



Journal of Tertiary Education and Learning (JTEL)

ISSN: 2994-4015 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 3 ISSUE 1 (2025)



PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

The Nexus Between Belongingness and Self-Esteem in University Students

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Article Information

Received: September 12, 2024

Accepted: October 16, 2024

Published: January 30, 2025

Keywords

*Belongingness, Mental Health,
Philippines, Self-Esteem*

ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between belongingness and self-esteem among university students, with a focus on how these factors influence psychological well-being and academic success. Self-esteem is a critical component of psychological health, plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes, behaviors, and academic engagement, and a strong sense of belonging positively impacts self-esteem and overall mental health. Using a correlational, non-experimental quantitative design, data were collected from 220 students across two universities in the Philippines using standardized instruments: the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). Results indicate a statistically significant positive relationship between belongingness and self-esteem, with belongingness also serving as a predictor of positive mental health outcomes. Although belongingness accounts for 11.5% of the variance in mental health, the findings underscore the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive campus environment to enhance students' well-being and academic performance. These results have implications for developing institutional strategies that promote social integration and mental health support within educational settings.

INTRODUCTION

University life is a long journey of substantial growth for the student, with an exceptional personal and social growth period; changing from high school to college involves new experiences and challenges that may negatively or positively impact self-esteem (Alamanda, 2023). Salice (2020) defined self-esteem as being "often considered to be one of the self-conscious emotions because it forms an enduring state, related to one's sense of self-worth, and is responsible for the evaluation of others, particularly those considered in-group members." Mostly, it is known that self-esteem, being one of the most vital components in psychological health, has a pretty big role in shaping the kinds of attitudes, feelings, and actions that individuals have. Since it plays a critical role not only in individual psychological health but also in developing academic engagement and achievement (Fouad *et al.*, 2020).

According to Miller *et al.* (2019), a sense of belonging has positive psychological implications, particularly on self-esteem or "an overall belief about one's worth and abilities". Another study in the Philippines explains that students with low self-esteem were significantly associated with a higher likelihood of depression; this underlines the importance of developing a sense of belonging within educational setups (Obenza *et al.*, 2024b). Obenza *et al.* (2024a) contribute significant insights by highlighting how personality traits like agreeableness and extraversion correlate positively with happiness, while traits such as neuroticism have a negative association. This finding underscores the importance of cultivating supportive social networks within university settings to boost both self-esteem and overall happiness. Furthermore, studies

within the Philippine context have shown that low self-esteem is strongly linked to a heightened risk of depression, thus emphasizing the critical role of fostering belonging in educational institutions to promote better mental health and positive academic outcomes (Obenza *et al.*, 2024c).

This research develops the complex relation between belongingness and self-esteem, which subjects respond to in terms of being accepted and appreciated within the university setting. Pittman and Richmond (2019) also said that higher-self-esteem students also tend to have a more heightened sense of belonging - emphasizing the role of social integration for mental well-being. Furthermore, in the study, Harris and Orth (2020) reported that self-esteem and social relationships have a bidirectional influence on each other at all developmental ages with a positive feedback loop between the constructs. Furthermore, although high belongingness needs alone do not particularly have adverse effects on well-being, unmet needs in turn increase loneliness, depression, and self-esteem.

A harsh reality for those students who find it difficult to find their place at university is that the requirements of being in college can consume them. Which is why it is clear in many previous research works that a sense of belongingness within the school setting leads to a better outcome for self-esteem among those involved. Hence, it only presents value to have an understanding of how these two interact with each other as a way of developing support structures for such people within educational settings. This study attempts to explore the connection between these two constructs among university students. This study aims at finding the relationship between

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perceptions of belonging and self-esteem; following gaps in previous researches, it attempts to open insight that may help improve institutional practices and intervention strategies for better improvement of student well-being and achievement in student academic success.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

The researchers utilized correlational, descriptive, and non-experimental design under quantitative research. Correlational with a descriptive nature, the study will be using a correlational research design since it analyzes the relationships between variables without any control or manipulation by the researcher (Bhandari, 2021). In addition to this, the study will also be descriptive. According to Manuel and Medel (1976), descriptive research is a “description, recording, analysis, and interpretation of the nature, composition, or process of events as they currently exist.” In addition, the research study is not experimental in nature as it does not incorporate the manipulation of variables and the introduction of controlled interventions. The purpose of the study is to observe and analyze naturally occurring relationships between belongingness and self-esteem within the population of the university student. Adopting a non-experimental design, the research will explore the correlational pattern between and among these variables. That is, this study will explore the relationship between variables without such manipulations that change the subjects’ experience or setting. It is also a quantitative method since it deals with the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of data and information generally based on self-report and also collected through surveys (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Population and Sample

This study consists of the undergraduate university students 18 to 25 of age group of the University of Mindanao and the University of the Immaculate Conception. Thus, to ensure that at least 110 participants from each university would come from different academic years and programs, the researchers opted for a stratified random sampling with a total sample size of 220 students.

Instruments

Among the standardized instruments to be used by the researchers would be the measurement scales on belongingness and self-esteem using the following: Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale: This is a scale developed by Goodenow (1993) and would be used in assessing the extent to which students feel they belong in the campus community. Statements such as “I feel like a real part of this school” are among the items, and for each statement, the respondent is graded with a 5-point Likert scale on how much he or she agrees or disagrees: strongly disagree.

- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES): This is a 10-item scale which measures the level of self-esteem. Items

such as “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself” are rated on a 4-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The scales are validated and reliable tools, very commonly used in studies exploring self-esteem and belongingness.

Data Collection

During research and collection of data, the questionnaires will be in a form of 5-point Likert, and online surveys (Google Forms) will be made. There will be these following steps which are to be observed and applied by researchers: First we will create a letter that will be sent via email to the heads of each university requesting permission for allowing the researchers to conduct a survey to the students of their institution. When the research permit is given, online surveys will be distributed via emails and affiliated university social media platforms, after having informed consent given. The items on the belongingness and self-esteem scores will be before the demographic questions on age, gender, and academic year. The entire questionnaire should take 10-15 minutes to answer. The data obtained will then be encoded, tallied, and tabulated using Microsoft Excel. Lastly, the raw data will be submitted to the statistician for analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential analyses will be conducted. Means, standard deviations, and frequencies on demographic information, belongingness scores, and self-esteem scores will be computed. An inferential method will be conducted by calculating the Pearson correlation coefficient in order to describe the strength and the direction in which a relationship might exist between belongingness and self-esteem. The contribution of belongingness as a good predictor of self-esteem will be established through multiple regression analysis, controlling for the demographic factors: age, gender, and academic year.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the key variables in the study, including belongingness and self-esteem, along with their subcomponents, such as inclusion/acceptance, rejection/exclusion, and positive mental health. A total of 203 university students participated in the survey.

The mean score of 4.30 indicates that students generally report a high sense of belongingness. The close alignment between the mean, median, and mode suggests a relatively symmetric distribution of responses around the central value. However, the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.953$, $p < .001$) indicates that the data deviate significantly from a normal distribution. With a high mean of 4.96, this subscale shows that students experience high levels of inclusion and acceptance within their academic environment. The large standard deviation (1.268) implies that there is considerable variability in how students

Table 1: Descriptives Shapiro-Wilk

N	Median	Mode	SD	W	p	
Belongingness	203	4.25	4.25	0.745	0.953	<.001
Belongingness- Inclusion/Acceptance	203	5.17	5.50	1.268	0.970	<.001
Belongingness- Rejection/Exclusion	203	3.67	3.67 ^a	1.440	0.982	0.012
Positive Mental Health	203	3.00	3.00	0.705	0.956	<.001

perceive inclusion **More than one mode exists, only the first is reported** and acceptance. The Shapiro-Wilk normality test ($W = 0.970, p < .001$) suggests a non-normal distribution for this variable. High levels of inclusion and acceptance within academic environments positively affect student self-esteem, since inclusive settings enhance self-esteem, would in turn improve academic self-concepts and overall well-being. However, the type of classroom setting (inclusive vs. mainstream) does not significantly impact self-esteem, highlighting the importance of the quality of social integration and acceptance rather than the setting itself (Lohbeck, 2020; Alshutwi *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2019).

The mean value of 3.63 indicates a moderate level of perceived rejection or exclusion, and the large standard deviation (1.440) shows high variability in responses. This indicates that students perceive rejection or exclusion in their school environment moderately. This coincides with some studies which suggest that social exclusion generally decreases self-esteem, although some studies indicate that it may not affect self-esteem or can even trigger short-term positive emotional responses in certain contexts (Blackhart *et al.*, 2009; Stewart *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, the Shapiro-Wilk test ($W = 0.982, p = 0.012$) suggests that this data also deviates from normality, though the deviation is less severe than for the other belongingness subscales. Students' positive mental health scores are relatively moderate, with the mean and median both close to 3.00. The standard deviation (0.705) indicates that most students' positive mental health ratings are clustered around the mean. A person with positive mental health ratings is a distinct indicator of a person's mental well-being (Lamers. *et al.*, 2011). The results in the study imply that the students' positive mental health moderately affects the self-esteem of the students. While studies suggest that positive mental health is greatly associated with a students' self-esteem (Ya-min, 2008; Codo-Rendon *et al.*, 2020; Moksnes & Reidunsdatter, 2019). The normality test ($W = 0.956, p < .001$) suggests significant non-normality in the data distribution.

Regression Analysis

The R^2 value indicates that belongingness explains 11.5% of the variance in positive mental health. Although this is a modest portion of the total variance, it demonstrates a statistically significant relationship between belongingness and positive mental health. This also supports several studies which indicates that sense of belongingness creates a positive outlook towards academic performance (Lam *et al.* 2012; Roorda *et al.* 2011). The intercept

value suggests that when belongingness is at zero, the predicted value for positive mental health is 1.585. This represents the baseline level of positive mental health when belongingness is not present. The positive regression coefficient (0.321) indicates that for every one-unit increase in belongingness, positive mental health increases by 0.321 units. This result is highly statistically significant ($p < .001$), suggesting that a stronger sense of belongingness is associated with improved mental health outcomes in university students. Some studies shows a sense of belongingness is highly correlated to academic performance (e.g, Mehta *et al.*, 2011; Pittman & Richmond, 2008)

Table 2: Linear Regression

Model Fit Measures		
Model	R	R ²
1	0.339	0.115

Note. Models estimated using sample size of N=203

Table 3: Model Coefficients - Positive Mental Health

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	1.585	0.2736	5.79	<.001
Belonging	0.321	0.0628	5.11	<.001

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study reveal a statistically significant positive relationship between belongingness and positive mental health among university students. Specifically, higher levels of belongingness contribute to greater positive mental health, as indicated by the significant regression coefficient (0.321). However, belongingness only accounts for 11.5% of the variation in positive mental health, indicating that other factors not included in this model also contribute to students' mental health. The descriptive statistics suggest that most students report high levels of belongingness, particularly in terms of inclusion and acceptance. However, there is also considerable variability in how students experience rejection or exclusion. The moderate level of positive mental health further highlights the need for interventions that foster a sense of belonging to improve student well-being.

The regression analysis supports the hypothesis that belongingness is a significant predictor of positive mental health, but further research could explore additional variables, such as academic stress, social support, or coping mechanisms, that may also influence mental health outcomes. Given the non-normality of the data, future

studies might benefit from larger, more diverse samples to improve the generalizability of these findings. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study have several important implications for both research and practice. First, the significant positive relationship between belongingness and positive mental health highlights the critical role that a sense of belonging plays in enhancing students' well-being. Universities should consider implementing policies and support programs that foster a more inclusive campus environment, which could, in turn, improve students' mental health outcomes and academic performance. Programs that promote social integration, peer support networks, and community-building activities could be particularly effective in enhancing students' sense of belonging and reducing feelings of exclusion or rejection. Additionally, the findings suggest that while belongingness significantly contributes to mental health, it is only part of a more complex set of factors that influence students' overall well-being. Future research should explore other contributing factors, such as resilience, academic pressure, or interpersonal relationships, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what influences students' mental health. Given the non-normality observed in the data distribution, future studies should also consider using larger, more diverse samples to ensure the robustness of the findings and improve their generalizability across different student populations.

Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights into the relationship between belongingness and positive mental health among university students, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of self-reported data through standardized instruments like the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) may introduce response biases, as participants might provide socially desirable answers rather than their true feelings. Additionally, the study's reliance on online surveys may have led to limited participation, potentially excluding students who are less engaged or have limited access to digital platforms, thereby affecting the representativeness of the sample. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study, which captures data at a single point in time and does not allow for any conclusions about the causality of the relationships observed between belongingness and self-esteem. Longitudinal research would be needed to establish the direction of these relationships over time. Moreover, while the sample size of 203 is acceptable, the study is geographically limited to students from two universities in a specific region, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of students from other regions or cultural backgrounds. Finally, the regression analysis explained only 11.5% of the variance in positive mental health, suggesting that many other factors not accounted for in the model—such as academic stress, social support,

or coping mechanisms—could be influencing the mental health of students.

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