A Study of Online Media Representation of Ethnic Minorities and Online Racial Discrimination in Hong Kong

Executive Summary

Project Title: A Study of Online Media Representation of Ethnic Minorities and Online Racial Discrimination in Hong Kong

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Background

This research project titled "A Study of Online Media Representation of Ethnic Minorities and Online Racial Discrimination in Hong Kong" is funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). The objectives of this project are:

a. To analyze how online news articles and their reader comments portray ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether this portrayal involves racial bias, stereotypes, or discrimination;

b. To gain original insight into whether and how people from ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong experience online racial discrimination;

c. To examine the effect of social media use for race-related purposes on ethnic minority group members' experiences of online racial discrimination and their impact on depressive symptoms and aggressive behavior;

d. To study the moderating roles of ethnic identity, self-esteem, and time spent online in the relationships between online racial discrimination and depressive symptoms and aggressive behavior;

e. To provide practical strategies and suggestions for the EOC, the Hong Kong Government, and online media platforms to reduce online racial discrimination in Hong Kong; and

f. To offer suggestions for ethnic minority group members in Hong Kong to tackle online racial discrimination and protect them from its negative outcomes.

To realize these objectives, the research team conducted (1) a content analysis to examine how online news articles and their readers' comments portray ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether this portrayal involves racial bias, stereotypes, or discrimination, and (2) a survey to examine whether and how people from ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong experience online racial discrimination and to explore the antecedents (i.e., race-related social media use), moderators (i.e., ethnic identity, self-esteem, and length of time spent online), and outcomes (i.e., depressive symptoms and aggressive behavior) of this discrimination.

The research team analyzed 341 news articles related to ethnic minority groups and racial issues published on online media platforms in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic (between 23 January and 1 September 2020) and the 7,381 comments left by their readers. The team also recruited 250 Hong Kong residents belonging to ethnic minority groups to participate in the survey in June 2021 to complete questionnaires online.

Key Findings

Online Media Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong

1. This project collected and analyzed 341 online news articles (not including commentaries and editorial pieces). Only 0.3% of the sampled articles ($n = 1$) contained racial bias, stereotypes, or discrimination in their reporting of race-related issues and 0.9% of those articles (n = 3) used pejorative or stereotypical terms. By comparison, out of 7,381 reader comments, while 4.7% of them ($n = 348$) contained racial bias, stereotypes, or discrimination, 4.3% ($n = 315$) adopted pejorative or stereotypical terms when describing ethnic minorities groups.

2. Concerning the tone of news articles and their reader comments, over 90% of them (96.2% of news articles and 94.2% of reader comments) adopted a neutral tone. Having said that, it is more likely to find a negative tone being used in reader comments than in news articles. While only 1.2% of race-related news articles were found to utilize a negative tone, 4.9% of reader comments adopted a negative tone. In addition, 2.6% of those articles ($n = 9$) adopted a positive tone, whereas comments with a positive tone only accounted for 0.9% of the total comments ($n = 64$).

3. Among the ethnic minority groups, Filipinos and Indonesians were most frequently referred in reader comments. Nepalese were most frequently mentioned in negative reader comments.

4. Over half of the sampled news articles (58.7%) mentioned the COVID-19, whereas 41.3% of them did not mention that. Nearly half of the race-related news articles (49.6%) discussed health and crime issues. In particular, the most frequent topic of COVID-19-related news articles was "health," whereas that of non-COVID-19-related articles was "crime/police." On average, each of the non-COVID-19-related news articles received more "dislikes" ($M = 10.0$, $SD = 25.7$) from their reader comments than their COVID-19

counterparts ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 9.3$). More reader comments of non-COVID-19-related news articles used pejorative or stereotypical terms (1.4%) and the negative tone (1.4%) compared with their COVID-19 counterparts.

5. The observable amount of discriminatory and detrimental expressions in news reports and reader comments generally alerts us to an unfriendly, if not hostile, (online) public opinion toward ethnic minorities in Hong Kong.

Online Racial Discrimination in Hong Kong

1. Ethnic minorities in Hong Kong felt they experienced online racial discrimination at times. People from ethnic minority groups using social media for race-related purposes (e.g. commenting about high-profile incidents related to race) were more likely to experience more online racial discrimination.

2. Ethnic minorities' experience of online racial discrimination can significantly induce their depressive symptoms.

3. The effect of online racial discrimination on depressive symptoms was weaker among ethnic minorities with higher self-esteem.

4. Ethnic minorities who experienced online racial discrimination were more likely to have aggressive behavior, such as verbal or physical fights with other people. It should be noted that the level of aggressive behavior reported by our EM survey respondents is low.

5. The positive relationship between online racial discrimination and aggressive behavior was found to be weaker among ethnic minorities who spent more time online. Online communities provide a virtual dwelling place for interaction and social support within ethnic minority groups.

6. In conclusion, this online survey documented that many ethnic minorities in Hong Kong experienced online racial discrimination, which was influenced by their use of social media

for race-related purposes and led to their depressive symptoms and aggressive behaviors. Furthermore, the effect of online racial discrimination on depressive symptoms was weaker among those with higher self-esteem, and its impact on aggressive behaviors became weaker for those who spent more time online.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Online Media Companies in Hong Kong

1. Online media corporations in Hong Kong are encouraged to provide training to their new journalists and editors on how to prevent racism in reporting. Reporters and editors should learn how to portray ethnic minority groups in news reports in an objective way, how to avoid racist terminologies in reports, and how to deal with reader comments that involve racism.

2. Online media platforms should closely monitor the reader comments on their online reports and consider deleting reader comments that may amount to racial vilification. They can also adopt anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies and ask their members and readers to agree with those terms and conditions.

Recommendations for Ethnic Minorities in Hong Kong

3. People from ethnic minority groups may take a more proactive role in reacting to online racism. They are suggested to report to the online media companies if they come across any abusive contents, discriminatory comments, and misinformation in news articles and reader comments. Furthermore, they may consider filing complaints in writing to the EOC when they identify news articles and reader comments posted on online media platforms which may amount to racial vilification under the Race Discrimination Ordinance.

4. The findings of this study suggests that people from ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong should use social media for race-related purposes (e.g., joining discussions about race-related issues on social media) less frequently when they experience depressive symptoms due to online racial discrimination.

Recommendations for the Hong Kong Government

5. The Hong Kong Government is recommended to plan and implement public communication campaigns to promote a better understanding of different ethnic groups.

6. The Government may consider offering more resources to Support Service Centres for Ethnic Minorities to provide courses or activities for enhancing the self-esteem of ethnic minorities, with a view to protecting them from negative outcomes of online racism, such as depressive symptoms.

7. The Government might consider launching public consultation with a proposal to prohibit speech that maintains or normalizes racial hatred, in addition to speech that incites or stirs up racial hatred and expand the coverage of communicating speech to those by electronic means with reference to the recent action taken by the Government of New Zealand (Ensor, 2021).

Recommendations for the EOC

8. As a statutory body tasked to enforce the Race Discrimination Ordinance (Cap. 602), the EOC may consider taking action against online racial discrimination in Hong Kong.

9. The EOC should plan and implement public relations campaigns against online racial bias, stereotyping, and discrimination and promote equal opportunity. They can also strengthen website and social media efforts to inform the public and the media about ethnic minority groups to debunk the stereotypes and misunderstandings.