

SOCIOPSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS FOR PARTICIPATION IN COLLECTIVE PROTEST ACTIONS

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the key factors that influence how Bulgarian citizens participate in different forms of protest. The socio-political context in the country is marked by polarization between social groups, which is associated with the potential for civil protests, conflicts, and clashes. The study analyzes the impact of social identity and group affiliation, attitudes toward protests, and distrust in the political system and politicians. Based on content analysis of 40 semi-structured interviews conducted with respondents from small, medium, and large cities in Bulgaria, significant trends emerge in both the experiences and beliefs related to participation in civil protests. An original model of the interrelations between the studied constructs is proposed, along with recommendations for future research steps in this relatively underexplored protest phenomenology in Bulgaria.

Keywords: collective protest, social identity, political system, attitudes; attitudes towards protest, trust/ distrust

Social Identity and Civic Protest

Social identity refers to an individual's membership or sense of belonging to various social groups and categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The complexity of social identity—that is, identification with multiple social categories—serves as an indicator of openness and tolerance toward diverse groups and identities (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Zografova, 2013). This complexity, in turn, facilitates the coordination of joint actions among different social groups and communities.

The Bulgarian sociopolitical context is characterized by a growing withdrawal of individuals from political party organizations, not only in terms of formal membership but also in terms of a subjective sense of affiliation. A rather heterogeneous pattern of tendencies can be expected concerning the relationship between identity and participation or non-participation in civic protests and collective action more broadly. This context of polarization inherently generates conditions for various social confrontations, conflicts, and protest movements.

Group identification encompasses both affective components and the internalization of shared norms that guide the organization of collective actions, including protest mobilization (Ellemers, 1993). Solidarity among members of a group or community represents another crucial factor consistently associated in research with collective action, and it has been integrated into recent models of collective behavior (Saavedra & Drury, 2019).

Social group identity is generally recognized as a central determinant, however, when it becomes politicized, it transforms into an activating force for collective action. The politicization of identity occurs through the awareness of shared grievances (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013).

Identity, Shared Norms, and Collective Action

A different line of research and analysis seeks to establish a substantiated relationship between identity, formed on the basis of shared norms among participants and between groups and the emergence of social action, including protest (Smith, Thomas, & McGarty, 2015). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that perceived group efficacy mediates the relationship between social norms adopted within one's close social circles and participation in protest activities. The involvement of an individual's immediate social network strengthens their belief in the group's efficacy and encourages their engagement (Smith, Gonzalez, & Frigolet, 2021).

The conviction that the group can address its problems through collective effort serves as an indicator of group efficacy and is regarded as "a key construct predicting collective action" (Thomas & McGarty, 2009). Empirical evidence also shows that collective efficacy influences support for protest participation, particularly when intragroup identification is strong (Abrams et al., 2002).

Among the first researchers to systematically examine the role of collective identity in social movements and protest was Klandermans. He identifies identity as one of the three principal motivational bases for participation in protest. The other two being the instrumental motive aimed at changing existing conditions and the ideological motive, which reflects emotions and beliefs derived from one's identification with a particular group (Klandermans, 2014, p. 2). Cross-cultural studies further indicate that identity exerts a determining influence on individuals' readiness for action, while participation itself, in turn, reinforces and strengthens group identity (ibid.).

Attitudes and Perceptions Toward Collective Action

Attitudes toward civic or socio-political protests reflect and are closely related to citizens' positions on social and political issues. Among Bulgarians, attitudes toward protests and participation in them have developed gradually over time within the social psyche, both at the individual and group levels. The insufficient or entirely absent socio-historical experience of organizing and conducting collective protest actions is primarily a consequence of the prolonged socialist stagnation that restricted free civic behavior and any form of protest, demonstration, or uprising. It was only after the regime change and the subsequent formation of a democratic society that civic development began to take shape.

Attitudes toward protests and participation are multifaceted and they reflect dissatisfaction with inequality and injustice, perceptions of problems in social development, and personal interests that individuals may perceive as violated. According to Kraus, the specificity of the attitude - behavior relationship enhances the predictive power of attitudes regarding participation in protest actions (Kraus, 1995). However, some researchers argue that the general attitude toward protest, regardless of its specific form, is among the most significant predictors of participation (Sweetman et al., 2019).

Attitudes toward protest, both among groups in disadvantaged positions and among groups with higher social status, may be linked to normative as well as non-normative political actions (Sweetman et al., 2019). Moreover, it is suggested that attitudes toward protest reflect the underlying ideology, which in turn constitutes an important factor influencing participation in collective action (ibid.).

Based on a comprehensive analytical framework, a model for assessing the effectiveness of civic protest has been proposed, consisting of three components: the types of actions considered, the target audience affected, and the outcomes evaluated. "Mobilization is measured in terms of attitudes and readiness or willingness to engage in a series of actions..., as well as actual participation in collective action" (Shuman et al., 2024, p. 257). It is generally accepted that nonviolent protests are effective in mobilizing sympathizers who support the cause, whereas violent or non-normative protests may foster attitudes favoring policy change among opposing groups (ibid.).

Participation of Privileged Groups and Cultural Values

Researchers are also confronted with the question of what motivates members of privileged groups to participate in protests, given that they have an inherent incentive to preserve the status

quo. It is generally assumed that such participation depends on the perceived level of inequality within society and on the degree of connectedness individuals feel with their advantaged social group (Teixeira et al., 2023).

Support for, or opposition to, anti-government protests is also influenced by the cultural values prevailing within society, which serve the function of maintaining community cohesion (Akkuş, 2020). Collectivist attitudes and the governance perceptions associated with them are mediated by political orientation and emotions related to intergroup conflict. In this regard, it is necessary to understand the structure and values of the community as a whole, rather than focusing solely on individual political attitudes (ibid.).

However, a paradox has been identified in democratic societies, as analyzed by Passini: when democratic freedoms are perceived as excessively broad, civil society may become deactivated and withdraw from social and civic protests even in the face of visible restrictions on certain freedoms (Passini, 2017).

Particularly significant is the relationship between attitudes and readiness to participate in protests and the level of trust or distrust toward authorities, governance, leaders, and institutions. In Bulgaria, trust in institutions and state governance remains low, a condition that has characterized Bulgarian society for many years (Eurobarometer, 2024).

Trust as an Object of Research

Trust has been a subject of investigation across multiple scientific disciplines, including psychology, economics, sociology, political science, and organizational studies. It has been conceptualized both as a relational attitude (Rousseau et al., 1998) and as an action or process (Möllering, 2006).

Trust or distrust may emerge as a consequence of positive or negative experiences when individuals, politicians, or institutions prove to be reliable or unreliable (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Trust and distrust are often understood as phenomena that reveal more about the societal conditions in which people live and the quality of social systems than about citizens' individual characteristics (Lenard, 2015). Others, however, conceptualize them as relatively stable individual traits, learned and developed early in childhood (Delhey & Newton, 2003).

Trust and Distrust: Polar Opposites or Distinct Constructs

The propensity to trust has been described as the degree to which an individual demonstrates a willingness to depend on others across a broad range of situations and relationships (Harrison et al., 2001, p. 38). In contrast, distrust is understood as the expectation that another person or institution will intentionally cause harm (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998), that is, something beyond the mere absence of trust. This means that distrust constitutes an independent attitude, an actual expectation that another actor cannot be relied upon, or that one will be drawn into a situation with negative consequences (Ullmann-Margalit, 2002).

While trust consists of “confident positive expectations regarding another’s behavior,” distrust comprises “confident negative expectations regarding another’s behavior” (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998, p. 439). As Gamson (1968) argued in his classic analysis of power and discontent, political trust or distrust can have different objects and may relate to specific representatives, institutions, political philosophies, or even the political community as a whole.

Trust and Distrust Toward Others, the Political System, and Political Actors

A particularly important aspect of trust/distrust is its orientation not only towards other people, but also towards the political system and politicians. It is generally assumed that individuals exhibiting low levels of trust are more inclined to vote for government change, opposition parties, or independent candidates. Higher levels of generalized social trust, on the other hand, play a crucial role both as a catalyst and as a consequence of engagement in social processes (Bäck & Christensen, 2016). Another line of research suggests that distrustful individuals tend to abstain from political or civic participation (Schäfer, 2015).

According to Anderson and Mendes (2006) and Dalton et al. (2010), distrust in institutions and dissatisfaction with democracy can foster protest participation. Newton and Norris (2000) argue that these variables serve as key indicators of citizens' underlying sentiments toward the political system, and when the system fails to respond to public demands, individuals are likely to pursue alternative avenues for enacting change (Klandermans & van Stekelenburg, 2014; Bäck & Christensen, 2016).

Trust constitutes a vital component of a society's social capital and it is what enables and motivates individuals to engage in social movements. However, empirical findings suggest that distrust also may act as a significant catalyst for mobilization.

Research Methodology

Instrument and Procedure

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 42 respondents. Among them, 21 participants had engaged in protest activities, while 21 had not. The sample included 20 men and 22 women. Regarding educational background, 22 respondents held higher education degrees, and 20 had completed secondary education. In terms of marital status, 17 respondents are divorced, 16 are married or living with a partner, 8 are single, and 1 widowed. Interviews were conducted in small, medium, and large cities, including the capital of Bulgaria.

Data Analysis

The first stage of the qualitative analysis involved coding to define thematic units and their parameters, based on all interviews and in accordance with the conceptual framework of the study. In the subsequent discursive analysis, these units were elaborated upon by incorporating additional aspects revealed in the respondents' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Through thematic analysis, social group identity and belonging were outlined across different types including party, professional, informal, and other forms, manifested to varying degrees. Attitudes toward civic protest and the respondents' overall orientation toward collective action constituted another main thematic line, encompassing perceptions of the significance, causes, and effects of protests, as well as the clarity of such perceptions. The analysis also captured respondents' readiness to participate in civic protests. Trust or distrust toward others, politicians, and institutions was considered an important determinant influencing engagement in collective action.

Research Results

Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

Social Group Identity and Collective Action. Attitudes Toward Civic Protest

Among interviewees who had participated in protests, a clear and pronounced social identity emerged. Informal, professional, and other social groups sharing common socio-political ideas were most frequently cited as primary groups of belonging. Simultaneously, political affiliations or trade union memberships were also often noted. *"I am more a member of informal groups, which are something between a professional circle of friends and a group of people who are somewhat more socially engaged."* (int. with a 26-year-old woman from a medium-sized city)

A trend of diverse interests, a well-developed sense of hybrid identity, and complexity in social identity was also evident (Dovidio et al., 2009). A 28-year-old man from a small city, with a strong social and professional identity, explained:

Yes, indeed, when a person has varied interests, they can belong to different social groups. I have been involved in cultural circles, in the guild of programmers in Bulgaria, and also, due to my interest in politics, I'm also involved in political circles... As a participant in protests, I can say that

I am also a member of the democratic community striving for a better environment in Bulgaria.

Among interviewees who had not participated in protests, identity was most commonly associated with professional, informal, or friendship groups. However, some respondents displayed greater complexity in their identities, indicating affiliation with a political party without formal membership. At the same time, their identification with specific political ideas or party organizations was often accompanied by skepticism and regret regarding missed opportunities offered by those parties. It was also not uncommon for respondents to express suspicion that participants in protests might be paid.

A 56-year-old man from Varna, who had not participated in protests, reported moderate affiliation with professional and informal groups, and a strong identification with a political party without formal membership:

I belong to certain groups related to painting and my work as a gallery owner... I have always had my own personal opinion. I am more in the blue spectrum, /with a democratic orientation- author's note/.

Attitudes Toward Participation and Perceptions of Collective Action

In addition to identity, attitudes and perceptions about collective actions are an important factor for participation in such actions. Among respondents who had actively participated in protests, perceptions and attitudes toward participation were more diverse. Here one can see specific clear goals and interests in different directions, but also basic dissatisfaction and criticism towards policies and violations of rights and freedoms. The leading attitude of these respondents is the expectation of positive changes, regardless of the field, and often for general social changes in society.

Protests are a kind of outlet for society, they... awaken society, even if only a little. They can have an effect when political forces intervene, sometimes even achieving legislative changes. For example, protests against domestic violence exerted pressure for changes in the law... As an immigrant in Spain, my interests were also affected, and as a woman who experienced violence in my youth /in Bulgaria/."/int. with a 50-year-old woman from a large city/.

Attitudes also reflected both personal and socially oriented motivations:

The protests I have participated in were for both personal interests and for the common good... They primarily reflect the civic stance of a particular group. / int. with a 53-year-old woman from a medium-sized town/

Heightened sensitivity to violations of laws, rights, and public interests was expressed particularly by older respondents. *"I believe that there must be control over those in power. I also consider it my duty as a citizen to act as a corrective to the authorities."* /int. with a 51-year-old man from the capital city/

Young active citizens view civic engagement with more hope and a positive attitude. "I believe society is receptive to social causes... Citizens themselves have been quite active over the past five, six years... These developments give me hope rather than pessimism." /int. with a 24-year-old man from a large town/

Although aggressive tendencies were rarely expressed, some respondents, both participants and non-participants, demonstrated very low tolerance toward infringements of collective interests and indicated a willingness to resort to radical actions. Some of interviewed expressed a willingness to tolerate or even support radical actions when conventional protest actions are perceived as insufficient. *"In Bulgaria, there is a very low sense of civic engagement... That is why I believe that without a certain degree of violence, so that all social groups understand that the situation is serious,*

there will be no progress."/int. with a 58-year-old man from a large city/

Some interviewees do not see protests as producing effective results, which in turn demotivated them from participating. *"For me personally, protests are important because they uphold the opinions of the people. The question is to what extent they will be effective."/int. with a 30-year-old man from a small town/*

Ambivalent and Negative Attitudes Toward Protest

A significant group of interviewees, including participants, expressed ambivalent or somewhat contradictory views regarding protests, which reduces their likelihood for participation in future actions. Among those with extensive protest experience, the attitudes are often in favor of public debates and negotiations rather than confrontational actions. *"Our political party, of course, organized protests, and I participated... For me, I continue to believe in the power of representative democracy. So, I find protest useful only to the extent that it can provoke debate and discussion."/int. with a 45-year-old man from a large city/*

Some respondents express hope for better governance and problem-solving through elections, but also express disappointment at the low level of civic engagement.

"...What angers me first is apathy, low voter turnout... because this is a struggle connected to fundamental democratic values and our desire to be a normal country /int. with a 28-year-old man from a small town/

There are clear negative perceptions and attitudes towards collective action and participation in some parts of society. The belief that such actions are financially motivated and thus manipulated is often an expression of distrust towards protests among some respondents. Others, mostly non-participants, expressed a fear of violence at large gatherings: *"When something is spontaneous, that people do spontaneously, I understand it. But not when a party or certain people organize and pay others to protest."/interview with a 49-year-old man from a medium-sized city/* Some interviewees directly express their fear of violence during protests, as a 21-year-old woman points out: *"I basically don't want to go somewhere... to risk being beaten and then having to go back home. Another reason I personally don't participate is that I don't feel good in such an environment, because the people there make me feel uncomfortable."/interview with a 21-year-old woman from the capital/*

Readiness or Lack of Readiness to Participate in Civic Protests

An important component of attitudes toward protest is the behavioral component. In this case, this is the real willingness, expressed to varying degrees, to participate in protests. The expectations are that those who have participated in protests and have clear ideas and attitudes will be most willing to participate again. It turns out that different subjects are willing to participate in different types of protests. They can be aimed at resolving local problems, grievances, and conflicts.

Some respondents express a willingness to participate in specific types of local protests due to concrete issues. *"If we are talking about local issues, for example, cleanliness, clean air, a clean river, those kinds of things."/int. with a 33-year-old man from a medium-sized town/*. And a 28-year-old woman states: *"Yes, I would participate if it is something that can improve the way of life for people and for our loved ones."*

Most of the interviewees who have already participated demonstrate a clear willingness to engage again in civil protests, with some variation regarding the reasons that would prompt them to become active. Attitudes towards a more active civil society are evident.

When the cause concerns societal problems, with clear, proven benefits from the desired change, then I would certainly participate... I would say that it is a good exercise for society to protest... as long as it does not escalate and cause harm, because that is an indicator of a healthy society. It is also a manifestation of freedom."/int. with a 24-year-old man from a large city/

Some respondents indicated a more general goal for participating in a protest, such as improving the quality of life: “Yes, I would participate if it was something that could improve the way of life of people, of our loved ones” /int with a 28-year-old woman from a medium- sized city/. Most of the interviewees who had already participated demonstrate a clear willingness to engage in civil protests again, with some variation regarding the reasons that would prompt them to immediate activity. Attitudes towards a more active civil society are evident.

Among those who did not participate in protests, a fairly common pattern is a general, sometimes vague, willingness to engage in protest. This readiness is often conditional or tied to personal interests and goals. “*I would participate, but only in something that is truly spontaneous, without the involvement of parties, politicians, or people connected to corrupt schemes in Bulgaria.*” /int. with a 49-year-old man from a medium- sized town/

Trust/Distrust in Politicians and the Political System

In the interviews, we also analyze the phenomena of trust or distrust in politicians and institutions as important factors for civic activity. Protest participants often express trust in specific political parties or politicians, but not in the political system as a whole. Almost everyone votes in elections, with many consistently supporting the same party or, in some cases, voting majoritarian for a specific politician regardless of his party affiliation.

“Naturally, my trust in individual politicians within a political party may vary, but generally, it is directed toward the party because it represents a concept of governance that aligns with my own views.” / int. with a 51-year-old man from a large city/. Some respondents direct their trust to specific politicians: “I do have trust. Like everyone, I have my preferences and, naturally, certain political figures whom I trust more.” /int. with a 35-year-old man from a medium-sized city/

In contrast, a large proportion of non-participants demonstrated greater distrust toward specific political parties or politicians. Consequently, many reported voting for different political formations or individual politicians in each election. Such interviewees express skepticism towards all kinds of politicians and parties, a skepticism that is, by the way, widespread at the mass level. “*The question is not whether it will be this or that candidate at the moment. The whole situation makes it all the same.*” /int. with a 49-year-old man from a medium-sized city/

Trust/Distrust of State Institutions

Among non-participants in civil protests, a relatively small proportion express distrust of state institutions, while the majority of them show trust.

“... to have some kind of upgrade, ... to have some prosperity... if I see that something is being done for the benefit of the state, of society, then I approach with trust.”/int. with a 30-year-old man from a small city/

In contrast to the group of non-participants, protest participants are rather distrustful of the work of state bodies and institutions.

“Well, I have seen that they do not always do their jobs properly... I see distrust daily at work. My work involves constant interaction with many people, and dissatisfaction is evident.” /int. with a 40-year-old woman from a medium-sized city/

The respondents often list concrete institutional entities in which they have a high degree of distrust. “Regarding state institutions, I have doubts about the judicial system, the prosecution, the healthcare system, and the Ministries of Health and Culture.” /int with a 24-year-old man from a large city/

The phenomena of trust and distrust manifest differently among participants and non-participants in civic protests. Protest participants generally show lower trust in state institutions and the political system overall but exhibit trust in specific political parties or politicians whose positions they support. Non-participants, in contrast, often display trust in the political system and state institutions but show distrust toward specific political actors or parties, which does not motivate them to protest to express their dissatisfaction. There are also respondents who report that they not only do not trust individual political figures, entire parties or state institutions, but also strongly disapprove of the structure of the political system in Bulgaria as a whole. *“No, I don’t trust the system. I want to say I do not approve the system, which is a very abstract concept.”* /int. with a 24-year-old man from a large city /

Discussion

All respondents expressed interest in participating in interviews on the topic of protest. The interviews often elicited a willingness to share experiences from past protests or reasons for non-participation. Respondents were eager to narrate their past experiences with protests and their future intentions regarding engagement in collective actions or events. Their narratives also contained personal grievances, experienced frustrations, as well as reflections on societal processes, the development of the socio-political situation in the country, and governance.

Regarding social-group identity, primary affiliations were along professional and informal lines, with political party affiliation less common. Willingness and readiness to participate were more strongly associated with informal markers, shaped by personal views and informal group decisions, aligning with trends observed in multiple countries according to UNICEF data (data (Unicef, 2024). Where political affiliation existed, particularly toward opposition parties, readiness to protest was somewhat more pronounced. There was a noticeable lack of involvement or interest in trade union movements, even among those with professional membership, but there was a tendency to actively engage in civic initiatives within NGOs and social causes, such as campaigns against domestic violence, animal abuse, and similar issues.

Attitudes toward participation in future protests were clearly verbalized, especially among those with prior experience. Most respondents expressed readiness to participate again under sufficiently serious circumstances and when protest movements involved broader public engagement. A key feature of these attitudes was the perceived group efficacy. Previous unsuccessful protests sometimes led to hesitation or ambivalence regarding future participation. When failure was anticipated or perceived, many respondents expressed more diffuse attitudes toward potential future engagement.

There was a clear rejection of violence in protests, with only a few respondents expressing extreme views that they would participate only in events resembling a “revolution or civil war.” Most respondents had not observed violence or aggression during protests. Participation in anti-war protests, particularly in connection with the war in Ukraine, was highlighted by several respondents.

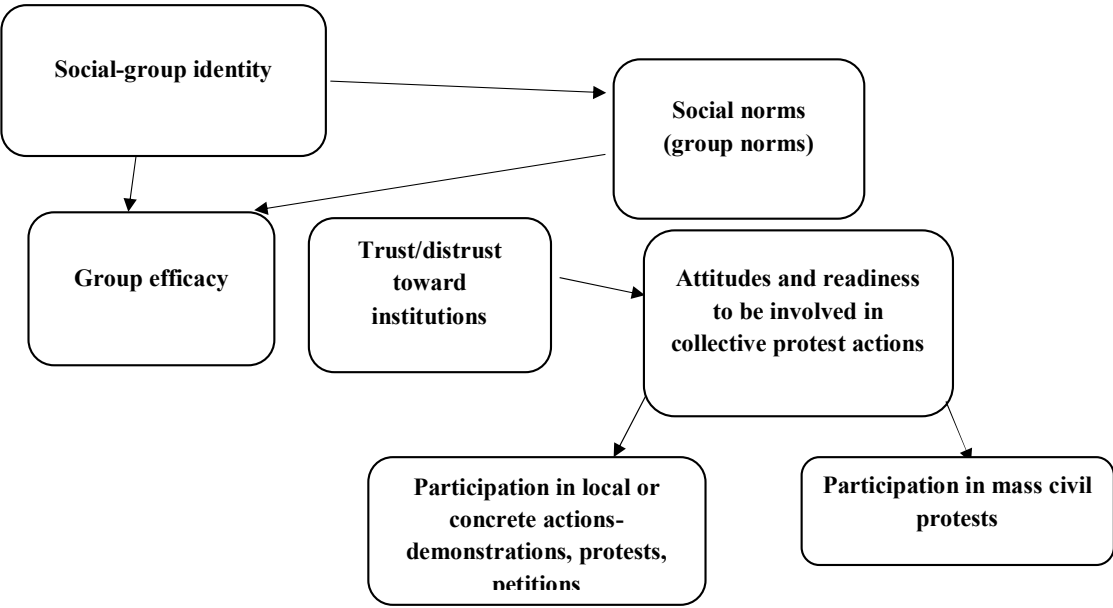
Regarding past experience with protests, respondents have particularly vivid memories of the mass demonstrations against the government and some corrupt politicians in 2013/2014, as well as earlier protests in the 1990s during the country’s transitional period. However, many protest memories were associated with perceived failures to achieve their goals. In more specific instances, objectives were perceived as successfully achieved, particularly for clear causes protecting disadvantaged individuals, victims of accidents, animals, and similar issues.

Overall, respondents expressed a general readiness to participate in protests in response to socio-political issues related to poor governance and inadequate institutional performance. The socio-political situation in the country generates dissatisfaction, but most respondents viewed mass civic protest as primarily civic rather than politically motivated. At the same time, there is a certain level of satisfaction with personal status and economic situation, which is clearly not related to dissatisfaction as personal reasons for protest by respondents. Rather, distrust in institutions and governance remains high among most interviewees, which emerges as a persistent factor that should remain central to the field of protest research. The analyzed interviews constitute the first phase of a broader representative quantitative study on civic protest, exploring its socio-psychological

dimensions. The model presented here captures the interrelations among the phenomena identified in respondents' narratives, which will be further supplemented, expanded and specified through new empirical data.

As a result of the qualitative research, a model of the interrelationships between the studied constructs was formed.

Figure 1
Model of Relationships between the Constructs, Presented in the Qualitative Analysis



Note. This model is based to some extent on known models in this field (Van Stekelenburg, & Klandermans, 2013; Van Zomeren et al., 2008) and on the analysis of the presented qualitative research in this text. Through a quantitative study with a representative sample, the model will be expanded and supplemented.

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