

Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement Among University English Majors in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Abstract

The research looked at the connection between self-esteem and academic achievement among 222 undergraduate students studying English at a private university in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and it used a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational approach. Self-esteem was measured using five items taken from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Cronbach's alpha was .652); one item, which was worded negatively, was reversed when scoring was done on a four-point scale. Academic achievement was taken to be the students' most recent English grade. Thirty-three students who had not yet been given a grade were omitted from the analysis of academic achievement, which left 189 valid cases. The grades were recoded so that higher scores meant better performance (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and D/E = 1). The mean self-esteem score was 2.95 (SD = 0.36). Self-esteem and academic achievement showed a positive relationship, with $r(187) = .267$ and $p < .001$. The simple linear regression was also significant, with $F(1, 187) = 14.324$, $p < .001$, and $R^2 = .071$. This indicates that self-esteem accounted for 7.1% of the variance in achievement. Female students had slightly higher self-esteem than male students, but this difference was not statistically significant, $t(216) = -1.395$, $p = .164$, $d = -0.20$. Self-esteem therefore served as a statistically significant but modest correlate of academic achievement and should be considered together with motivational, instructional, and sociocultural factors.

Keywords: Academic Achievement, Cambodia, English Majors, Higher Education, Self-Esteem

1. Introduction

Academic achievement is affected by several cognitive, motivational, psychological, social, and institutional factors. Self-esteem is still important since the way students view their own worth can influence their confidence, persistence, level of participation, and the way they respond to difficulties in

their studies. Rosenberg described self-esteem as being the individual's overall positive or negative attitude towards themselves [1]. Self-esteem is related to self-efficacy but is in a different conceptual category: self-esteem refers to perceived self-worth while self-efficacy refers to perceived capability [1], [2]. Neither of these should be regarded as a direct measure of academic ability [3].

Previous studies have found positive associations between self-esteem and academic achievement in certain groups of students [4], [5]. Yet the association is usually weak, and self-esteem by itself does not account for most of the variation in academic performance. More recent evidence shows that self-esteem is part of a wider network that includes academic motivation, procrastination, social relationships, and socioeconomic conditions [6]-[8]. Furthermore, longitudinal meta-analytic evidence from adolescents also reveals small reciprocal prospective relationships between self-esteem and academic achievement [9].

Students majoring in English at the university are expected to show proficiency in language, take part in discussions and lectures, give presentations, and carry out continuous assessments. Also, cultural orientations may affect the way in which people express their confidence and self-worth. Cross-cultural theory warns that psychological constructs do not function in the same way in individualistic and collectivist environments [10]-[12]. Since this study did not directly measure collectivism, modesty, or self-construal, these ideas are regarded only as contextual factors rather than as explanations of the findings from Cambodia. There is still a lack of empirical research that is specifically focused on university English majors in Cambodia. The study therefore looked at the students' self-esteem and academic achievement, tested the relationship between these two, examined any gender differences in self-esteem, and assessed whether self-esteem predicted achievement statistically.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-Esteem and Academic Functioning

Rosenberg's global self-esteem model defines self-esteem as an overall evaluation of one's self-worth [1]. Humanistic theory regards esteem as a major element in personal development [13], whereas social cognitive theory emphasizes the effect that beliefs regarding one's competence have on motivation and behavior [2]. Even though these views suggest that positive self-evaluations could help to promote academic engagement, they do not imply that global self-esteem is a significant factor, or the only factor, in determining grades.

The evidence shows a positive yet variable connection. Aryana found a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement [4], and Pullmann and Allik associated both academic self-esteem and general self-esteem with school achievement [5]. Research carried out at university has also identified positive links between academic motivation and self-esteem [8] as well as inverse relationships between self-esteem and academic procrastination [6]. Moreover, longitudinal evidence shows that the course of self-esteem depends on social and socioeconomic circumstances [7]. Yet Baumeister and his colleagues warn against viewing high self-esteem as a direct cause of improved performance [3]. On the other hand, meta-analytic longitudinal evidence from adolescence suggests only small reciprocal effects between self-esteem and academic achievement [9].

2.2 Cultural Context

Self-esteem is different in various cultural contexts. Whether people have an independent or interdependent self-conception can affect the way they understand and express their self-worth [11], and individualistic or collectivist attitudes can influence the kind of social behavior that is expected [10], [12]. In situations where modesty and harmony are important, positive self-evaluations may not be shown by being openly assertive. Although these theories offer some guidance in a particular context, they cannot be used to explain the current findings in a causal way since the cultural orientations were not measured directly.

2.3 Hypotheses:

H₁: There is a significant association between self-esteem and academic achievement among university English majors.

H₂: There is a marked difference in the average level of self-esteem between male and female students.

H₃: Self-esteem significant predictor of academic achievement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design, Setting and Participants

At a private higher education institution in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational study was conducted, and the institution's identity was kept confidential. The group being studied consisted of undergraduate students majoring in English. A sample size of about 222 participants was determined using Yamane's sample-size formula, with an estimated population of 500 and a 5% level of precision [14]. The final dataset included 222 respondents.

3.2 Measures

Self-esteem was measured by means of five items taken from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [1] and presented on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The item that was worded negatively was reversed, and the answers given to the items were averaged so that higher scores reflected higher self-esteem; the internal consistency was moderate (Cronbach's alpha was .652). Academic achievement was ascertained by referring to the students' most recent self-reported English grade. Thirty-three respondents who had no valid grades were excluded, leaving 189 cases; the grades were recoded to indicate better performance with higher values (A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and D/E = 1).

3.3 Data Collection and Ethical Procedures

The questionnaire was handed out both in person and on the internet. Taking part was voluntary and the respondents were made aware of the aim of the study as well as the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and their right to withdraw at any time. Approval from the institute had been secured prior to the collection of the data. Nothing that could identify a person was included in the report and both the name of the university and any other identifying information were left out.

3.4 Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics version 27, and frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to summarize the participants' characteristics and the study variables. Cronbach's alpha was used to examine internal consistency; Pearson's correlation was employed to test the association between self-esteem and achievement; an independent-samples t-test was carried out to look at gender differences; and simple linear regression was used to determine whether self-esteem statistically predicted achievement. Statistical significance was taken to be alpha equal to .05.

4. Results

4.1 Participant Characteristics

The group included 222 students, of whom 145 were women (65.3 per cent), 73 were men (32.9 per cent), and 4 identified as belonging to another gender (1.8 per cent). The biggest age group was that of people aged 21 to 22 years (40.5 per cent, equivalent to 90 individuals), after which came those aged 20 to 21 years (28.4 per cent, or 63 people).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 222)

Characteristic	n	%
Male	73	32.9
Female	145	65.3
Other	4	1.8
18–19 years	9	4.1
20–21 years	63	28.4
21–22 years	90	40.5
22–23 years	32	14.4
24+ years	28	12.6

Source: Authors' field survey and SPSS analysis.

4.2 Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

The five-item scale for self-esteem showed a moderate degree of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha was .652). Of the 222 respondents, the average self-esteem score was 2.95 (with a standard deviation of 0.36). For the 189 respondents who had valid data on their grade level, the mean score after recoding for academic achievement was 2.34 (standard deviation = 0.92).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

Measure	N	Mean	SD
Self-esteem	222	2.95	0.36
Academic achievement (higher = better)	189	2.34	0.92

Source: Authors' field survey and SPSS analysis.

4.3 Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

For the 189 students who had valid English grades, Pearson's correlation revealed a statistically significant, although small, positive association between self-esteem and academic achievement, with $r(187)$ equal to .267 and p less than .001. It thus followed that higher self-esteem was linked to better academic performance, even though the size of the relationship was only modest. Therefore, hypothesis H1 was supported.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation Between Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement

Variable	1	2
1. Self-esteem	—	.267**
2. Academic achievement	.267**	—

Note. $N = 189$ valid grade cases. Higher scores indicate better grades. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

4.4 Gender Differences in Self-Esteem

Men and women often report different levels of self-esteem; this has been shown in studies. Many studies have found that, on average, men rate their self-esteem a bit higher than women do. This difference can appear in early adolescence and may persist in adulthood, but the gap is usually small. Sociocultural factors, such as media messages and gender roles, may influence how people feel about themselves. Some research suggests that the gap in self-esteem between men and women has become smaller over time, especially in countries that support gender equality. Still, it is important to remember that self-esteem varies from person to person, and not everyone conforms to these directions.

Large-scale evidence from a cross-cultural study shows that men generally have slightly higher self-esteem than women, although the difference is usually small and depends on age and culture [16].

Female students showed a slightly higher level of self-esteem ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.38$, $n = 145$) than male students ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.33$, $n = 73$). Levene's test showed that the assumption of equal variances held, with an F value of 0.178 and a p value of .674. The gender difference was not statistically significant, the t value being -1.395 with a p value of .164 and a 95% confidence interval of $[-0.175, 0.030]$, the effect size being $d = -0.20$. As a result, H2 was not supported.

4.5 Regression Analysis

The Simple linear regression showed that self-esteem was a significant predictor of academic achievement, $F(1, 187) = 14.324$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .071$; self-esteem therefore explained approximately 7.1% of the variance in achievement. The unstandardized coefficient was $B = 0.683$ ($SE = 0.180$) and the standardized coefficient was $\beta = 0.267$ ($t = 3.785$, $p < .001$). Thus, hypothesis H3 was supported.

5. Discussion

The analysis showed a statistically significant positive relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement in the case of university students studying English. This finding is in line with the positive associations that have been reported in earlier studies involving pre-university and school-based samples [4], [5], [15]. It is also in agreement with the evidence which links self-esteem to greater academic motivation and less academic procrastination [6], [8], and with the adolescent meta-analytic evidence of small reciprocal relationships between self-esteem and achievement [9]. Yet self-esteem explained only 7.1% of the variation in grades. Factors such as motivation, academic self-efficacy, language proficiency, study habits, socioeconomic circumstances, employment demands, teaching quality, and the learning environment are likely to account for a great deal of the rest of the variation. The result thus supports the warning that general self-esteem should not be seen as the only cause of academic performance [3].

It was necessary to assign the data correctly; in the first data set lower code numbers meant higher achievement and a code of 5 indicated that the results had not yet been received. If code 5 had been regarded as a grade or if the coding direction had been disregarded, this might have resulted in a misleading relationship. A positive and interpretable coefficient was achieved after removing those students who had no grades and by recoding achievement to have higher values show better performance.

Boys and girls had about the same degree of global self-esteem; while the mean score was only very slightly higher for the girls, the difference and the effect size were not statistically significant. It is possible that cultural context affects the way in which self-worth is expressed [10]-[12]; yet this study did not assess collectivism, modesty, or self-construal. The factors mentioned therefore ought to be considered as possible interpretations in the light of the cultural context, not as explanations of the gender difference observed.

6. Implications

Universities should enhance students' psychological well-being and their academic abilities. Counseling and student support services can aid academic programs by helping students to deal constructively with difficulties, and supportive classrooms, clear feedback, and realistic learning objectives can help to develop genuine competence. Cultural programs should not regard assertiveness as the sole sign of confidence; instead, they should promote meaningful participation, academic responsibility, and constructive engagement.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study was conducted at one university using a cross-sectional design; therefore, causal conclusions cannot be drawn and the findings may not generalize to other institutions. Academic achievement was based on self-reported grade categories rather than official records. The self-esteem instrument contained only five adapted Rosenberg items and demonstrated moderate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .652$). Future research should use the complete validated scale or a validated short form, test its factor structure, obtain official academic records where possible, and include additional predictors such as academic self-efficacy, motivation, study habits, language proficiency, socioeconomic status, employment, and the learning environment. Longitudinal and multi-institutional designs would provide stronger evidence concerning direction and generalizability.

8. Conclusion

A statistically significant but small positive relationship was found between self-esteem and academic achievement among English majors at a private university in Phnom Penh. After the negatively worded self-esteem item was reverse scored, 33 respondents without valid grades were excluded, and achievement scores were recoded so that higher values indicated better performance, the association was $r(187) = .267$, $p < .001$. Self-esteem accounted for 7.1% of the variance in achievement, and no statistically significant gender difference in self-esteem was found. Self-esteem should therefore be understood as a modest correlate of academic achievement that operates alongside motivational, instructional, and sociocultural factors.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary and, before any data was collected, the participants were made aware of the purpose of the study as well as the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and their right to withdraw. Permission had been secured from the institution, and no personal identifiable information was included in the report; the university's name and all other identifying details were left out to protect the institution's confidentiality.

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