

SELF-ESTEEM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS WHO ARE VICTIMS OF TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

The phenomenon of toxic relationships among university students has received increasing attention due to its serious impact on mental health, particularly in relation to self-esteem and psychological well-being. This study aims to examine the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among students who have experienced toxic relationships. The research employed a quantitative bivariate correlational design involving 71 students selected through incidental sampling. Data were collected using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWBS). The findings indicate a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being ($r = 0.615$; $p < 0.01$). Self-esteem was also found to be significantly and positively associated with all dimensions of psychological well-being. These results suggest that the higher the level of self-esteem students possess, the higher their perceived psychological well-being, even when they are involved in unhealthy relationships. This study underscores the importance of strengthening self-esteem and enhancing social support as essential strategies for maintaining and improving the psychological well-being of students who are victims of toxic relationships.

Keywords: : *self-esteem; psychological well-being; students; toxic relationships.*

Introduction

University students who become trapped in toxic relationships often experience a mismatch between their psychological needs such as safety, self-esteem, and autonomy and the realities of romantic relationships marked by emotional pressure and manipulation. Such relationships are characterized by excessive control, irrational jealousy, and demeaning communication, all of which significantly elevate stress and anxiety levels among students (Young & Huwae, 2022; Nurdini et al., 2024). Students involved in unhealthy relationships also tend to experience a decline in self-worth, which subsequently hampers their ability to form healthy interpersonal relationships and diminishes their sense of competence (Setianingrum & Kelly, 2023). Furthermore, the psychological impacts of toxic relationships include emotional trauma, sleep disturbances, and tendencies toward social withdrawal, ultimately leading to the failure to achieve optimal psychological well-being (Parinsi & Huwae, 2022; Prasety, 2023).

According to the 2024 Annual Report (CATAHU) of Komnas Perempuan, 407 cases of dating violence were recorded in 2023. This positions dating violence as the third most prevalent form of personal violence, following violence against wives and violence committed by former partners. Overall, there were 401,975 cases of violence against women in Indonesia in 2023, marking a 12% decrease from the previous year. The various

negative impacts associated with toxic relationships demonstrate that such relationships are not merely interpersonal issues but constitute a significant threat to students' psychological well-being.

Toxic relationships are strongly associated with increased stress levels among university students, which may disrupt their academic and social functioning (Nurdini et al., 2024). In addition, Setianingrum and Kelly (2023) found that toxic relationships contribute to reduced self-esteem, which further deteriorates students' psychological conditions. Poor interpersonal communication within toxic relationships may lead to persistent feelings of isolation and prolonged anxiety (Syafdana & Gumelar, 2024). Overall, involvement in toxic relationships during the college years can impair students' psychological well-being, elevate stress, and hinder their personal development.

This study examines two psychological constructs among students who are victims of toxic relationships: self-esteem and psychological well-being. These variables were selected because toxic relationships have been shown to decrease students' self-esteem, which in turn exacerbates their psychological difficulties (Setianingrum & Kelly, 2023). The first variable, self-esteem, refers to an individual's evaluation of themselves both positive and negative based on the balance between accepting personal strengths and weaknesses, which then influences overall self-evaluation (Rosenberg, 2015).

Students involved in toxic relationships often experience significant disturbances in their self-evaluation. According to Rosenberg (2015), self-esteem consists of two components: (1) self-acceptance, which reflects one's ability to acknowledge personal conditions and trust in one's capacities, and (2) self-worth, which represents the sense that one is valuable and deserving of respect. Healthy self-esteem serves as a crucial component in maintaining emotional stability, particularly when individuals face emotional challenges in their relationships (Neff, 2013).

High and stable self-esteem is generally associated with greater psychological well-being, adaptive coping abilities, and healthier social relationships (Paradise & Kernis, 2002). Conversely, low self-esteem is linked to psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, and dependency within interpersonal relationships (Rosenberg, 2015), including a tendency to remain in toxic relationships.

The second variable examined in this study is psychological well-being. Psychological well-being refers to an individual's efforts to achieve their optimal potential by experiencing positive emotions, engaging in self-actualization, planning continuous personal development, and managing life effectively (Ryff, 2013). According to Ryff (2013), psychological well-being comprises six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

High psychological well-being plays an important role in helping students who are victims of toxic relationships maintain emotional stability, enhance resilience, and reduce their risk of developing mental health disorders (Pantjo'u & Kusumiati, 2024). In contrast, low psychological well-being may result in decreased academic performance, social isolation, and increased vulnerability to mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. The more severe the toxic relationship experienced, the higher the level of stress reported by students (Nurdini et al., 2024; Sugiharto & Huwae, 2025).

Based on these phenomena, toxic relationships characterized by excessive control, verbal or emotional abuse, and psychological manipulation can disrupt individuals' adaptive functioning, including academic, social, and emotional aspects. Involvement in toxic relationships during university life can undermine psychological well-being, lower self-esteem, increase stress, and hinder personal development. Therefore, students who are victims of toxic relationships are expected to possess high levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being.

The present study aims to examine the relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among university students who have experienced toxic relationships. The major hypothesis proposes that there is a significant influence of self-esteem and psychological well-being among students who are victims of toxic relationships. The minor hypotheses state that self-esteem influences victims of toxic relationships, and psychological well-being also influences students who experience toxic relationships.

Method

Participants

A non-probability sampling technique was used to recruit participants, with the inclusion criteria requiring that the respondents be university students who had experienced toxic relationships. A total of 71 participants met these criteria. Prior to participation, all respondents were required to complete an informed consent form outlining the research procedures, the purpose of their involvement, and their rights as participants. After reviewing this information, participants indicated their willingness or unwillingness to participate by selecting the appropriate option. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of Research Participants

Participant Classification	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	9	12,7%
	Female	62	87,3%
Age	18 Years	3	4,2%
	19 Years	3	4,2%
	20 Years	6	8,5%
	21 Years	12	16,9%
	22 Years	28	39,4%
	23 Years	11	15,5%
	24 Years	5	7%
	25 Years	3	4,2%

Procedure

The measurements in this study utilized two psychological scales: a self-esteem scale and a psychological well-being scale. Prior to distribution, both instruments underwent construct validity and content validity assessments by three expert judges who specialize in psychology. The scales were then pilot-tested on 30 students who had experienced toxic relationships but were not included in the main study sample.

Following the validation process, the researchers obtained formal research permission (Approval No. 259/PU-F.Psi/IX/2025) and prepared the informed consent forms. The study was administered online using Google Forms. Data collection was conducted from July 20 to August 31, 2025. Before completing the questionnaires, participants were provided with an informed consent form to ensure that they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Instruments

Self-Esteem Scale

Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) developed by Rosenberg (2015). The scale was translated into Indonesian and adjusted to the research context by the authors. The instrument consists of 10 items rated on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The reliability analysis indicated that all items were valid, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.822.

Psychological Well-Being Scale

Psychological well-being was assessed using Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (RPWBS) (Ryff, 2013), which had been previously adapted into Indonesian by Rahmania, Munir, and Budiman (2019). The instrument contains 31 items representing six dimensions and employs a four-point Likert response format. Reliability testing yielded Cronbach's alpha values of 0.775 for self-acceptance, 0.703 for positive relations with others, 0.706 for autonomy, 0.679 for environmental mastery, 0.699 for purpose in life, and 0.810 for personal growth.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using multiple linear regression. Prior to hypothesis testing, normality and linearity assumptions were examined. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 22 for Windows.

Result and Discussion

The descriptive statistics presented in Table 2, based on data from 71 participants, indicate that the self-esteem variable had a minimum score of 20, a maximum score of 38, a mean of 30.01, and a standard deviation of 4.125. The psychological well-being variable had a minimum score of 62, a maximum score of 114, a mean of 90.94, and a standard deviation of 10.550.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Self-Esteem	71	20	38	30,01	4,125
Psychological Well-Being	71	62	114	90,94	10,550

The results of the hypothesis test in Table 3 show that self-esteem is significantly positively related to psychological well-being ($r = 0.615$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Correlation Test of Self-Esteem and Autonomy Dimensions

		Self-Esteem	Psychological Well-Being
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	0,615**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0,000
	N	71	71
Psychological Well-Being	Pearson Correlation	0,615**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0,000	
	N	71	71

** . Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (1-tailed)

Correlation Test between Self-Esteem and Each Dimension of Psychological Well-Being

The correlation test results between self-esteem and the autonomy dimension in Table 4 indicate a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.408$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 4. Correlation Test of Self-Esteem and Autonomy Dimensions

		Self-Esteem	Dimension of Autonomy
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	0,408**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0,000
	N	71	71
Dimension of Autonomy	Pearson Correlation	0,408**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0,000	
	N	71	71

** . Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (1-tailed)

The results of the correlation test of self-esteem and environmental mastery dimensions in Table 5 show a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.488$ $p < 0.01$).

Table 5. Correlation Test of Self-Esteem and Environmental Mastery Dimensions

		Self-Esteem	Environmental Mastery Dimensions
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	0,488**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0,000
	N	71	71
Environmental Mastery Dimensions	Pearson Correlation	0,488**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0,000	
	N	71	71

** . Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (1-tailed)

The results of the correlation test of self-esteem and personal growth dimensions in Table 6 show a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.414$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 6. Correlation Test of Self-Esteem and Personal Growth Dimensions

		Self-Esteem	Personal Growth Dimensions
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	0,414**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0,000
	N	71	71
Personal Growth Dimensions	Pearson Correlation	0,414**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0,000	
	N	71	71

** . Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (1-tailed)

The results of the correlation test of self-esteem and the dimensions of positive relationships with others in Table 7 show a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.540$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 7. Correlation Test of Self-Esteem and Dimensions of Positive Relationships with Others

		Self-Esteem	Dimensions of Positive Relationships with Others
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	0,540**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0,000
	N	71	71
Dimensions of Positive Relationships with Others	Pearson Correlation	0,540**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0,000	
	N	71	71

** . Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (1-tailed)

The results of the correlation test of self-esteem and dimensions of life goals in Table 8 show a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.489$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 8. Correlation Test of Self-Esteem and Dimensions of Life Purpose

		Self-Esteem	Dimensions of Life Purpose
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	0,489**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0,000
	N	71	71
Dimensions of Life Purpose	Pearson Correlation	0,489**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0,000	
	N	71	71

**. Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (1-tailed)

The results of the correlation test of self-esteem and self-acceptance dimensions in Table 9 show a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.318$; $p < 0.01$).

Table 9. Correlation Test of Self-Esteem and Self-Acceptance Dimensions

		Self-Esteem	Self-Acceptance Dimensions
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	0,318**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		0,003
	N	71	71
Self-Acceptance Dimensions	Pearson Correlation	0,318**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0,003	
	N	71	71

**. Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (1-tailed)

The findings of this study indicate that the major hypothesis is supported, demonstrating a positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among students who are victims of toxic relationships. This suggests that both the level of self-esteem and the level of psychological well-being significantly influence students affected by toxic relationships. Thus, variations in self-esteem and psychological well-being contribute to differences in how students cope with toxic relational experiences.

The results further show a strong and significant positive correlation between the independent and dependent variables. The correlation analysis revealed that self-esteem is positively associated with psychological well-being among students who have experienced toxic relationships, with a correlation coefficient of 0.615 and a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$). This indicates that the higher the students' self-esteem, the higher their psychological well-being, and conversely, lower self-esteem corresponds to lower psychological well-being. These results are consistent with the findings of Putri and Maryatmi (2020), who reported a significant relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among university students.

The study also shows that students who have experienced toxic relationships tend to maintain relatively high levels of self-esteem despite their involvement in harmful relational situations. In the context of toxic relationships, self-esteem serves as a protective mechanism against emotional distress. This finding is supported by Orth and Robins (2014), who highlighted that higher self-esteem is associated with lower levels of depression, stress, and anxiety, as well as with greater psychological coping abilities. This implies that students possess internal strengths that enable them to persevere and sustain confidence in themselves despite exposure to toxic relational dynamics.

Similarly, Ady et al. (2023) found that students with high self-esteem are more likely to take decisive actions such as seeking social support, establishing personal boundaries, or even terminating harmful relationships. In contrast, students with low self-esteem often choose to remain in distressing relationships due to fear of abandonment or feelings of

unworthiness. Although the participants in this study displayed relatively high levels of self-esteem, their psychological well-being fell within the moderate category. According to Ryff (2013), psychological well-being encompasses self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. The moderate level suggests that students retain the capacity for adaptive functioning, but not at an optimal level. Toxic relationships may inhibit several dimensions of well-being, such as positive relations (e.g., conflict, manipulation, isolation), self-acceptance (e.g., guilt, low self-worth), and environmental mastery (e.g., difficulty managing relational dynamics).

The findings further reveal that self-esteem functions as a “shield,” preventing students from experiencing a complete decline in psychological well-being; however, the distress associated with toxic relationships still limits their ability to achieve high levels of well-being. This aligns with the findings of Sari and Widjanarko (2025), who showed that high self-esteem, when accompanied by external factors such as social support, enhances resilience and improves psychological well-being among victims of toxic relationships. Therefore, self-esteem acts as a crucial internal determinant of psychological well-being. High self-esteem not only protects individuals from emotional distress related to toxic relationships but also serves as a foundational element for achieving optimal psychological well-being. Nonetheless, its effectiveness depends on the presence of supportive social and environmental conditions.

Oktaviona and Iswinarti (2024) also support these findings, showing that toxic relationships may lower self-esteem and weaken mental health, including psychological well-being. However, among students with high self-esteem, the negative effects are not severe enough to drastically reduce well-being, thus keeping it within a moderate range.

The study also encountered limitations, particularly regarding participants who frequently sought clarification about whether they met the eligibility criteria. This required the researchers to provide detailed explanations of the inclusion requirements. Additionally, certain dynamics or variables that may influence the findings were not captured or explored in this study.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there is a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological well-being among university students who are victims of toxic relationships. More specifically, the findings indicate that self-esteem is significantly and positively associated with each dimension of psychological well-being. Thus, self-esteem serves as a strong contributing factor in both enhancing and diminishing the psychological well-being of students affected by toxic relationships.

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations can be proposed to support the improvement of self-esteem and psychological well-being among students who have experienced toxic relationships. First, students who are currently or have previously been involved in such relationships are encouraged to enhance their self-esteem through positive activities, self-acceptance practices, and the development of healthy social relationships, enabling them to maintain psychological well-being despite difficult relational experiences. Second, counselors and higher education institutions are advised to provide counseling services, seminars, or workshops focusing on self-esteem, self-acceptance, and education related to healthy relationships as preventive efforts to mitigate the negative effects of toxic relationships. Third, future researchers are encouraged to include additional variables that may influence psychological well-being, such as social support, resilience, or locus of control, and to broaden the research population across different educational levels or age groups to improve the generalizability of the findings.

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Author Contributions Statement

All authors contributed equally to this study and fulfilled their respective roles throughout the research process.

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