

A Review of Studies on Self-Esteem and Automatic Thoughts among Students

Ms. Anshika Dikshit^{1*}, Dr. Neerja Pandey², Mr. Priyanshu³

ABSTRACT

Self-esteem and automatic thoughts play a central role in psychological functioning, mental health, and overall well-being. Self-esteem, broadly understood as an individual's evaluation of their own worth, is shaped by multiple influences such as social interactions, self-concept, family environment, and demographic factors (Hosogi et al., 2012; López-Escobar, 2021; Martin, 2025). Research consistently demonstrates that higher self-esteem is associated with greater resilience, effective coping strategies, improved academic performance, better social functioning, and higher life satisfaction, whereas low self-esteem increases vulnerability to stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and maladaptive coping patterns (Flett, 2021). Automatic thoughts, first conceptualized by Beck (1976) within the cognitive model, refer to spontaneous and often unconscious cognitions that arise in response to everyday situations. Negative automatic thoughts, while sometimes positive, are often distorted or irrational and can lead to heightened anxiety, hopelessness, and depression. In clinical and non-clinical populations alike, frequent negative automatic thoughts are recognized both as a symptom and as a maintaining factor of psychological distress (Beck & Fleming, 2022; Burns, 1980; Stress & Development Lab, 2025). The present review aims to examine the relationship between self-esteem and automatic thoughts among student populations. Specifically, this study examines how social, demographic, and personal factors affect self-esteem, the influence of negative automatic thoughts on emotional and academic results, and how these elements combine to shape psychological functioning. The review also highlights intervention strategies, including cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, psychoeducation, and self-compassion practices, that can mitigate maladaptive cognitions and enhance self-perceptions. The study follows the PRISMA model to ensure a systematic, transparent, and methodologically rigorous approach to literature selection and synthesis. Evidence highlights consistent positive associations between healthy self-esteem and adaptive outcomes, such as improved academic performance, emotional regulation, and overall well-being, while negative automatic thoughts are strongly linked to emotional dysregulation and cognitive distortions. Importantly, cultural context, developmental stage, and individual differences moderate these relationships. Overall, the literature underscores the interconnectedness of self-esteem and automatic thoughts and emphasizes the need for targeted strategies to

¹AIBAS, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, Gomti Nagar Extension, UP, India

²Assistant Professor Psychology, AIBAS, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, Gomti Nagar Extension, UP, India. ORCID ID 0000-0002-7495-2413

³AIBAS, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus, Gomti Nagar Extension, UP, India

*Corresponding Author

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enhance self-perceptions, challenge cognitive distortions, and foster adaptive psychological functioning across diverse student populations.

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The present review paper aims to examine self-esteem and automatic thoughts among students and explore how these two variables are interconnected. Self-esteem refers to confidence in one's abilities, character, and overall self-worth, influencing motivation, coping, academic performance, and social functioning. Automatic thoughts are spontaneous cognitions, often negative or maladaptive, that shape emotions, behaviors, and psychological well-being. Understanding these concepts help identify distorted thinking patterns and adopt strategies to manage challenges in daily life. This review synthesizes existing research to highlight the relationship between self-esteem and automatic thoughts and emphasizes the importance of fostering adaptive self-perceptions and cognitive patterns among students.

Self-Esteem

William James (1890) discussed the self and self-esteem early in psychological literature; his work is among the earliest influences on contemporary self-esteem theory. Importance of self-esteem is commonly associated with the key domains like development, human motivation, performance, coping ability, psychopathology, relationship formation, and mental health or overall well-being (Hosogi et al., 2012). Later, it was explained in a book by Cooley, C. H. (1902) that Self-esteem is developed through social interactions and that it is not something internal. He introduced the idea of the "looking-glass self" in which individuals shape their self-image according to how they believe others see them. This process happens step by step: first, one imagines how one looks in the eyes of others; second, one thinks about the opinions they might form about that image; and finally, how one feels emotions like confidence, pride, or shame depending on those assumed judgments. In this way, one's self-esteem is not created in isolation but shaped by the approval or disapproval of how one believes, or one receives from people around them (López-Escobar). Furthermore, Rogers (1951), the founder of humanistic psychology, explained that self-esteem is closely linked to a person's overall self-concept, or the way they see and understand themselves. He believed that people develop a strong and healthy sense of worth when they are accepted and valued without conditions, rather than only when they meet certain standards or expectations. This type of unconditional acceptance, which he called unconditional positive regard, helps individuals feel secure, confident, and authentic. However, when love and approval depend on achievements or behavior, self-esteem becomes unstable and easily threatened (Martin, 2025). Rogers also pointed out that self-esteem grows best when there is harmony between a person's self-image and real-life experiences, a state he described as congruence. The most popular self-esteem scale was introduced by Rosenberg (1965). In his book *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*, Rosenberg explained self-esteem as the general way people feel about themselves, either in a positive or negative sense. He pointed out that self-esteem involves the degree to which a person accepts, values, and respects who they are. Rosenberg made it clear that true self-esteem is not about being proud or arrogant, but about having a healthy and balanced view of oneself. He also connected self-esteem to social influences, noting that family, friends, and society play an important role in shaping how individuals see themselves (Flett, 2021).

Automatic Thoughts

The concept of automatic thoughts was first identified by Beck in the 1960s while he was developing Cognitive Therapy. He described these negative thoughts as forming what he called ‘a cognitive triad’ in which patients experienced maladaptive cognitions about themselves, the world, and their future. Ellis formulated his Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), which revolved around the ABC Model, that explains how an activating event (A) doesn't directly cause emotional or behavioral consequences (C), but rather a person's irrational beliefs (B) about that event lead to those consequences (Ellis, 2018). Later, combining both the cognitive and behavioral aspect together, Beck introduced the process of “cognitive restructuring” in the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, wherein clients are made aware and challenge the automatic thoughts, replace them with some other alternative, and practice new thinking patterns to build metacognitive awareness (Beck, 1970). Beck found that depressed patients often experience negative thoughts about themselves, the world, and/or the future. These thoughts, or cognitions, appeared to occur spontaneously and referred to them as “automatic thoughts.” He also believed that depressed patients would focus on these negative automatic thoughts resulting in both negative feelings and negative behaviors (Beck, 2021). Burns (1990) popularized the idea of immediate negative thoughts and cognitive distortions in his book *Feeling Good*, translating clinical concepts (automatic thoughts, distortions) into widely used worksheets and patient exercises. Hollon and Kendall (1980) developed the Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire (ATQ) to implement and measure the frequency of negative automatic thoughts in depression, showing the incorporation of Beck’s concept into empirical research. The Harvard Stress & Development Lab (2025) describes “negative automatic thoughts” and lists common cognitive distortion patterns—such as all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, catastrophizing, “should” statements, and other unhelpful thought styles—that shape emotional and behavioral responses and can reinforce distress or lower self-esteem.

Rationale

The present review is conducted to consolidate and synthesize existing research on self-esteem and automatic thoughts among student population. While numerous studies have examined the role of self-esteem in academic performance, psychosocial adjustment, and overall well-being, and the influence of automatic thoughts on emotional regulation and mental health, a comprehensive understanding of their interrelationship remains limited. By reviewing the findings across developmental, clinical, and educational contexts, this paper seeks to highlight how self-esteem and automatic thoughts interact to influence psychological functioning, coping strategies, and life outcomes. The review also identifies factors that moderate these relationships, including social, demographic, and cognitive variables, providing a foundation for targeted interventions such as cognitive restructuring, mindfulness, and psychoeducation.

The student researcher could find only six research that had used both the variables highlighting the need for further work.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This review of related literature has been divided into three major parts. First part highlights the researches based on self-esteem, the second part is highlighting those researches that are done using automatic thoughts, and finally the third part is based on researches using both the variables.

Self-Esteem

During the review, it was noted that Anjali et al. (2024) examined the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance among undergraduate students and reported a significant positive association, showing that students with higher self-esteem demonstrated better academic performance. Another study by Mahadi et al. (2015) supported these findings by emphasizing that self-esteem played an important role in enhancing creativity, career decision-making, and overall academic achievement. Extending these results, Mandal et al. (2023) found that adolescents with higher self-esteem, particularly females and those from joint families, showed healthier psychosocial adjustment. Adding further support, Arshad et al. (2015) also reported a strong positive correlation between self-esteem and academic performance, with gender differences where females scored higher academically while males reported higher self-esteem. In a similar line, Ahmad and Siddiq (2023) studied male university students and revealed a weak but significant positive correlation between self-esteem and academic performance, even though no significant effects were observed for economic status or rural–urban residence.

Additional research reinforced this positive connection. Norazman (2023) highlighted that self-confidence, gender, age, and physical appearance significantly influenced self-esteem, which in turn was positively related to academic success. In line with this, Putri et al. (2023) reported a positive relationship between self-esteem and self-confidence among undergraduates, while Ling and Ee (2023) found that self-esteem directly impacted life satisfaction regardless of demographic differences. Similarly, Noronha et al. (2018) emphasized that self-esteem, shaped by recognition or criticism during development, influenced creativity, confidence, decision-making, and mental health. Supporting these observations, De Prada et al. (2024) showed that teamwork skills significantly predicted self-esteem, with differences observed across gender and age. Further extending this evidence, Muris and Otgaar (2023) conducted a meta-analysis and demonstrated a strong overlap between self-esteem and self-compassion, underscoring their joint protective role in resilience and mental health. In the same direction, Julius (2022) revealed a positive correlation between self-esteem and self-efficacy, suggesting that greater self-esteem strengthens self-beliefs and coping capacities.

Contrasting findings, however, were also reported. Ravikanth (2010) observed no significant differences in self-esteem between IT and non-IT students or between engineering and postgraduate students, indicating that contextual variables may moderate its role. Similarly, Vilani and Sugiarto (2024) found that the relationship between self-esteem and writing ability among tenth-grade students was not significant, with no gender differences in self-esteem. Complementing these results, Yaremko (2023) noted that although higher self-esteem was linked to improved academic performance and psychological well-being, the strength of this relationship was weaker than suggested in earlier studies. In addition, Gidado et al. (2025) reported that while self-esteem was positively related to academic achievement among secondary students, socio-demographic factors such as age had a stronger impact on performance outcomes.

Automatic Thoughts

During the review, it was noted that Iancu et al. (2015) examined the relationship between positive and negative thoughts and social anxiety, emphasizing that individuals with social anxiety perceived their environment as threatening and dangerous. Using the Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale (Taylor, 1953), Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire (Hollon and Kendall, 1980), and State Emotion-Regulation Questionnaire (Kashdan and Steger, 2006) on

A Review of Studies on Self-Esteem and Automatic Thoughts among Students

25 participants, they confirmed significant correlations between perceived anxiety and automatic thoughts adjustment, between perceived anxiety and emotional control, and between automatic thoughts adjustment and emotional control. Another study by Sultan Okumuşoğlu (2017) complemented these findings by examining depressive tendencies among university students in relation to gender, class, economic status, and satisfaction with social connections. The study revealed that freshmen scored higher, males exhibited higher loneliness/isolation, and students unsatisfied with their social connections showed greater depressive tendencies, reinforcing the role of automatic thoughts in emotional experiences. Adding to these findings, Hatice ŞİRİN and Hüseyin IZGAR explored the relationship between undergraduates' communication skills and negative automatic thoughts in 478 students, revealing a significant negative correlation. While communication skills did not vary by department, negative automatic thinking did, contrasting with earlier assumptions that automatic thoughts function uniformly across contexts. Similarly, Direktor et al. (2017) assessed automatic thoughts alongside emotional intelligence subscales, gender, and department in 291 students and found that students better at managing emotions and understanding others experienced more negative automatic thoughts, while awareness of one's own emotions was unrelated, providing a nuanced perspective on automatic thoughts as predictors of emotional states.

Extending the scope to clinical and developmental contexts, Ren et al. (2025) demonstrated that automatic thoughts mediate the relationship between self-compassion and mental pain in 389 inpatients with depression, where greater self-compassion reduced negative automatic thoughts and consequently mental pain. Florean et al. (2024) highlighted that adolescents' connections with parents and peers influenced internalizing problems largely through positive and negative automatic thoughts, accounting for 57% of variance, further emphasizing the mediating role of automatic thoughts in emotional outcomes. Yesilyaprak et al. (2019) compared cognitive patterns among patients with bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, and healthy controls, showing that depressed and bipolar patients exhibited more negative and manic-related cognitions, while healthy controls had higher positive self-perceptions and positive rumination, supporting the differential role of automatic thoughts across psychopathology. Further insights into clinical implications were provided by Takeda et al. (2024), who examined negative and positive automatic thoughts in patients with schizophrenia. Negative automatic thoughts were linked to depressive symptoms, whereas positive automatic thoughts were associated with cognitive functioning, indicating that the type of automatic thought may have distinct outcomes. Similarly, Kürümlüoğlu and Tanrıverdi (2021) showed that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy-based psychoeducation significantly reduced negative automatic thoughts, cognitive distortions, and dysfunctional attitudes in patients with depression, demonstrating its effectiveness as an intervention.

Complementing these findings, Yapan et al. (2022) investigated whether anxiety and depression form discrete subgroups or exist on a continuum in 310 undergraduate students. Automatic thoughts, dysfunctional attitudes, rumination, and thought suppression were identified as key transdiagnostic risk factors, reinforcing earlier findings linking automatic thoughts to emotional regulation and mental health. Kumar et al. (2023) extended this understanding by showing that negative automatic thoughts were inversely related to mindfulness in patients with dual diagnoses, suggesting that high levels of negative thinking can exacerbate psychological difficulties. Finally, Yavuzer and Karatas (2017) demonstrated that negative automatic thoughts, lower life satisfaction, symptom interpretation, and

A Review of Studies on Self-Esteem and Automatic Thoughts among Students

psychological coping strategies significantly predicted depression, explaining 52% of variance, and highlighted the mediating role of life satisfaction in depressive symptoms.

Self-Esteem and Automatic Thoughts

Upon further review, it was found that only a few numbers of research were conducted using both the variables. In one of the recent literature reviews Razak, N.M.A et al., (2025) examined the associations between self-esteem, automatic thoughts, and quality of life among siblings of individuals with Cerebral Palsy, targeting how limited scholarly attention have been given to their psychosocial challenges. Saurabh, M. & Cherian, J. (2024) conducted research on 95 people to study the relationship between automatic thoughts and self-esteem in adult substance users and found out that there is a significant correlation among adults who use drugs, automatic thoughts and their levels of self-esteem. Li, X. et al., (2024) used yearly and daily tracking to show a bidirectional causal relationship where rumination and self-esteem each predict the other over time, supporting a spiral model linking the two. Similarly, Brueckmann, M. et al., (2025) explored the links between self-esteem, repetitive negative thinking, and burnout by tracking students for 4 weeks and found a bidirectional cycle where low self-esteem increases negative thinking and burnout, and that burnout further worsens self-esteem.

Hicdurmax, D. et al., (2017) used the Brief Symptom Inventory, the Automatic Thoughts Questionnaire, and determined that mental health in university students is shaped by income and family relationships, with automatic thoughts, self-esteem, and age strongly predicting one another. Closely related to this research, Savi Çakar, Firdevs. (2014) tested a structural model to examine whether self-esteem mediates the link between automatic thoughts and hopelessness in university students and found that automatic thoughts and self-esteem directly predict hopelessness, but self-esteem does not mediate this relationship.

CONCLUSION

The literature consistently demonstrates that self-esteem and automatic thoughts are closely interlinked and play critical roles in students' psychological functioning, academic outcomes, and overall well-being. High self-esteem is associated with enhanced resilience, motivation, effective coping strategies, academic success, and life satisfaction, while low self-esteem correlates with vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and maladaptive behaviors. Negative automatic thoughts act as key predictors of emotional dysregulation, depressive symptoms, and reduced life satisfaction, whereas interventions such as cognitive restructuring, self-compassion, and psychoeducation effectively mitigate these maladaptive cognitions. Evidence further suggests that social, developmental, and demographic factors moderate these relationships, emphasizing the need for tailored strategies to foster adaptive self-perceptions and healthy cognitive patterns. Overall, understanding and addressing the interplay between self-esteem and automatic thoughts is essential for promoting mental health and psychological resilience in student populations.

Future implications

Because the student researcher could find only six research that had used both the variables, Self-Esteem and Automatic Thoughts, it highlights the need for further work in the field.

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A Review of Studies on Self-Esteem and Automatic Thoughts among Students

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A Review of Studies on Self-Esteem and Automatic Thoughts among Students

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict between the authors.

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