

Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement: The Relationship and Gender Differences of Malaysian University Undergraduates

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Abstract

A positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement is often noted in the literature on educational psychology. As such, self-esteem and academic achievement are often inter-related. Additionally, gender is believed to have an impact on an individual's self-esteem and varied disparities are found in self-esteem level between genders. The relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement among undergraduates in Malaysia, is still understudied and the lack of literature necessitates an empirical study. Hence, this study explored the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement among undergraduates of a private university in Malaysia. Also, it investigated if there is any significant difference in self-esteem and academic achievement between genders. A convenience sampling method was employed on 60 male and 60 female undergraduates of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) program. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire was utilized to obtain the data on the participants' self-esteem and their Grade Point Average (GPA). Data analysis using Spearman's rho correlation revealed a significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. Based on the Chi-square test result, a significant difference in academic achievement between male and female students was established. However, the independent t-test result revealed an absence of significant difference in self-esteem between male and female students. The findings demonstrate essential implications for students, counselors, and educators, and suggest relevant recommendations for future research. A larger sample size should be employed, and other important demographic variables should be explored to examine more in-depth into this interesting field of study.

Keywords: academic achievement, correlation, gender differences, self-confidence, self-esteem

Introduction

Self-esteem refers to a personal evaluation of his or her worth as a person (e.g., Donnellan et al., 2011; MacDonald & Leary, 2012). It is the subjective measure of a person's values – the worth that one believes one has as an individual (Sharma, 2014). Self-esteem, by definition, is a construct that does not necessarily reflect objective characteristics of the person, or how the person is seen by others (Orth, Erol, & Luciano, 2018). Nevertheless, self-esteem is often associated with self-confidence because it predicts certain outcomes, such as academic achievement. Studies among university students reveal a significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement (e.g. Akram & Suneel, 2018; Arbabisarjou, et al., 2016; Arshad, Zaidi & Mahmood, 2015). In fact, self-esteem plays an important role in determining academic achievement and for students who obtained high achievement in their studies, the confidence level is higher than those who attained less because the latter are disadvantaged by their lack of self-confidence (Aryana, 2010). While increasing the learners' self-esteem can help to improve their academic performance (Rubie et al., 2004), a poor academic attainment does not necessarily display a low general self-confidence (Pullmann & Allik, 2008). At the same time, other studies have found a significant but weak correlation between the two variables (Wibowo, 2016) and self-esteem has a weak positive effect on academic achievement (Marsh & O'Mara, 2008). Although much attention has been given to the relationships between self-esteem and academic performance (Jordan, et al., 2015; Doodman, et al., 2017), similar studies are very limited in Malaysia especially among undergraduates of private universities and the lack of literature necessitates an empirical study. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate whether a significant relationship exists between self-esteem and academic achievement among male and female undergraduates of a private university in Selangor, Malaysia.

Literature Review

Studies on the association between self-esteem and academic achievement among university students have been conducted in other countries like Pakistan (Akram & Suneel, 2018), Iran (Mirzaei-Alavijeh et al., 2018), and Indonesia (Wibowo, 2016). In Malaysia, although many studies have also been conducted on the association between self-esteem and academic achievement, the participants were usually students from secondary schools (e.g., Sherina, et al., 2008; Nazirah, et al., 2012; Wan Mohamed & Yunus, 2017). The dearth of literature on this topic among university students in Malaysia offers a gap in the existing literature, which has prompted this present study. This present study is deemed as necessary to reduce the gap in literature on the relationship and gender differences in self-esteem and academic achievement among university undergraduates.

Among these past studies, Mohammad (2010) examined the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement among 50 male and 50 female pre-university students. The findings revealed a significant difference in academic achievement between genders and a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. However, there was an absence of significant difference in self-esteem between genders. Muhammad's (2010) findings were supported by Rosli et al. (2011). Using 220 second-year medical students of a public university, they performed a cross-sectional study to investigate the association between self-esteem and students' academic achievement. The results showed that students with higher self-esteem performed better in their academic and they concluded that self-esteem is one of the key factors that contribute to individual's academic performance. Kharsah's & Latada's

(2016) study also ascertained the findings by previous studies that significant relationships existed between the levels of self-esteem and academic performance.

In contrast with other research findings, Emamzadeh (2004) revealed that there was no significant association between self-esteem and academic success in his study among 261 male and female students which compared social skills and self-esteem and academic success. This finding is supported by a study conducted by Rahimi (2016) who investigated the association between emotional intelligence, self-esteem, and academic achievement among 300 university students. The results of the data analyses displayed that emotional intelligence and self-esteem had no significant relationship with academic achievement. Besides, there was no significant difference in emotional intelligence between genders, but female participants exhibited better self-esteem than male participants. Therefore, psychological concepts such as emotional intelligence and self-esteem alone are proven not effective factors in determining academic achievement in this study.

Notably, gender is generally believed to have an impact on the development, demonstration, and existence of self-esteem in individuals (Naderi et al., 2009) and varied disparities are discovered in the level of self-esteem between genders. While some studies on self-esteem and gender (e.g., Habibollah, et al., 2009; Sadaat, Ghasemzadeh & Soleimani, 2012; Rahimi, 2016; Damota, Ibrahim, Woldemariam & Kifle, 2019) discovered a significant relationship, others (Mohammad, 2010; Twinomugisha, 2008; Sar Abadani Tafreshi, 2006) found no significant difference between the two variables. Habibollah et al. (2009) who studied the association between self-esteem, gender, and academic achievement among 153 Iranian undergraduates studying at Malaysian universities, discovered an absence of significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement, but a significant difference between gender and self-esteem. This finding is supported by Rahimi (2016) and Damota, et al. (2019) who also found a significant difference for self-esteem between genders. While Rahimi (2016) ascertained that self-esteem among female students is generally higher than male, Damota, et al. (2019) concluded with a contradictory finding.

Accordingly, the diverse findings from past studies and the available literature from Malaysian contexts are utilized to shape and guide the scope of this study. In sum, this study is conducted to ascertain the relationship and gender differences in self-esteem and academic achievement among undergraduates of a private university in Malaysia. The research questions include:

1. Is there any significant difference in academic achievement between genders?
2. Is there any significant difference in self-esteem between genders?
3. Is there any significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement?

The following research hypotheses were also examined.

- H1 - There is a significant difference in academic achievement between genders.
- H2 - There is a significant difference in self-esteem between genders.
- H3 - There is a significant relationship between students' self-esteem and academic achievement.

Methodology

Research Design

This is a correlational study that measures the relationship between variables. This design allows researchers to assess the statistical relationship (i.e., the correlation) between variables and it has higher external validity than experimental research (Price et al., 2017).

Participants

The convenience sampling method was used to select the respondents. A sample of 120 TESL undergraduates from a private university in Selangor, Malaysia who were made up of 60 female and male students respectively were involved in this study.

Research Instrument

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965) was employed to obtain the data on the participants' self-esteem and their Grade Point Average (GPA) in their present and preceding semesters. This questionnaire is a ten-item scale that measures both positive and negative feelings about oneself (Rosenberg, 1965). All the items were ranked in a four-point Likert scale format from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Some of the items are reverse-scored, and the total score was calculated by summing up the total points for an overall measure of self-esteem. The scale is considered highly consistent and reliable, and scores correlate highly with other measures of self-esteem. It has been used by many researchers over the years and it remains as one of the most-cited scale of measurement for self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has a high rating reliability and internal consistency of 0.77. The participants were required to sign a consent document before responding to the questionnaire. They took 20-25 minutes to answer the questionnaires.

Data Analysis

The data was computed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 21.0. Inferential statistics namely the Spearman's rho correlation and Independent Sample Test (T-test) and descriptive statistics that is chi-square were used in the data analyses.

Results

The results are presented based on the three research questions: whether there is any significant difference in academic achievement between genders, significant difference in self-esteem between genders, and the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement.

The Differences in Academic Achievement Between Genders

To answer the first research question, a Chi-square test was run to make a comparison between genders in terms of their GPA (Grade Point Average) achievement. There were 60 male and 60 female students, respectively. The comparison was made based on the students' GPA which was classified into four levels of achievement namely between 2.00-2.50, 2.60-3.00, 3.10-3.50, and 3.60-4.00 respectively.

Table 4.1 The differences in academic achievement between genders

Gender	GPA				X2	p
	2.00-2.50	2.60-3.00	3.10-3.50	3.60-4.00		
Male	5	27	24	4	48.158	.001
Female	2	1	24	33		

Table 4.1 shows that there were differences in academic achievement based on the respondents' Average Point (GPA). The result revealed that the female students had obtained better and higher scores than the males. The male students tended to dominate the lowest levels, that is, the first and second levels with 5 males (2.00-2.50) and 27 males (2.60-3.00) as compared to only 2 females (2.00-2.50) and 1 female (2.60-3.00) respectively. In contrast, most female students dominated the higher level of achievement with 24 (3.30-3.50) and 33 (3.66-4.00) as compared to only 4 males scoring between 3.60-4.00 and 24 achieved between 3.10-3.50 respectively. The overall result was significant as the total amount of X2 is 48.158 and $P=.001 < 0.05$. There were significant differences between male and female students in academic achievement. Therefore, the research hypothesis (H1) was accepted as there were significant differences in academic achievement between genders.

The differences in Self-Esteem Between Genders

An independent t-test was run to answer the second research question on the differences in self-esteem between genders. There were 60 females and 60 males who responded to the questionnaire.

Table 4.2 The differences in self-esteem between genders

Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	p
male	60	79.55	9.93	.412	.681
female	60	80.35	10.94	.413	.681

From Table 4.2, the analysis shows that both genders had a good level of self-esteem as the mean scores for males and females are $M=79.55$ and $M=80.35$ respectively. However, there was no significant difference between males and females in terms of their self-esteem with $P=.681 > 0.05$. Thus, the research hypothesis (H2) was rejected as there was no significant difference in self-esteem between males and females.

The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

Spearman's rho correlation was employed to examine the relationship between students' self-esteem and academic achievement. All the data obtained from the 60 male and 60 female respondents were computed respectively and the result was generated as follows.

Table 4.3 The relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement

	Academic achievement	
Self-esteem	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Spearman's r	0.214*	0.019

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

From table 4.3, it is found that the relationship between students' self-esteem and academic achievement was at $p=.019$. This shows that there was a significant relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. Therefore, the research hypothesis (H3) was accepted because there was a significant relationship between students' self-esteem and academic achievement.

Discussion

The findings on the positive relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement support past studies. The first finding is consistent with past studies, which confirmed that there were significant differences in academic achievement between genders, and female students have high scores on academic performance as compared to male students (Jacob, 2002; Mohammad, 2010; Twinomugisha, 2008; Baharudin & Zulkefly, 2009; Arshad, et. al., 2015). A study on gender differences in adolescents' academic achievement also observed that girls are less likely to get low scores than boys (Marcenaro–Gutierrez, et. al., 2018). In this study, male students tend to dominate the lowest grades in terms of their GPA. Nevertheless, this finding leaves us with a paradoxical curiosity on whether these significant differences were the effects of the respondents' self-esteem or other cognitive or non-cognitive variables.

Past findings ascertained that females outperform their male counterparts in academic achievement because in general females have better memory than males in all types of memory such as episodic, spatial, short-term, visual, specific memories, and early memories (Halpern 2000). Furthermore, males are three to five times more susceptible to language disorders such as stuttering, dyslexia, and so on, than females (Bannatyne 1976; Gordon 1980; Sutaria 1985). Since this study did not include intelligence quotient (IQ), it can be considered as an important variable to be included in future studies to examine its relationships with academic achievement and self-esteem.

For the second finding, it is ascertained that there is no significant difference in self-esteem between male and female students which supports the findings by some past studies (e.g., Joshi & Srivastava, 2009; Mohammad, 2010; Twinomugisha, 2008; Sar Abadani Tafreshi, 2006). For the analysis of self-esteem between genders, the result reveals that both males and females have a good level of self-esteem, which has probably boosted their academic performance and enabled many of these undergraduates to obtain a high CGPA of between 3.00 – 4.00 for both genders. Indeed, a good self-esteem has the potential of giving a positive impact because students with higher self-esteem have been proven to do better in their academic performance (Rosli et al., 2011). Additionally, it has been shown that students with high self-esteem are able to set better academic goals based on their values and work hard to achieve them (Oztas, 2010).

However, this second finding also contradicts other past studies (e.g., Rahimi, 2016; Naderi et al., 2009; Sar Abadani Tafreshi, 2006; Zareh, 1994) which discovered that there were significant differences in self-esteem between genders. Although a study by Arshad, et. al., (2015) reveals that male students have high scores on self-esteem as compared to female students, our study shows that gender does little influence on self-esteem. However, gender differences may vary between ethnicities and across cultures and such demographic variables can be intentionally explored in future studies.

Finally, for the third and the main finding, the study results also support the findings from previous studies (e.g., Mirzaei-Alavijeh et al., 2018; Wibowo, 2016; Rosli et al., 2011; Aryana, 2010; Sandra, 2009; Habibollah et al., 2008; Sadaat et al., 2012) who all cited a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic performance. However, the findings differ from Van Laar's (2000) study who found that there is little to no relationship between self-esteem and academic success in African American students.

Nevertheless, whether self-esteem has really impacted the undergraduates' academic achievement could not be fully ascertained as past studies also found that academic achievement can also affect self-esteem. Although there are many different views on the relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem, some studies also revealed that self-esteem can reflect a response to school performance (Alves-Martins et al., 2002; Morvitz & Motta, 1992; Osborne, 1995; Rosenberg et al., 1995). Students may automatically feel better about themselves when they receive good grades, thus boosting their self-worth and directly improving their self-esteem. This is ascertained by Ross' and Broh's (2000) self-esteem model which states that adolescents do better in school when they feel good about themselves than students with low self-esteem. On the other hand, a poor achievement in academic can contribute towards a more negative perception of oneself (Osborne, 1995).

However, other researchers have different views and findings related to this relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. Kohn (1994) claims that there is no definite relationship between self-esteem and higher achievement. Kohn (1994) also contends that some researchers believe in the causal relationship between self-esteem and achievement. It is possible in certain situations that students may be feeling good because they are doing well rather than doing well because they are feeling good about themselves (Baumeister & Lipsitt, 2003.). Besides, there are other researchers who also argue that it may not be truly an independent variable that has impacted the relationship because there may be other factors that have increased the level of self-esteem and achievement, denoting as if there is a close relationship between the two (Kohn, 1994). Furthermore, past studies also revealed that there are other factors that have also impacted ones' performance, for example, anxiety which surprisingly can lead to positive pushing effect (Kaswadi et al., 2018), or it may be due to occupational or academic settings (McLaughlin, 2015). Hence, more studies are eminent to probe further into the association between self-esteem and academic achievement, especially among university students in Malaysia.

Like any other research studies, the present study has its own limitation. Primarily, in this study only one demographic variable, that is, gender is examined. However, the magnitude of the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement can also be affected by several other demographic variables such as parents' educational background, income, age, learning environment, cultures, and so forth. Taking this into consideration, future research can take any of these demographic variables to be studied in order to obtain more compelling results.

Conclusion

Despite the inconsistent findings from various past studies, this study shows that there was a significant relationship between the students' self-esteem and academic achievement. Whether self-esteem affects academic achievement or academic achievement affects self-esteem, the relationship is still worthy of understanding and researching. More studies in the context of Malaysian higher education are needed to examine this relationship. Also, future studies may employ a larger sample size and take into account other relevant variables such as self-confidence, attitudes, IQ, motivation, family background, or socio-economic status to examine their influence on academic achievement and self-esteem.

Self-esteem is an exciting research topic that can offer opportunities for future research especially in Malaysia where there are still limited studies conducted in this field of study. Future studies can employ a mixed-method design to obtain qualitative data from their respondents to identify their opinions on what have boosted their academic achievement. Additionally, future research can also explore other influencing factors for academic achievement, whether it is their self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, encouragement from family members, or the academic achievement itself.

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