

SELF-ESTEEM AND DEPRESSION AMONG VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract: Research and theories on gender differences in self-esteem and depression as well as the relationship between self-esteem and depression play an important role in the field of psychology. In the current study, we explore these two issues with Vietnamese university students. The levels of self-esteem and depression were assessed with a sample of 859 university students drawn from three universities in central Vietnam. The results showed that Vietnamese university students have moderate self-esteem and most do not suffer from depression. As expected, the male students reported significantly higher self-esteem than their female fellows; however, the female students reported higher levels of depression than the male ones. The results also revealed that self-esteem was negatively correlated with depression. The research contributes to the understanding of the gender differences between the two mental health factors and the relationship between them among Vietnamese university students. These findings are important to the development of intervention strategies that help improve self-esteem and prevent depression in university students.

Key words: self-esteem; depression; Vietnamese university students; gender differences.

1. Introduction

College is a period in which most students develop their sense of identity (Maheswari & Maheswari, 2016). For many students, this is also the first time away from parents and relatives to explore university life and discover themselves. Living in a new environment, students try to make friends and need to be accepted by peers. Social support and self-esteem are essential at this time. It is a common observation that individuals with lower self-esteem often report higher risk of depression (Klein et al., 2011; Lim & You, 2017; Orth & Robins, 2013). Around the world, the prevalence of depression among college students ranged from 10% to 85% (Thi Hong Tuyen et al., 2019). In samples of

Vietnamese university students, the prevalence of depression ranges from 51.6% (Quynh et al., 2020) to 52.3% (Thi Hong Tuyen et al., 2019). These data show that the prevalence of depression among Vietnamese university students is relatively high. On the other hand, previous studies have shown that depressed college students may be associated with suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior (Mustaffa et al., 2014). It is therefore important to have specific depression prevention programs for Vietnamese university students.

Previous studies have found gender differences in self-esteem (Al Khatib, 2012; Arshad et al., 2015; Dar & Amin Wani, 2017; Haq, 2016; Malik and Sadia, 2013); gender differences in depression (Armstrong & Oomen-Early, 2009; Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Ghaedi & Mohd Kosnin, 2014; Özdemir & Rezaki, 2007) and a negative correlation between self-esteem and depression (Mu et al., 2019). Understanding gender differences in self-esteem and depression as well as the relationship between self-esteem and depression among Vietnamese university students are important in the development of

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intervention strategies that improve self-esteem and prevent depression for Vietnamese university students. However, in Vietnam, we have not found investigative studies on gender differences in self-esteem, gender differences in depression and the link between self-esteem and depression among Vietnamese university students. To fill this gap, our study aimed to investigate gender differences in self-esteem and depression among Vietnamese university students and the relationship between their self-esteem and depression. The findings of this study can serve as a good basis for developing intervention strategies to improve self-esteem and prevent depression in Vietnamese university students.

1.1. Gender differences in self-esteem

Self-esteem is “a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self” (Winch & Rosenberg, 1965). According to Orth and Robins (2013), self-esteem is considered a subjective assessment of an individual’s self-worth. Self-esteem is related to a number of important psychological phenomena, both negative and positive. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to cope effectively when facing difficulties, experience positive emotional states, and feel satisfied with life. In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem tend to experience emotional and behavioral disorders, such as anxiety, lack of motivation, suicidal behavior, eating disorders, delinquency, and depression (Quatman & Watson, 2001).

Psychological research has examined gender differences in self-esteem for the past two decades. According to Kling et al. (1999), the relationship between self-esteem and gender is very complex. Although the literature is somewhat inconsistent, most previous studies have reported that men tend to have higher self-esteem than women (Kling et al., 1999; Major et al., 2004; Orth et al., 2010; Rentzsch et al., 2016; Robins et al., 2002). Consistent with previous findings, in samples of university students, several studies reported that women have lower self-esteem than men (Al Khatib, 2012; Arshad et al., 2015; Dar & Amin Wani, 2017; Haq, 2016; Malik & Sadia, 2013; Marron & Kayson, 1984). Different explanations have been proposed about why men report higher self-esteem than women. For example, several studies have shown that genetic-based mechanisms can also play a role in the normative development of male and female self-esteem (Kling et al., 1999). Other studies have shown

that masculine attributes have a positive correlation with both male and female self-esteem, while the relationship between feminine attributes and self-esteem was weaker and less consistent (Gebauer et al., 2013; Wojciszke et al., 2011). In addition, low social support, socioeconomic status and other psychological factors (i.e., emotional stability, depression) are also considered as other causes of low self-esteem (Ikiz & Cakar, 2010; Mu et al., 2019; Poudel et al., 2020; Shahar & Davidson, 2003; Veselska et al., 2010).

1.2. Gender differences in depression

Depression is considered to be the most common mental health disorder among social groups at different ages (Zhao & Gao, 2018). It not only affects individuals’ perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors, but can also lead to physical and emotional problems. Therefore, depression is also considered a major risk factor with serious personal and social consequences (Zhao & Gao, 2018).

Gender differences in depression have long been a focus of psychiatric and epidemiological research. According to Nolen-Hoeksema (2001), in many countries, ethnicities, and cultures, women are nearly twice as likely to suffer from depression than men. Kessler et al. (1993) reported that the *prevalence of depression* among women is 21.3%, and only 12.7% among men. Similarly, Ferrari et al. (2013) reported that the global prevalence of major depressive disorders over 12 months was 5.8% for women and 3.5% for men. In a sample of university students, Armstrong and Oomen-Early (2009), Bayram and Bilgel (2008), Ghaedi and Mohd Kosnin (2014), Özdemir and Rezaki (2007), Soet and Sevig (2006) found that the prevalence of depression was higher in females than in males. According to Ghaedi and Mohd Kosnin (2014), female college students have higher levels of depression than males because fatigue and lack of energy are more frequent in females. Avison and McAlpine (1992) revealed that the level of depression in females is higher because they have greater stress levels. In addition, factors such as pessimism, sadness, low self-esteem, and low social support were mentioned as other reasons for depression in college students (Ghaedi & Mohd Kosnin, 2014; Ho et al., 2020), so these factors can also be seen as causes of gender differences in depression.

1.3. Relationship between self-esteem and depression in youth

Various studies have shown that there is a strong link between self-esteem and depression (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). Two common models that explain this relationship are the vulnerability model and the scar model. According to the vulnerability model, self-esteem can be regarded as an important predictor of personal and social health (Orth et al., 2016). Low self-esteem is a trigger and maintenance factor for depression (Orth et al., 2008) because low self-esteem relates to vulnerability and has been linked to depression (Orth et al., 2016). The vulnerability model reveals that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to have increased risk of depression (Mu et al., 2019). Negative self-beliefs is not only a symptom of depression, but it also causes the development of depression (Beck, 1967). According to Ottenbreit and Dobson (2004), low self-esteem leads to social avoidance, loneliness, social isolation and reduced social support which can contribute to the development of depression. In contrast, the scar model revealed that experiences of depression can lead to “scars” in an individual’s perception. In other words, depression erases an individual’s self-esteem. Therefore, low self-esteem is seen as a consequence of depression (Shahar & Davidson, 2003). However, the majority of studies support the vulnerability model (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). In this study, we expect that low self-esteem can increase an individual’s risk of depression.

1.4. The present study

Based on previous studies, this study proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Male Vietnamese university students would have higher levels of self-esteem than female students.

Hypothesis 2. Female Vietnamese university students would have higher levels of depression than male students.

Hypothesis 3. Self-esteem would be negatively correlated with depression among Vietnamese university students.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Research data were collected in mid-2019. Convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants who volunteered to help the researchers and answer the questionnaire. The sample size was determined according to Slovin's formula ($N=40,000$, $e=5\%$, $n \geq 396$). With the help of academic advisors, the researchers held meetings with the students. At the meeting, the researcher asked the students for help. Students who agreed to engage in the study would complete a questionnaire which was then distributed and collected at each classroom. After the researcher explained the purpose of the study, all the students agreed to participate and signed the “Participant Consent Form”. 859 university students from Hue City returned their complete answers. To enhance the participants’ sense of responsibility, the researchers gave each a small gift before they answered the questionnaire.

Vietnamese university students ($N=859$) aged 17–25 years ($M=20.742$; $SD=1.121$) were recruited from universities in central Vietnam. This sample included 351 men and 508 women; 272 Sophomores, 311 Juniors, and 276 Seniors, among whom 78.8% reported average socio-economic status, 6.9% low socio-economic status, and 14.4% high socio-economic status.

2.2. Materials

Using paper and pen, participants completed the Vietnamese version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and the depression subscale of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales 21 (DASS 21). Higher scores indicated higher levels of self-esteem and depression.

The Vietnamese version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Nguyen et al., 2019), developed from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Winch & Rosenberg, 1965), was used to measure the self-esteem of Vietnamese university students. The RSES has been identified as the most commonly used self-esteem measure in psychological research (Jordan, 2020). It is used to measure global self-esteem, one’s overall sense of being a worthy and valuable person (Rosenberg, 1965). The RSES includes 10 items (five negative and five positive items) related to overall feelings, self-acceptance, and self-worth, to measure global self-esteem.

Participants responded to statements such as “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others” and “At times I think I am no good at all” on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree (0 – 3). Before calculating the total score, scores of the negative items were reversed. Self-esteem scores ranged from 0 to 30, where an overall score below 15 was considered low-esteem and above 25 was considered high-esteem. RSES showed well-established psychometric characteristics in our study ($\alpha = .723$).

The Vietnamese version of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales 21 (Van Nguyen et al., 2015), developed from the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales 21- DASS 21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), was used to measure the level of depression among Vietnamese university students. The DASS 21 consists of 21 items representing three dimensions of stress, anxiety, and depression. DASS 21 is one of the commonly used scales to detect mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression. DASS-21 has good reliability and validity among clinical and non-clinical adult samples (Le et al., 2017). This study only used the seven depression items of the DASS 21 to measure the depression level of Vietnamese university students. Participants responded to items such as “I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything” and “I found it is difficult to work up the initiative to do things” on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “did not apply to me at all” to “applied to me very much or most of the time” (0 – 3). Total scores ranged from 0 to 42, with total scores between 0 and 9 considered normal and above 9 considered depression (of which, mild depression = 10 to 13, moderate depression = 14 to 20, severe depression = 21 to 27, and extremely severe depression = 28 to 42). Previous research in Vietnam has demonstrated the reliability of depression subscale among adolescents $\alpha = .0.74$ (Le et al., 2017) and university students $\alpha = .0.80$ (Ho & Gu, 2021). Depression subscale showed well-established psychometric characteristics in our study ($\alpha = .797$).

Information on gender, age, grade and socio-economic status was collected at the end of the questionnaire. Regarding socio-economic status, the participants were asked to rate their socio-economic status when compared to others on a five-point Likert scale (1 = “very bad compared to most of the others” to

5 = “Very good compared to most the others”). The socio-economic status was aggregated into three categories: low, average, and high.

2.3. Statistical analysis

To perform this study, we used SPSS software version 20.0 to perform statistical analysis. The analyses included descriptive statistics and independent *t*-tests. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the mean and standard deviation of self-esteem and depression. Independent *t*-tests were used to identify the differences in self-esteem and depression between male and female students. Effect size was described using Cohen’s *d*, where .20 constituted a small effect, .50 a medium effect, and .80 a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

To explore the relationship between self-esteem and depression in Vietnamese university students, correlation analysis was performed with self-esteem as the independent variable and depression as the dependent variable.

3. Results

3.1. Gender differences in self-esteem

Regarding the total sample, the self-esteem score of Vietnamese students was 20.32, *SD* = 5.52 (Table 1), of whom 13.2% had low self-esteem, 56.6% had average self-esteem, and 30.3% had high self-esteem (Figure 1).

To test Hypothesis 1, an independent *t*-test was used. The self-esteem scores of male and female students were 23.07 (*SD* = 5.69) and 18.41 (*SD* = 4.52), respectively; male students had higher self-esteem than female students ($t_{(857)} = 12.81, p < .001$, Cohen’s *d* = .93 – a large effect size) (see Table 1). This indicates that the difference in self-esteem between male and female students was statistically significant.

3.2. Gender differences in depression symptoms

As shown in Table 2, the depression score for Vietnamese students was 7.94 (*SD* = 6.43); 64.3% of the sample did not suffer from depression, 18.2% experienced mild depression, 13.0% experienced moderate depression, 3.4% suffered from severe depression, 1.2% from extremely severe depression (Figure 2).

To test Hypothesis 2, an independent *t*-test was used. The depression scores of male and female students were 6.67 (*SD* = 5.86) and 8.83 (*SD* = 6.66),

respectively; female students had higher depression scores than male students ($t_{(857)} = 5.02, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .34$ – a medium effect size) (see Table 2).

3.3. The relationship between self-esteem and depression among Vietnamese university students

To test Hypothesis 3, correlation analysis was performed. Table 3 indicates that self-esteem was significantly negatively correlated with depression ($r = -.238, p < .01$).

4. Discussion

Regarding the total sample, the Vietnamese university students had moderate self-esteem. The majority of students had high and moderate self-esteem, while a few had low self-esteem. This finding is consistent with other studies (Deepu Abraham, 2010; Na et al., 2015). Moderate self-esteem of Vietnamese university students is probably related to their socio-economic status ($r = .079, p < .05$). This study revealed that more than 80.0% of the college students reported their socio-economic status as low or average. According to Veselska et al. (2010), individuals with lower socio-economic status report lower self-esteem than those with higher socio-economic status.

In line with the findings of Al Khatib (2012), Arshad et al. (2015), Dar and Amin Wani (2017), Haq (2016), Malik and Sadia (2013), the results showed that male Vietnamese university students had higher self-esteem than the female ones, which confirms Hypothesis 1. This result can be explained as follows: male students have higher self-esteem because their perception and attitude toward themselves are more positive than women (Brack et al., 1988; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975). On the other hand, gender inequality is a normal and prevalent fact in Vietnam since the early years of the 20th century, because Vietnam is a country strongly influenced by feudalism and Confucianism. Today, with the socio-economic development, Vietnamese women are more independent than before. However, male chauvinism still deeply influences Vietnamese thinking (Cao, 2017). Male chauvinism can influence men's and women's self-esteem. Accordingly, women can increase negative self-assessment, whereas men can increase positive self-assessment. This may be

another reason why male Vietnamese university students have higher self-esteem than females.

Consistent with the findings of Taouk et al. (2001) and Wong et al. (2006), Table 2 and Figure 2 show that the majority of Vietnamese university students did not suffer from depression, and a small number of students had mild and moderate depression (31.2%), while very few students had severe or extremely severe depression (4.6%). Compared with the study of Ahmed et al., (2020), the percentage of Vietnamese university students with mild, moderate and severe depression is higher than that of Jimma university students. This situation can negatively impact academic performance, mental health and quality of life of Vietnamese university students. This result may be related to the level of self-esteem of Vietnamese students. The current research reveals that self-esteem was negatively correlated with depression levels ($r = -.294, p < .01$). Thus, it is the moderate self-esteem that helps most Vietnamese university students escape the risk of depression.

In line with the findings of Armstrong and Oomen-Early (2009), Bayram and Bilgel (2008), Ghaedi and Mohd Kosnin (2014), Özdemir and Rezaki (2007), Soet and Sevig (2006). Table 2 shows that female Vietnamese university students had higher levels of depression than male Vietnamese university students, which supports Hypothesis 3. This difference may be explained by the existing gender difference in self-esteem among Vietnamese university students. The present study revealed that female Vietnamese university students had lower levels of self-esteem than male Vietnamese university students.

Sharing similar results with previous studies (Bajaj et al., 2016; Creemers et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2011; Lim & You, 2017; Na et al., 2015; Orth & Robins, 2013), Table 3 shows that students with low self-esteem have a higher risk of experiencing symptoms of depression. The relationship between self-esteem and depression in Vietnamese university students can be explained as follows: Students with low self-esteem may feel miserable, anxious, underconfident, and have a negative self-assessment, which will contribute to the development of depression (Beck, 1967; Orth et al., 2016). Additionally, individuals with low self-esteem

tend to reduce positive affect and feel that they are not achieving positive results, which increases the individual's possibility of experiencing depression (Wood et al., 2003).

5. Contributions, limitations, and future research

An important contribution of this study is the discovery of gender differences in self-esteem and depression as well as the relationship between self-esteem and depression among Vietnamese university students. These findings are important in the development of intervention strategies to increase self-esteem and prevent depression in Vietnamese university students. It also confirms that when developing interventions aimed to increase self-esteem and preventing depression, researchers need to pay attention to gender differences.

The current research is limited for a number of reasons. The findings of the current study depended heavily on a self-reporting method that required participants to recall their experiences; therefore, the answers may be inaccurate because they may be subject to recall biases. Future studies should use other assessment methods that do not rely on participants' recall such as experience sampling. Moreover, this sample included university students in central Vietnam, so caution should be applied when generalizing the results of this study to students in the North and South of Vietnam. Therefore, future research should include research participants from throughout Vietnam. In addition, this study used convenience sampling method to recruit participants, so sampling error could not be determined and no conclusions could be drawn for the target population from the sample results. Therefore, inferences based on the convenience sampling should be made only about the sample itself.

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LÒNG TỰ TRỌNG VÀ TRẦM CẢM Ở SINH VIÊN ĐẠI HỌC VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu và lý thuyết sự khác biệt giới tính về lòng tự trọng và trầm cảm cũng như mối quan hệ giữa lòng tự trọng và trầm cảm đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong tâm lý học. Trong nghiên cứu này, chúng tôi tìm hiểu sự khác biệt giới tính về lòng tự trọng, trầm cảm và điều tra mối quan hệ giữa lòng tự trọng và trầm cảm ở sinh viên đại học Việt Nam. Mức độ tự trọng và trầm cảm được đánh giá với một mẫu tương đối lớn sinh viên (n = 859) từ ba trường đại học ở miền Trung Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên Việt Nam có lòng tự trọng vừa phải và hầu hết sinh viên không bị trầm cảm. Đúng như dự đoán, nam sinh viên Việt Nam có lòng tự trọng cao hơn đáng kể so với nữ sinh viên; tuy nhiên, nữ sinh viên Việt Nam có mức độ trầm cảm cao hơn nam sinh viên. Kết quả cũng cho thấy lòng tự trọng có mối tương quan tiêu cực với trầm cảm. Nghiên cứu này góp phần tìm hiểu mối quan hệ cũng như sự khác biệt giới tính về các yếu tố liên quan đến sức khỏe tâm thần ở sinh viên Việt Nam. Những phát hiện này rất quan trọng trong việc phát triển các chiến lược can thiệp nhằm cải thiện lòng tự trọng và ngăn ngừa trầm cảm ở sinh viên Việt Nam.

Từ khoá: lòng tự trọng; trầm cảm; sinh viên đại học Việt Nam; sự khác biệt giới tính.