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The ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN INTERPERSONAL FUNCTIONING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between self-esteem and interpersonal relationships of the university students and compared male and female students in relation to self-esteem and interpersonal relationships. The transition to university can be challenging, and having a positive view of oneself, along with positive relationships with others, influences whether students adjust well to their university and feel good about themselves. A correlational, cross-sectional design was used. The study used purposive sampling and 200 students (100 males and 100 females) were selected, with their sample coming from various degree programs. The State Self-Esteem Scale and short form of the Functional Idiographic Assessment Template Questionnaire (FIAT-Q-SF), which assesses interpersonal functioning, were used to collect data. The results indicated that there was a positive and significant correlation between the concepts of self-esteem and interpersonal relations, thus it was found that students who have positive self-esteem have good interpersonal relations. There was no difference found between men and women with regard to self-esteem, indicating that men and women have the same self-esteem. However, female students scored significantly better than male students on the interpersonal relationship quality. The conclusions overall indicate that self-esteem plays a pivotal role in the development of healthy relationships during university life and that the development of self-esteem, communication skills and peer relationships may be beneficial for institutions to

Keywords: *self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, university students, gender differences*

INTRODUCTION

University is a significant milestone in a young person's life. They leave behind their previous way of life and assume new responsibilities in school, new friendships, new relationships with teachers and peers and responsibilities for themselves as they transition from childhood to adulthood. These changes can be thrilling, but they can also be stressful, and how these students respond to such changes is related to two psychological factors: self-esteem and interpersonal relationships (Liu et al., 2019; Richardson et al., 2012).

Students' sense of self-regard, or how they value themselves, is one of the most potent factors influencing their coping with life at university. Students' self-worth has a broader impact on their behavior; for example, confidence in speaking in class, dealing with failures, etc. (Orth & Robins, 2014). Conversely, interpersonal relationships – the social, emotional and academic connections

students have with fellow students, roommates and teachers – serve to support, foster trust and a sense of belonging that assists students to cope with the pressures of academic life (Wentzel, 2017; Demir & Davidson, 2013).

Conceptual and Operational Definitions

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a person's general evaluation of his/her value, competence and worth (Rosenberg, 1965; Orth & Robins, 2014). A relatively enduring self-perception which influences feelings, decisions, and actions. Higher self-esteem has been shown to help students deal with academic failures in a healthier manner, positively relate with others, and be less likely to experience anxiety, withdrawal, or a decline in motivation (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). The State Self-Esteem Scale, a standardised self-report scale, was used to measure self-esteem, with high scores indicating high self-esteem, and low scores indicating low self-esteem and self-confidence.

Interpersonal Relationships

Interpersonal relationships are the social, emotional and academic relationships students form with others in their classroom, friends, teachers, and mentors. While healthy relationships are cooperative, trusting and emotionally supportive (Wentzel, 2017), they also foster a sense of belonging and safety that helps students to manage the rigors of college life (Barry et al., 2009). This study used a standardised interpersonal relationships questionnaire which examines perceived support, communication, trust and cooperation with others, with scores indicating more positive and supportive interpersonal relationships.

Background of the Study

Self-esteem influences social adjustment, emotional well-being and academic participation (Rosenberg, 2015). Students who feel good about themselves are more confident, more motivated, and more socially engaged; they are more likely to participate in discussions, work within groups, and maintain positive friendships. However, students who have lower self-esteem are more prone to academic disengagement, social disengagement, and have a fear of being judged by others.

The relationships with others are as important. Friendships and peer relationships provide friendship and mutual learning, and relationships with teachers and mentors provide motivation and skill development (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002). Either type of relationship helps to decrease common stressors like loneliness and school pressure, while providing students with a sense of belonging.

There is an increasing amount of research that connects the two constructs. Higher self-esteem leads to increased resilience, which means students will seek assistance when they need it, have positive relationships with others and be more involved in class discussions (Orth et al., 2012). There is also a connection between supportive peer and academic relationships and increases in self-esteem, as students feel affirmed and accomplished in their relationships (Demir & Davidson, 2013). In contrast, poor peer relations and social isolation are associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and less self-esteem (Wentzel, 2005). The findings confirm the same trend in Pakistan; students with positive peer relationships also report higher self-esteem, which highlights the cultural significance of the role of social support in schools here.

How these two factors correlate to one another can help universities create more effective support systems for students that can range from confidence building workshops to peer mentoring.

Rationale of the Study

This is an important topic because when combined, self-esteem and inter-personal relations account for a significant portion of a student's emotional and academic development. University can be challenging in many ways, with new pressures like living away from home, making new friends and dealing with increased workloads, and many pupils find this time stressful and not very confident. An understanding of how self-esteem impacts on students' relationship forming and sustaining abilities can be beneficial in understanding the emotions driving common challenges including loneliness, low self-esteem and social anxiety.

Good relationships also safeguard the mental health of pupils, helping them to de-escalate stressful situations and for some, poor self-esteem, shyness or fear of rejection can make it difficult to

make friends. The study will explore this connection in order to assist teachers, counsellors, and university administrators in creating improved support for those students having social or emotional difficulties and to promote the development of the kind of personal growth that will be evident in students' future work.

Objectives

- To examine the relationship between self-esteem and interpersonal relationships among university students.
- To compare male and female university students on self-esteem.
- To compare male and female university students on interpersonal relationships.

Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and interpersonal relationships among university students.
H2: Male and female university students differ significantly in self-esteem.
H3: Male and female university students differ significantly in interpersonal relationships.

METHOD

The research approach adopted was quantitative with correlational, cross sectional design because the purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between self-esteem and interpersonal relationship at one time.

Sample

The sample consisted of 200 students from different degree programs, such as BS IT, BS English, BS Artificial Intelligence, and BS Psychology, aged from 25-45 years; 100 male and 100 female students. The study included only students that provided informed consent.

Inclusion criteria:

- Students between 25-45 years age.
- Students who provided informed consent to take part.

Exclusion criteria:

- Students who were unwilling to share their responses.
- Students who were diagnosed with a psychotic disorder when the data was collected.
- Students age 25-45 who were out of the range.

Instruments

Demographic Sheet

A brief demographic questionnaire was completed to gather the ages, gender, marital status, qualification, rural/urban background and family system (joint/nuclear) of the participants.

Individuals completed the Scale I — State Self-Esteem Scale (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991)

This 20 item scale assesses a person's "here and now" level of self-esteem, not a personality trait. Items are related to confidence in abilities, satisfaction with appearance, perceived respect from others and are rated on a 5-point scale from 'Not at all' to 'Extremely'. Total scores indicate higher levels of momentary self-esteem.

Scale II — FIAT-Q-SF (Callaghan et al., 2012)

The Functional Idiographic Assessment Template Questionnaire – Short Form (FITQ-SF) is a 32 item scale that examines behaviours in relationships such as expressing feelings, asking for help, conflict, setting boundaries and staying connected with others. The ratings range from 'Almost Never' (1) to 'Almost Always' (5), with a total score of 32 to 160 possible. The higher the score the more problems there are in the interpersonal areas, the lower the score the better the interpersonal functioning. In previous studies the scale has demonstrated a high level of reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .70 to .90).

Procedure

Participants were informed about the study's purpose and signed up to participate. They then filled in at their own speed in a quiet and comfortable environment the demographic sheet and then the State Self-Esteem Scale and the FIAT-Q-SF. Precise instructions were provided prior to each questionnaire. Responses were gathered,

recorded and analysed confidentially and respectfully with only academic research purposes in mind.

Ethical Considerations

- Data collection was preceded by informed consent.
- Participation was completely voluntary.
- Participants were free to withdraw at any point.
- Responses were kept anonymous and confidential.
- Data were used only for academic research.

RESULTS

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of self-esteem and interpersonal relationships (N = 50)

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Self-Esteem	50	24.00	75.00	54.88	9.50
Interpersonal Relationships	50	32.00	177.00	120.52	22.96

Note. SD = Standard Deviation.

The overall level of self-esteem reported by participants was moderate (M = 54.88, SD = 9.50); scores were fairly similar across the sample. Interpersonal relationship scores, however, ranged quite widely (M = 120.52, SD = 22.96) with some students having significantly more interpersonal skills than others.

Table 2

Reliability of the study scales (N = 200)

Scale	No. of Items (k)	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Self-Esteem Scale	20	.66
Interpersonal Relations Scale	32	.69

Note. k = number of items, α = Cronbach's alpha reliability.

Exploratory social science research was found to have acceptable, moderate reliability on both scales. The Self-Esteem Scale (SE α = .66) and the Interpersonal Relations Scale (IR α = .69) yielded fairly consistent results, but future studies may be able to make a few modifications to get closer to the more desirable .70 level.

Table 3

Pearson correlation between self-esteem and interpersonal relationships

Variable	1	2	M	SD
1. Self-Esteem	—	.764**	42.32	18.59
2. Interpersonal Relations	—	—	53.72	10.32

*Note. **p < .01.*

A strong, positive correlation was found between self-esteem and interpersonal relationships (r = .764, p < .01). In other words, students who had positive self-perceptions were more likely to communicate well, develop positive relationships,

and have healthy relationships with others. This finding is consistent with Hypothesis 1.

Table 4

Independent samples t-test comparing men and women (N = 200)

Variable	Men (n=100) M (SD)	Women (n=100) M (SD)	t	p	95% CI (LL–UL)	Cohen's d
Self-Esteem	20.79 (8.90)	21.86 (10.10)	-.788	.187	-3.74, 1.60	-.111
Interpersonal Relations	36.21 (5.60)	39.52 (7.40)	-3.68	.007	-6.26, -1.98	-.543

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit.

There was no significant difference between the genders in terms of self-esteem (p = .187); moreover, the effect size was very small (d = -.111), thus failing to support Hypothesis 2, which states that there will be a significant difference between the self-esteem of men and women, with no significant effect. The interpersonal relationship scores differed, with females (M = 39.52) having significantly higher scores than males (M = 36.21); t = -3.68, p = .007, d = -.543, supporting Hypothesis 3 and indicating that in this sample, females related to others, to some degree, more effectively than males.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the relationship between self-esteem and interpersonal relationship and to investigate whether there is any differences between the two genders, university students. As predicted, there was a strong and positive correlation between self-esteem and interpersonal relationships: the students who were more confident, more valuable were also the ones who had better interpersonal relationships. This is consistent with previous studies which found that self-esteem is one of the key factors determining social behavior and emotional relationships of young adults (Orth et al., 2021). Self-esteem appears to relate to students' ability to express themselves, trust others more rapidly and participate in social interactions without feeling rejected.

There is also evidence that self-esteem has some impact on students' social adjustment. For students, confidence is associated with smoother interactions with peers and teachers, and students with lower self-esteem may not even participate in group settings. This aligns with recent research that found a link between self-esteem and social confidence as well as satisfaction with relationships (Kernis & Goldman, 2020), meaning that activities that increase self-esteem may benefit communication and social bonding.

There was no significant difference in self-esteem, which aligns with some more recent research that concluded that gender was not a strong determinant of university students' self-esteem (Bleidorn et al., 2021). For the overall sample, male and female students seem to experience similar psychological pressures throughout their school careers.

The gender gap was more clearly visible in interpersonal relations as female students outperformed male students. A possible reason for this is that women are more emotionally expressive and socially involved, as indicated in recent literature concerning the communication style of men and women (Rose & Rudolph, 2020). There may be some social relationships that are more shallow among male students, as they may not show their emotions as openly as female students.

All of this evidence supports the notion that self-esteem is linked to the quality of students' relationships, and that nurturing students' confidence may be one tangible approach for universities to improve social and emotional wellbeing on campus.

Conclusion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that there is a positive and significant correlation between the level of self-esteem and the level of

interpersonal relations among college students — that is, students with higher self-esteem have better interpersonal relations. There was no meaningful difference between the self-esteem of male and female students, suggesting that there is no difference in self-worth between the sexes. However, interpersonal relationships were very different, with female students reporting higher quality interpersonal relationships than male students. Self-esteem is overall a significant aspect to be considered when studying the factors that can positively support students' relationships in university.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

Standardised scales of psychology were used and they were well established and standardised, providing credibility to the results. The number of students selected for the sample (200) was large enough to permit meaningful gender comparisons and offered good generalisability. All information was gathered with regard to ethical standards including informed consent and confidentiality, which further enhanced the trustworthiness of the information.

Limitations

Because the cross-sectional design utilized to collect the data did not allow for the drawing of any cause-and-effect inferences. Since the measures relied on self-report, participants' answers may have been affected by response bias. The sample also consisted of students who were easily accessible, which may restrict the extent to which the results generalize, and there were other factors that might have been relevant, such as personality, family background and mental health, that were not looked at.

Implications and Suggestions

- University should conduct workshops to enhance students' self-esteem and confidence.
- Students who have low self-esteem should be given the opportunity to receive counselling services.
- Group activities are encouraged and interpersonal relationships will be reinforced.
- Efforts should be made by teachers to set up an atmosphere in class that is friendly and supportive.
- Peer Mentoring programs should be expanded to increase students' social support.
- Students would benefit from awareness sessions on self-worth and communication skills, which would be applicable to the whole student body.
- Longitudinal designs should be used in future studies for cause and effect over time.
- The findings would be more generalizable if larger, more diverse samples were available.
- More insight might be gained by mixed-method designs, integrating quantitative and qualitative data.
- Further research should include other variables such as personality type and stress.
- Further emphasis should be placed on the cultural aspects and on cross institutional comparisons.

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