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ROLE OF UNCONDITIONAL SELF-ACCEPTANCE IN PREDICTING SELF-ESTEEM AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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KEYWORDS
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of unconditional self-acceptance (USA) in predicting self-esteem among young adults. We hypothesized that unconditional self-acceptance would positively predict self-esteem among young adults and that unconditional self-acceptance and self–esteem would differ significantly by gender. This correlational study design collects data through questionnaires from 200 individuals using convenience sampling. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 35 years. To measure the variables, the researchers used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Unconditional Self-Acceptance Questionnaire, and a self-developed demographic sheet. The researchers analyzed the results using simple linear regression and independent-samples t-tests to compare two groups. The Results showed a significant positive prediction effect of unconditional self-acceptance on self-esteem. Moreover, males scored significantly higher in unconditional self-acceptance than females, while participants showed no significant gender differences in self-esteem. The present findings highlight the importance of unconditional self-acceptance in helping adults accept themselves regardless of any condition or exception. This study will also help bridge the knowledge gap by educating young adults about unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem. The study also highlights the importance of interventions like Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy in enhancing individuals' self-esteem by strengthening their unconditional self-acceptance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Self-acceptance and self-esteem are two important topics discussed repeatedly in academia and psychology, particularly in studies of human psychological functioning. Morgado et al. (2014) define self-acceptance as an individual's acceptance of all their attributes, whether positive or negative. Unconditional self-acceptance (USA) refers to a person's ability to value and accept oneself unconditionally, even when one's behavior is not praiseworthy and regardless of whether others are likely to approve (Jibeen, 2016). Self-esteem is an individual sense of value or worth, or the extent to which a person approves of or appreciates him or herself. High self-esteem is associated with positive outcomes, whereas low self-esteem is associated with mental health issues like depression and poor academic performance. It is often considered dysfunctional (Tarlow & Haaga, 1996). Self-

esteem refers to how an individual feels about himself and is also known as self-worth, while self-acceptance is simply acknowledging who you are. Irrational beliefs are rigid, unreasonable, and inconsistent with reality, while rational beliefs are flexible, reasonable, and consistent with reality (Ellis, 2004). Many researchers suggest that more rational, realistic thinking produces functional behaviors, healthier emotions, and greater acceptance of self and others, while irrational thinking leads to dysfunctional behaviors, unhealthy emotions, and a lack of self-acceptance (Davies, 2007). Irrational beliefs are generally divided into two categories based on their overall content: discomfort and ego disturbance. Irrational beliefs related to ego disturbance are based on a definition of self-worth that depends on certain conditions and demands that one must perform well or gain approval to achieve self-worth. Unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem are closely interlinked. Unconditional self-acceptance is associated with self-esteem (Macinnes, 2006). If an individual accepts his flaws and attributes, he will have higher self-esteem, due to which many psychological problems will automatically reduce or be diminished completely because USA leads to a decrease in depression and anxiety as well.

Unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem are two major psychological concepts that have been widely studied. There are many studies regarding unconditional self-acceptance and psychological disorders. However, unfortunately, very few studies have been conducted on this topic, as all these psychological problems are developed by low self-esteem, which results in feelings of emptiness. This study will help future researchers in this area. Adulthood is a period of rapid physical and cognitive growth as well as changes in self-esteem. By young to middle adulthood, they place more emphasis on social virtues such as being friendly, considerate, and kind. They become preoccupied with being liked and viewed positively by others so they can fit within society; if they do not, they develop low self-esteem (Harter, 2012). They keep trying to win other people's approval but do not accept their flaws, which can leave them feeling worthless and depressed as they think poorly of themselves. Studies have found that one-third of young adults' struggle with low self-esteem, especially in early adulthood. When young adults practice unconditional self-acceptance, they begin to love themselves; they embrace their authentic selves and work on improving fewer desirable traits and qualities (Dinos & Palmer, 2015). Full self-acceptance can lay the foundations for positive self-esteem. These two often go hand in hand, but they reflect different aspects of how we think and feel about ourselves. Satisfaction with physical appearance is a large component of self-esteem, and adolescents, specifically girls, have greater dissatisfaction with physical appearance than boys. Pardede et al. (2020) reported that high self-esteem develops from an individual's unconditional self-acceptance, even when they are wrong, defeated, or have failed in a vulnerable, unimportant trait. Feelings of worthlessness and low unconditional self-acceptance, driven by negative self-evaluation and doubts about one's capabilities, can lead to low self-esteem.

Contemporary research on individual differences in unconditional self-acceptance suggests that a lower level of unconditional self-acceptance in a person can be dangerous for well-being and sometimes may lead to some mental disorders. At the same time, other researchers note that many individuals view self-worth as necessary to achieve other outcomes. According to rational-emotive behavioral therapy REBT, unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem are conceptually different concepts, but in research practice they tend to be closely related to each other and to mental health outcomes (Florin et al., 2011). Previous studies suggest that USA and ESE are positively correlated, with correlations ranging from 0.51 to 0.59 (Falkenstein & David, 2013). Many studies emphasize the association between these concepts and suggest a clear relationship. REBT holds that unconditional self-acceptance is associated with healthy emotions and helpful behavior, whereas self-esteem is associated with self-rating and psychological disturbance (Ellis, 2003); therefore, the current study aims to investigate the relationship between unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem among young adults. Nevertheless, attempts to increase self-esteem may also have drawbacks. Individuals with extremely high self-esteem may be more prone to acts of violence (Baumister et al., 1996). Chamberlain and Haaga (2001) concluded in their research that an alternative interpretation of the relation between Unconditional self-acceptance (USAQ) and Rosenberg self-esteem (RSE) is that there is a relationship between USA and Self-esteem as they exist in real world but, still in many empirical studies, it is concluded that USA and self-esteem often correlate moderately while SE correlates positively with mental health (Popov, 2018). Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) consider USA an alternative to self-downing, which often manifests as low self-esteem, as well as self-idealization, which manifests as high self-esteem.

Young adults' mental health is very important as it plays a major role in their health and life. Adults with low unconditional self-acceptance have low self-esteem, which leads to many psychological problems as well as poor academic performance. This study examines the relationship between unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem among Young Adults, as both are important in an individual's life and will be helpful for young adults, parents, and therapists in the future. The study reviewed previous research but found no clear justification because very few studies have addressed this topic, especially in Pakistan, despite its importance in the modern era, where most affected people are adolescents. This study aims to contribute new findings and strengthen the literature to support future research. Because prior studies show no significant relationship between Unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem regarding gender differences, this study aims to fill this gap by collecting equal numbers of participants from both genders and examining gender differences. This study will help adults accept themselves regardless of any condition or exception. It will help them build and maintain their self-esteem and be independent by accepting their failures and flaws, so that they can live a healthy life lacking anxiety, depression, and other behavioral problems.

Objectives

1. To identify the impact of unconditional self-acceptance on the self-esteem of Young Adults.
2. To investigate the gender differences in Unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem among Young Adults.

Hypotheses

1. Unconditional self-acceptance will positively predict young adults' self-esteem.
2. Young adults will differ significantly in both unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem by gender.

II. METHOD

Participants

The current study used a correlational research design and purposive convenience sampling to collect information. Initially, the USA and Self-Esteem Scales were administered to 200 young adults. The sample included 100 males and 100 females aged 18-35 years studying in different cities in Pakistan. Researchers used convenience sampling to approach adults and asked them to complete questionnaires. Only those adults were included who were between the age ranges of 18-35years and were living in Pakistan.

Measures

[I] Demographic Sheet: It was created to collect participants' personal information, such as name, age, gender, level of education, and other information required for the study. **[II]** Unconditional Self-Acceptance Questionnaire. The Unconditional Self-Acceptance Questionnaire (USAQ) was developed by Chamberlain and Haaga (2001). The USAQ is a 20-statement questionnaire derived from Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. It is rated on a 7-point Likert scale, where participants respond from 1 (Almost always untrue) to 7 (Almost always true). Scores on the scales are summed. Nine items are scored directly such that a higher score represents higher Unconditional self-acceptance (e.g., I believe that I am worthwhile simply because I am a human being), whereas 11 items are reversely scored such that a lower score represents low USA (e.g., I feel that some people have more value than others). The scale reported a Cronbach's alpha of .72, an acceptable level of internal consistency. **[III]** The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) measures self-esteem in young adults. The RSE has 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree). Scores on the scale are summed. Among these 10 items, 5 items (2, 5, 6, 8, and 9) are reversely scored from 4 (Strongly Disagree) to 1 (Strongly Agree), while 5 of them are forwardly scored. Higher scores suggest higher self-esteem. Sample items are "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself", and "All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure". It is the most widely used self-esteem assessment in research. It has two-week test-retest reliability and convergent and discriminant validity.

Procedure

The sample was approached after obtaining permission from the authors to use the required scales. The scales were self-report measures; therefore, they were administered individually and online. Informed consent was obtained from all the adults in the first section of the e-questionnaire. To maintain confidentiality, all responses were made anonymous. Because of COVID-19, data could not be collected manually. Participants completed the survey questionnaires via a Google Forms link. Data collection took two months. After data collection, the data were transferred and entered into SPSS for analysis. The study followed the American Psychological Association's ethical principles during data collection, statistical analysis, and interpretation of results.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting the study, the researchers strictly followed APA ethical guidelines. They ensured that all participants were fully informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Moreover, participants were informed that the study posed no psychological or physical risk and that their participation would help address a significant knowledge gap.

III. RESULTS

Table I: Psychometric Properties of Unconditional Self-Acceptance and Self-Esteem Scales

Variables	M	SD	Range	α
Unconditional Self-Acceptance	74.82	12.16	25-113	.72
Self-Esteem	27.05	4.47	14-37	.73

Table 1 illustrates the descriptive characteristics and alpha reliability coefficient for the study variables. Both study variables have acceptable alpha reliability coefficients. Alpha reliability of unconditional self-acceptance is excellent, whereas alpha reliability of self-esteem is satisfactory. Results indicate that the data are normally distributed and meet all assumptions of the parametric tests.

Table II: Simple Linear Regression Showing Predictive Effect of Unconditional Self-Acceptance on Self-Esteem

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI for B
Constant	13.02	1.24	—	10.50	< .001	[10.58, 15.46]
Unconditional Self-Acceptance	0.19	0.02	.51	11.80	< .001	[0.16, 0.22]

A simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether unconditional self-acceptance predicted self-esteem. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 198) = 139.21$, $p < .001$, explaining approximately 26% of the variance in SE ($R^2 = .26$). Unconditional self-acceptance was a significant positive predictor of SE, $B = 0.19$, $SE = 0.02$, $\beta = .51$, $t(198) = 11.80$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.22]. Thus, a one-unit increase in unconditional self-acceptance was associated with an estimated 0.19-unit increase in self-esteem.

Table III: Mean Differences in Unconditional Self-Acceptance and Self-Esteem across Gender

	Males	Females			
Variables	M (SD)	M (SD)	*t*(198)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Unconditional Self-Acceptance	76.93 (14.6)	72.71 (8.7)	2.5	.01	.39
Self-Esteem	27.52 (4.9)	26.57 (3.9)	1.5	.06	-

Table 3 shows mean differences and standard deviations of study variables across gender. Significant mean differences were reported in unconditional self-acceptance (.01, p<.05), while differences in self-esteem were non-significant (.06, p >.05). The results indicated that self-esteem did not differ significantly between males and females; however, unconditional self-acceptance was significantly higher in males than in females.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results showed that unconditional self-acceptance significantly and positively predicted self-esteem in young adults (see Table 2). The findings are consistent with previous literature, including research by Thompson and Waltz (2007), which showed a significant relationship between the SE and USA. The correlation between the SE and USA was similar to that found by Chamberlain and Haaga (2001), who have suggested that the relatively high correlation between the SE and USA may reflect substantial overlap between self-esteem and self-acceptance, or that the distinction between self-esteem and unconditional self-acceptance is too subtle for the average person to discern. The independent-samples t-test revealed no significant differences between males and females in self-esteem, while males scored significantly higher than females in unconditional self-acceptance. Unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem are dynamic and susceptible to internal and external influences during adolescence. Bean et al. (2003) also found that young adult boys have higher self-esteem and unconditional self-acceptance than girls. Boys are more likely to be in situations that encourage competition, conflict, power, and excitement; they tend to develop emotions related to externalizing them (Baer et al., 2004).

Gender is believed to influence the development and manifestation or expression of self -esteem. According to Robins et al. (2002), self-esteem in both genders falls during adolescence; however, the drop is twice as large for girls as for boys. Falkenstein and David (2013) suggest that biological changes in the psyche strongly affect psychosocial well-being. tent. Male adults have higher self-esteem than female adults, even though the differences are relatively small (Bachman et al., 2011). Moreover, Ahmad and Siddiq (2023) identified differences in self-esteem based on area of belonging, such as rural and urban participants. However, they found no significant differences between rural and urban participants. Despite these findings, Ahmad et al. (2026) also identified significant gender differences in stress levels and psychological well-being, revealing that males scored significantly higher on psychological well-being while scoring lower in stress levels than females. Many perspectives support this statement; some argue that self-confidence is more central than other traditional roles for men than for women in our society, citing assertiveness, cultural emphasis on females, different socialization experiences, dissatisfaction with appearance, and male dominance in overall self-evaluations. A meta-analysis by King et al. (1999) on gender differences in self-esteem compared samples of 80% White and 80% Black men and found a gender effect: men and boys scored higher than women and girls on self-esteem. Similarly, another study conducted by Bachman et al. 2011) on race and gender interaction showed that among White and Asian subgroups, adolescent boys had higher self-esteem than adolescent girls. Many researchers have found that males score higher than females on standard measures of self-esteem. These studies support our hypothesis that males report higher self-esteem than females.

Limitations and Implications

Although the findings are promising, our study has several limitations. First, because of COVID-19, we collected data through e-forms, and we suspect participants may not have taken them seriously. Second, the results may be less generalizable because the assessment occurred in only a few cities in Pakistan. Subsequent work should examine the extent to which findings generalize beyond the present context. Third, our study did not account for external factors such as the pandemic and lockdown, which also limited the study. Moreover, participants may not have taken the electronic forms seriously and may have filled out the questionnaire randomly out of interest. Finally, future work could extend the research beyond the limited cities. Samples could be collected in person to reduce the chance that participants do not take it seriously or complete it just for fun. This research will raise awareness of unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem among young adults by showing how changes in one affect the other. Psychologists can use the findings to help educate young adults about their emotional distress, mental health, and how it affects their self-esteem. This research will help adults love themselves unconditionally, without fear or exception.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

Despite the limitations, the present study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on unconditional self-acceptance and self-esteem. In conclusion, this study shows a relationship between Unconditional self-Acceptance

and Self-Esteem among Young adults. The gender differences were also analyzed. The data obtained showed a positive correlation between USA and self-esteem. Male adults showed more USA and self-esteem than female adults. In this connection, the research results and discussion show that USA is significantly correlated with self-esteem, and males show more USA and SE than females. Future research could collect data in person from adolescents to improve accuracy.

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