

Research Paper

Self-Esteem as a Predictor of Romantic-Relationship Involvement among Indian Young Adults: A Cross-Sectional Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem plays a critical role in emotional functioning and interpersonal behavior, yet its association with romantic relationships during emerging adulthood remains underexplored in India. This cross-sectional online survey of 386 Indian young adults (18–25 years) assessed global self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and examined its relationship with voluntary romantic-relationship involvement. Overall, 62.7% of participants exhibited low self-esteem, and 63.2% reported being in a self-initiated romantic relationship. Individuals in relationships demonstrated significantly lower self-esteem than those not involved ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.001$), with females showing marginally lower mean scores than males. Findings suggest that young adults with diminished self-worth may be more inclined to pursue romantic relationships as a source of emotional validation. Interventions aimed at strengthening self-esteem during adolescence may support healthier relational development among Indian youth.

Keywords: *Self-Esteem, Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, Emerging Adulthood, Romantic Relationships, Indian Youth, Cross-Sectional Study, Psychosocial Factors, Youth Psychology*

Self-esteem, broadly conceptualized as an individual's appraisal of their own value and competence, is foundational to emotional well-being and social functioning. Contemporary research views self-esteem not merely as a static personality trait but as a dynamic construct shaped by internalized experiences, interpersonal feedback, and sociocultural factors.

Emerging adulthood (18–25 years) is a period characterized by identity formation, increased autonomy, and exploration of intimate partnerships. Romantic relationships formed during this phase are known to influence psychological adjustment and may both shape and be shaped by self-esteem. Individuals with diminished self-worth may gravitate toward romantic partners for reassurance, whereas those with healthier self-esteem may approach relationships with greater autonomy and emotional security.

In India, the growing visibility of self-initiated romantic relationships marks a notable sociocultural shift from the historically dominant arranged-marriage system. Despite this

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transition, empirical research examining psychological correlates of such relationships, particularly self-esteem remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by assessing self esteem levels among Indian young adults and evaluating how self esteem relates to romantic relationship involvement. The findings aim to contribute to a culturally grounded understanding of youth relational development in a transforming social context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Setting:

A descriptive cross-sectional online survey was conducted during August–September 2023 following institutional ethical approval. All procedures complied with established research standards for privacy, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Participants and Sampling:

Participants were Indian residents aged 18–25 years. Snowball sampling was employed to reach individuals who were currently engaged in voluntary, non-arranged romantic relationships—a population that is difficult to access through conventional sampling strategies. Individuals receiving treatment for significant physical or psychological illness were excluded.

Survey Instrument

The survey consisted of three sections:

1. Socio-demographic variables including age, gender, family structure, educational background, and place of residence.
2. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)—a 10-item instrument widely used to assess global self-esteem.
 - Items are rated on a 4-point agreement scale.
 - Negatively worded statements are reverse-scored.
 - Total scores range from 0 to 30, with lower scores indicating poorer self-esteem.
 - Scores ≤ 17 were categorized as low self-esteem.
3. Romantic-relationship variables, including current relationship status and relevant background information.

The questionnaire was pilot-tested on 20 respondents for clarity and comprehension prior to final dissemination.

Data Management and Statistical Analysis

Data was exported to Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means \pm SD) summarized participant characteristics. Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) assessed the association between RSE scores and current relationship status. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic Profile:

Among the 386 participants, 56.7% were female and 43.3% male. The mean age was 21.1 ± 1.8 years, with most respondents (82%) aged 18–22 years. A majority belonged to nuclear

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families (77.2%) and resided in urban areas (90.7%). The sample included students from medical (37%), engineering (26.2%), and other academic disciplines (36.6%).

Self-Esteem Levels:

The mean RSE score was 15.9 ± 4.2 .

- Low self-esteem (≤ 17): 62.7% ($n = 242$)
- Healthy self-esteem (≥ 18): 37.3% ($n = 144$)

Females had slightly lower scores (15.4 ± 4.1) than males (16.7 ± 4.3), a difference approaching significance ($p = 0.053$). A modest increase in self-esteem across ages 18–21 followed by a slight decline indicated an inverted-U developmental pattern.

Relationship Status:

Of the total participants, 63.2% ($n = 244$) reported being in an active romantic relationship, while 36.8% ($n = 142$) were not. Among individuals in relationships, 81.6% ($n = 198$) scored in the low self-esteem range.

Correlation Analysis:

A significant negative correlation was observed between RSE scores and romantic-relationship involvement ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.001$). Participants with lower self-esteem were more likely to be in romantic relationships. Urban residence was also strongly associated with higher relationship prevalence compared with rural residence ($\chi^2 = 9.83$, $p = 0.002$).

DISCUSSION

The present study highlights a notable prevalence of low self-esteem among Indian young adults and identifies a strong inverse association between self-esteem and romantic-relationship involvement. These findings reinforce existing evidence suggesting that self-esteem is both influenced by and predictive of interpersonal dynamics during emerging adulthood.

The predominance of low self-esteem in this sample aligns with developmental literature indicating that self-worth often fluctuates during late adolescence and early adulthood in response to identity-related challenges, academic pressures, and heightened social comparison. The observed gender patterns—wherein females reported marginally lower self-esteem—are consistent with prior studies attributing such differences to sociocultural expectations, relational norms, and internalized standards prevalent in collectivist contexts. The strong negative correlation between self-esteem and romantic-relationship involvement suggests that young adults with diminished self-worth may seek romantic partnerships as a compensatory mechanism to fulfill unmet emotional needs or validate personal desirability. This observation is consistent with sociometer theory, which conceptualizes self-esteem as an internal gauge of perceived relational acceptance.

Urban participants demonstrated substantially higher involvement in romantic relationships, likely reflecting greater social exposure, autonomy in relationship initiation, and liberalized attitudes toward premarital partnerships in metropolitan environments.

While romantic relationships can foster emotional growth and companionship, individuals with persistently low self-esteem may be more vulnerable to relational dependency, conflict, and dissatisfaction. These findings underscore the need for early interventions—such as

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school-based mental-health programs, counseling services, and psychoeducation—to cultivate healthy self-concept and relational skills among adolescents and young adults.

CONCLUSION

Low self-esteem emerged as both prevalent and strongly related to romantic-relationship involvement among Indian young adults. The results suggest that diminished self-worth may contribute to increased pursuit of romantic intimacy as a form of emotional validation. Initiatives aimed at strengthening self-esteem during adolescence may promote healthier relational trajectories, reduce dependency-driven relationship patterns, and enhance psychological resilience.

Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and include broader rural and socioeconomically diverse populations to strengthen generalizability and clarify causal pathways.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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