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## Self-esteem and Life Satisfaction among University Students

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### Abstract

The achievement of personal goals and aspirations affect a person's self-esteem and will critically determine the person's psychosocial well-being. Being acutely aware of one's intrinsic strengths and positive traits defines one's self-esteem. This awareness results in present good experiences instead of negative thoughts becoming the focal point. The sum total of good experiences will result in better life satisfaction. It is found that self-esteem is an important determinant of one's life satisfaction because of the close relationship between the two, with demographic characteristics, social relationships, and personality being the other determinants. This study aims to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction among Psychology Program students in a university in Sabah. The two instruments used in this study were Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). A total of 243 Psychology Program students participated in this study. The results indicated that there was a large positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction among the Psychology Program students. However, there were no significant differences between self-esteem and life satisfaction based on gender, age, and year of study. Thus, increased self-esteem is crucially important as it would directly increase life satisfaction regardless of gender, age and year of study.

**Keywords:** Self-Esteem, Life Satisfaction, Gender, Age, Year of Study

### Introduction

Self-esteem, as defined by Rosenberg (1965), is the evaluation of one's positive or negative traits. Fundamentally, Rosenberg's self-esteem theory relies on two assumptions. The first assumption is seeing ourselves from others perspectives. The second assumption is social comparisons. We compare ourselves with others and make positive or negative self-evaluations. On the other hand, based on Diener's (1984) bottom-up theory, life satisfaction is the satisfaction derived by taking an average of the different aspects of life. Thus, life satisfaction is an average satisfaction of the many aspects of life.

Self-esteem has been acknowledged across all cultures as an important factor that determines life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 2009). Moksnes and Espnes (2013) also appear to support this view as they reiterated that adolescents' life satisfaction, regardless of their age or sex, have been positively influenced by their self-esteem. Mann et al (2004) put forward the idea

of self-esteem being a vital psychological construct as it contributes positively to one's life quality. Self-esteem is crucial for mental health and will influence one's aspiration, life goals and social interactions.

According to Trzesniewski et al (2006), a person's success and well-being in life are pre-determined by one's self-esteem. Hence, a wide spectrum of negative outcomes, such as higher delinquency rates and drug abuse, and lower levels of life satisfaction, with the need to make constant adjustments, manifest themselves in low-self-esteem adolescents.

The study of Baumeister et al (2003) also suggested that the high self-esteem people will be braver to speak out in groups comparable to low self-esteem people. Their study suggested also those with higher self-esteem have a stronger relation to happiness as they are more likable in groups. Low self-esteem people are more likely to be prone to depression under certain circumstances as they are unhappy with themselves. Hence, it is highly possible that low self-esteem increases the level of dissatisfaction with life.

### **Statement of Problem**

Mann et al (2004) showed that a high self-esteem not only strengthens one's physical and mental health but also acts as a protective mechanism, enabling one to cope better and adjust accordingly in the face of adversities, resulting in even better health and well-being. Numerous studies have reported this close relationship between self-esteem and good psycho-social adjustment, active-positive coping styles, mental well-being, happiness, educational success, and physical health (Li et al., 2010; Mann et al., 2004; Steiger et al., 2015).

According to Trzesniewski et al (2006) adolescents with low-esteem are more likely to have a negative mindset. Orth et al. (2009) agree that this group of adolescents are more susceptible emotionally compared with those with a high self-esteem. Hence, it is not surprising and as pointed out by Orth et al (2012); Li et al (2010); Sowislo and Orth (2013); Tetzner et al (2017) that low self-esteem adolescents will have a lowered sense of well-being, experience more external and internal conflicts, physical health problems, and eventually educational failure.

Evidence collected across cohorts, samples, and measures in previous studies have documented that in the area of gender differences, males tend to have higher self-esteem than females (Orth, 2017). According to Diener and Diener (2009), females experience lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction because traditionally, they have been bestowed with lesser power and fewer resources than males.

A cross-cultural examination to determine the effect of gender and age differences on self-esteem in an internet sample across 48 nations where their ages ranged from late adolescence to middle adulthood, found that self-esteem increased with age (Bleidorn et al., 2016). Bleidorn et al (2016) also highlighted that males reported higher self-esteem than females. However, a study by Zhang and Leung (2002) on a sample Chinese population to examine the moderating effect of gender on self-esteem and life satisfaction revealed no significant impact. Moksnes and Espnes (2013) shared self-esteem has a positive influence on adolescents' life satisfaction irrespective of age or gender.

Even though numerous research on self-esteem and life satisfaction related to gender and age have been carried out on university students, still not enough studies have been carried out to investigate the differences between self-esteem and life satisfaction of students throughout their academic year in the university. Furthermore, most of the findings on positive psychological constructs were drawn from research conducted overseas, therefore it

is timely to look at the self-esteem and life satisfaction in terms of gender, age and year of study in the Malaysian context. Moreover, though a close link between self-esteem and life satisfaction have been clearly shown in previous studies and a sound explanation for gender and age differences have been provided for, still very little is known about the direction of these two variables in terms of year of study. There is a lack of data regarding the well-being of Malaysian students, especially data related to issues which address the significance of self-esteem and its effects on life satisfaction among Malaysian university students in terms of gender, age and year of study. Herein lies the roots of the research problem. In view of this, the objectives of this study are to investigate:

- The differences in self-esteem based on a. gender; b. age; c. year of study among university students.
- The differences in life satisfaction based on a. gender; b. age; c. year of study among university students.
- The relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction among university students.

### Methodology

The two instruments used to gather data of a sample group of Psychology program students at a local public university in Sabah were the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). The RSES developed by Rosenberg (1965), is a reputable instrument that has been used in the measurement of self-esteem.

This unidimensional scale with 10 items, five positive, while the remaining five are negative, are reverse scored. The five positive items are Items 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, and the five negative items are Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 respectively. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the RSES was given 0.83 (Kong et al., 2012). Arslan (2019) reported that the internal consistency ( $\alpha$ ) of RSES was adequate ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

The overall cognitive judgments about one's satisfaction towards life as a whole was evaluated using SWLS developed by (Diener et al., 1985). This instrument consisted of five positively worded items that were grouped together, representing a strong single dimension.

There are a total of five items, each item is a brief statement, and is to be answered accordingly using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 7, (1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree). The total score, the sum of all five items would have a range from 5 to 35, with the higher scores signifying higher levels of life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Studies have shown that the SWLS have a strong internal reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .87 among adults (Diener et al., 1985) and  $\alpha = .78$  among adolescents (Neto, 1993). The IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22 was used to analyse the data.

### Results

The results of this study are shown as below

#### *Differences in Self-esteem Based on Gender, Age and Year of Study*

Table 1 showed the differences in self-esteem based on gender. The results being tested using the Independent Sample *t*-test. As shown in the table, there were no significant differences in self-esteem (RSES) based on gender,  $t(127.911) = -1.434$ ,  $p = .154$ .

Table 1  
*Differences in Self-Esteem Based on Gender*

	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>RSES</b>	-1.434	127.911	.154	2.649 (Male) 2.758 (Female)	.550 .524

As for Table 2, the result was tested using One-way ANOVA. It also showed no statistically differences in self-esteem (RSES) based on age  $F(3,239) = 1.616, p = .186$ .

Table 2  
*Differences in Self-Esteem Based on Age*

		<b>df</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>RSES</b>	Between Groups	3	1.616	.186

For the differences between self-esteem based on year of study, the results were tested using One-way ANOVA. As shown in Table 3, there were no significant differences in self-esteem (RSES) based on year of study  $F(3,239) = .888, p = .448$ .

Table 3  
*Differences in Self-Esteem Based on Year of Study*

		<b>df</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>RSES</b>	Between Groups	3	.888	.448

*Differences in Life Satisfaction Based on Gender, Age and Year of Study*

Table 4 showed there was no significant difference in life satisfaction (SWLS) based on gender,  $t(136.873) = -.912, p = .363$ .

Table 4  
*Differences in Life Satisfaction Based on Gender*

	<b>t</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>SWLS</b>	-.912	136.873	.363	4.497 (Male) 4.644 (Female)	1.139 1.171

Table 5 also showed that there was also no significant difference in life satisfaction (SWLS) based on age  $F(3,239) = 1.495, p = .217$

Table 5  
*Differences in Life Satisfaction Based on Age*

		<b>df</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>SWLS</b>	Between Groups	3	1.495	.217

Table 6 showed that there was also no significant difference in life satisfaction (SWLS) based on year of study,  $F(3,239) = .774$ ,  $p = .510$ .

Table 6

*Differences in Life Satisfaction Based on Year of Study*

		df	F	Sig.
<b>SWLS</b>	Between Groups	3	.774	.510

*Relationship between Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction*

As for self-esteem (RSES) and life satisfaction (SWLS), the results of the Pearson correlation in Table 7 showed that there was a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction,  $r = .630$ ,  $p < .01$ .

According to the guidelines by Cohen (1988),  $r = .10$  to  $.29$  or  $r = -.10$  to  $-.29$  (small strength);  $r = .30$  to  $.49$  or  $r = -.30$  to  $-.49$  (medium strength);  $r = .50$  to  $1.0$  or  $r = -.50$  to  $-1.0$  (large strength). The results of this study showed a large positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Table 7

*Relationship between Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction*

		RSES	SWLS
<b>RSES</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.630**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	243	243
<b>SWLS</b>	Pearson Correlation	.630**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	243	243

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

A non-significant relationship was found between self-esteem and life-satisfaction with regards to gender, probably because equality between the two sexes is practised in today's society. In Malaysia, both males and females are given equal opportunities to education, resulting in equal opportunities to pursue their aspirations in life. Thus, self-esteem and life satisfaction for both genders showed no differences. The findings in this study which showed non-significant results between self-esteem and life-satisfaction based on age and year of study could be attributed to the narrow age gap of 3 years in the sample group comprising students aged between 21 to 24.

It is not difficult to understand that the findings of this study revealed that self-esteem impacts life satisfaction. Self-esteem can be equated with the self-worth within a person, influencing a person's decisions when faced with challenges in life. People with higher self-esteem in the face of challenges are expected to be more robust when dealing with obstacles. This is mainly because they have more self-confidence and therefore are capable of coming



up with more solutions to their problems. They will definitely experience better life satisfaction once their problems are over and vice versa.

Based on these findings, it is fair to conclude that how university students ultimately view their lives will largely depend on their level of self-esteem. Therefore self-esteem is vital for a general evaluation of one's life (Çivitci & Çivitci, 2009). Hence, there exists an alignment between the current findings with that of earlier research, which stipulated that self-esteem remains constantly a correlate of life satisfaction (Diener & Diener, 1995). Hence, university students with low self-esteem could experience less satisfaction towards life. The same would also be true of university students who would experience favourable life outcomes as a result of their positive self-evaluation.

This study suggests that self-esteem should be recognised as a critical resource of life satisfaction. Needless to say, it is essential to develop one's self-esteem since it determines the level of one's satisfaction in life and will be a good buffer against negative emotions. Increased self-esteem results in attainment of higher levels of well-being (Ji et al., 2019) and a better quality of life. Thus, self-esteem will always be regarded as an important mediator in the various aspects of life such as social support, self-efficacy, self-confidence, resiliencies, and happiness. It is crucial that the future pillars of the nation, our university students, possess good mental health, so that they can contribute to the nation and society.

### **Contribution of the Study**

According to Self-Esteem Theory, self-esteem is based on people viewing themselves. If they view themselves highly, their self-esteem would be high even if they have not been successful in the eyes of others. Whereas for Bottom Up Theory, life satisfaction is also very subjective. It is based on how people view their life as a whole. Even though both theories are subjective in a sense, they are related to each other (Çivitci & Çivitci, 2009). The major contribution of this study is proven that there is a large positive relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction. This implies that universities need to run more programs in helping students boost their self-esteem. Once their self-esteem is high, their life satisfaction will also simultaneously be high too, regardless of gender, age and year of study.

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