

## Impact of self-esteem and overall life satisfaction on perceived social competence in university students

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### ABSTRACT

Positive psychology is transformative in developing individuals' self-esteem, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and social competence. The objectives of the present study were to investigate the impact of self-esteem and overall life satisfaction on perceived social competence in university students while measuring subjective happiness as a mediator and gender differences across variables. A sample of 1,168 participants was selected using purposive and random sampling techniques across universities in Pakistan. The study design was correlational with a quantitative method. Four scales, the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSE), satisfaction with life scale (SWLS), subjective happiness scale (SHS), and perceived social competence scale (PSCS), were administered to measure the variables. Pearson correlation and mediation models were used to test the hypotheses. The analysis indicated that subjective happiness mediated the relationship between self-esteem, perceived social competence, life satisfaction, and perceived social competence. Moreover, the results showed that males scored higher than females in terms of levels of self-esteem. No significant gender difference existed in life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence. These findings may significantly enrich the literature on positive psychology in Pakistani university students and can assist universities in their mental health programs and sustain students' healthier well-being.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is one of the most researched psychological constructs, highlighting its importance in individuals' lives. Self-esteem is our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about ourselves [1]. Following the terror management theory, self-esteem is believed to be vital for reducing anxiety over death. Self-esteem forms a buffer in individuals against their existential fear of death. However, excessively high or low self-esteem is problematic in the long run [2]–[4] argued the use of self-esteem pursuit instead of level, highlighting the link between high self-esteem, and long-term adverse effects.

On the other hand, the sociometer theory proposes that self-esteem is motivation-based rather than cognitive-based [5]. It is a gauge or monitor for individuals' interpersonal relationships within their society. Individuals need a sense of belonging where self-esteem monitors their interpersonal relationships to serve to

belong [6]. Hence, the need to have high self-esteem arises through the motivation of being accepted and valued by others or the surroundings [7]. In this study, we focus on the link of self-esteem with life satisfaction and social competence and whether this relationship is mediated by happiness in a sample of Pakistani university students.

Previous research found a positive association between self-esteem and life satisfaction; however, the directionality of the relationship is unclear [8]–[11]. In other studies, self-esteem was a predictor of life satisfaction [9] and a mediator between happiness and life satisfaction [12]. Study by Schaffhuser *et al.* [13] has demonstrated that self-esteem is affected by one's relationship satisfaction. Self-efficacy and self-confidence are higher for people who consider their lives satisfied [14]; moreover, good performance is predominantly correlated with self-esteem [15]. Musetti and Corsano [16] also found that adolescents with low self-esteem spend most of their time alone instead of communicating with others. The inability to initiate contact and loneliness mediated the relationship between low self-esteem and excessive internet use [17].

In a similar context, perceived social competence positively affected self-esteem [18]. A person's beliefs about the effectiveness of their socially oriented behaviors determine the degree of perceived social competence they possess [19]. A sense of personal control, a positive relationship with others (parents and peers), and high levels of hope were characteristics of adolescents with high overall satisfaction [20]. Then again, self-esteem and perceived social support mediated the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction in university students [21]. Furthermore, social competence was associated with life satisfaction [22]. Perceived support from parents and friends during adolescence plays a vital role in increasing life satisfaction and social competence, and it is considered necessary for university students [23]. Both variables (self-esteem and overall satisfaction) directly or indirectly predict perceived social competence; research indicates that self-esteem directly predicts social competence [24]. Regardless of the measurement, it was found that life satisfaction is also a predictor of perceived social competence [25].

Moreover, previous research also found a correlation between self-esteem and happiness [26]–[28]. According to Esaiasson *et al.* [29], high levels of self-esteem lead to happy and productive lives, self-esteem being a direct predictor of happiness. Likewise, previous research found a positive association between happiness and life satisfaction [29]. Life satisfaction is directly related to the level of happiness achieved in recreational activities [30], can influence the increase of happiness about the current mood [31], or can be mediated by resilience to elevate happiness [32]. Similarly, Musetti and Corsano [16] found that psychological well-being, leisure satisfaction, and national well-being significantly correlate with happiness. Subjective happiness mediates the relationship between social connectedness and loneliness [33]. A study that examined the relationship between social skills and happiness in 1st-year teaching school students found a positive correlation between happiness and perceived social competence [34]. In addition, psychological well-being was significantly influenced by the perception of social support from family, friends, and the individual [35]. Subjective happiness tends to blur long-term prospects, but it provides a positive outlook for medium-term success [36]; hence, it is limited in duration.

Adolescence is a transitional period characterized by developmental shifts, transitions, and challenges that impact self-esteem and life satisfaction. These changes and variations will vary based on gender and age [37]. A study in Norway with 1,289 participants indicates that males scored significantly higher than females on self-esteem and life satisfaction constructs [38]. Another study with nursing students and practitioners in Italy also found that males had higher self-esteem levels than females [39]. Additionally, men often report greater self-esteem levels than women, which first occur throughout adolescence and continue through early and middle adulthood before it gets narrower and possibly even disappears as people get older [40]. Over 985,000 men and women aged 16 to 45 from 48 different nations were included in the survey data Bleidorn *et al.* [41] reviewed; the researchers discovered that, globally, men at every age tended to have greater levels of self-esteem than women.

Moreover, a study on children's life satisfaction in Italy showed that females reported feeling and being more satisfied in their relationship with their parents, the people they live with, and other people in their families than males [42]. Women generally demonstrated superior skill levels in social competence compared to men [43], possibly due to differences in parenting strategies [44]. Concerning subjective happiness, previous research found gender differences. Females reported higher levels of subjective happiness than males in university students and adults [34], [45].

There are several reasons why studying the relationship between self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, and perceived social competence is essential. Defining self-esteem from the terror management theory or the sociometer theory places the construct among the essential ones in individuals' well-being and life [46], [47]. Moreover, even though these constructs were researched before, they were not researched in the same relationship as the one presented here. However, the most crucial factor of this study is that this relationship is being measured in an under-studied area and sample. Most psychology research is done in Western cultures, leaving the gap of whether the findings apply to Eastern cultures. Hence, measuring self-esteem, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence with a sample of Pakistani

university students can fill a gap in the literature. On the one hand, subjective happiness as a mediator is scarcely measured, and measuring this relationship in Eastern culture, precisely Pakistan, is new.

Based on what was presented, the present study has two objectives: i) to measure the relationship between self-esteem, life satisfaction, happiness, and perceived social competence in Pakistani university students; ii) to measure whether their gender differences exist at the level of these variables. This is primarily due to the evidence suggesting that individualistic countries have a stronger correlation between these variables than collectivist countries [48]. Thus, three hypotheses are generated: i) self-esteem, life satisfaction, perceived social competence, and subjective happiness would positively correlate among Pakistani university students (H1); ii) subjective happiness would mediate the relationship between self-esteem and perceived social competence and overall life satisfaction and perceived social competence (H2); and iii) males would have higher self-esteem and life satisfaction levels than females. On the other hand, females would have higher levels of perceived social competence and subjective happiness than males (H3).

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Procedure

This study is of a correlational design with a quantitative approach; data were collected cross-sectionally. Online questionnaires were created using Google Forms to collect data. All data were collected in English, Pakistan's official language. In each university, participants were presented with a brief explanation of the questionnaire. Then, the link was shared with them. Also, before data collection, they signed informed consent and were asked to respond correctly. Furthermore, the researchers ensured that the data of participants would remain confidential. Besides, the guidelines and ethical protocols of the study were approved by the ethics committee of the IRB of the Department of Education, University of Loralai Pakistan (approval number: 2022-12-01/DOE/IRB/001).

### 2.2. Participants

The target population was students at Pakistani public and private universities. The inclusion criterion was any university student in Pakistan. Hence, the sampling technique was purposeful in university students yet random in participants from these universities. This approach eliminates bias from the selection process to obtain a representative sample. The sample size was calculated from G\*power. For a linear multiple regression random model, 2-tailed, .95 power, with three predictors, a total of 56 participants are needed. Additionally, for a two-tailed correlation model with a power of .95, 138 participants are required [39]. Hence, data was collected over one semester to ensure a high sample size. A total of 1,168 university students across Pakistan participated in this study. Concerning gender distribution, 594 (50.9%) were females, and 567 (48.5%) were males. Most participants were single, 978 (83.7%) at the time of data collection, and the rest were married. Additionally, 456 (39%) participants were from a rural area, 697 (59.7%) were from an urban area, and 15 (1.3%) did not report their place of origin. Age was reported in groups; 903 (77.3%) were between the age of 20-25, 91 (7.8%) were between the age of 26-29, and 83 (7.1%) were between the age of 30-35.

### 2.3. Measures

Four scales, the Rosenberg self-esteem scale (RSE), satisfaction with life scale (SWLS), subjective happiness scale (SHS), and perceived social competence scale (PSCS), were used to collect the data for the current study. Confirmatory factor analysis was run to measure whether the model of these scales fit in a sample of Pakistani university students. Four models were generated for every scale. The models were considered fit if Chi-square/*df* ( $\chi^2/df$ ) is below 5, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the root mean square residual (SRMR) are below .06 and .08, respectively, and the goodness fit index (GFI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) are above .9 [49]. The results presented in Table 1 reflected a very good fit for RSE and SHS, RMSEA, and SRMR are below, and GFI and CFI are above the cutoff. SWLS and PSCS showed a good fit with RMSEA slightly above the cutoff; however, since SRMR, CFI, and GFI results were very good, we adopted the model in further analysis.

Table 1. Confirmatory factor analysis of RSE, SWLS, SHS, and PSCS

|      | $\chi^2(df)$ | $\chi^2/df$ | <i>P</i> | CFI  | GFI  | RMSEA (Low, high) | SRMR  |
|------|--------------|-------------|----------|------|------|-------------------|-------|
| RSE  | 144.521 (27) | 5.353       | .001     | .919 | .975 | .062 (.052, .072) | .0451 |
| SWLS | 40.96 (5)    | 8.19        | .001     | .97  | .98  | .08 (.05, .10)    | .037  |
| SHS  | 5.114 (2)    | 2.56        | .078     | .97  | .98  | .04 (.00, .08)    | .019  |
| PSCS | 15.67 (2)    | 7.84        | .001     | .98  | .99  | .08 (.04, .12)    | .02   |

### 2.3.1. Rosenberg self-esteem scale

Rosenberg self-esteem scale [50] is a ten-item scale that measures global self-worth by measuring positive and negative feelings about the self. Five of the items are positively worded, and five are negatively worded. An example of a positively worded item is “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself,” an example of a negatively worded item is “I feel I do not have much to be proud of.” The scale is believed to be unidimensional. All items are answered using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree. The scale showed good reliability with Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .70$ .

### 2.3.2. Satisfaction with life scale

Satisfaction with life scale was developed to assess satisfaction with respondents’ lives [51]. It is a 5-item with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Items include “In most ways, my life is close to my ideal” and “The conditions of my life are excellent.” Cronbach alpha was also used to measure the scale’s reliability, which was good at  $\alpha = .71$ .

### 2.3.3. Perceived social competence scale

Perceived social competence scale was used to measure perceived social competence [52]. It is a 4-item with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=not true at all to 5=really true. Items include “I am good at making friends” and “I help others.” The PSCS also showed good reliability with  $\alpha = .72$ .

### 2.3.4. Subjective happiness scale

Subjective happiness scale [53] was used to measure subjective happiness. It is a 4-item with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=low happiness to 5=high happiness. Three of the items are positively worded, and one is negatively worded. An example of the positively worded items is “Some people are generally very happy. They enjoy life regardless of what is going on, getting the most out of everything. To what extent does this characterization describe you?”. The negatively worded item is “Some people are generally not very happy. Although they are not depressed, they never seem as happy as they might be. To what extent does this characterization describe you?”. The scale showed good reliability with  $\alpha = .72$ .

## 2.4. Statistical analysis

The statistical analysis used IBM SPSS (version 26) and Mplus (version 8.3). Confirmatory factor analysis was used to check for the model fit of the four scales. AMOS graphics was used to run confirmatory factor analysis. Pearson correlation was used to measure the relationship between self-esteem, overall life satisfaction, perceived social competence, and subjective happiness. The traditional mediation test was used to measure the mediation of subjective happiness [26]. Two mediation models were built: one representing self-esteem–subjective happiness–perceived social support, and one representing life satisfaction–subjective happiness–perceived social support. Maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors estimator and bootstrap at 10,000 were used.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Results

Table 2 presents the variables’ means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis, range, and correlation coefficients. As shown in Table 2, there was a positive correlation between the variables. Self-esteem, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence are all positively correlated. Moreover, to measure the second hypothesis, mediation test was performed first with self-esteem as an independent variable and second with life satisfaction as an independent variable [26]. In both models, perceived social competence was entered as a dependent variable and subjective happiness as a mediator.

Table 2. Means, SDs, and correlation coefficient of the variables

|                      | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Self-esteem          | -     | .38** | .27** | .45** |
| Life satisfaction    |       | -     | .29** | .43** |
| Perceived competence |       |       | -     | .26** |
| Subjective happiness |       |       |       | -     |
| Mean                 | 27.56 | 16.93 | 14.92 | 3.44  |
| SD                   | 3.26  | 3.58  | 3.38  | .68   |
| Skewness             | .20   | -.46  | -.46  | -.39  |
| Kurtosis             | .46   | .29   | -.31  | .52   |
| Range                | 24    | 20    | 4     | 16    |

\*\* $p < .01$

Results of model 1 presented in Figure 1 showed that subjective happiness mediated the interaction between self-esteem and perceived social competence. Similarly, in model 2, subjective happiness mediated the interaction between life satisfaction and perceived social competence, as shown in Figure 2. In addition, the independent sample t-test showed that males ( $M=27.848$ ,  $SD=3.242$ ) had significantly higher self-esteem levels than females ( $M=27.267$ ,  $SD=3.264$ ). There was no gender difference in perceived social competence, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness. The results are presented in Table 3.

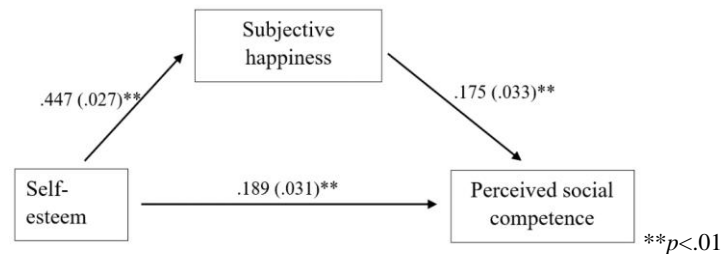


Figure 1. Model 1, significant mediation of subjective happiness in the relationship between self-esteem and perceived social competence

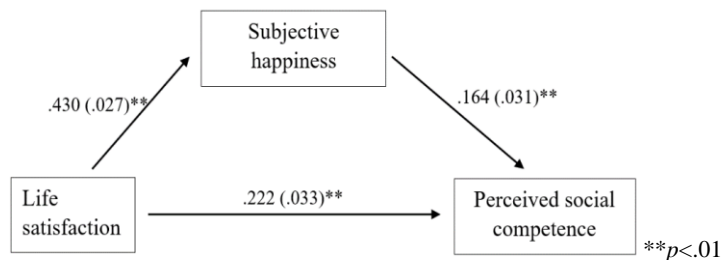


Figure 2. Model 2, significant mediation of subjective happiness in the relationship between life satisfaction and perceived social competence

Table 3. Independent sample t-test, the difference between genders across the variables

|                             | Females |      | Males |      | t(1123) | p    | Cohen's d |
|-----------------------------|---------|------|-------|------|---------|------|-----------|
|                             | M       | SD   | M     | SD   |         |      |           |
| Self-esteem                 | 27.27   | 3.26 | 27.85 | 3.24 | -2.99   | .003 | .18       |
| Life satisfaction           | 16.78   | 3.64 | 17.09 | 3.51 | -1.46   | .145 | .09       |
| Subjective happiness        | 3.42    | .68  | 3.46  | .67  | -.94    | .348 | .06       |
| Perceived social competence | 14.74   | 3.33 | 15.11 | 3.42 | -1.81   | .070 | .11       |

### 3.2. Discussion

This study explored the impact of self-esteem and overall life satisfaction on perceived social competence in Pakistani university students while taking subjective happiness as a mediator. Based on previous research, three hypotheses were generated. The findings revealed the total acceptance of hypotheses 1 and 2 and the partial acceptance of hypothesis 3.

As expected, self-esteem, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence positively correlated. Hence, the findings confirmed hypothesis 1 in a sample of Pakistani university students. In addition, the results were similar to previous research that found an association between the variables [8], [18], [22], [23], [26], [34], [48], [54]–[57].

Moreover, the results also confirmed hypotheses 2a and 2b. Subjective happiness mediated the relationship between self-esteem and perceived social competence, life satisfaction, and social competence. Previous research found a direct relationship between self-esteem and social competence [24] and between self-esteem and happiness [26], [58]. Similarly, life satisfaction was associated with perceived social competence [22], [55] and with happiness [30], [31], [59]. Subjective happiness is important in forming perceived social competence among Pakistani university students. As the sociometer theory discussed [7], [47], self-esteem can lead to happiness, and monitor interpersonal variables. Perceived social competence is

directly related to individuals' relationships within their societies. Moreover, it is related to individuals' perceived societal position. However, this study also showed that subjective happiness can mediate between self-esteem and perceived social competence. Individuals who have high self-esteem can have, as a result, high perceived social competence, and this relationship can be stronger if individuals are happy in their lives. The results can also be discussed from the terror management theory; self-esteem leads to happiness and perceives social competence, which in turn decreases death anxiety since the first is related to well-being and the latter is related to interpersonal relationships [1].

Pakistani university students with high self-esteem and life satisfaction generally perceive themselves to have high social competence. This relationship becomes stronger in those university students who perceive their lives to be happy and happier than others. Hence, it is important in Pakistani universities and early adulthood to focus on how these students perceive themselves in terms of their relationship with others, their value in society, their level of satisfaction, and how they perceive their happiness. Moreover, the study showed that self-esteem, life satisfaction, and happiness are essential factors in a collectivist society like Pakistan. Besides, they are critical to forming perceived social competence in a society like the one in Pakistan.

Furthermore, hypothesis 3 expected to find differences in gender across all variables. Research has shown some gender differences in self-esteem, with males generally having higher levels of self-esteem than females. However, it is essential to note that this difference is slight and varies depending on the context and culture. Additionally, self-esteem is a complex construct influenced by various factors, including childhood experiences, cultural and societal expectations, and individual differences. The results confirmed the difference in self-esteem between males and females. Similar to previous research, males had higher self-esteem than females [40], [41]. The concept of self-esteem is likely to fluctuate and change throughout time due to internal and external forces; compared to females, males appear to have greater self-esteem scores. High self-esteem may be seen as a stereotypically masculine trait in a culture where gender roles play an essential role. High self-esteem may also be linked with masculinity-associated features [60].

On the level of other variables, there were no significant gender differences. These constructs are multifaceted, dynamic, and influenced by individual and cultural influences; thus, several factors might contribute to the absence of gender differences. Being in a collectivist culture might be one reason these variables did not differ between genders. However, further research is needed to measure this compared to individualistic cultures. Additionally, the scales presented might not be able to highlight differences between males and females. However, that was not an issue that was presented in previous research. Finally, the sample measured is homogeneous, which might affect the absence of gender difference. Participants were university students, with the majority single, reflecting similar social, and academic roles.

### 3.3. Limitations and future research

Despite the strengths of this study, it has some limitations. This study is a correlational design with the cross-sectional method of data collection. A longitudinal study would be more appropriate for determining the causal relationship between self-esteem, overall life satisfaction, perceived social competence, and subjective happiness and their correlation over time. Second, a more technical restriction is shared-method variance, which results from using solely self-administered constructs for the study's variables. Self-reflection assessments seemed acceptable because these factors are based on internal subjective processes. It is suggested that future researchers use mixed-method design research designs to understand these constructs thoroughly. Finally, further research could focus on the difference between collectivist and individualistic cultures in life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence. Since this study did not find gender differences in these variables, focusing on collectivist versus individualistic cultures might enhance our understanding of the concepts.

### 3.4. Research implication

University students are at the beginning of their adult lives. This study's results can support early adults' well-being, especially at a transitional stage into adulthood. Self-esteem, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence have been shown to play an important role in an individual's life. Moreover, their relationship can be used in mental health support programs at universities in Pakistan. The findings can assist and be a base for mental health practitioners, involved bodies, and leadership in universities in Pakistan. To increase Pakistani university students' academic and social engagement, life satisfaction, self-esteem, or both can be supported. In addition, involving Pakistani university students in activities that might increase their subjective happiness will also lead to higher perceived social competence. In general, the relationship between self-esteem, life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence in this study can contribute to healthier well-being in Pakistani university students. These factors are crucial for students' well-being as they transition into adulthood and can impact their future happiness and success.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study showed that Pakistani university students with high self-esteem, life satisfaction, and high subjective happiness perceive themselves as socially competent. Moreover, males showed higher self-esteem levels than females, while no gender difference was reported in life satisfaction, subjective happiness, and perceived social competence. These findings can assist universities in their mental health programs and sustain students' healthier well-being. It is worth noting that these relationships are not always straightforward and that other factors such as personality, coping style, and life events can also affect self-esteem, life satisfaction, perceived social competence, and subjective happiness.

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