

FACTORS RELATED TO SELF-ESTEEM  
AMONG VIETNAMESE ADOLESCENTS



Psychology  
KEYWORDS: self-esteem, Vietnamese  
adolescent, state affect, optimism.

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ABSTRACT

The research seeks to understand Vietnamese adolescents' self-esteem in relation to their own exogenous factors (age, gender, academic performance) as well as endogenous factors (state affect, optimism). The study was conducted on 1505 Vietnamese adolescents who are currently studying in secondary schools and high schools in all 3 regions of Vietnam: North, Central and South. Results of data-analyzing process illustrated that there were considerable differences of self-esteem between two genders concerning general self-esteem and emotional self. In detail, in these aspects, Vietnamese male adolescents showed higher self-esteem than their counterpart. With regard of physical self, academic-future self and social self, we noted no statistically significant difference of data between male and female subjects. There were also no statistical significance despite difference in ages. In respect of academic performance, we found that adolescents with higher self-esteem reported better results in their studying compared to their friends who had lower self-esteem. Moreover, after processing and analyzing data, we noticed positive correlation between self-esteem and state affect and optimism of Vietnamese adolescents.

**Introduction**

Since the beginning of modern psychological research in the late 19th century, self-esteem has been one of the most studied constructs in social sciences. With regard to the concept of self-esteem, two popular theoretical models are the unidimensional model and the multidimensional model. The unidimensional model proposed that self-esteem is an overall construct, referring to the most general self-evaluation. Pioneering research supporting this approach were conducted by Coopersmith (1964/ 1967), Piers & Harris (1964). These research examined self-esteem on various aspects of an individual's life such as academic performance, friendship, familial relations, however, they focused on only one score out of the whole scale, and this score reflected self-esteem of an individual. In support of the unidimensional model, Rosenberg (1965) suggested that self-esteem reflected positive or negative attitudes toward oneself. Therefore, Rosenberg pointed out that self-esteem consists of two different connotations: one for people who consider themselves "very good", which means they have higher self-esteem than others, and one for those who think they are just "good enough" (Trinh Thi Linh, 2014).

The unidimensional model has been proved to have many limitations. This model has not considered the personal development within a wide range of practical contexts and real life activities that an individual participates in. In fact, an individual may not be good at specific areas but very adept at other fields. In other words, an individual may simultaneously have low self-esteem in particular areas and high self-esteem in others, depending on their performance levels in each area. Harter (1982) has criticized the unidimensional model as she pointed out that this model only provided us with an overall, sometimes even one-sided, perspective without considering flexibility of an individual's self-esteem in different fields of life. Therefore, Harter suggested that the multidimensional model should be used when examining self-esteem. Her point of view has been supported by most researchers in the world, including Oubrayrie and et al. with ETES scale that will be mentioned in the following part. In other words, these researchers proposed that generally, self-esteem is a result of a combination of an individual's self-evaluation in various fields of life and it is governed by different exogenous as well as endogenous factors of that person. Within the scope of this study, we aimed at exploring the relations between self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents with exogenous factors (gender, academic performance, age) as well as endogenous factors (state affect, optimism).

**Method**  
**Sampling**

In this study, the group of subjects consists of 1505 adolescents from 14 to 18 years-old who are now living in 3 cities of Viet Nam (Ha Noi, Hue, Ho Chi Minh). These cities represent three regions in Vietnam (Northern, Central and Southern). The obtained data does not show

the statistically significant differences in terms of age ( $p > 0.05$ ). The demographic characteristics of the sample are represented in Table 1:

**Table 1: Background information of inquiry participants**

Variables	N	%	
Gender	Male	737	49.0
	Female	768	51.0
Age	14	218	14.5
	15	285	19.0
	16	437	29.1
	17	373	24.9
	18	188	12.5
Academic performance	Excellent	46	3.1
	Good	431	28.7
	Fair	791	52.7
	Poor	222	14.8
	Unsatisfactory	11	0.7

**Materials**

The scale of self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents

Based on theoretical overview of previously conducted research by Coopersmith (1967), Rosenberg (1965), Harter (1985/ 1988), Oubrayrie and et al. (1994) devised an attitude scale to measure self-esteem of targeted subjects in the most general way as well as on specific aspects, and they named it The self-esteem scale of Toulouse "Échelle d'Estime de soi Toulousaine" in place of (Échelle Toulousaine d'Estime de soi – ETES). This scale focuses on measuring self-esteem of an individual in five main areas: academic self, physical self, emotional self, future self and social self. We have noticed that these areas are closely related to adolescents' life because they are associated with psychological and physical characteristics of this group. Also, the assessment areas are not too fragmented and do not delve too much into emotional life of adolescents, which makes us believe that the targeted subjects of this scale may share similarities with Vietnamese subjects. Therefore, we have decided to use this scale as the basis to develop a scale for practical research. However, as Markus and Kitayama (1991) noted that "culture determines how people perceive themselves, independently and separately from others or closely related to others", we have recognized the importance of measuring self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents in terms of their families. In a country that has been imbued with traditional collectivist culture of Eastern communities, the Vietnamese often value the generality more than individuality, "we" than "I". Most of the time, personal identity is not perceived independently but indeed, it has always been considered in relation

with other people, especially family members (Do Long, 2000). Therefore, we have added a sub-scale of familial self in order to measure self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents.

The measure includes 72 items (according to Likert measure) divided into 6 subscales as mentioned above. Each sub-scale contains 12 items- 6 positive items and 6 negative items. It permits us to get the general score of self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents and 6 component scores of 6 subscales. This scale was verified and developed on the first tested group of participants including 359 Vietnamese adolescents with 166 male (46.2%) and 193 female (53.8%), aging from 14 to 18 years-old ( $M=15.7$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ). Before analyzing factors, all negative items had been coded inversely. All the items with loaded coefficient less than 0.4 were rejected (Burn & Grove 2005). After analyzing factors by varimax rotation method, we collected 34 items (loaded coefficient over 0.4) and 5 main factors. Based on each item's content, we have grouped these items into 5 factors, namely: familial self, physical self, emotional self, academic-future self and social self. These 5 factors accounted for 53.26% of the variance of the component solution. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was 0.79, the Bartlett's result test was 0.000 and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total scale was 0.83. For each subscale (component), this coefficient ranged from 0.63 to 0.87. The values of Cronbach's alpha coefficient showed high reliability (internal consistency reliability) of the scale. So we decided to use this 34-item scale for the official sample group of this research. To confirm the structure of the scale obtained above, we conducted a formal investigation on 1505 participants who are Vietnamese adolescents, including 737 male (49%) and 768 female (51%). The analytical results confirmed the reliability of the obtained scale ( $\alpha = 0.86$  for the total score).

#### *Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS)*

In this research, we have used Positive and Negative Affect Scale of Watson, Clack and Tellegen (1994). This scale comprises 20 items (10 items measuring positive affect and 10 items measuring negative affect) using 5-point Likert scale ranging from "very slightly/ not at all" to "extremely". The result includes a general score of affect and two component scores of negative affect (NA) and positive affect (PA). The higher the score is, the more positive the students' affect are (negative affect had been code reversely in the data processing stage so that we could obtain the total score of the scale).

#### *Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R)*

We have used the LOT-R of Scheier, Carver and Bridges (1994). This scale includes 10-item measuring optimism versus pessimism. Of these 10 items, 3 items measure optimism, 3 items measure pessimism, and 4 items serve as fillers. Respondents rate each item on a 4-point scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = neutral, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. All negative items are reversely scored. Scoring is kept continuously – there is no benchmark for being an optimist/pessimist.

#### **The process**

All samples of the research were selected randomly with the support of schools in each chosen city.

The participants volunteered to answer the questionnaire without incurring any strings attached. We were always present when selected adolescents answered the questionnaire to assist them when needed. In the process of answering the questionnaire, if a person found it difficult (eg. they were tired, there was not enough time ...) and did not want to complete it, we respected their decision. The confidentiality of the information obtained is guaranteed. The participated Vietnamese adolescents in research are kept anonymous.

#### **Data analysis.**

Statistical calculations were performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 16.0. In this research, SPSS supported all the statistical methods. Specifically, we have used the

descriptive statistical analysis to calculate average scores, we also used percentage data analysis as well as the statistical inference to understand the correlation, the nexus that might appear among different variable. Factor analysis method was also used as one of the main research methods.

#### **Results**

Evaluation of self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents by gender

The data in Table 2 illustrates that Vietnamese male adolescents have higher self-esteem than their counterpart in all aspects (academic-future self, familial self, social self, physical self, emotional self as well as general self). Specifically:

In general, we recorded a statistically significant difference between male and female adolescents in Vietnam with regard to general self-esteem ( $t(1501)=2.519$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Accordingly, male adolescents evaluate themselves in a much more positive way than female subjects do with the average scores of 122.21 and 119.89 respectively. This result is consistent with evidence given by previous research proposing that boys have higher self-esteem than girls (Alsaker & Owens, 1993; Block & Robins, 1993; Fertman & Chubb, 1992; Wigfield & Eccles, 1994, cited by Seidat et al., 2004; Bariaud et al., 1998; Harter, 1993; Oubrayrie et al., 1991).

**Table 2: Self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents by gender**

Gender		General self-esteem	Academic-Future self	Familial self	Social self	Physical self	Emotional self
Boy	Mean	<b>122.21</b>	19.70	50.50	13.43	<b>23.78</b>	<b>14.81</b>
	N	737	737	737	737	737	737
	SD	17.94	4.20	9.46	3.09	6.54	4.31
Girl	Mean	<b>119.89</b>	19.44	50.33	13.34	<b>23.25</b>	<b>13.51</b>
	N	767	767	767	767	767	767
	SD	17.76	4.43	9.31	3.09	6.24	4.20
	t	2.519	1.138	0.336	0.497	1.629	5.879
	p	<b>0.012</b>	0.255	0.737	0.619	0.104	<b>0.000</b>

With regard to physical self, we found that a few number of investigations have analysed the differences in physical self-esteem related to gender. These investigations suggested that male have higher perceptions of physical self-worth (Gutierrez et al., 1999a; Maïano et al., 2004; Marsh, 1998; Marsh et al., 1994; Whitehead and Corbin, 1997), attractive body (Hagborg, 1994; Maïano et al., 2004), sport competence (Maïano et al., 2004; Marsh, 1998), physical condition and physical strength (Maïano et al., 2004) than female (cited by Moreno and Cervelló, 2005). This is also true to studied group of Vietnamese adolescents. Specifically: The data in Table 2 show a higher level of self-esteem of male ( $M=23.78$ ) compared to that of female ( $M=23.25$ ) on physical aspect. However, the difference is not statistically significant ( $p>0.05$ ). This result can be attributed to practical situations in Vietnam. Nowadays, Vietnamese children have the tendency to reach puberty earlier than in the past. This may lead to the fact that at the age of 14-18, physical changes are no longer worrying factors to children. Therefore, whether they are male or female, children express certain degree of confidence about their appearance.

In terms of emotional self, we noted that perceptions of gender differences in emotional responding constitute one of the most robust existing gender stereotypes (Fabes & Martin, 1991; Fischer, 1993; Grossman & Wood, 1993; Hess et al., 2000; Plant, Hyde, Keltner, & Devine, 2000; Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 2003). In fact, the belief that women are more emotional than men has been labeled a 'master stereotype' (Shields, 2003). Men and women, older and younger individuals, as well as individuals from a wide range of

cultural backgrounds hold the belief that women are more emotional than men (Belk & Snell, 1986; Birnbaum, Nosanchuk, & Croll, 1980; Heesacker et al., 1999; Hess et al., 2000). This is also reflected in our research outcome: Male adolescents believed they have better control over their emotions than their counterpart do ( $t(1502)=5.879$ ;  $p<0.001$ ).

In respect of academic-future self and social self, we have noticed that the amplitude of oscillation of self-esteem between male and female adolescents is not statistically significant. This result is completely similar to what Oubrayrie and et al. (1994) reported in their study on a group of subjects of French adolescents. In other words, gender does not influence adolescents' perception in their studying as well as social relations that they belong to.

Results of T-test calculator did not record any statistically significant differences between male and female concerning familial self-esteem ( $t(1502)=0.336$ ;  $p>0.05$ ). It seems that gender does not determine whether adolescents feel loved and respected in their families or not. This result has lead to the hypothesis that in Vietnamese families nowadays, is it true that male chauvinism has gradually become eroded? Or if it still exists, as the children grow up over time, family members in general and parents specifically seem to have come to accept the presence of the children no matter what their gender are. These may be the reasons why adolescents do not notice any differences in attention and care that they receive from other family members in everyday life.

**Evaluation of self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents by age**  
Concerning the question of how the structure of self-esteem has evolved across ages, many authors have suggested that self-esteem becomes increasingly differentiated with age (e.g. Harter, 1983, 1985; Montemayor & Eisen, 1977; Shavelson et al., 1976). For example, Shavelson et al. (1976) suggested that self-esteem becomes more differentiated with increased experience and thus, with age. Indeed, previous research has supported this notion. For example, across several studies, Marsh and colleagues found that multiple self-esteem domains become more distinct from the second to the fifth grade (e.g. Marsh, 1989; Marsh & Ayotte, 2003; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). After the age of 12, no further differentiation has been observed so far, which leads to the conclusion that the process of differentiation is completed during pre-adolescence (Marsh, 1989) (cited by Rentzsch, 2016). The result we received in this study is also similar. In detail, ANOVA analysis result reflected no statistically significant difference among adolescents at different ages ( $F(3)=1.117$ ;  $p>0.05$ ). In other words, despite a variety of ages, Vietnamese adolescents share the similar degree of self-esteem. However, we are well aware of the fact that this is just a cross study, and a longitudinal would be necessary and more reliable to support this result.

**Evaluation of self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents by academic outcomes**  
Drawing from various theoretical perspectives (e.g., social comparison theory, symbolic interaction theory), much research has validated the assumption that high self-esteem is associated with educational achievement (Marsh, Byrne & Yeung, 1999), that ability levels may influence depressive symptoms and levels of self-esteem (Humphrey, Charlton & Newton, 2004), and that a positive self-concept is desirable for children's personal development (Branden, 1994). This is also reflected in our research with studied group of Vietnamese adolescents. According to the report of the subjects, we noted statistically significant differences of self-esteem among groups with different academic performance in all aspects: general self, academic-future self, familial self, social self, physical self and emotional self. Specific data is shown in Table 3:

The Table above has clearly illustrated that all adolescents with excellent and good academic performance have higher self-esteem than their friends. And based on reported data, this result is true in every studied aspect of self-esteem in this research. According to this

result, we propose that in order for Vietnamese students to achieve their potential in academic performance, not only do we need to teach them knowledge, but it is also important for teachers, families and communities to create a supportive environment to help children to develop their self-confidence.

**Table 3: Academic outcomes difference in self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents**

Academic outcomes		General self	Academic-Future self	Familial self	Social self	Physical self	Emotional self
Excellent	Mean	127.13	21.09	50.70	15.00	25.33	15.02
	N	46	46	46	46	46	46
	SD	19.00	4.73	9.89	3.05	6.62	4.96
Good	Mean	122.61	20.37	51.59	13.62	22.74	14.31
	N	432	432	432	432	432	432
	SD	17.02	4.32	8.64	3.03	6.05	4.33
Fair	Mean	120.16	19.24	50.04	13.26	23.36	14.25
	N	793	793	793	793	793	793
	SD	17.96	4.13	9.60	3.11	6.38	4.26
Poor	Mean	120.59	20.00	49.73	13.20	25.20	13.48
	N	222	222	222	222	222	222
	SD	18.53	4.59	9.66	2.97	6.66	4.13
Unsatisfactory	Mean	107.55	17.63	45.09	10.55	22.91	11.36
	N	11	11	11	11	11	11
	SD	18.95	5.90	10.00	3.53	7.06	5.33
F		4.283	7.874	3.214	6.676	6.626	3.243
df		4	4	4	4	4	4
p		0.002	0.000	0.012	0.000	0.000	0.012

**Self-esteem and state affect**  
According to Watson and his colleagues (1994), each of the emotional dimensions (NA and PA) incorporates aspects of self-esteem. High PA individuals tend to have a positive self-evaluation, whereas low PA individuals tend to be insecure and unsure of themselves. In the same vein, high NA individuals have a tendency of evaluate themselves negatively, whereas low NA individuals are likely to be secure and satisfied with themselves. For these reasons, the typical high-self-esteem person scores high in PA and low in NA, and the typical low-self-esteem person scores low in PA and high in NA. In other words, self-esteem is closely related with state affect of each person.

**Table 4: Correlations between self-esteem and state affect**

		Self-esteem	State affect
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.542**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1504	1504
State affect	Pearson Correlation	.542**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1504	1505

\*\* .Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Results of correlation analysis in Table 4 firmly depict statistical significance of positive correlation between state affect and self-esteem among Vietnamese adolescents ( $r=0.54$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). This means that when adolescents evaluate themselves positively, they will be likely to express positive feelings about themselves, and conversely,

those who have low self-esteem tend to show more negative emotions. These results are consistent with what Watson and his colleagues noted in their research before.

### Self-esteem and optimism

In the field of positive psychology, Carver and his colleagues (2010) pointed out that optimism is an individual difference variable that reflects the extent to which people hold generalized favorable expectancies for their future. Higher levels of optimism have been potentially related to better subjective well-being. Consistent with such findings, some authors also reported positive correlation (from  $r = .50$  to  $r = .60$ ) between optimism and self-esteem (Wong & Lim, 2009; Snyder, 2000). This correlation occurs because of the potential role that optimism has in raising the possibility of successful experiences (Heinonen, Rääkkönen, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2005) as the subject who has high self-esteem has a greater sense of worthiness.

**Table 5: Correlations between self-esteem and optimism**

		Self-esteem	Optimism
Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.240**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	1145	1145
Optimism	Pearson Correlation	.240**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	1145	1145

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to what Vietnamese adolescents have reported within the scope of our study, their self-esteem is positively correlated with optimism ( $r = 0.24$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). In other words, whether an adolescent is optimistic or pessimistic will considerably influence the way they perceive themselves. Adolescents who are highly positive tend to have high self-esteem and vice versa.

### Discussions

Even though there have been many scientific research into self-esteem among Vietnamese adolescents, we found that none of those previous research were conducted in such a large scale as our study, with the group of samples comprising adolescents from all three regions of North, Central and South Vietnam. Moreover, previous studies primarily focused on children's self-esteem in relation to exogenous factors such as age, gender, academic performance rather than referring to endogenous factors and how they are related to adolescents' self-esteem. Therefore, we hope that the results of this research would provide scientific basis for further studies and support them in the work of assessing practical issues related to self-esteem of adolescents. Last and not least, we believe that the practical results obtained from this study would play an important role in developing a new research direction in which the relations between endogenous factors with self-esteem of Vietnamese adolescents are thoroughly studied.

### Acknowledgement

The research is funded by Asia Research Center, Vietnam National University, Hanoi (ARC-VNU).

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