Self-Concept and Perceived Social Support as Predictors of Self-Esteem Among Students in a Malaysian University

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Abstract
Recent findings have shown that the differences between self-concept and self-esteem are becoming more apparent. Self-concept serves as a cognitive domain of the self, while self-esteem involves emotional and affective stances. Historically, self-concept and self-esteem were used interchangeably. As studies have found, self-concept is not the sole factor that influences self-esteem but social relationships and/or perceived social support have also predicted one's level of self-esteem. It is unclear why previous studies have produced inconsistent results about the correlations between self-concept, social relationships and self-esteem. Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine the association of self-concept, and perceived social support, on self-esteem and gender difference in self-esteem among students in a private university in Malaysia. The objectives of this study are (1) To identify the relationship between self-concept and self-esteem (2) To determine the relationship between perceived social support and self-esteem, and (3) To measure the differences in self-esteem between male and female students. The study utilized quantitative methods. A total of 197 students participated in the study. The results showed that there was no significant relationship between self-concept and self-esteem, but there was a significant relationship between perceived social support and self-esteem. Additionally, there was a significant mean difference in the levels of self-esteem between the male and female students, where male students had higher self-esteem compared to female students. The study suggests that educational institutions should serve as a strong social support platform for its students, to enrich their well-being as well as to promote self-esteem.

Keywords: Self-Concept, Perceived Social Support, Self-Esteem

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Introduction

Well-being is a crucial factor in a student's quality of life. Self-esteem is one of the important aspects in determining the student's psychological well-being, (Dogan et al., 2013; Singhal & Prakash, 2021), as positive self-esteem is not only seen as a basic feature of mental health but also protects one from negative experiences (Michal et al., 2004). The belief and perceptions students have of themselves may greatly impact how well they can perform in their studies (American Psychological Association, 2020). A study by Blegur et al. (2021) showed that self-esteem has a significant role in students' personal development due to its association with group learning commitments and responsibilities. Self-esteem tends to fluctuate depending on the student's environment, for example, an experimental study done by Shimizu et al. (2022) showed that students who had low self-esteem, had lower self-evaluation in comparison with those who have improved self-esteem.

The term self-concept and self-esteem are often used interchangeably according to King (1997). Redefining the term, self-concept is more of a general set of beliefs one has about oneself, whereas self-esteem is the affective aspect that measures self-concept (Huitt, 2009). In recent findings, the differences between self-concept and self-esteem are becoming more apparent, where self-concept serves as a cognitive domain of self while self-esteem involves emotional and affective stances but both have similar relationships in determining the well-being of a person. (Pilarska & Suchańska, 2015; Jhangiani & Tarry, 2016; Bhatt & Bahadur, 2018). Research suggests that one's self-concept may identify the level of self-esteem. (Lachowicz-Tabaczek & Śniecińska, 2011). When exposed to a new distinct environment where social comparisons are apparent, self-concept would likely go through changes (Gore & Cross, 2014). Another connotation towards self- esteem is that it is also often known as global self-worth, as seen by King et al. (1993) and Erdvik et al. (2020). One question to ponder upon, does the state of one's self-concept necessarily reflect their self-esteem? There are unclear repercussions as to why previous studies produced inconsistent results on the relationship between self-concept, social relationship and self-esteem. Therefore, to provide a better understanding of this relationship, research has been carried out on students in a private university in Malaysia.

Moreover, recent studies showed that women's self-esteem was profoundly lower compared to men in Western countries. In Asian countries the gap in gender differences is smaller (American Psychological Association, 2016; Biolcati, 2019). It is suggested that cultural aspects have some influence on self- esteem development in men and women. This grounded basis that indicates male to have better level of self-esteem compared to female could be induced from male's self-reporting style which maybe better patterned i.e., higher value threshold (Compas, 2013 as cited in Moksnes & Reidunsdatter, 2019). Although, it is suggested that gender does not have a strong influence on the developmental trajectory of self-esteem despite the differences (Moksnes & Reidunsdatter, 2019). Asian countries like Malaysia are said to have a relatively lower gap of gender difference in self-esteem (Bleidorn, 2016). But in higher learning institutions, female students were found to have higher self-esteem than male students due to it being a female-dominant industry (Fakaruddin & Tharbe,2018; Hirschmann, 2022).

Methodology

Study Design

This study utilised quantitative methodology to find out about the relationship between self-concept, perceived social support and self-esteem amongst students in a private university in Malaysia, with the help of three instruments- Personal Self-Concept Questionnaire (PSQ), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Demographic questions were incorporated in the research instruments as well. Correlational research design was employed in this study for examining the relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable that are both continuous and categorical. The data was collected using Google Form using convenience sampling and questionnaires were distributed to the participants through online and physical means. The data was analysed using Statistical Pack for Social Sciences (SPSS) by using Pearson correlation for the first and second research objectives, and independent samples t-test for the third research objectives.

Questionnaire Design

The first instrument was the Personal Self-Concept Questionnaire (PSQ) developed by Goñi, Madariaga, Axpe & Goñi (2011) in which the statements were related to the dimensions of self-concept (i.e honesty, autonomy, self-fulfilment, emotional self-concept). This questionnaire consisted of 18-items that are rated using a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = Totally Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Totally Agree). Its aim was to measure the personal domain of self-concept through 4 subscales; self-fulfilment, honesty, autonomy, and emotional self-concept. Higher score indicated higher sense of self-concept.

The second instrument was the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) designed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley (1988). This questionnaire is a 12-items self-report questionnaire that measures subjective assessment from three sources of social support, which is family, friends and significant others. Items are rated using a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = Very Strongly Disagree; 2 = Strongly Disagree; 3 = Mildly Disagree; 4 = Neutral; 5 = Mildly Agree; 6 = Strongly Agree; 7 = Very Strongly Agree). The score range between 12-35 indicates low perceived support, between 36-60 indicate medium perceived support while scores between 61-84 indicate high perceived support.

The third instrument was Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) developed by Rosenberg, M. (1965) that measures both positive and negative aspects about the self. This questionnaire consists of 10-items rated using 4-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly Agree). Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 are reverse scored. The scores interpretation is considered as high when the scores between are 35 to 40, medium when scores are between 25-35, and low when the scores are below 25.

Data Analysis

The data collection was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) in order to determine the correlation between self-concept and perceived social support as predictors of self-esteem amongst students in a private university in Malaysia. The data also consisted of descriptive analysis. The data analysis refers to the 3 main objectives of this study; (1) to identify the relationship between self-concept and self-esteem among students in a

private university in Malaysia (2) To determine the relationship between social support and self-esteem among students in a private university in Malaysia, and (3) to measure the difference in self-esteem between male and female students in a private university in Malaysia.

Result

The results of demographic data showed 197 respondents who agreed to participate in the online survey. The percentage of female respondents was higher than the male respondents with a percentage of 68.5%, in comparison to 31.5% male respondents. The level of education of the respondents was mostly undergraduate with a largest percentage of 95.9%, while the remaining being diploma and foundation students. As for the courses, majority of the respondents were Bachelor in Education (TESL) students with a percentage of 41.1%, followed by Bachelor in Public Relations Management with 14.2%. In contrast, respondents from the program, Bachelor in Education (Visual Arts) have the lowest percentage (1%). 58.9% of the respondents were in their third year of their study, followed by first year students at 22.3%, then second year students at 16.2% and the least being fourth year students at 2.5%.

Table 1. *Item-Total Percentage of Self-Concept*

No.	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
1.	I am satisfied with what I am achieving in my life.	2.5%	12.7%	26.9%	37.6%	20.3%	3.60
2.	If I'm feeling down, I find it hard to snap out of it.	1.5%	22.8%	14.7%	45.2%	15.7%	3.51
3.	So far, I have achieved every important goal I have set myself.	5.1%	27.9%	21.8%	29.9%	15.2%	3.22
4.	I am a trustworthy person.	1.5%	0.5%	17.8%	56.9%	23.4%	4.00
5.	In order to do anything, I first need other people's approval.	6.6%	17.3%	28.4%	32.5%	15.2%	3.32
6.	I consider myself to be a very uptight and highly strung person.	5.1%	18.8%	25.9%	40.1%	10.2%	3.31
7.	I have yet to achieve anything I consider to be important in my life.	7.1%	9.6%	19.3%	48.2%	15.7%	3.56
8.	I am a man/woman of my word.	1.0%	2.5%	18.8%	42.1%	35.5%	4.09
9.	I find it hard to embark on anything without other people's support.	2.0%	19.3%	26.4%	38.1%	14.2%	3.43
10.	I find it hard to embark on anything without other people's support.	3.6%	19.3%	21.3%	39.1%	16.8%	3.46
11.	I have always overcome any difficulties I have encountered in my life.	0.5%	7.1%	22.3%	55.3%	14.7%	3.77
12.	When taking a decision, I depend too much on other people's opinions.	6.1%	22.8%	22.3%	36.0%	12.7%	3.26

No.	Item						
13.	If I could start my life over again, I would not change very much.	12.7%	30.5%	14.2%	27.9%	14.7%	3.02
14.	If I could start my life over again, I would not change very much.	5.6%	13.2%	26.9%	39.1%	15.2%	3.45
15.	If I could start my life over again, I would not change very much.	3.0%	15.2%	25.9%	39.1%	16.8%	3.51
16.	I feel proud of how I am managing my life.	2.5%	20.8%	26.4%	39.1%	11.2%	3.36
17.	I suffer too much when something goes wrong.	7.1%	28.4%	26.9%	27.9%	9.6%	3.05
18.	My promises are sacred.	1.5%	5.1%	27.9%	44.7%	20.8%	3.78

Referring to the Table 1 above, it shows the percentage of responses for the items in the Personal Self-Concept questionnaire (PSQ). As shown, the fourth and eighth items have the highest percentage of responses with most participants agreeing to these items- "I am a trustworthy person" and "I am a man/woman of my word." On the other hand, the statements "if I could start my life over again, I would not change very much" and "I suffer too much when something goes wrong" have shown a neutral response from most respondents.

Table 2. *Item-Total Percentage of Perceived Social Support*

No. Items	Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Neutral	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree	Mean
1. There is a special person who is around when I am in need.	4.6%	7.6%	9.1%	10.2%	13.2%	28.9%	26.4%	5.12
2. There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	2.0%	10.2%	5.6%	9.6%	19.3%	28.4%	24.9%	5.19
3. My family really tries to help me.	2.5%	1.5%	8.1%	17.8%	15.7%	23.4%	31.0%	5.37
4. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.	3.0%	5.6%	12.7%	13.7%	17.8%	21.3%	25.9%	5.05
5. I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.	6.1%	6.6%	8.1%	12.2%	14.7%	25.4%	26.9%	5.07
6. My friends really try to help me.	1.0%	1.5%	7.6%	11.7%	23.4%	35.0%	19.8%	5.39
7. I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	0.5%	1.0%	7.6%	19.8%	19.3%	25.9%	25.9%	5.38
8. I can talk about my problems with my family.	10.2%	11.2%	13.2%	18.3%	12.7%	13.7%	20.8%	4.37
9. I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	2.0%	3.6%	6.6%	12.7%	18.8%	33.0%	23.4%	5.35
10. There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.	6.6%	6.1%	8.1%	11.7%	15.2%	26.9%	25.4%	5.05
11. My family is willing to help me make decisions.	2.0%	5.1%	8.1%	17.8%	17.3%	24.4%	25.4%	5.18
12. I can talk about my problems with my friends.	3.0%	6.1%	6.6%	12.7%	20.3%	30.5%	20.8%	5.16

Table 2 shows the responses for the items in the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support scale (MSPSS). The highest number of responses have been found to be for item-"I

have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows," with a majority of the respondents answering "Strongly Agree" to the statement. However, respondents surprisingly showed that they were neutral to the statement "I can talk about my problems with my family." This showed that the respondents tend to be close to friends in comparison to their family.

Table 3. *Item-Total Percentage of Self-Esteem*

No.Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	2.0%	16.8%	47.7%	33.5%	3.13
2. At times I think I am no good at all.	9.6%	30.5%	44.2%	15.7%	2.66
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	1.0%	15.2%	61.9%	21.8%	3.05
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.	3.0%	12.7%	60.4%	23.9%	3.05
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	12.7%	37.6%	36.0%	13.7%	2.51
6. I certainly feel useless at times.	9.6%	19.8%	49.7%	20.8%	2.82
7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	2.5%	12.2%	62.4%	22.8%	3.06
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	2.0%	8.1%	56.3%	33.5%	3.21
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	27.9%	34.5%	30.5%	7.1%	2.17
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.	1.5%	12.2%	52.3%	34.0%	3.19

Finally, Table 3 shows percentage of responses for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). As shown above, most respondents have indicated agreement to positive items like 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 10. While for the negative items such as 2, 5, 6 and 9 they have disagreed. This shows an aligned results of self-esteem among the university students. The results show that there are more than 80% of the respondents who tend to agree with the all the positive items which are statements reflecting satisfaction, quality, ability, self-worth, respect and positive attitude.
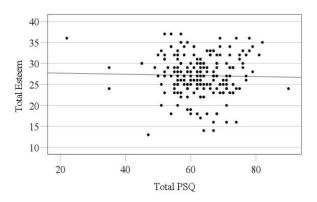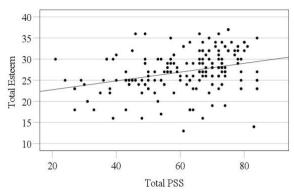

Figure 1. *Total PSQ(Personal self concept)*

Figure 2. *Total PSS (Perceived social support)*

Table 4. *The correlation table between Self-Concept, Perceived Social Support,*
to Self-Esteem

	Self - Esteem	
	r	*p*
Self - Concept	0.004	0.957
Perceived Social Support - PSS	0.290**	0.001

Significant level at *p*=0.05

Based on Table 4., Pearson correlation analysis showed that there was no significant relationship between self-concept and self-esteem among the respondents (r=0.004, p>0.05). However, the finding also showed that there was a significant positive relationship between perceived social support and self-esteem among the respondents (r = 0.290, p<0.05). The relationship is mild which means an increase in perceived social support would result in an increase in the self-esteem.

Table 5. *Gender difference in Self-Esteem*

Variable	Mean		*t*	p
	Male	Female		
Esteem	28.73	26.36	3.81	.001

The last objective was to measure the difference in self-esteem between male (M = 28.73, SD = 4.22) and female (M = 26.36, SD = 4.86) students, in which this study found that there was a significant mean difference between male and female students (t=3.81, p<.05).

Discussion

In this study, it was hypothesised that there is a significant relationship between self-concept and self- esteem. However, the finding did not find as such (r = .004, p = .96). Despite the fact that there was no significant relationship between self-concept and self-esteem, yet both are similarly constructed in ways that both have their own roles in cognitive and affective domains, where self-esteem could be seen as a belief of one's worth and self-concept is considered as how one would heed the importance of their personal attributes.

As Swann Jr et al. (2007) said, "There is little basis for dismissing self-concepts as merely cognitive or for focusing on the predictive capacity of self-esteem at the expense of self-concepts." Perhaps what this study found was more aligned to the thoughts that self-concepts are merely the extent of "how I see myself" versus self-esteem, is prone to be viewed as "how I feel about how I see myself" (Marcic & Grum, 2011). This might suggest the way students describe their personal attributes which do not correlate to their evaluation of one's selves, separating the two self-entities. The results of self-esteem depend on one's perception on their standard of excellence or living up to interpersonal expectations and values whereas self-concept is a structure of characteristics, beliefs, personal attributes, morality, etc. Du, King and Chi (2017) stated that subjective well-being is one of the most important outcomes associated with self-esteem and Xu, Li and Yang (2019) suggested that positive self-concept could uplift

a crucial part of well- being, particularly self-esteem. One way or another there could be an indirect correlation between self- concept and self-esteem.

Onto the next finding, the study found a positive correlation between perceived social support and self- esteem amongst the respondents (r = .29, p < .001) which coincides with previous findings about the relationship between the variables (Budd et al., 2009; Tam et al., 2011). Therefore, it can be said that when perceived social support of students increases, their self-esteem levels increase accordingly.

Ioannou et al. (2019) found that low level of perceived social support led to high level of perceived stress among young adults. Social support roles have a huge impact in determining one's self-esteem as it is considered as a protective factor against mental health issues (i.e., loneliness) (Ren & Ji, 2019; Liu et al., 2021). The findings suggest that the perception towards the availability of the students' social support could be the source to their self-esteem. It is evident that the accessibility of their social support could mediate the way they evaluate themselves. Seemingly, life is demanding in nature, having a strong bond and supportive interpersonal relationship would fortify our mental aptitude and makes life more meaningful.

As for the last finding, there was a significant mean difference between male and female students (t = 3.31, p = .001). Male students showed higher self-esteem than female students. As opposed to some of the established self-esteem studies done in Asian country, higher gaps of gender difference in self-esteem were only found in Western countries, driven with the influences of individualistic-centric culture (Bleidorn et al., 2016). Meanwhile, Malaysia is known to be collectivist in its societal culture (Ahmad et al., 2018; Sumari et al., 2020). The findings of this study implied that the selected population sample may have been involved in individualistic sociocultural settings. Rather, it is an established concern that many of the gender studies on self-esteem found males to have higher self-esteem (Schwalbe & Staples, 1991; Bleidorn et al., 2016; Li et al., 2022). Contrastingly, Tafarodi, Lang, and Smith (1999) found there was no significant mean difference in self-esteem between the cultural trade-off. The relevance on culture-specific influences were thought to be the determinants in the gaps of self-esteem between males and females due to the involvement of gender roles in sociocultural settings where males were given advantages in the autonomy of choices and decision making. Regardless, the rate of response would void this study to reach to such conclusions. The respondents who participated were disproportionate between male and female students, where the majority of the respondents were females, with 68.53% (135), while males were of the remaining 31.47% (62). Perhaps if the gender of the respondents were to be equalised, there could be less of a difference in self-esteem between male and female students.

Conclusion

The conundrum of the self-topic is still being discovered in the field of personality and social psychology. Some define self-esteem as how one feels others value them considering self-esteem to be socially susceptible, while another perspective emphasized that it is the evaluation of one's feelings in relation to oneself. Perhaps lexical intervention may be needed to verify the distinction between the terms within the self- concept components. Moreover, as humans are inherently social, there is not a moment where people do not require interaction. Our identity is constantly alternating between different social landscapes to fit in a society, hence the wavering stance of self-esteem. Generally, the self-esteem one has with their circle of friends, could never equate with the self-esteem one has while being with their supervisor or people with higher status. Gender difference in self-esteem amongst students may signify

various constituent influences on evaluation of self, which can be further studied by future researchers. To summarize, the study contends that educational institutions should provide a robust social support platform for their students in order to improve their well-being and boost self-esteem.

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