicating no influential outliers (min = .000, max = .075).

The normal P-P plot of regression standardized residual of the dependent variable (Qatar identity) was checked, and it apparently was non normally distributed. In addition to that, the scatter plot of standardized residuals against the predicted values showed a heteroscedasticity. The Breusch-Pagan test and White test were carried out to check if there is a linear functional relationship between the predictors and the variances of the residuals; the two test results showed that heteroscedasticity is found (p 's < .001). Consequently, biased standard errors, t-test, and significance values resulted from heteroscedasticity might affect the accuracy of the regression model. Wild bootstrapping is a good approach to address the problems resulting in heteroscedastic residuals (Ostivia & Zumbo, 2019; Rosopa et al., 2013); therefore and along with the multiple linear regression analysis, a wild bootstrapping 2000 was carried out to obtain accurate results of the multiple linear regression model. Hence, we decided to run all models including all answers, also the outliers. Finally, bootstrapped confidence intervals (95%) were computed to test the proposed mediation model (model 6) for the current study. We used PROCESS Macro (v. 3.5) in SPSS (Hayes, 2017).

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical approval has been provided for this study by (removed for anonymous review).

Results

The descriptive statistics and their correlations are shown in Table 1. The table shows that national identity positively correlates with perceived influence of local verbal assault ($r = .17, p < .001$), television and social media ($r = .36, p < .001$), and desire for self-reliance ($r = .35, p < .001$).

Table 1 (insert table here)

Table 2 illustrates the results of the multiple linear regression analysis. The model explained 21.9% of the variance, $F(3, 289) = 27.03; p < .001; R^2 = .219; d = 0.28$. The individual predictors were examined further, and these indicated that the desire for self-reliance ($b = .291; p < .001$) and perceived influence of local television and social media ($b = .297; p < .001$) were significant predictors in the model. In contrast, exposure to verbal assault ($b = .071; p = .182$) was a non-significant predictor.

Table 2 (insert table here)

A wild bootstrapping results for the multiple regression analysis showed no significant changes of the results. The model explained 21.1% of the variance. The desire for self-reliance ($p < .001$) and perceived influence of local television and social media ($p < .001$) were significant predictors in the model. However, exposure to verbal assault ($p = .127$) was a non-significant predictor.

Table 3 (insert table here)

The results of the mediation and multiple regression analyses (Table 4 and Figure 1) showed that the direct effect of verbal assault (main predictor) on national identity (outcome) was non-significant ($b = .076, SE = .050, p = .182$). Verbal assault (main predictor) was a significant predictor of the perceived influence of local television and social media ($b = .658, SE = .185, p < .001$). Moreover, Verbal assault (main predictor) was a marginally significant predictor of the desire for self-reliance (second predictor) ($b = .157, SE = .089, p = .079$). Perceived influence of local television and social media (first mediator) was a significant

predictor of national identity (outcome) ($b = .087$, $SE = .015$, $p < .001$). The desire for self-reliance (second predictor) is significant predictor of national identity (outcome) ($b = .182$, $SE = .033$, $p < .001$).

Although the direct effect of verbal assault on national identity was non-significant, the results showed that there were three significant indirect effects: the first path indicated that verbal assault predicted national identity through the perceived influence of local television and social media ($b = .057$, $SE = .020$, 95% CI [.023, .100]); the second path revealed that verbal assault was associated with national identity through the desire for self-reliance ($b = .028$, $SE = .017$, 95% CI [.000, .066]); and the third path showed that verbal assault related to national identity through the perceived influence of local television and social media and the desire for self-reliance ($b = .007$, $SE = .005$, 95% CI [.001, .019]). The total effect of verbal assault on national identity was significant ($b = .161$, $SE = .054$, $p < .001$). The model predicted 21.9% of the variance in national identity ($R^2 = .219$).

Table 4 (insert table here)

Insert figure here

Discussion

When a conflict arises among human groups, and the political atmosphere becomes fraught with hostility, the country's media become involved in the dispute and ingroup members look for unity and a shared identity. The current study investigated the effect of verbal assault, media influence, and desire for self-reliance on national identity among Qatari youth.

The Pearson correlation results showed that exposure to verbal assault by outgroups (citizens of blockade states) was positively associated with national identity, indicating that being verbally insulted by others (outgroup members) was associated with ingroup members becoming defensive and motivated to coordinate and centralize on a shared identity. This motivation is designed to mitigate the stress that resulted from being degraded by outgroup

members (De Dreu et al., 2016). This result is congruent with Bauer and Hannover (2020), who found that national identity was positively associated with outgroup hostility.

Further, the desire for self-reliance was linked to national identity. Limiting Qataris' access to food and other necessary resources encouraged them to consider the necessity of developing self-reliance and self-sufficiency. This led citizens in general, and youth in particular, to develop a sense of resilience and to take action to overcome these challenges. This is consistent with Lenkens and colleagues' (2020) findings, who demonstrated that the desire for self-reliance stemmed from negative experiences in social interactions, and it emerged primarily when adolescents develop distrust of others, have a desire to depend on themselves, and reject to allow others to interfere with their lives.

Applied to the intergroup dynamics accompanying the blockade crises, Qataris managed to avoid negative repercussions from the blockade owing to rapid measures taken by the State. High growth rates were also recorded; in particular, food production exceeded self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency was realized through self-reliance in managing resources and developing industries, which was later attributed to independence in decision-making, preservation of national sovereignty, and, as confirmed in the current study, strengthening of national identity.

Moreover, our results showed that perceived media influence was positively correlated with exposure to verbal assault and national identity owing to the exposure to national television programs along with the news followed on social media platforms that aimed to promote national identity. This is in line with previous work showing that individuals who have been subjected to verbal assaults felt an external threat to their country and sense of patriotism, especially after the closure of land, air, and sea borders (Gibler, 2010). Qatar utilized local television and social media platforms to explain the blockade and danger of the situation to those residing in Qatar. Programs discussed how to overcome the blockade by emphasizing the importance of unity as a nation and strengthening the Qatari national

identity. Consequently, it makes sense that those that experienced more verbal assault from outgroups tended to watch such news and visit such websites more frequently. Further, by consuming these comforting media, they felt a stronger desire for self-reliance, which in turn was associated with stronger feelings of national identity.

According to Goodrich and De Mooij (2014), media indeed plays an important role in strengthening people's national identity. This is due to exposure to daily television programs and social media news about the crisis. Further, confirmation bias leads individuals to seek information that is consistent with their attitudes and beliefs, which lowers their cognitive dissonance, allowing them to reach stability (Cardenal, Aguilar-Paredes, Galais, & Pérez-Montoro, 2019; Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, & Polavin, 2020). Consequently, selective exposure to local television and social media platforms related to the political information about the crisis is positively associated with an increased national identity.

The ironic effects of verbal assaults

The results of multiple linear regression analysis demonstrated that the contribution of desire for self-reliance and perceived media influence in predicting national identity were greater than verbal assault, which showed less of a contribution and was a non-significant predictor. This indicates that there is no significant direct effect of verbal assault on youths' national identity. The mediation analysis results showed that exposure to verbal assault did not have a significant direct effect on national identity; however, the effect was mediated by both self-reliance and perceived influence of the media. To explain, when the crisis emerged, and the citizens of the blockade states became involved, several social media accounts targeted Qatari political symbols as well as citizens (Jones, 2019). The Qatari government urged citizens not to react to the assaults by the citizens of the blockade states (GCO, 2017) and encouraged them to focus on supporting the country's leadership as well as working to achieve self-reliance in different fields of manufacturing (Albasoos et al., 2021). Hence, the alleged aims of the members of the other Gulf countries ironically fostered opposite results.

While one can argue that the verbal assaults were meant to destabilize Qatar and undermine the morale of its citizens, our findings point to a reversed, de-escalation pattern. Indeed, Qataris experiencing these assaults more frequently were found to be more strongly identified with their country, exactly because they consumed more media and had a greater desire for self-reliance.

Being verbally attacked by outsiders (citizens of the blockade states) encouraged Qataris to follow national television programs about the crisis along with consuming news related to the crisis on social media platforms, which intensified the boost in self-reliance.. This in turn strengthened youngsters' social cohesion and national identity. Both the perceived influence of the media and the desire for self-reliance played a crucial role in promoting national identity, which points to a very effective way of dealing with the blockade. Instead of planning counter-measures and mobilizing citizens to react in a violent way, Qatar opted for a non-violent reaction that focused on ingroup cohesion and independence from the other Gulf states. History taught us that counterviolence and fostering outgroup hostility is never an adequate answer to solve intergroup conflicts (see Van Assche, Amin, & Abdelrahman, 2022). It is hard to predict whether the ingroup-defensive strategy of Qatar will have long-lasting consequences on the de-escalation of intergroup tensions in the area, and whether harmony will return. Although it is unknown if such strategy is effective on the intergroup level, our results suggest that it does work on the ingroup level.

Limitations and future studies

Of course, the current study had several limitations. First, we examined national identity, and some degree of social desirability bias can be expected among the sample. Second, concerning the desire for self-reliance, to our knowledge, no scales exist to measure this variable. Therefore, we developed two items; however, they were not validated in a pilot study. Accordingly, a validated measure of self-reliance is needed to confirm our findings, also in a different context. Third, the sample comprised Qatari youth, indicating that a large

segment of the Qatari population (youth, senior citizens) could not participate in the study. Therefore, representative data, including all population sections, should be used to generalize the study outcomes.

Fourth, we tested the effect of verbal assault, perceived media influence and desire for self-reliance on national identity. However, we did not test how national identity could encourage Qatari citizens to develop the desire of self-reliance and stick to social platforms to defend their country against assaults to the country and the leadership. Fifth, the dependent variable (national identity) was not normally distributed due to a ceiling effect. Although we provided statistical justification that illustrates the outliers were ineffective on the accuracy of the regression results offered and for the violation of homoscedasticity of residuals, we recommend developing an alternative scale to measure national identity in a way to show more variance among sample subjects which in turn might produce a normally distributed variable.

Conclusion

The current study sheds light on the main factors that were associated with Qatari youths' national identity during the blockade conflict. Although several accounts on different social media platforms were dedicated to attack Qatar and Qatari citizens in an attempt to put Qataris under stress and question their identity, our results demonstrated that this was effectively countered by the role of mass media (e.g., local television) and social media in promoting individuals' desire for self-reliance, which further boosted a sense of national identity and social cohesion.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Availability of the data and materials

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Consent for publication

Consent and assent forms were obtained from all participants.

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