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CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CYNICISM, NARCISSISM, AND SELF-ESTEEM

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the relationships among self-esteem, cynicism, and narcissism in convenience samples from Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Data were collected between March and May 2024 from 626 respondents using established measures of self-esteem, cynicism, and narcissism. The results showed a significant negative association between self-esteem and cynicism and a significant positive association between self-esteem and narcissism in the total sample. Cross-group comparisons further indicated significant differences in mean levels of the studied variables, with the Bulgarian subsample showing higher cynicism scores than the British and American subsamples. Regression analyses demonstrated that self-esteem significantly predicted both cynicism and narcissism, although the strength of these relationships varied across subsamples. Because the study relied on convenience sampling and did not test measurement invariance across groups, the findings should be interpreted as preliminary. Nevertheless, they contribute to the study of self-evaluative and interpersonal dispositions in cross-cultural perspective and provide a basis for future research using more rigorous comparative designs.

KEY WORDS

cynicism, narcissism, self-esteem, self-discrimination, cross-cultural analysis

CLASSIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of their self-worth, encompassing feelings of value, adequacy, and personal significance. It generally reflects adaptive psychological functioning and is linked to numerous positive mental health outcomes, including emotional stability, resilience, and effective coping strategies [1, 2]. In contrast, cynicism is characterized by a pervasive belief in human selfishness and insincerity, often manifesting as mistrust or negativity toward others' motives and behaviors. Narcissism, another closely related construct, entails an inflated self-concept, accompanied by maladaptive behaviors such as entitlement, exploitation, grandiosity, and diminished empathy [2-5]. Although narcissism may superficially appear like high self-esteem due to assertive and confident behaviors, underlying differences significantly influence psychological health and social interactions.

Research has extensively explored the nuanced relationships between self-esteem, narcissism, and cynicism, revealing intricate patterns and implications. For instance, narcissism has been conceptualized as comprising both defensive and non-defensive elements of self-esteem. Traits such as authority and vanity often represent non-defensive narcissism, whereas other characteristics may mask deeper self-esteem deficits [6]. This duality aligns with evidence suggesting narcissism frequently functions as a psychological defense against underlying insecurities, reinforcing self-enhancement behaviors to conceal vulnerabilities [7, 8].

Empirical evidence consistently illustrates the differential implications of these constructs. For example, individuals exhibiting narcissism coupled with high self-esteem frequently engage in assertive or aggressive behaviors, particularly when encountering ego threats [9]. Conversely, genuine self-esteem typically predicts healthier psychological and interpersonal outcomes, promoting emotional stability even under stressful conditions [1, 2]. Thus, narcissism's correlation with maladaptive outcomes, such as interpersonal dysfunction and aggressive behaviors, contrasts sharply with the more adaptive nature of authentic self-esteem [10].

The interplay between self-esteem and cynicism further exemplifies complexity, contingent on situational and contextual factors. Studies indicate a reciprocal relationship, wherein low self-esteem is associated with heightened cynicism, serving as a defensive reaction to perceived threats or failures [3]. This relationship is contextually sensitive, as demonstrated by research highlighting academic stress as a mediator linking student self-esteem with cynicism [11]. Similarly, in occupational settings, self-esteem functions as a critical mediator between workplace stress and cynicism, underscoring its role in buffering negative effects arising from occupational demands [12, 13]. Family dynamics further illustrate this link, as family dysfunction significantly lowers self-esteem and thereby enhances social cynicism, reinforcing the lasting impact of early interpersonal experiences [4].

Cynicism and narcissism also display a meaningful and well-documented association. Narcissistic individuals often hold cynical views of others, driven by mistrust and an antagonistic perspective on interpersonal interactions [14, 15]. Within organizational contexts, narcissistic traits exacerbate cynical attitudes, leading to diminished ethical behavior, increased employee silence, defensive behaviors, and lower organizational commitment. Moreover, cynicism and narcissism jointly suppress positive social emotions like gratitude, thereby reinforcing negative interpersonal dynamics and further deteriorating organizational climates [16-18].

According to Manolov's theory of self-discrimination [19], individuals exhibit passive or self-discriminatory behaviors toward their own group due to internal conflicts between overestimated positive self-perceptions (defensive, related with low self-esteem) and negative attitudes toward others within the same group. Specifically relevant to the Bulgarian context,

this phenomenon manifests as a reluctance to unite around common goals, driven by suspicion and mistrust of fellow group members who are perceived as similar yet differentiated through subjective bias. Such behavior encourages passivity, impedes community formation, and exacerbates individualism, effectively discriminating against peers not categorically different from oneself. This self-discriminatory behavior is linked to heightened cynicism and associated with lower self-esteem, intensifying passive attitudes toward collective welfare and hindering social and communal evolution. In the Bulgarian context, previous theoretical work suggests that processes related to mistrust, passive social positioning, and self-discriminatory attitudes may be relevant for understanding cynical orientations. However, in the present study, such expectations are treated as exploratory rather than as assumptions about the Bulgarian population as a whole. Accordingly, it was tentatively expected that the Bulgarian sample might exhibit higher cynicism scores than the other two samples; however, this expectation was considered exploratory and not representative of the national population.

Considering the theoretical and empirical links among self-esteem, cynicism, and narcissism, the present study aimed to examine their interrelationships and cross-cultural differences in samples from Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. More specifically, the research addressed the following research questions:

RQ_1: Are there significant associations among self-esteem, cynicism, and narcissism in the total sample?
RQ_2: Do these constructs differ significantly across the three national samples?
RQ_3: Does self-esteem significantly predict cynicism and narcissism within each cultural group?

Based on previous literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H_1: Self-esteem will be negatively associated with cynicism.
H_2: Self-esteem will be positively associated with narcissism.
H_3: Significant cross-cultural differences will emerge in the mean levels of cynicism, narcissism, and self-esteem across the Bulgarian, British, and American samples.
H_4: Self-esteem will significantly predict both cynicism and narcissism within each national sample.

Given the exploratory and preliminary character of the present cross-cultural comparison, culture-specific expectations were interpreted cautiously, with particular attention to the risk of overgeneralizing from non-representative national subsamples.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a cross-sectional, comparative survey design in order to examine associations among self-esteem, cynicism, and narcissism and to compare their levels across three national samples: Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Data were collected between March and May 2024.

PARTICIPANTS

The total sample consisted of 626 respondents: 382 from Bulgaria (61,0%), 142 from the United States (22,7%), and 102 from the United Kingdom (16,3%), as shown in Table 1. The sample was predominantly female (70,3%). Regarding age, 42,8% were aged 18-25 years, 28,1% were aged 26-38 years, and 29,1% were aged over 39 years, as presented in Table 2.

Sample participants were recruited through convenience sampling, with online distribution via university networks and institutional mailing lists. Because the sample was non-probabilistic

and unevenly distributed across countries, the findings should be interpreted as applying to the studied respondents rather than to national populations.

Table 1. Nationality distribution.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	USA	142	22,7
	GB	102	16,3
	BG	382	61,0
	Total	626	100,0

Table 2. Age distribution.

		Frequency	Percentage
Valid	18-25	268	42,8
	26-38	176	28,1
	Over 39	182	29,1
	Total	626	100,0

PROCEDURE

The survey was administered online. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Before completing the questionnaire, respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, the anonymous handling of data, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

The distribution of the survey in the United States and the United Kingdom was facilitated through collaboration with Assoc. Prof. Giacomo Bono from California State University.

The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

INSTRUMENTS

Three established self-report measures were used. Narcissism was assessed using the narcissism subscale of the Dark Triad measure [20]. The scale included 9 items, with higher scores indicating stronger narcissistic tendencies such as grandiosity, entitlement, and self-enhancing interpersonal orientation. Cynicism was measured using the Cook-Medley Cynicism Scale [21]. The version used in this study included 13 items. Higher scores reflect stronger cynical beliefs characterized by interpersonal mistrust, suspicion regarding others' motives, and negative expectations concerning social relations. Self-esteem was assessed with Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale [22], consisting of 10 items evaluating global self-worth. Respondents rate agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher total scores indicating higher self-esteem.

The instruments were administered in English for respondents from the United States and the United Kingdom. For the Bulgarian sample, Bulgarian versions were used.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation, one-way ANOVA, and linear regression. Self-esteem categories (low, middle, high) were derived using the ±1 SD criterion.

Reliability coefficients (Table 3) were calculated for both the total sample and each national subsample. In the total sample, Cronbach's alpha was 0,744 for self-esteem, 0,841 for cynicism, and 0,696 for narcissism. In the Bulgarian sample, alpha coefficients were 0,751 for self-esteem, 0,811 for cynicism, and 0,645 for narcissism. In the United Kingdom sample, the respective coefficients were 0,849, 0,770, and 0,616, and in the United States sample 0,920, 0,860, and 0,682. These results indicate satisfactory internal consistency for the cynicism scale

across all samples, as well as good reliability for self-esteem, especially in the British and American subsamples. By contrast, the narcissism scale demonstrated lower internal consistency across the three national groups, which should be taken into account when interpreting comparative findings involving this construct.

Table 3. Reliability analysis.

	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha BG	Cronbach's Alpha UK	Cronbach's Alpha US	Number of Items
Self-esteem	0,744	0,751	0,849	0,920	9
Cynicism	0,841	0,811	0,770	0,860	13
Narcissism	0,696	0,645	0,616	0,682	9

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Correlation analysis showed significant inverse relationships between self-esteem and cynicism (r = –0,308, p < 0,001), and significant positive relationships between self-esteem and narcissism (r = 0,342, p < 0,001). The correlation between narcissism and cynicism was weak yet significant (r = 0,126, p = 0,002). Results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Corelation analysis.

		Self-esteem	Cynicism	Narcissism
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	–0,308**	0,342**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0,000	0,000
	N	626	624	626
Cynicism	Pearson Correlation	–0,308**	1	0,126**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000		0,002
	N	624	624	624
Narcissism	Pearson Correlation	0,342**	0,126**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,002	
	N	626	624	626

ANOVA revealed significant differences in cynicism and narcissism based on self-esteem levels (low, medium, high), calculated with the result +/– 1 SD. The results are shown in Tables 5-8, which presents ANOVA results by Nationality.

The ANOVA results clearly indicate statistically significant relationships among the constructs of self-esteem, narcissism, and cynicism across the total sample, encompassing participants from

Table 5. ANOVA Self-esteem, narcissism, cynicism – whole sample.

Dependent Variable	(I) SECateg	(J) SECateg	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Cynicism	Low	Middle	0,31892*	0,06870	0,000	0,1840	0,4538
		High	0.68145*	0,08508	0,000	0,5144	0,8485
	Middle	Low	–0,31892*	0,06870	0,000	–0,4538	–0,1840
		High	0,36252*	0,06555	0,000	0,2338	0,4913
	High	Low	–0,68145*	0,08508	0,000	–0,8485	–0,5144
		Middle	–0,36252*	0,06555	0,000	–0,4913	–0,2338
Narcissism	Low	Middle	–0,27104*	0,06552	0,000	–0,3997	–0,1424
		High	–0,62583*	0,08138	0,000	–0,7856	–0,4660
	Middle	Low	0,27104*	0,06552	0,000	0,1424	0,3997
		High	–0,35479*	0,06304	0,000	–0,4786	–0,2310
	High	Low	0,62583*	0,08138	0,000	0,4660	0,7856
		Middle	0,35479*	0,06304	0,000	0,2310	0,4786

Bulgaria, Great Britain, and the USA. Specifically, lower self-esteem is associated with significantly higher levels of cynicism compared to both middle (Mean difference = 0,31892, $p < 0,001$) and high self-esteem groups (Mean difference = 0,68145, $p < 0,001$). Likewise, for narcissism, the lowest self-esteem category again significantly differs from middle (Mean difference = –0,27104, $p < 0,001$) and high self-esteem categories (Mean difference = –0,62583, $p < 0,001$), confirming that higher narcissism coincides with higher self-esteem levels. The trend is consistent, showing that those in the high self-esteem category exhibit significantly greater narcissism compared to middle (Mean difference = 0,35479, $p < 0,001$) and low self-esteem groups (Mean difference = 0,62583, $p < 0,001$).

Table 6. ANOVA Self-esteem, narcissism, cynicism – Bulgarian sample.

Dependent Variable	(I) SECateg	(J) SECateg	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Cynicism	Low	Middle	0,45360*	0,08634	0,000	0,2838	0,6234
		High	0,56077*	0,11021	0,000	0,3441	0,7775
Narcissism	Low	High	–0,63304*	0,12102	0,000	–0,8710	–0,3951
	Middle	High	-0,50516*	0,09080	0,000	–0,6837	–0,3266

Regarding cynicism, individuals with low self-esteem report significantly higher levels of cynicism compared to both middle (Mean difference = 0,45360, $p < 0,001$) and high self-esteem categories (Mean difference = 0,56077, $p < 0,001$). For narcissism, the pattern shows that participants with low self-esteem have significantly lower levels of narcissism compared to those with high self-esteem (Mean difference = –0,63304, $p < 0,001$).

Table 7. ANOVA Self-esteem, narcissism, cynicism – USA sample.

Dependent Variable	(I) SECateg	(J) SECateg	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Cynicism	Low	Middle	0,48768*	0,13116	0,000	0,2284	0,7470
		High	0,95983*	0,14073	0,000	0,6816	1.2381
	Middle	High	0,47215*	0,11507	0,000	0,2446	0,6997
Narcissism	Low	High	–0,41605*	0,13651	0,003	–0,6860	–0,1461

Specifically, individuals with low self-esteem report significantly higher cynicism compared to those with middle (Mean difference = 0,48768, $p < 0,001$) and especially high self-esteem (Mean difference = 0,95983, $p < 0,001$). Additionally, individuals in the middle self-esteem group also exhibit significantly higher cynicism compared to those in the high self-esteem category (Mean difference = 0,47215, $p < 0,001$), demonstrating a consistent inverse relationship between self-esteem and cynicism in the US sample.

Regarding narcissism, only one significant difference emerges, with low self-esteem participants showing significantly lower narcissism compared to the high self-esteem group (Mean difference = –0,41605, $p = 0,003$).

Table 8. ANOVA Self-esteem, narcissism, cynicism – British sample.

Dependent Variable	(I) SECateg	(J) SECateg	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Cynicism	Low	Middle	0,28974*	0,13772	0,038	0,0165	0,5630
		High	0,36049	0,19242	0,064	–0,0213	0,7423
Narcissism	Low	Middle	–0,43619*	0,11309	0,000	–0,6606	–0,2118
		High	–0,94755*	0,15801	0,000	–1,2611	–0,6340
	Middle	High	–0,51136*	0,13734	0,000	–0,7839	–0,2388

Cynicism demonstrates a limited association with self-esteem categories. Individuals with low self-esteem report slightly higher cynicism compared to the middle self-esteem group (Mean difference = 0,28974, p = 0,038), whereas the difference between low and high self-esteem categories narrowly misses statistical significance (Mean difference = 0,36049, p = 0,064). This indicates a relatively weaker and less clear-cut relationship between self-esteem and cynicism among British respondents. In contrast, narcissism shows a strong and clear association with self-esteem. Participants in the low self-esteem category show significantly lower narcissism compared to both middle (Mean difference = –0,43619, $p < 0,001$) and high self-esteem categories (Mean difference = –0,94755, $p < 0,001$). Furthermore, middle-esteem participants have significantly lower narcissism than those in the high self-esteem category (Mean difference = –0,51136, $p < 0,001$).

Regression analyses provided insight into cultural nuances. Among USA respondents, self-esteem significantly predicted cynicism ($R^2 = 0,251$) and narcissism ($R^2 = 0,130$). In contrast, for GB respondents, self-esteem significantly predicted narcissism ($R^2 = 0,213$) but explained less variance in cynicism ($R^2 = 0,072$). Bulgarian data demonstrated that self-esteem significantly explained only a small variance in cynicism ($R^2 = 0,08$) and narcissism ($R^2 = 0,078$), suggesting additional intervening variables (Tables 9-11: Regression analyses by nationality).

For cynicism, self-esteem emerges as a strong negative predictor (B = –0,407, β = –0,501, t = –6,841, $p < 0,001$), with self-esteem explaining approximately 25,1% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0,245$). This result indicates that higher self-esteem significantly predicts lower cynicism among US respondents, reinforcing the findings from the earlier ANOVA.

In contrast, regarding narcissism, self-esteem acts as a significant positive predictor (B = 0,253, β = 0,360, t = 4.565, p <0,001), also accounting for about 25,1% of variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0,245$). This outcome confirms that as self-esteem increases, levels of narcissism rise correspondingly, affirming a robust positive association between these constructs among the US participants.

For narcissism, self-esteem significantly positively predicts narcissistic traits (B = 0,357, β = 0,461, t = 5,196, $p < 0,001$), explaining 21,3% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0,205$). This robust finding emphasizes that higher self-esteem among British individuals is strongly associated with elevated narcissism, consistent with prior ANOVA results.

Conversely, self-esteem emerges as a negative predictor for cynicism (B = –0,222, β = –0,269, t = –2,788, p = 0,006), yet it accounts for only a modest proportion of variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0,063$). Although statistically significant, this weak relationship suggests that while higher self-esteem does predict lower cynicism in the British sample, the explanatory power is comparatively limited.

The regression analyses for the Bulgarian sample indicate statistically significant relationships between self-esteem and both narcissism and cynicism. Specifically, self-esteem negatively predicts cynicism (B = –0,311, β = –0,288, t = –5,856, $p < 0,001$), explaining approximately 8,3% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0,081$). This finding aligns with earlier observations, confirming that increased self-esteem corresponds with lower cynicism among Bulgarians, although the relationship's explanatory power remains relatively modest.

Concerning narcissism, self-esteem emerged as a significant positive predictor in the Bulgarian sample (B = 0,331, β = 0,280, t = 5,687, $p < 0,001$), accounting for 7,8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0,078$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0,076$). Thus, higher self-esteem was associated with higher narcissism scores, although the explanatory power of the model remained modest.

The final analysis consisted of ANOVA comparisons of mean values across the three scales and the three national subsamples, Table 12.

Table 9. Regression analysis – Self-esteem, narcissism, cynicism about US sample.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4,602	0,228		20,160	0,000
	Self-esteem	–0,407	0,059	–0,501	–6,841	0,000
			Location: USA (Selected)	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Dependent Variable: Cynicism			0,501	0,251	0,245	0,59624
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1,851	0,213		8,686	0,000
	Self-esteem	0,253	0,055	0,360	4,565	0,000
			Location: USA (Selected)	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Dependent Variable: Narcissism			0,501	0,251	0,245	0,59624

Table 10. Regression analysis – Self-esteem, narcissism, cynicism about British sample.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1,283	0,244		5,268	0,000
	Self-esteem	0,357	0,069	0,461	5,196	0,000
			Location: GB (Selected)	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Dependent Variable: Narcissism			0,461	0,213	0,205	0,48169
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4,003	0,282		14,180	0,000
	Self-esteem	0,222	0,080	–0,269	–2,788	0,006
			Location: GB (Selected)	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Dependent Variable: Cynicism			0,269	0,072	0,063	0,55824

Table 11. Regression analysis – Self-esteem, narcissism, cynicism about Bulgarian sample.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1,646	0,219		7,530	0,000
	Self-esteem	0,331	0,058	0,280	5,687	0,000
			Location: BG (Selected)	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Dependent Variable: Narcissism			0,280	0,0780	0,0760	0,59407
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4,803	0,200		24,010	0,000
	Self-esteem	–0,311	0,053	–0,288	–5,856	0,000
			Location: BG (Selected)	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
Dependent Variable: Cynicism			0,288	0,083	0,081	0,53095

Table 12. ANOVA: Mean differences among different samples.

Dependent Variable	(I) Location	(J) Location	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Self-esteem	USA	GB	0,27092	0,08287	0,001	0,1082	0,4337
		BG	0,03018	0,06275	0,631	–0,0931	0,1534
	GB	USA	0,27092	0,08287	0,001	–0,4337	–0,1082
		BG	–0,24074	0,07116	<0,001	–0,3805	–0,1010
Cynicism	USA	GB	–0,15222	0,07659	0,047	–0,3026	–0,0018
		BG	–0,56396	0,05804	<0,001	–0,6779	–0,4500
	GB	USA	0,15222	0,07659	0,047	0,0018	0,3026
		BG	–0,41174	0,06580	<0,001	–0,5410	–0,2825
Narcissism	USA	GB	0,27572	0,07797	<0,001	0,1226	0,4288
		BG	–0,07699	0,05904	0,193	–0,1929	0,0390
	GB	USA	–0,27572	0,07797	<0,001	–0,4288	–0,1226
		BG	–0,35271	0,06695	<0,001	–0,4842	–0,2212

Self-esteem

Individuals from the USA exhibit significantly higher self-esteem compared to the British sample (Mean difference = 0,27092, $p < 0,001$). There is, however, no significant difference in self-esteem between American and Bulgarian participants, indicating comparable levels of self-esteem between these two groups. The difference between Bulgarians and British is significant, with the British displaying lower self-esteem (Mean difference = –0,24074, $p < 0,001$).

Cynicism

The results show distinctive patterns across cultures. Bulgarians exhibit significantly higher cynicism than both American (Mean difference = 0,56396, $p < 0,001$) and British respondents (Mean difference = 0,41174, $p = <0,001$). Americans show lower cynicism compared to the British sample (Mean difference = –0,15222, $p = 0,047$). These findings highlight a clear trend – the highest levels of cynicism occur among Bulgarians, intermediate among the British, and lowest among Americans. This is consistent with the theoretical framework of self-discrimination, suggesting that heightened cynicism among Bulgarians may reflect socio-historical and cultural influences, potentially exacerbated by individualistic and self-discriminatory attitudes.

Narcissism

Regarding narcissism, the American respondents show significantly higher levels compared to British participants (Mean difference = 0,27572, $p < 0,001$). Interestingly, the British sample has significantly lower narcissism compared to both American and Bulgarian groups (The British sample showed significantly lower narcissism than the Bulgarian sample (Mean difference = –0,35271, $p < 0,001$). Narcissism does not significantly differ between Americans and Bulgarians, suggesting relatively comparable narcissistic tendencies within these two groups.

DISCUSSION

The present study indicate that self-esteem, cynicism, and narcissism are related across the total sample, while also showing different patterns across the three studied cultural groups. Most consistently, self-esteem was negatively associated with cynicism and positively associated with narcissism, which is in line with previous research on the distinction between adaptive self-worth and more defensive or antagonistic self-evaluative processes.

The cross-cultural comparisons revealed higher cynicism scores in the Bulgarian subsample than in the British and American subsamples. However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously. Because the present study relied on convenience samples with uneven group sizes and without formal measurement invariance testing, the results cannot be generalized to national populations. The observed differences therefore more appropriately characterize the specific respondents included in this study rather than Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, or the United States as whole societies.

In the Bulgarian subsample, cynicism remained relatively elevated across self-esteem categories, with smaller within-group variation than in the American subsample. This pattern may be interpreted as consistent with the theoretical perspective of self-discrimination proposed by Manolov [19], but such interpretation should remain tentative.

In contrast, the American sample exhibits a clear, stepwise decrease in cynicism as self-esteem increases, indicating a pronounced inverse linear relationship. This pattern suggests that in the American cultural environment, higher self-esteem actively buffers individuals against cynicism, reflecting a more individually empowering and proactive cultural orientation. Meanwhile, the British sample reveals the weakest relationship between cynicism and self-esteem. Only minimal differentiation occurs between self-esteem categories, implying that self-esteem exerts limited influence over cynical attitudes within British culture, possibly due to culturally ingrained critical self-evaluation and less explicit expressions of cynicism.

Regarding narcissism, all three cultural samples demonstrate a consistent positive association with self-esteem, reinforcing established psychological theories positing narcissism as a complex trait closely linked to heightened self-esteem. However, nuances exist in the intensity and clarity of these relationships. The British sample notably presents the clearest and strongest incremental relationship, with narcissism significantly rising at each level of self-esteem, from low through middle to high. This pattern suggests that, in the present British subsample, higher self-esteem was more strongly associated with narcissistic tendencies than in the other two subsamples.

In contrast, the Bulgarian sample, although confirming a positive association between self-esteem and narcissism, demonstrates relatively moderate differentiation. This suggests cultural specificity, with narcissism influenced by self-esteem but not dramatically differentiated at intermediate levels. The American sample also supports this positive relationship but primarily in the extremes – those with low versus high self-esteem – rather than showing clear incremental increases across categories. Thus, Americans' narcissistic tendencies are associated distinctly with high self-esteem rather than moderate increases.

These culturally distinct patterns underscore the complexity of psychological constructs and highlight the necessity of considering cultural context when interpreting self-esteem's associations with cynicism and narcissism. The Bulgarian participants' pronounced cynicism reflects cultural influences such as historical experiences and individualistic attitudes that foster interpersonal mistrust, aligning closely with Manolov's self-discrimination theory. The American subsample showed the clearest inverse association between self-esteem and cynicism, alongside a positive link between self-esteem and narcissism. Within the limits of the present design, this may indicate that self-esteem functions as a stronger protective factor against cynical attitudes in this subsample. The British subsample showed a relatively strong positive association between self-esteem and narcissism, whereas the association between self-esteem and cynicism was weaker. This pattern points to a distinct configuration within the studied group, although it should not be overinterpreted as a definitive cultural profile.

These findings indicate important implications for psychological interventions, counseling, and organizational strategies across cultural contexts. Specifically, interventions aimed at reducing cynicism in Bulgaria may need to address deep-rooted historical and cultural factors, while in American contexts, bolstering self-esteem could substantially mitigate cynical attitudes. For

British populations, recognizing the strong association between high self-esteem and narcissism may guide more nuanced therapeutic or organizational approaches to fostering healthy self-perceptions without exacerbating maladaptive narcissistic behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides preliminary evidence that self-esteem, cynicism, and narcissism are systematically related, while also differing across the three studied subsamples from Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Across the overall sample, higher self-esteem was associated with lower cynicism and higher narcissism. Cross-cultural differences were also observed, particularly in cynicism. However, because of the non-representative sampling strategy and the absence of formal measurement invariance testing, these findings should be interpreted as preliminary. The study contributes to the growing discussion on how self-evaluative and interpersonal dispositions are configured across cultural contexts and offers a basis for more rigorous future cross-cultural research.

A methodological limitation of the present study is that measurement invariance across the three cultural groups was not formally tested. Therefore, although the same instruments were applied across samples, it cannot be conclusively established that the measured constructs were interpreted in fully equivalent ways in Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. For this reason, the cross-cultural comparisons reported here should be treated as preliminary and interpreted with caution.

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