Self Esteem Amongst Young Adults: The Effect of Gender, Social Support and Personality

Teoh HJ, Nur Afiqah R

Department of Psychology, School of Health and Natural Sciences, Sunway University College, Malaysia

Abstract

A total of 200 university students were surveyed to ascertain if gender, personality traits and social support were associated with self-esteem. There were equal numbers of males and females in the study, with controls for living and education status. The results showed that gender was not significantly associated with self-esteem. Whilst all the personality and social support factors were found to be associated with levels of self-esteem, only extraversion, openness to new experiences, conscientiousness, emotional stability and total amount of social support were found to predict self-esteem. Recommendations are made for early identification and interventions for populations at risk of low self-esteem based on the findings of the study.

Keywords: Personality, Self-esteem, Social support, Gender, Young adults

Introduction

The rate of mental health problems amongst Malaysians is rising. According to the Ministry of Health Malaysia\(^1\), 61% of Malaysians in a sample of 36,519 subjects, aged 16 years and above, were reported to have some mental health symptoms. Within this sample 6.3% had symptoms of depression and feelings of taking their lives. Within the 16-24 year old age group the prevalence of suicidal ideation was 11%. Of concern is that feelings of low self-esteem may result in suicidal ideation\(^2\). Given the link between self-esteem and suicidal ideation, this paper’s concerns are on the predictors of self-esteem whether it is biologically or socially related. Several possible factors have been found to be associated with self-esteem. Amongst these are personality\(^3\) and social support\(^4\). Understanding these predictors of self-esteem would assist with targeting groups at risk so that intervention programs can be developed.

There have been several definitions of self-esteem. Robson\(^5\) defined it as “the sense of contentment and self acceptance that results from a person’s appraisal of his own worth, significance, attractiveness, competence, and ability to satisfy his aspirations”. According to Harmon-Jones et al.\(^6\) it is “one’s belief regarding how well one is living up to the standards of value prescribed by the worldview”. In general, self-esteem concerns how people view themselves.
There has been many speculations about the relationship between gender and self esteem. A study by Naderi and colleagues amongst 153 adults observed that females had a higher score of self-esteem, as compared with males. On the other hand, Gentile and colleagues, in a meta-analysis of 115 studies, did not find gender differences where self esteem was concerned. Therefore the link between gender and self-esteem is not clear.

Two main descriptions of social support exist. Firstly, Weiss suggested a multi-dimensional model of social support which includes attachment (a sense of emotional closeness and security); reliable alliance (the assurance that one can count on others for assistance under any circumstances); enhancement of worth (affirmation of one's competence and skill); social integration (a sense of belonging to a group of people who share common interests and recreational activities); guidance (advice and information); and opportunity for nurturance (taking care of another person). Secondly, social support has also been described in terms of network density and satisfaction with support received.

Social support levels have been found to be associated with self esteem. Huurre assessed 115 young adults and found that those with higher levels of social support from friends and parents were more likely to have a higher level of self-esteem which subsequently protected against the symptoms of depression. Lower levels of children’s perceived social support from their classmates were also found to be associated with higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem. Thus social support may have a role in buffering against symptoms of depression and low self-esteem. To explain these interactions, Stryker suggested that people tend to use role models as tools that shape thinking about themselves, thus persons who have supportive role models, tend to have higher self-esteem. This social support theory may be the cause of the changes of social support levels.

Personality can be described as the pattern of thought, emotion and behaviour that defines an individual’s personal style and influences his interactions with the environment. Several descriptions of personality currently exist. The Cattell Personality Factor profile describes sixteen types of personality traits. The sixteen traits are listed below along with a description of what is derived from either extreme of the personality axis. Eysenck developed a general method of describing personality. In his description, two major traits were identified. These were introversion and extroversion. Using statistical methods, Costa & McCrae found that there were 5 broad traits which all behaviours could be classified into. They labelled these traits Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness.

Personality has been found to be associated with self-esteem. Garaigordobil and Bernaras studied 90 participants and found that high extraversion was associated with high self-esteem, hence implying that internal factors too such as personality traits can be associated with levels of self-esteem. Similar findings were observed by Gosling and colleagues amongst 326,641 subjects where emotional stability, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience were associated with high self-esteem.

A review of the literature has indicated that a sizeable proportion of young adults have a low self-esteem. However, it is unclear whether there are gender differences.
Furthermore, it has been observed that personality and social support has been associated with self-esteem. Given these observations, the speculations of this study with regards the impact of gender, personality and social support on self esteem are as follow:

1. Gender differences are not associated with levels of self-esteem.
2. Some personality traits would predict higher self-esteem.
3. Higher level of social support would predict higher level of self-esteem.
4. Personality traits and self-esteem would predict social support equally.

**Methods**

**Study design**

The study design employed was a cross-sectional survey. The independent variables were the level of social support, personality traits and gender, whilst the dependent variable was the level of self-esteem.

**Subjects**

The study comprised 100 males and 100 female subjects. They were aged between 18-24 years with a mean age of 21.31 years. A breakdown of the racial composition showed that there were 172 (86%) Malays, 13 (6.5%) were Indians, 14 (7%) were Chinese and 1 (0.5%) from the ‘others’ racial group. All the subjects were living with their families. In terms of the courses that subjects were taking, 2 (1%) of the subjects were studying psychology, 14 (7%) were from Information Technology, 11 (5.5%) were from Accounting and the other 173 (86.5%) subjects were from other courses. The bulk of the data was collected from University Technology Mara, unfortunately, some of the subjects did not provide the name of course that they were enrolled into.

**Measurement Instruments**

The main variables included in this study were self-esteem, personality and social support. Three instruments were used to measure these factors. They are depicted in this sub-section, and the means, standard deviations and ranges of each of the subscales are depicted in Table 1.

**Ten Item Personality Index (TIPI)**

The TIPI consists of ten items that are used to evaluate the five different personality traits of the subject. These traits are Neuroticism - Emotional Stability, Extraversion - Introversion, Openness - Closeness, Agreeableness - Disagreeableness and Conscientiousness - Non-Conscientiousness and based on the work of Costa & McCrae (17)’s NEO Personality Inventory. The responses are based on a seven point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Agree a lot”. The sub-scale correlation with the NEO Personality Inventory subscales ranges from 0.65-0.87. Test-retest reliability of the TIPI after two weeks is r = 0.72.

**Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ)**

The SSQ is a 27 item questionnaire that examines perceived social support and satisfaction with social support. A 1-6 Likert scale was used to score the degree of satisfaction. Higher scores indicate that respondents are more satisfied with social support. For the purpose of this study, only the satisfaction with social support score was utilised. The score has been found to correlate negatively with anxiety, depression and neuroticism. The SSQ was selected as it had been evaluated on more than one sample and correlated with measures of parent well-being (i.e., depression, r = -.43  p < .01; anxiety, r = -.39  p < .01; and
neuroticism, \( r = -0.37 \) \( p < 0.05 \) and encompassed the widest variety of issues concerned with the subject’s social support. The Internal reliability of the scale has been reported to be as .97 (10).

Self-Esteem Rating Scale (SERS)\(^{20}\).

The SERS consists of 40 questions on self-evaluation including overall self-worth, social competence, problem-solving ability, intellectual ability, self-competence, and worth relative to other people. The SERS has an excellent internal consistency with an alpha of .97 and the validity of SERS was reported as having good construct validity, with significant correlations with the Index of Self-Esteem and the Generalised Contentment Scale \(^{20}\). The higher the score, the more positive self-esteem the individual would likely have.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Scale</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>183.00</td>
<td>-86.00</td>
<td>97.00</td>
<td>19.30</td>
<td>27.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>9.01</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>9.21</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>9.68</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>9.36</td>
<td>2.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>14.00</td>
<td>10.40</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.S total</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.07</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.S Satisfaction</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Procedure

The students were randomly selected at various Universities. They were first asked to sign the consent form. They were then instructed to complete the demographic data, the Ten Item Personality Index, the Social Support Questionnaire and finally the Self-esteem Rating Scale.

Results

An independent samples t test was used to determine the relationship between gender and self esteem. The results showed that there was no significant difference in self-esteem across groups \( t(198) = -0.38, p > 0.5 \). The mean self-esteem scores were 18.54 and 20.06 respectively for males and females. Thus, gender was not associated with self-esteem.

A bivariate correlation was employed to ascertain if there is a relationship between personality traits and self-esteem (Table 2). It was found that a high level of self-esteem was associated with high levels of extraversion \( (r=0.40, \ p<0.01) \), conscientiousness \( (r=0.40, \ p<0.01) \), emotional stability \( (r=0.43, \ p<0.01) \) and openness \( (r=0.23, \ p<0.01) \). Only Agreeableness was not found to be significantly affected by the level of self-esteem.
Table 2.

Correlation Matrix Depicting Relationships between Personality Traits and Levels of Self-esteem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extraversion</th>
<th>Agreeableness</th>
<th>Conscientious</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Openness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.43**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientious</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.43**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: **p<0.01  
* p<0.05

The relationship between self esteem and level of social support was ascertained using a bivariate correlation (Table 3). The results showed that there was a significant relationship between total social support (r=0.19, p<0.01), satisfaction with social support (r=0.34, p<0.01) and self-esteem. Thus, higher self-esteem was associated with having more friends, and a higher satisfaction with social support.

Table 3

Correlation Matrix Depicting Relationships between Self-Esteem and Social Support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Support Total</th>
<th>0.19**</th>
<th>0.34**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Support Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: **p<0.01  
* p<0.05

Given that subscales of personality and social support were associated with the subject’s self-esteem, the researchers were also interested to ascertain which aspects of these sub-scales played an important role in predicting levels of self-esteem. A multiple linear regression was conducted and showed that 47% of the variance for self-esteem was accounted for by measures of personality and social support $R^2 = 0.47$ [F (6,193) = 28.54, p<0.01]. See Table 4. The analysis also revealed that higher levels of extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness to new experiences and total social support a person could significantly predict self-esteem. Social support was not found to be as important in predicting self-esteem as the other factors.
Table 4

*Summary of Ordinary Least Squares Multiple Regression Analysis for Personality Predicting Social Support (N=200)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Scales</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personality</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.30**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Stability</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.12*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support Total</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ R^2 = .470 \ [F (6,193) = 28.542, p<0.01 \]

Key: ** p<0.01  * p<0.05

**Discussion**

This study sought to understand affects of gender, social support and personality on the levels of self-esteem. The analysis found that gender differences were not associated with levels of self-esteem. It was also found that personality traits such as extraversion, openness, emotional stability and conscientiousness were associated with higher levels of self-esteem. Having more friends, as well as being more satisfied with social support was found to be associated with higher levels of self-esteem. Finally, personality traits such as extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness, and the total social support a person was found to predict self-esteem.

Many studies have also found that gender was not associated with self-esteem. Gentile et al tested 32,486 subjects on 10 specific domains on self esteem, and concluded that gender difference did not affect the general. Several studies have also found that social-support is related to self-esteem\(^1\).\(^2\). It has been suggested that social support buffers self esteem. The lack of self-esteem differences between genders was believed to be due to self-esteem being more dependent on domain such as physical appearance and athletic competence.

Personality traits such as openness, emotional stability and conscientiousness were associated with self-esteem. Similar results have been observed by several researchers who found that some of the personality factors such as neuroticism, which is similar to emotional instability, and introversion, were associated with lower levels of self esteem\(^1\).\(^8\). It has been suggested that introverted people talk less and are less expressive and learn to view themselves negatively in front of others. Furthermore, those who are emotionally unstable may think poorly of themselves as they are not able to control their emotions as well as others. Does this have a reference?

Several studies have also found that social support is related to self-esteem\(^2\).\(^2\). It has been suggested that social support buffers against the effects of stress, thus having beneficial effects on the emotional health of adults\(^2\).\(^3\).
Personality traits such as extraversion, openness, emotional stability, conscientiousness and the amount of support from friends were found to predict higher levels of self-esteem. Satisfaction with social support was found to be less important as a predictor of self-esteem, when compared with the other factors. This may be the rationale why young adults link ‘popularity’ with their self-esteem. They may believe that having more friends would make them more popular and consequently lead to a higher level of self-esteem. The effect of being called a ‘loner’ can be deemed a form of social exclusion that triggers the effects of low self-esteem.

An important implication from the findings of this study concerns setting up programmes for young adults with low self-esteem. As gender differences were not found to be associated with self-esteem, it may be implied that interventions should not target specific genders. In addition, given that specific personality traits seem to be associated with lower levels of self-esteem, those who have introverted, neurotic, conventional and disorganized tendencies should be targeted for assistance. Furthermore, interventions also need to seek out those who do not have a circle of friends, and appear isolated. The author should elaborate the type of programmes that would be needed to address this problem. This includes the target groups and how it is going to be set up and run. This needs to be clearly explained as it is the main finding in this study.

This study has several strengths and limitations. Amongst the strengths of this study are the controlling of participants’ ages and gender. Furthermore, the study also controls for living status and is restricted to specifically university students. The main limitation of this study is that its sample may not be representative of young people in Malaysia as it is limited to those in urban areas, and living within the Klang Valley.

Future studies could explore self-esteem status amongst different age groups. As this study controlled the living status of the participants whereby all of the participants were required to be living with their family, further studies could also include different types of living status (e.g. living with friends, alone, hostel) and ascertain if this has an impact on levels of social support and self-esteem. In this study only global self-esteem was studied, future studies could look at more specific aspects of self-esteem similar to Gentile et al.’s study whereby 10 domains of self-esteem were studied.

To conclude, this research was set up due to concerns of factors that affect the young Malaysian adults’ self-esteem. It was found that those who are introverted, neurotic and conventional, disorganized and have a lack of friends would be more likely to have low levels of self-esteem. The results of the study add to a growing understanding about the mental state of young Malaysians which assists with the development for intervention programs for those at risk.

References


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**Corresponding Author**
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Teoh Hsien-Jin,
Department of Psychology,
School of Health and Natural Sciences,
Sunway University College,
No. 5, Jalan Universiti, Bandar Sunway,
46150 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

Tel: +603 7491 8622 Ext 3837
Fax: +603 5635 8633
Email: hsien_jin@yahoo.com