Self-Esteem and its Impact on University Students' Academic Performance: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem is an important psychological concept in understanding how an individual evaluates their personal worth and self-value. In the context of university students, the level of self-esteem plays a crucial role in academic achievement. Low self-esteem among university students can negatively affect their motivation, emotional well-being, and academic achievement. This study was conducted to explore how the level of self-esteem impacts the academic performance of university students. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving three randomly selected UniSHAMS's students as participants through semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed four main themes: Understanding of Self-Esteem, The Impact of Self-Esteem in Daily Life, Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Performance, and Reflection and Self-Awareness. The findings indicate that self-esteem influences aspects such as learning motivation, stress management, goal setting, and social interaction among university students. Those with high self-esteem were more likely to achieve strong academic performance, while those with low self-esteem tended to give up easily and were more emotionally affected. This study highlights the need for psychosocial support programmes to strengthen university students' self-esteem in a holistic manner.

Keywords: self-esteem, academic performance, university students.

INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is an important psychological concept in understanding how individuals evaluate their personal worth and self-value. According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem refers to a person's overall sense of self-worth, encompassing how they assess their abilities, characteristics, as well as their roles and significance within a social context. Among university students, the level of self-esteem not only affects emotional well-being but also plays a significant role in academic achievement.

Previous studies have shown that self-esteem can influence academic performance in various ways. For instance, students with high self-esteem are more likely to possess effective problem-solving skills, be willing to try new approaches, and adapt well to challenging situations (Iswandi et al., 2022). These abilities are crucial in a university learning environment that demands independence and critical thinking from students.

In addition, positive self-esteem is also associated with a higher level of motivation among students. Individuals who believe in their own abilities are more driven to strive toward their academic goals (Farah & Mujaheed, 2021). This is because they are confident that their efforts will yield worthwhile results, thus encouraging them to persevere and not give up easily.

Self-esteem also helps students manage emotions and fear of failure. A study by Azlina et al. (2020) found that students with low self-esteem are more affected by failure and tend to lose confidence and motivation when faced with academic challenges. On the other hand, those with stable self-esteem are able to recover and learn from these failures.

Marion et al. (2022) further found that individuals with low self-esteem tend to underestimate their own performance even in the absence of negative feedback, reflecting a pattern of negative self-evaluation that is not always based on actual ability.

Similarly, Siljie et al. (2021) showed that social media use focused on others—such as viewing and commenting on others' posts—was linked to lower appearance-related self-esteem, particularly among adolescent girls.

Despite the growing interest in self-esteem, the research gap lies in the limited use of qualitative approaches to explore how self-esteem affects academic performance within real-life student contexts. Most existing studies rely heavily on quantitative methods focused on correlations, overlooking the personal and emotional experiences of students (Najwa & Syazwana, 2023; Yanhui et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is a lack of research involving students from medium-scale institutions such as Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS), who remain underrepresented in current literature.

Problem Statement

In today's increasingly competitive and demanding higher education landscape, self-esteem has emerged as a critical element influencing students' motivation, learning behaviors, and academic achievement (Sidiq & Eka, 2019). University students are now expected not only to master academic content but also to cope with a wide range of internal and external pressures—including family expectations, peer competition, financial stress, and social adjustment. When not well-managed, these pressures can negatively affect students' self-esteem, which in turn may hinder their academic performance.

Previous research has shown a consistent link between low self-esteem and poor academic outcomes, along with other psychological difficulties. For instance, Hilwa and Asyirah (2019) found that students with lower levels of social support also reported lower self-esteem scores, which were closely associated with increased symptoms of depression and declining academic performance. Similarly, a study by Azlina et al. (2020) revealed that students categorized as having low self-esteem recorded lower CGPA scores compared to their peers with moderate or high levels of self-esteem.

Despite these findings, there remains a significant gap in the existing literature. Much of the research on self-esteem continues to rely on quantitative approaches, focusing primarily on statistical correlations between variables without exploring the lived experiences of students within their everyday academic and personal contexts (Najwa & Syazwana, 2023; Yanhui et al., 2020). These methods, while valuable, often overlook the emotional, psychological, and narrative dimensions that offer a more layered and humanized understanding of how self-esteem operates in real life.

In addition, the majority of existing studies tend to concentrate on students from large or prestigious universities, leaving the experiences of students from medium-sized institutions—such as Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS)—largely underrepresented. Yet, students in such institutions may face unique challenges shaped by their socioeconomic background, campus culture, and educational structure, which may differ substantially from those in major universities.

Therefore, this study seeks to address two critical gaps in the current body of research: (1) the underrepresentation of students from medium-sized institutions, and (2) the limited use of qualitative methods in understanding the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance. Using a qualitative case study design and semi-structured interviews, this research aims to explore the personal narratives of UniSHAMS students and gain deeper insight into how self-esteem affects their academic experiences. Through this approach, the study hopes to uncover emotional struggles, coping strategies, and psychological factors that may not be captured through survey-based methods alone.

Ultimately, this research offers both methodological and contextual contributions by enriching the academic literature with findings from a less-explored population using a human-centered qualitative lens. It also holds practical value in informing the development of more effective psychosocial interventions and student support

strategies—particularly within Islamic-based higher education settings—toward promoting students' holistic growth in cognitive, emotional, and social domains.

Research Objective

To explore the various ways self-esteem shapes and influences students' academic performance through their lived experiences.

Research Question

In what ways does self-esteem shape and influence the academic performance of university students?

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a multifaceted psychological construct that reflects how individuals perceive and evaluate themselves. Rather than being a fixed trait, self-esteem is shaped by ongoing internal and external experiences and plays a crucial role in one's motivation and emotional well-being. Feshbach et al. (1996) describe it as an evaluative judgment—positive or negative—that a person makes about themselves, while Duffy et al. (2006) emphasize its significance within the broader concept of self-identity. Mansur and Nordinar (1998) further expand this understanding by associating self-esteem with one's sense of worth, confidence, and perceived contribution to society. In the Malaysian context, the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka defines self-esteem as a state of self-worth that leads to personal satisfaction. Synthesizing these perspectives, self-esteem in this study is understood as an individual's internal appraisal of self-worth, confidence, and value—particularly in relation to academic roles and pressures faced by university students.

University Students

University students represent a unique developmental group transitioning from adolescence into adulthood. This stage involves not only academic engagement but also identity formation, emotional regulation, and social adaptation (Santrock, 2019). While the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka defines them as learners in higher education institutions, their role goes beyond classroom learning. University students are actively involved in constructing their intellectual, emotional, and social selves within diverse academic and societal expectations. In this study, university students are viewed as emerging adults navigating complex academic demands and psychological experiences, including issues of self-esteem that potentially influence their academic journey.

Academic Performance

Academic performance typically refers to the extent to which a student has achieved their educational goals, usually measured through formal assessments such as tests, assignments, and examinations. Tuckman (1992) defines it as the outcome of one's learning, assessed using institutional criteria. However, academic performance is not merely a reflection of cognitive achievement—it also encompasses the ability to apply, express, and sustain learning in real-life academic contexts. The Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka similarly defines it as individual accomplishment in the field of learning. For this study, academic performance is seen as both a cognitive output and a reflection of deeper psychological processes, including self-esteem, that shape how students engage with their studies and demonstrate success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Najwa and Syazwana (2023) conducted a quantitative study titled "Personality and Self-Esteem Among Staff of the Melaka Islamic Religious Council (MAIM)," which investigated the relationship between Big Five personality traits and self-esteem. Their findings indicated significant positive correlations, particularly in traits such as conscientiousness and openness. While this study underscores the importance of internal traits in shaping self-esteem, it was limited to an adult working population in an organizational setting. Moreover, the use of statistical instruments like the RSES and BFI-44, while useful for broad correlation analysis, did not explore the lived experiences or contextual factors that influence self-esteem development. In contrast, the current study seeks to examine self-esteem through a qualitative lens, focusing on university students as a

distinct population group whose developmental stage involves identity formation and emotional maturity—factors not addressed in Najwa and Syazwana's research. This shift in context and methodology addresses a gap in understanding how self-esteem operates in educational rather than occupational environments, particularly among young adults in Islamic higher education institutions.

Meanwhile, Marion et al. (2022) investigated how individuals with low self-esteem perceive their own performance in the absence of external feedback. Though the study was experimental and provided insight into internal self-evaluation processes, it focused on general individuals rather than specific populations such as students. The research revealed that participants with low self-esteem consistently underrated their performance, despite having comparable objective outcomes with their high self-esteem counterparts. This finding aligns with the assumption that self-esteem plays a critical role in shaping academic self-perceptions. However, Marion et al.'s study was conducted in a Western context, with no consideration for cultural or educational environments. This highlights a cultural gap that the present study aims to fill by exploring self-esteem within the socio-cultural and religious framework of a Malaysian Islamic university. By centering students' own narratives, the current research captures how cultural expectations, religious values, and academic demands intersect with self-esteem in a way that is rarely addressed in the global literature.

Collectively, these reviewed studies provide valuable insights into self-esteem from different angles. However, they also highlight the need for deeper, context-sensitive exploration that considers the cultural and educational experiences of students, especially those in underrepresented institutions like UniSHAMS. This study responds to that need by using a qualitative case study approach to uncover the nuanced ways self-esteem influences academic performance in this specific setting.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design in the form of a case study. As stated by Creswell and Poth (2018), a case study is appropriate when researchers seek to explore complex issues in depth within their real-life contexts. The purpose of this research is to understand how self-esteem influences academic performance among university students, particularly through their personal experiences.
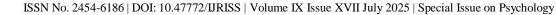
The population for this study consisted of undergraduate students at Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS). Three participants were selected through simple random sampling across several kulliyyah (faculties). Although the sample size is small, the selection approach ensured that each student had an equal chance of being chosen, thus supporting the representativeness within the specific context of this institution.

In qualitative case study research, the focus lies not on the number of participants but on the richness and depth of the data gathered (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Therefore, the use of a small sample is methodologically acceptable, especially when the aim is to conduct an in-depth exploration of individual lived experiences, as in the present study.

Basic demographic information such as gender, year of study, and academic program has been described in the findings section to enhance contextual understanding without compromising anonymity.

In terms of ethical procedures, approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee before data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, scope, and their rights as voluntary participants. Written informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Pseudonyms were used in all reporting, and interviews were conducted in private settings with the participants' permission for audio recording.

This methodological structure ensured that the study maintained ethical transparency, allowed for meaningful data collection, and upheld the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process.

Research Instrument

In this study, the main instrument used was a semi-structured interview. Through this type of interview, the researcher can prepare flexible guiding questions that allow the conversation to flow naturally while still focusing on the objectives of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions used during the interview with respondents were:

1.“*Boleh terangkan apa yang anda faham tentang penghargaan kendiri*?”

(Can you explain what you understand about self-esteem?)

2.“*Sejauh mana penghargaan kendiri memberi kesan terhadap kehidupan harian anda sebagai mahasiswa*?”

(How far does self-esteem affect your daily life as a university student?)

3.“*Adakah anda merasakan tahap penghargaan kendiri mempengaruhi prestasi akademik anda*?”

(Do you feel that your level of self-esteem affects your academic performance?)

4.“*Pernahkah anda mengalami situasi di mana penghargaan kendiri rendah menjejaskan prestasi akademik anda? Boleh kongsikan pengalaman tersebut*?”

(Have you ever experienced a situation where low self-esteem affected your academic performance? Could you share that experience?)

RESULTS

Respondent Demographic

Respondent 1 is a 19-year-old male student currently studying at the Matriculation Centre. He is in Semester 3 and has achieved good academic results, with a current Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) above 3.0.

Respondent 2 is a 23-year-old female student enrolled in the Bachelor of Counselling programme at the Kulliyyah of Counselling. She is currently in Semester 7 and is the eldest of seven siblings. She has demonstrated excellent academic performance, with a current CGPA of approximately 3.6.

Respondent 3 is a 23-year-old female student in Semester 7 at the Kulliyyah of Usuluddin and Dakwah (KUBRA). She has shown commendable academic performance, with a current CGPA estimated at around 3.7.

Themes founds through thematic analysis

This study identified four main themes based on semi-structured interviews with three respondents. Each theme has been analyzed and elaborated through sub-themes derived from the responses given.

Theme 1: Understanding of Self-Esteem

Sub-theme 1.1: Definition of Self-Esteem Based on Individual Understanding

Respondent 1

"*Kita kena hargai diri sendiri sebelum kita hargai orang lain.*"

(We need to value ourselves before we can value others.)

Respondent 2

"*Contoh macam mana seseorang tu menghargai diri dia lah.*"

(Like how a person appreciates themselves.)

Respondent 3

"*Protect diri. Sayang diri.*"

(Protect yourself. Love yourself.)

Respondent 1 stated that self-esteem means one must appreciate oneself first before being able to appreciate others. This reflects a fundamental understanding of the importance of respecting oneself as a foundation for social interaction. Respondent 2 perceived self-esteem as the way an individual shows appreciation for themselves, indicating a general understanding that is still tied to an inner awareness of personal value. Meanwhile, Respondent 3 interpreted self-esteem as a form of self-protection and self-love, highlighting a focus on emotional care and personal security.

Sub-theme 1.2: Initial Awareness of Self-Esteem

The researcher asked whether the respondents had ever heard about self-esteem, and their answers were:

"*Biasa dengar.*" (Commonly heard of it.) — All respondents

All three respondents (respondents 1, 2, and 3) admitted that they had previously heard about the concept of self-esteem. Although they had different definitions, this shows that basic awareness of the concept already exists among university students.

Theme 2: The Impact of Self-Esteem in Daily Life

Sub-theme 2.1: Mental and Emotional Well-being

Respondent 1

"*Melibatkan mental, emosi, untuk menjalani kehidupan seharian.*"

(It involves mental and emotional aspects in daily life.)

Responden 2

"*Kalau sorang tu takdak dia kemungkinan jadi macam dia takdak tujuan, lepastu takdak harapan.*"

(If someone doesn't have it, they may feel aimless and hopeless.)

Respondent 1 explained that self-esteem is closely related to mental and emotional health, which plays a vital role in living a balanced daily life. Respondent 2 emphasized that the absence of self-esteem may lead an individual to lose their life purpose and hope, potentially causing negative psychological effects such as a sense of meaninglessness.
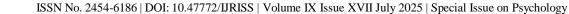
Sub-theme 2.2: Positive Attitude and Self-Love

Respondent 3

"*Buatkan kita sentiasa positif.*"

(Makes us stay positive.)

"*Kalau kita tak sayang diri, sapa lagi nak sayang kita.*"

(If we don't love ourselves, who else will love us?)

Respondent 3 expressed that self-esteem helps maintain a positive mindset. Furthermore, the respondent emphasized that self-love is fundamental to receiving love from others, demonstrating a belief that emotional well-being begins from within.

Theme 3: Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Performance

Sub-theme 3.1: Positive Influence on Academic Performance

Respondent 1

"*Dia macam mempengaruhi semua aspek lah.*"

(It seems to influence every aspect.)

Respondent 2

"*Kalau takdak penghargaan diri dalam pendidikan, dia takdak tujuan sebenar apa yang dia nak.*"

(If there's no self-appreciation in education, there's no clear purpose.)

Respondent 3

"*Ha, beri pengaruh.*"

(Yes, it gives influence.)

Respondent 1 stated that self-esteem affects almost all aspects of life, including academics, indicating that self-confidence forms the basis of excellent performance. Respondent 2 expressed that without self-esteem in the context of education, a person may lack a clear sense of purpose in learning. Respondent 3 also agreed that self-esteem plays an important role in determining one's academic success.

Sub-theme 3.2: The Impact of Low Self-Esteem

Respondent 2

"*Pernah alami… push diri untuk dapat CGPA… tapi mula rasa macam tak layak.*"

(I've experienced it… pushed myself to get a good CGPA… but started to feel unworthy.)
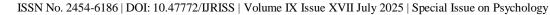
Respondent 3

"*Takdak lagi.*"

(Not yet.) — (showing no direct negative impact experienced)

Respondent 2 shared a personal experience of striving for a high CGPA but being plagued by feelings of unworthiness, which ultimately affected their emotions. In contrast, Respondents 1 and 3 reported that they had never directly experienced the negative effects of low self-esteem.

Sub-theme 3.3: The Impact of High Self-Esteem

Respondent 1

"*Kadang-kadang ada semangat, rasa lebih semangat untuk exam tu.*"

(Sometimes I feel more motivated, especially for exams.)

Respondent 3

"*Kalau letak harapan tinggi… tiba-tiba dapat rendah… memang down.*"

(If I set high hopes… and then get low results… it's really demotivating.)

when they felt motivated and confident, they were more enthusiastic about sitting for exams. Respondent 3 explained that although they had high hopes regarding academic performance, failure to achieve the expected results led to stress and disappointment. This highlights the importance of balancing high self-esteem to avoid excessive pressure.

Theme 4: Reflection and Self-Awareness

Sub-theme 4.1: Regret and Late Realization

Respondent 2

"*Mai sekarang baru rasa menyesal… merit boleh bantu untuk anugerah.*"

(Only now I feel regret… merit could have helped for awards.)

Respondent 2 mentioned that they only realized the importance of academic merit at a later stage, leading to feelings of regret for not taking advantage of earlier opportunities. This demonstrates a delayed self-awareness in appreciating academic potential.

Sub-theme 4.2: Moderate Expectations

Responden 3

"*Letak tak tinggi sangat… biasa-biasa.*"

(Didn't set it too high… just average.)

Respondent 3 emphasized that they set expectations for themselves at a moderate level, not too high. This approach reflects a balanced and rational attitude toward self-management and goal-setting, which helps avoid disappointment and excessive stress.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that self-esteem plays a pivotal role in shaping students' academic performance. Based on semi-structured interviews, students with high self-esteem demonstrated positive academic behaviours, including confidence in communication, willingness to ask questions, and active engagement in classroom discussions. This reflects the Self-Esteem Theory by Rosenberg (1965), which posits that individuals with a strong sense of self-worth are more likely to behave assertively, take initiative, and approach tasks with self-assurance. These findings are consistent with those of Iswandi et al. (2022), who also noted that individuals with high self-esteem tend to adopt proactive problem-solving strategies and exhibit greater resilience in academic settings.

Furthermore, the findings align with the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation in academic success. Students who reported higher self-esteem also expressed a stronger belief in their abilities, which in turn enhanced their internal motivation and perseverance. As supported by Farah and Mujaheed (2021), self-belief contributes to greater academic persistence, enabling students to bounce back from setbacks. This was particularly evident among participants who viewed academic failure not as a defeat but as a learning opportunity to improve.

Conversely, students with low self-esteem tended to experience greater emotional vulnerability and disengagement. They were less confident, easily demotivated, and hesitant to express opinions during learning sessions. This is in line with the findings of Azlina et al. (2020), who reported that low self-esteem is often associated with increased academic stress and a diminished capacity to cope with academic disappointments. From a psychological standpoint, this reinforces the idea that self-esteem acts as a buffer against emotional instability and academic withdrawal.

In addition, the findings resonate with the principles of Reality Therapy, as introduced by William Glasser (1998). According to this framework, self-esteem is deeply connected to one's ability to fulfil five basic psychological needs: love and belonging, power, freedom, fun, and survival. Among these, the need for love, belonging, and a sense of worth (power) is particularly influential in academic contexts. The participants in this study frequently referenced the importance of being acknowledged and supported—by family members, lecturers, and peers—which aligns with Glasser's view that feeling connected and empowered is essential to healthy self-concept and motivation. When these needs are unmet, students may feel disconnected and powerless, leading to low self-esteem and academic disengagement.

Interestingly, this study also uncovered contextual factors that contribute to the development of self-esteem, such as family background, learning history, and social support. Although these variables were not measured quantitatively, qualitative insights revealed that supportive parental relationships, encouragement from lecturers, and involvement in co-curricular activities played a significant role in strengthening academic self-confidence. These findings echo the socio-ecological perspective, which asserts that self-esteem is not only an internal trait but also influenced by the surrounding environment and social interactions.

In sum, the discussion underscores that self-esteem is a dynamic construct influenced by personal, academic, and interpersonal factors. It is not an isolated psychological attribute, but one that interweaves with students' emotional well-being, intrinsic motivation, and academic engagement. Therefore, universities and educational institutions should consider integrating self-enhancement programmes, peer support systems, and lecturer mentoring into their student development frameworks. Drawing on Glasser's Reality Therapy, such efforts should also aim to meet students' fundamental psychological needs, thereby fostering both academic excellence and emotional resilience in a holistic manner.

Implications of the Study

This study provides several important implications for stakeholders involved in student development, particularly within the context of higher education institutions.

First, for students, the findings highlight the need to recognise their own strengths and to develop a growth-oriented mindset. Students should be encouraged to focus on self-improvement rather than comparing themselves with others. As a concrete step, institutions can implement student-led peer support initiatives, self-reflection workshops, and resilience training sessions that empower students to take ownership of their self-worth.

Second, for lecturers and university administrators, this study underscores the importance of creating a psychologically safe and emotionally supportive learning environment. This includes promoting open communication, demonstrating empathy in academic advising, and providing regular formative feedback. As a direct action, institutions should conduct staff development programmes that train lecturers in emotional intelligence, trauma-informed pedagogy, and student-centred teaching strategies.

Third, for student counsellors, the results reinforce the need for intentional and structured interventions aimed at building self-esteem. In addition to individual and group counselling sessions, universities should institutionalise evidence-based psychoeducational modules on self-worth, assertiveness, and emotional regulation. Action steps may include integrating self-esteem-building modules into orientation weeks, launching targeted support groups for at-risk students, and increasing outreach through campus wellness campaigns.

In summary, the study reaffirms that self-esteem is a crucial factor not only in academic performance but also in students' psychological resilience and personal growth. Therefore, the cultivation of healthy self-esteem should be embedded into the university's broader student development agenda. Institutions are encouraged to adopt a whole-campus approach—mobilising lecturers, counsellors, and student leaders—to build a culture that affirms student identity, promotes self-belief, and nurtures holistic student success.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study has provided valuable insights into the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance among university students. Nevertheless, further research is necessary to deepen understanding and broaden the implications of these findings. To improve focus and impact, the following prioritized research directions are proposed:

1. Expand Sampling Across Institutions and Demographics (High Priority)

The most immediate need is to improve the representativeness of future studies. As this study involved only three students from a single Islamic higher education institution, future research should prioritise a larger, more diverse sample. Including students from different faculties, ethnic backgrounds, public and private institutions, and academic levels (diploma, undergraduate, postgraduate) would enhance the generalisability of findings and uncover potential demographic variations in self-esteem.

2. Adopt Mixed-Methods or Quantitative Designs (Medium-High Priority)

To complement qualitative insights, future studies should consider using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches. Employing standardised instruments such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) can enable researchers to measure variables systematically, perform group comparisons, and conduct statistical analyses. This would allow triangulation of data and a stronger basis for causal inferences.

3. Investigate Mediating and Moderating Variables (Medium Priority)

Future research should explore how other psychological and contextual factors interact with self-esteem to influence academic performance. For instance, social support, emotional regulation, learning strategies, and coping mechanisms may either strengthen or weaken this relationship. Understanding these mediators and moderators could inform more targeted interventions.

4. Conduct Longitudinal Research (Medium-Low Priority)

Longitudinal designs are encouraged to track how students' self-esteem develops over time and how such trajectories impact academic outcomes. Observing changes from the first year to graduation would provide insight into when and how interventions can be most effective.
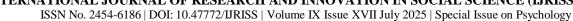
5. Examine the Role of Social Media and Digital Environments (Emerging Priority)

Given the growing digital presence in students' lives, future research should examine the influence of social media on self-esteem and academic motivation. The curated lives presented online may shape students' self-perceptions in profound ways. This is a timely area of inquiry, especially in the local context where digital literacy is increasing but psychological impacts remain under-researched.

In conclusion, while many avenues remain open for exploration, priority should be given to studies that enhance generalisability, methodological robustness, and real-world relevance—especially in light of the evolving challenges faced by university students in academic and psychosocial domains.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the relationship between self-esteem and academic performance among university

students, focusing on the lived experiences of three participants from Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah (UniSHAMS). In the current climate of increasing academic pressure and emotional complexity within higher education, this research highlights the internal psychological dimensions that influence students' learning motivation, emotional resilience, and academic outcomes.

What distinguishes this study is its methodological contribution—the use of a qualitative case study design, which allowed for rich, narrative-driven insights into how students interpret and experience self-esteem in real-life academic contexts. Unlike prior studies dominated by quantitative correlations, this research offers a human-centered lens to understand how self-worth shapes behaviour, decision-making, and coping strategies. Through thematic analysis of interview data, the study uncovered not only the impact of self-esteem on academic performance but also how that self-esteem is continually shaped by social support systems, life events, and personal reflection.

Contextually, this study fills a notable gap in the literature by focusing on students in an Islamic higher education institution—a population often underrepresented in psychological and educational research. The voices of students from this demographic provide a culturally grounded understanding of academic challenges and internal struggles that may differ from those in more urbanised or mainstream institutions. This strengthens the study's relevance within the Malaysian higher education landscape and contributes to a more inclusive academic discourse.

The findings reaffirm that self-esteem is not a fixed trait, but a dynamic process influenced by multiple internal and external factors. This has practical significance: universities must move beyond purely academic metrics and invest in holistic student development strategies. Lecturers, counsellors, and administrators should work together to foster environments that validate students' sense of worth, encourage open dialogue, and provide targeted interventions for those at risk of low self-esteem.

In essence, this study not only broadens theoretical understanding but also calls for actionable reform in how student well-being is prioritised in institutional policies. The findings serve as a reminder that behind every academic transcript lies a personal journey—and for many students, building a healthy sense of self may be the key to unlocking their full potential.
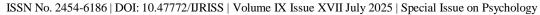
Looking ahead, future research should expand on this foundation with larger and more diverse samples, apply mixed-method approaches, and examine the influence of new variables such as social media and digital comparison. As the emotional demands of student life evolve, so too must our efforts to support them—not just as learners, but as whole individuals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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