Exploring Self-Esteem Levels among Adolescents: A Gender Perspective

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to assess self-esteem levels among adolescents and examine gender differences. An exploratory research design was employed, using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) to measure global self-worth. The sample included 201 adolescents (105 males and 96 females) with a mean age of 15.2 years, drawn from secondary schools in Jorhat, Assam, India. The results showed that a majority of adolescents exhibited average levels of self-esteem, indicating a balanced self-perception in most participants. However, a significant gender difference was observed; male adolescents reported higher self-esteem scores compared to females. This difference was found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) through an independent sample t-test.

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The findings suggest that gender plays a vital role in adolescent self-esteem, potentially influenced by socio-cultural factors such as body image, societal expectations, and peer pressure. The study highlights the need for gender-responsive strategies to support adolescent psychological development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a pivotal and sensitive phase of human development, typically spanning from ages 10 to 19, as defined by the World Health Organization (n.d.). It is marked by a multitude of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social changes that significantly influence an individual's growth and future trajectory (Steinberg, 2014). During this critical stage, adolescents begin to form their identity, establish values, make important life decisions, and navigate increasingly complex relationships with peers, family, and the broader society. Amidst these developmental tasks, self-esteem plays a vital role in shaping an adolescent's overall sense of self and well-being.

Self-esteem refers to an individual's perception of their own worth, value, and competence (Robins et al., 2008). In adolescence, it becomes a cornerstone of psychological development, deeply influencing behavior, emotional resilience, academic achievement, and interpersonal interactions. According to UNICEF (2008), self-esteem is one of the key life skills essential for children's personality development. It contributes significantly to building resilience, enabling adolescents to cope with stress and challenges effectively. Amirazodi and Amirazodi (2011) further highlight that positive self-esteem not only enhances personality development but also serves as a buffer against emotional difficulties.

High self-esteem during adolescence is associated with numerous positive outcomes, such as confidence, motivation, social adaptability, and mental well-being. Adolescents with a strong sense of self-worth are more likely to engage in constructive behaviors, maintain healthier relationships, and exhibit resilience in the face of adversity. This is supported by Arsandaux et al. (2020), who found that self-esteem significantly contributes to emotional stability and positive social engagement during adolescence.

Among the various influences on adolescent self-esteem, parental roles—especially those of mothers—play a crucial part. As societal norms evolve and economic demands increase, maternal employment has become a common feature in many households. The involvement of mothers in the workforce can have both direct and indirect effects on a child's self-esteem, depending on the quality of the parent-child relationship, communication, and support systems in place. Adolescents often look to their parents, particularly their mothers, for emotional validation and support, which in turn shapes their self-view and confidence. Given the central importance of self-esteem in adolescent development and the complex interplay of social and familial factors, a study titled *"Exploring Self-Esteem Levels Among Adolescents: A Gender Perspective"* was undertaken. The study aimed to understand the levels of self-esteem among adolescents and explore the key factors influencing it. With a focus on psychological well-being, identity formation, and gender-related dynamics, this research sought to provide a deeper insight into adolescent experiences and inform future interventions to support their holistic development.

1.1 Objectives

- To assess the levels of self-esteem of adolescents
- To compare how self-esteem levels vary between male and female adolescents

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Self-esteem plays a pivotal role in shaping adolescents' psychological well-being and social adjustment. According to Minev et al. (2018), high self-esteem enhances confidence, resilience, and adaptive functioning, while low self-esteem often leads to increased vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and negative self-perception. Kim et al. (2018) further emphasized that adolescents with low self-esteem are at a heightened risk of developing psychological disorders, including depression and social withdrawal. Expanding on this, Supervía et al. (2023) observed that adolescents with higher self-esteem tend to exhibit greater empathy,

optimism, and life satisfaction, indicating a strong connection between self-worth and emotional intelligence.

The digital environment also significantly affects adolescent self-esteem. Acar et al. (2022) and Cingel et al. (2022) reported that excessive use of social media, particularly involving upward social comparisons, often results in diminished self-esteem. These comparisons foster unrealistic standards and feelings of inadequacy. Si et al. (2023) added that the negative impact is intensified when adolescents lack ethical digital awareness, suggesting that mindful and responsible media use is essential to protecting self-esteem in the digital age. Collectively, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of self-esteem and the need for holistic support in both offline and online contexts.

Existing research suggests a gender disparity in adolescent self-esteem, with boys generally reporting higher levels than girls. While childhood self-esteem appears relatively balanced across genders, this equilibrium tends to shift during adolescence. Khan et al. (2018) and Aremu et al. (2018) observed that boys consistently demonstrate higher self-esteem in adolescence, potentially due to sociocultural expectations and gender-specific developmental experiences. However, Aremu et al. (2018) also noted that although more females reported low self-esteem, these differences were not always statistically significant, indicating that such trends may vary across different populations and contexts.

Further insight into the role of family dynamics is provided by Akdemir et al. (2016), who emphasized the importance of parental emotional support in fostering healthy self-esteem in both genders. Their findings suggest that while support benefits all adolescents, boys seem to derive greater psychological resilience from it, especially in psychiatric or high-stress scenarios. These patterns underscore the multifaceted nature of self-esteem development and the influence of gendered socialization, emotional support systems, and individual psychological needs during adolescence. As such, interventions aimed at promoting adolescent well-being should consider these gender-specific factors and encourage inclusive emotional support strategies.

Ayesha et al. (2024) conducted a comparative study on self-esteem and resilience among orphanage and non-orphanage adolescents. The research found that adolescents residing in orphanages demonstrated significantly lower levels of self-esteem and resilience compared to their peers living with families. The lack of consistent emotional support, stable attachments, and nurturing environments in institutional settings were identified as key contributors to diminished psychological well-being. In contrast, non-orphanage adolescents benefited from familial care, emotional bonding, and social reinforcement, which positively influenced their coping abilities and self-worth. The study emphasizes the importance of a secure and emotionally responsive environment in fostering adolescents' psychological strength. It calls for policy-level interventions and structured support programs in orphanage systems to build emotional resilience and promote healthy self-perceptions among institutionalized youth.

Karunarathne (2023) investigated the impact of adolescents' attachment to parents and peers on their self-esteem, focusing on how congruence or incongruence between these attachments affects psychological outcomes. The study found that adolescents with strong, congruent attachments to both parents and peers reported significantly higher levels of self-esteem. In contrast, when attachment quality was uneven—strong to one group but weak to the other—self-esteem was comparatively lower. The research underscores the dual importance of parental and peer support in adolescent development, suggesting that both relationships contribute uniquely and interactively to self-worth. Furthermore, it highlights that imbalances in attachment quality can create emotional strain and identity confusion during this critical developmental stage. The study supports the integration of family- and peer-based interventions to strengthen adolescent self-concept and emotional security.

The study findings should go on to show importance of self-assessment of self-esteem. A study by Nazir and Farooq (2024) examined self-esteem patterns among adolescents in slum areas, revealing that factors such as parental education, disciplinary styles, academic achievement, and body mass index (BMI) significantly influenced adolescents' self-perception. The study found that nearly 60% of adolescents displayed average or low self-esteem, suggesting a widespread need for psychological support during this stage.

Gender disparities in self-esteem are also well-documented. Singh and Sharma (2024) found

that male adolescents reported higher self-esteem levels than females, attributing this difference to social conditioning, cultural expectations, and peer interactions. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) reported that adolescent girls exhibited lower self-esteem when exposed to excessive social media comparisons, especially related to body image, highlighting the interaction between digital exposure and gender-specific self-perceptions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopted an exploratory research design to examine self-esteem among adolescents. This design was particularly suitable as it allowed for a comprehensive investigation into the levels of self-esteem and facilitated the exploration of potential gender-based differences. Exploratory research is often employed when there is limited prior knowledge about a topic or when the aim is to identify patterns, relationships, or variables that merit further investigation. In this context, the design enabled the researchers to delve into the complex and dynamic nature of adolescent self-perception.

Through the use of this flexible and open-ended approach, the study sought to gather meaningful data on how adolescents perceive their self-worth and how these perceptions may vary between males and females. The design also allowed for the consideration of multiple influencing factors, including social, cultural, and psychological aspects. By analyzing variations in self-esteem, the research provided a foundational understanding that can inform future studies and interventions aimed at promoting positive adolescent development. Ultimately, the exploratory design proved instrumental in uncovering significant gender differences and offering valuable insights into the developmental challenges and experiences that shape adolescent self-esteem.

3.2 Hypothesis

There would be no significant difference in self-esteem between male and female adolescents.

3.3 Sample

The study population comprised a total of 419 students from selected schools, chosen based on satisfactory gender representation to ensure balanced participation. To determine an appropriate sample size, Cochran's formula for a finite population was utilized, resulting in a total sample of 201 respondents (105 male & 96 female) These participants were proportionately distributed across the selected schools, with 86, 81, and 34 respondents drawn from each school respectively, maintaining representativeness and adhering to research standards.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to select the participants. Stratification was based on two key variables: age and gender, which are critical factors in adolescent development and self-esteem. This method ensured that the sample accurately reflected the diversity within the adolescent population. The respondents included students from standards IX (Ninth) and X (Tenth), aligning with the typical adolescent age range (10-19 years) This sampling approach enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the findings regarding self-esteem levels among adolescents.

3.4 Tools Used

3.4.1 Demographic profiling sheet

A questionnaire was designed to collect background information from all selected respondents by researcher. It consisted of information on respondents' gender, class, type of family, types of localities, parent's educational qualification and occupational status of the parents.

3.4.2 Rosenberg's self-esteem scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was employed to assess the levels of self-esteem of respondents in this study. Developed by sociologist Morris Rosenberg in 1965, the RSES is a widely recognized and validated tool for measuring global self-esteem. It consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Five of the items are positively worded, while the other five are negatively worded, ensuring that both positive and negative dimensions of self-esteem are captured. The responses are: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly disagree in which scores are given as 4,3,2 and 1 respectively against each positive statement and for negative statements, scores are given in a reverse order as 1,2,3 and 4 for Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly disagree. The scale provides a composite score, with higher scores reflecting higher level of self-esteem. The RSES demonstrates a Guttman

scale coefficient of reproducibility of .92, indicating excellent internal consistency. Test-retest reliability over a period of 2 weeks reveals correlations of .85 and .88, indicating excellent stability.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is evident from the Table 1 that the highest percentage (71.64%) of adolescent respondents had manifested "Average" level of self-esteem which indicate that majority of the respondents exhibited moderate confidence, balanced self-perception, and occasional self-doubt followed by 17.41 per cent, who had exhibited "Low" level of self-esteem indicating that they often struggle with self-doubt, insecurity, and feelings of inadequacy, impacting their overall emotional well-being and performance. "High" level of self-esteem was demonstrated only by 10.95 per cent of the respondents indicating that they had strong self-confidence, resilience, and a positive outlook. This may be due to the fact that during this period; they often experienced fluctuations in self-worth as they seek validation and purpose. This means that adolescents are in a stage of development where they work to discover their identity and define their sense of purpose. During this time, they often look for validation from peers, family, and society. Their self-esteem tends to vary depending on how they interpret acceptance, recognition, and feedback from others. Moreover, the respondents who were emotionally mature they were better equipped to cope with challenges, which bolstered their self-worth. Conversely, those with lower emotional maturity often struggled with self-esteem issues

due to difficulties in managing emotions and social interactions. They may grapple with feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, or self-doubt, leading to self-criticism and harsh self-judgment. Low self-esteem can significantly impact various areas of life, such as relationships, academic or career achievements, and mental well-being. Additionally, G. Stanley Hall's concept of the "stress and storm" phase highlights the emotional turbulence typical of adolescence. This emotional volatility, combined with societal expectations and pressures, can lead to self-esteem levels that are not extreme, but rather moderate or "Average". This result aligns with previous findings of Usher et al. (2019) found that external factors such as academic pressure, social comparisons, and peer influence often result in a distribution skewed towards average self-esteem, with fewer adolescents demonstrating either high or low level of self-esteem. Several studies support the finding that adolescents commonly exhibit average levels of self-esteem due to developmental and social factors. Bachman and O'Malley (2012) found that most adolescents report moderate self-esteem, as they navigate identity formation and social acceptance. Trzesniewski et al. (2003) also noted that self-esteem during adolescence tends to stabilize around average levels, influenced by peer feedback and academic stress. Furthermore, Erol and Orth (2011) emphasized that self-esteem typically increases only gradually during adolescence, supporting the trend of balanced but not extreme self-evaluations. These findings align with the normative emotional fluctuations of adolescence.
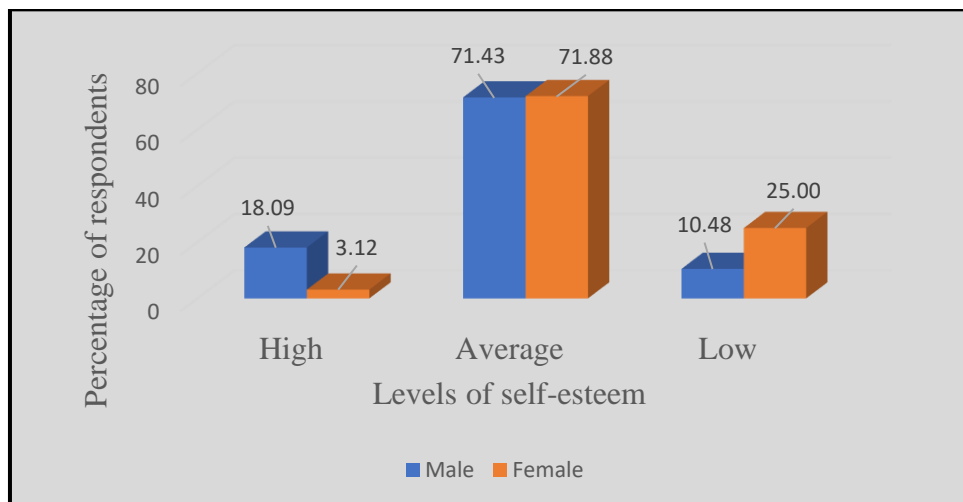

Fig. 1. Distribution of respondents according to levels of self-esteem of male and female adolescents

Table 1. Levels of self-esteem of adolescents

Respondents	Mean	SD	Levels of self-esteem					
Adolescents (n=201)	25.45	5.09	High		Medium		Low	
			F	p	F	p	F	p
			22	10.95	144	71.64	35	17.41

Table 2. Gender differences in the levels of self-esteem of adolescents

Respondents (n=201)	Mean	SD	df	Calculated t-Value	Significant value
Male (n=105)	19.44	4.23	199	4.360	0.00
Female (n=96)	16.87	4.11			

Table 2 provides a comparative analysis of self-esteem levels among male and female adolescents. The findings revealed that males (n=105) have a higher mean self-esteem score of 19.44, whereas females (n=96) exhibit a lower mean score of 16.87. The computed t-value of 4.360, coupled with a significance value of 0.00 ($p < 0.01$), confirms a statistically significant difference between the two groups. These results suggest that male adolescents tend to have higher self-esteem compared to females. The observed gender difference in self-esteem may stem from societal expectations, cultural norms, and psychological factors. Males often receive more encouragement for independence and confidence, while females may face higher societal pressures and self-criticism, leading to lower self-esteem during adolescence. The prior results of Khan et al. (2018) and Aremu et al. (2018) also support the conclusion of current findings that self-esteem levels remain comparable between boys and girls during childhood, a noticeable shift occurs in adolescence, with boys displaying significantly higher self-esteem. This difference underscores the influence of social and psychological factors on self-perception. Several studies corroborate the gender differences in adolescent self-esteem observed in the present study. Kling et al. (1999) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that males consistently report slightly higher self-esteem than females, particularly during adolescence. Similarly, Bleidorn et al. (2016) found that gender gaps in self-esteem are evident worldwide, with males scoring higher across diverse cultural contexts. Zuckerman et al. (2016) also confirmed that such differences become more pronounced during adolescence due to increasing societal and developmental pressures. These findings reinforce the view that gendered socialization patterns and cultural expectations significantly shape adolescent self-perception (Cong and Cheong, 2023).

The report reveals that the majority of male adolescents (71.43%) possess average self-esteem, while a significant proportion of females (25%) display low self-esteem. In contrast, high self-esteem is more prevalent among males (18.09%) than females (3.12%). These findings align with previous meta-analytical research by Kling et al. (1999), which found that males tend to report slightly higher self-esteem than females, especially during adolescence. Similarly, Zuckerman et al. (2016) observed gender-based variations in self-esteem, influenced by social expectations and internalized norms. These differences underscore the necessity for gender-sensitive interventions in adolescent development (Poulou and Norwich, 2020).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study conclude that the majority of adolescents demonstrate an average level of self-esteem, indicating a generally balanced sense of self-worth, accompanied by occasional doubts and insecurities typical of this developmental stage. This average self-esteem suggests that while most adolescents maintain a healthy perception of themselves, they may still experience fluctuations in confidence and self-belief due to the ongoing physical, emotional, and psychological changes characteristic of adolescence.

A key outcome of the research was the identification of a significant gender difference in self-esteem levels. Male adolescents were found to possess higher self-esteem compared to their female counterparts. This disparity may stem from a variety of social, cultural, and psychological influences, including gender-based expectations (traditional roles, stereotyped portrayals and educational bias), body image concerns, societal norms, and differential reinforcement by parents and teachers. Female

adolescents often face more pressure related to appearance and behavior, which can negatively affect their self-perception and lead to lower self-esteem.

These findings underscore the importance of considering gender as a crucial factor in understanding adolescent self-esteem. They point to a clear need for targeted, gender-sensitive interventions aimed at promoting positive self-image, emotional resilience, and self-worth, especially among female adolescents. Schools, families, and communities must work together to create supportive environments where adolescents—regardless of gender—can develop a strong sense of identity and confidence. Programs that focus on life skills, peer support, and mental health awareness can play a significant role in fostering healthier self-esteem and preparing adolescents to face the challenges of adulthood with resilience and optimism.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

To support adolescents' healthy self-esteem development, it is essential to implement school-based programs that promote emotional well-being, self-awareness, and confidence-building, particularly focusing on female students who showed comparatively lower self-esteem. Teachers and parents should be sensitized to recognize early signs of low self-esteem and encouraged to offer constructive feedback and emotional support. Peer mentoring and life skills education can also play a crucial role in fostering resilience and self-worth. Furthermore, integrating mental health education into the curriculum may help adolescents cope with the challenges of this transitional stage and build a stronger, more positive self-image over time.

7. LIMITATIONS

The study's findings are limited by its sample size and geographic scope, which may not fully represent the broader adolescent population. Participants were selected from a few schools, making it difficult to generalize the results to diverse cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, self-reported data may be subject to response biases, as participants could provide socially desirable answers.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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