

Research Paper

## A Study on Eating Disorders and Self-esteem among Indian and International College Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how self-esteem might be connected to the likelihood of developing an eating disorder (anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder) among Indian and international college students in Tamil Nadu, India. We looked at 100 students, half from India and half from other countries. We used a convenient sampling method and two well-known surveys which were the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Eating Disorders Diagnostic Scale to gather information. We formulated hypothesis to assess the correlations between self-esteem and eating disorders, gender differences in self-esteem and eating disorder prevalence, and cultural differences in these constructs. The results showed a weak but notable negative correlation between self-esteem and measures of eating disorders. Specifically, we noticed that people with eating disorders tended to have lower self-esteem, which was clear from the statistics ( $t = -2.846$ ,  $p = 0.006$ ). This difference was especially noticeable in cases of bulimia nervosa ( $p = 0.046$ ). While the study did not find substantial gender differences in self-esteem and eating disorder prevalence, existing literature suggests that females may be at a higher risk, indicating a need for further investigation in this area. The study also looked at how Indian and international students differ in terms of self-esteem and eating disorders, yet comprehensive conclusions could not be drawn in the quantitative analysis provided. The results show that the link between self-esteem and eating disorders is pretty complicated. This emphasizes needing more research that looks at these issues by incorporating longitudinal designs and qualitative methodologies. By addressing these relationships, the study aims to contribute to the development of targeted interventions and preventive strategies that can improve mental health outcomes among diverse college student populations.

**Keywords:** *Eating Disorders, Self-Esteem, College Students, Indian Nationals, International Students*

Eating disorders are complicated issues that involve unusual eating habits and deep worries about body weight and appearance. The most prevalent forms of these disorders like anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating can affect people of all genders and ages, but they often start during the teen and young adult years. (Glia et al., 2020). Sadly, these issues don't just affect the body; they often come hand in hand with mental health

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Received: May 01, 2025; Revision Received: September 01, 2025; Accepted: September 05, 2025

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problems like anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Seepersad, 2018). It's really important to tackle eating disorders because they can lead to serious health problems and even higher risks of death, especially with anorexia nervosa (Button et al., 1996).

Emerging evidence strongly suggests a critical link between self-esteem and the development and maintenance of eating disorders. This suggests that low self-esteem may be a contributing factor, and potentially a maintaining factor, in these conditions. (Plowman, 2007). Self-esteem, which is basically how we judge our own worth (Rosenberg, 1965), plays a big role in eating habits. Studies show it can really impact whether someone develops disordered eating patterns. Past studies indicate that individuals with low self-esteem are at a heightened risk of developing such disorders, particularly among adolescent females (Fremder, 2010; Kelly et al., 2020). Also, the way we see our bodies can really affect how we feel about ourselves, and this is important in understanding eating disorders. A negative body image can make low self-esteem worse and can also intensify the symptoms of eating disorders. (Kroplewski et al., 2018; Chaudhari et al., 2020).

While there's a lot of research showing a connection between self-esteem and eating disorders, we still have some unanswered questions about how they really relate to each other. Much of the current research focuses predominantly on female populations, thereby neglecting the dynamics at play among males and non-binary individuals (Shea & Pritchard, 2016). Also, we still don't know much about how things like family support, cultural backgrounds, and financial situations affect self-esteem and eating disorders in different groups of people (Joiner & Kashubeck, 2002). (Joiner & Kashubeck, 2002).

The transition to young adulthood, especially for college students between 18 and 25, is a key time to look closely at these relationships (Menon & Ranjani, 2015). This period is often marked by emotional fluctuations arising from life transitions, social pressures, and academic stressors, which may contribute to low self-esteem and subsequent psychological issues, including the development of eating disorders (Marques et al., 2024). This study aims to look into how self-esteem affects the development of eating disorders among college students. We're also interested in seeing if there are any differences between genders in this area. This research aims to fill in some gaps in our understanding of how self-esteem affects eating disorders. By doing so, we hope to develop better strategies for preventing these issues and creating effective interventions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Objectives*

- To examine the relationship between self-esteem and the occurrence and severity of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder among college students from India and abroad who are studying in India.
- To look into the differences in self-esteem and eating disorder symptoms between male and female students within the sample group.
- To investigate how cultural backgrounds (Indian versus international) influence self-esteem and body image among college students, and how these aspects connect to eating disorders.

**Hypothesis**

- Reduced self-esteem will be strongly linked to a greater occurrence of eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder, among college students.
- Females are likely to have lower self-esteem and are more prone to eating disorders compared to boys.
- International students will exhibit different patterns of self-esteem and eating disorders compared to Indian students, potentially reflecting the impact of cultural norms and values.

**Samples**

This study focuses on 100 college students hailing from various institutions in Tamil Nadu, India. The sample comprises an equal representation of 50 Indian nationals and 50 international students, allowing for a comparative analysis of the two groups. The selection of participants was carried out using a convenient sampling technique.

**Tools Used**

- **Self-esteem scale by Rosenberg (M.1965):** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a well-established self-report tool used to assess self-esteem and has been studied through item response theory. It includes 10 items that evaluate overall self-worth by capturing both positive and negative reflections about oneself. This scale is considered to have a single dimension. Respondents answer each item using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
- **Eating disorders diagnostic scale by Stice, E., Fisher, M., & Martinez, E. (2004):** The Eating Disorders Diagnostic Scale by Stice. E., Fisher M., & Martinez, E. is a widely used scale for evaluating eating disorders. The scale consists of 22 (twenty-two) items, which measure the three components of eating disorders, namely anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. Some of the items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale format ranging from not at all to extremely. Some of the items are also answered using yes or no, and finally, some of the items are also answered based on the frequency of a behavior or action occurring, ranging from 1 to 10. All the answers are based on the past 3 months.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

*Table 1: Shows the Frequency and Percentage of gender differences of the sample. (N=60)*

*Frequency*

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1(male), 2(female)				
Valid 1	50	48.4	50.0	50.0
Valid 2	50	48.4	50.0	100.0
Total	100	96.8	100.0	
Missing system	2	3.2		
Total	102	100.0		

**Table 2: Shows the Frequency and Percentage of the sample's Nationality or country of origin.**

Nationality 1(Indian), 2(Foreigners)	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	50	48.4	50.0	50.0
Valid 2	50	48.4	50.0	100.0
Total	100	96.8	100.0	
Missing system	2	3.2		
Total	102	100.0		

**Table 3: Shows the correlation between self-esteem and eating disorders**  
*Correlation*

	Self-esteem	Anorexia	Bulimia	Bingee
Self-esteem	1	-.145 .270	-.042 .750	-.014 .912
Anorexia	-.145 .270	1	.417** .001	.130 .356**
Bulimia	-.042 .750	.417** .001	1	.356** .005
Bingee	-.014 .912	.136 .299	.536** .005	1

\*\**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

**Table 4: Shows the significant difference value**

Study variable	F	sig	t	df	Sig(2 tailed)
Self-esteem	1.817	.183	-2.846	58	.006
Anorexia	4.237	.044	2.036	58	.046
			2.036	53.143	.047
Bulimia	2.531	.117	.070	58.	.944
			.070	53.233	.944
Bingee	.264	.609	-.942	58	.350
			-.942	57.632	.350

## DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to explore the relationships between self-esteem and the prevalence of eating disorders, specifically anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder among college students, while also exploring potential gender and cultural differences between Indian and international students. The results from the hypothesis testing give us valuable insights that help us better understand the mental health challenges faced by this demographic.

### ***Self-Esteem and Eating Disorders***

The hypothesis that lower self-esteem might lead to a higher chance of developing eating disorders was somewhat backed up by the results we found. The analysis in Table 3 shows that there's a weak negative relationship between self-esteem and eating disorders. In other words, as self-esteem goes down, eating disorder measures tend to go up, but the link isn't very strong. Specifically, the study found that there were correlations between self-esteem and the prevalence of eating disorders, with a correlation of  $r = -0.145$  for anorexia nervosa and  $r = -0.042$  for bulimia nervosa, suggesting that while self-esteem does play a role, it may not be the sole predictor of eating disorders among the college students sampled.

Importantly, the mean comparison showed a meaningful difference in self-esteem scores among the groups. We found a t-value of  $-2.846$  ( $p = 0.006$ ), which suggests that lower self-esteem is linked to a higher risk of eating disorders, especially bulimia nervosa ( $p = 0.046$ ). This reinforces existing literature indicating that self-esteem is a critical factor influencing eating behaviors and perception of body image.

### ***Gender Differences***

The second hypothesis suggested that female students would have lower self-esteem and a higher chance of developing eating disorders compared to male students. The sample's demographic distribution shows that there is an equal representation of genders, with 50% of the students being male and 50% female. However, the data didn't really show any big differences between genders when it comes to self-esteem or the rates of eating disorders.

Further analysis is warranted to assess self-esteem and eating disorders on a gender-specific basis, particularly since existing literature suggests that females are generally at greater risk for eating disorders (Fremder, 2010). Future research could take a closer look at how societal expectations and cultural pressures impact female students differently than their male peers.

### ***Cultural Differences***

The impact of nationality, as presented in Tables 2 and 3, sets the stage for exploring the cultural dynamics at play in this research. With equal representation of Indian and international students in the sample, the findings will be able to reflect on the differences in self-esteem and eating disorders shaped by cultural norms. Unfortunately, the current quantitative analysis did not explicitly address differences between these groups.

Previous research has shown that cultural factors play a big role in how we see our bodies and how we view our self-esteem (Joiner & Kashubeck, 2002). Future studies should look at how self-esteem and eating disorder risks compare between these two groups. This will help us understand how different cultural backgrounds might affect mental health.”

### ***Limitations and Future Directions***

Although this study offers important insights, it also has several limitations that should be taken into account. Using convenient sampling makes it hard to apply the findings more broadly, and the cross-sectional design doesn't really allow us to draw any causal conclusions. It's really important to consider that self-reported measures can have their own biases. These biases might skew how accurately someone rates their self-esteem or assesses eating disorders. Future studies should prioritize longitudinal designs and incorporate qualitative methodologies to gain a deeper understanding of these complex relationships.

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In conclusion, this study highlights the intricate connection between self-esteem and eating disorders among college students in Tamil Nadu. We found some strong connections that really deserve more digging into, especially when it comes to gender and cultural factors. By enhancing our understanding of these relationships, we can better inform targeted interventions aimed at improving mental health outcomes among diverse student populations.

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### Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Otabil, K. & Sekar, D. (2025). A Study on Eating Disorders and Self-esteem among Indian and International College Students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 13*(3), 3091-3096. DIP:18.01.278.20251303, DOI:10.25215/1303.278