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Self-Esteem Versus Subjectively Perceived Attractiveness. A Cross-Sectional Study in a Group of Individuals with Different Relationship Statuses¹

SAMOOCENA A SUBIEKTYWNE POSTRZEGANA ATRAKCYJNOŚĆ.

BADANIE PRZEKROJOWE W GRUPIE OSÓB O RÓŻNYM STATUSIE ZWIĄZKU

Summary

This article examines the relationship between self-esteem and perceived attractiveness within the context of interpersonal relationships. Social relationships are theorized to enhance self-esteem through positive feedback. The study employs a survey method, utilizing a self-report questionnaire and Rosenberg's SES scale. A total of 101 participants between the ages of 19 and 60 were included in the study. The results indicated that individuals in relationships were more likely to perceive themselves as attractive compared to single individuals, particularly those in informal relationships. Self-esteem was found to increase with age, while feelings of attractiveness decreased with age and relationship duration. City dwellers reported higher levels of perceived attractiveness than those from smaller towns. Conclusions confirm the important role of relationships in the development of self-esteem and perceived attractiveness and indicate their impact on psychological well-being.

Keywords: self-esteem; perceived attractiveness; interpersonal relationships; relationship

Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje zależność między samooceną a postrzeganą atrakcyjnością w kontekście relacji interpersonalnych. Relacje społeczne wzmacniają poczucie wartości poprzez pozytywne sprzężenie zwrotne. Badanie przeprowadzono metodą ankietową, używając kwestionariusza własnego i skali SES Rosenberga. Udział wzięły 101 osób w wieku 19-60 lat. Wyniki wykazały, że osoby

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w związkach częściej postrzegają siebie jako atrakcyjne niż osoby samotne, szczególnie w relacjach nieformalnych. Samoocena wzrastała wraz z wiekiem, ale poczucie atrakcyjności malało z wiekiem i długością związku. Mieszkańcy miast deklarowali wyższą atrakcyjność niż osoby z mniejszych miejscowości. Wnioski potwierdzają istotną rolę relacji w budowaniu samooceny i atrakcyjności, wskazując na ich wpływ na dobrostan psychiczny.

Słowa kluczowe: samoocena; postrzegana atrakcyjność; relacje interpersonalne; związek

Introduction

Building relationships is a fundamental aspect of human life, critically important for both mental health and self-esteem. Relationships afford us emotional support, which is invaluable in challenging times, while also providing opportunities to share joys and accomplishments. They foster a sense of belonging to a larger whole, which strengthens our sense of community and reduces loneliness. Relationships not only enrich our social lives but also influence our personal development – they help us form social skills, cultivate empathy and navigate conflicts. The link between relationships and self-esteem is profoundly strong.

The factors influencing self-esteem can be categorized into two primary groups, based on their source. Internal factors relate to an individual's self-perception and self-evaluation. External factors, conversely, are linked to the perception of others and the nature of interpersonal relationships.² Close relationships allow for a better understanding how we are perceived and appreciated by others. When we experience praise, compliments, or even simple recognition from loved ones, our self-esteem naturally increases. The individuals with whom we have relationships act as a mirror reflecting our positive qualities. Moreover, recognizing that we are important to others, that we can both provide and receive support, fosters a sense of belonging and purpose, further reinforcing a positive self-image. It is worth recalling Cooley's theory of "looking-glass self" suggesting that our self-concept, as well as its associated evaluation, is shaped by how we believe others perceive us. Thus, it can be said that individuals perceive themselves through the lens of their perceived social image. However, it should be noted that these perceptions can be inaccurate or distorted.³ Considering that self-esteem has the potential to change with experiences in different, often challenging life situations, it is difficult to characterize the factors that shapes it. Research indicates that self-esteem stability is quite low during childhood, increases throughout adolescence, and then decreases during middle age and

2 M. Ryś, *Kształtowanie się poczucia własnej wartości i relacji z innymi w różnych systemach rodzinnych*, "Kwartalnik Naukowy Fides et Ratio," 6 (2011), nr 2, p. 66.

3 U.N. Gurung et al., *Self-Esteem as a Protective Factor Against Adolescent Psychopathology in the Face of Stressful Life Events*, "Journal of Indian Association for Child & Adolescent Mental Health," 15 (2019), no. 2, pp. 34-54.

older adulthood. This non-linear trajectory is characteristic of both genders, different nations, and various self-esteem assessment models. Researchers suggest that lower levels of self-esteem in childhood and older adulthood may be attributed to the numerous changes that individuals experience during these periods. These changes include, for example, starting school or retiring, often accompanied by decreased financial stability. Studies have identified two major peaks in self-esteem. The most substantial increase occurs in early adulthood, while the most significant decline is observed in later life.⁴

Relationships also have a considerable impact on how we perceive our attractiveness. When others express interest in us and show appreciation, we receive confirmation of our value and attractive in their eyes. This social validation enhances self-confidence, which is considered a highly desirable trait. Relationships also motivate us to prioritize self-care – both physically and emotionally – which further influences how we feel about ourselves and how we are perceived by others. Research indicates that an individual's partner plays a particularly significant role in shaping self-esteem. It is important that individuals tend to selectively engage in social and close relationships with people who reinforce their existing self-perception. Individuals are also highly sensitive to the expectations of others, especially their partner, and often modify their behavior to meet those expectations.⁵ This suggests that building relationships not only enriches our emotional lives, but also profoundly affects how we perceive ourselves and our self-worth. Relationships contribute to feelings of being valued, attractive and, needed, all of which are fundamental to our well-being.⁶

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between self-esteem and subjectively perceived attractiveness. To accurately assess these variables relationship status, its duration, and sociodemographic data were considered.

1. Methods

The research employed a diagnostic survey method, utilizing a researcher-designed questionnaire and the Rosenberg's SES self-esteem scale. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part gathered sociodemographic information from participants, including gender, age, size of residence, relationship status, type of relationship, and relationship

4 M. Szpitalak, R. Polczyk, *Samoocena. Geneza, struktura, funkcje i metody pomiaru*, Kraków 2015, p. 188.

5 N. Kostić, Š. Solaković, *Loneliness of High School and College Students: The Relation of Socio-Demographic Characteristics and Self-Esteem with Loneliness*, "Journal Human Research in Rehabilitation," 10 (2020), no. 1, pp. 31-40, <https://doi.org/10.21554/hrr.042004>.

6 H. Avieli, T. Band-Winterstein, T. Araten Bergman, *Sibling Relationships Over the Life Course: Growing Up With a Disability*, "Qualitative Health Research," 29 (2019), no. 12, pp. 1739-1750, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732319837228>.

duration. The second part asked participants to rate their agreement with the following statements “I see myself as an attractive person” and “I believe my partner perceives me as an attractive person.” Respondents were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from “definitely yes” to “definitely no.”

The second tool used in this study was the Rosenberg’s SES self-esteem scale, adapted to Polish by Mariola Laguna, Kinga Lachowicz-Tabaczek, and Irena Dzwonkowska.⁷ This scale consists of 10 statements related to self-perceptions. Participants respond to each statement on a four-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (4). The total score is calculated by summing the responses to all statements, with reverse scoring applied to certain items. Possible scores range from 10 to 40, with a higher score indicating higher self-esteem. The SES has demonstrated good psychometric properties and is a reliable measure (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .81-.83$) In this study, the reliability of the scale was confirmed (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$).

1.1. Statistical analysis

Data analysis was performed using MS Excel 365 and STATISTICA (StatSoft) version 13.3. Due to the non-normal distribution of the dependent variables, non-parametric tests were employed. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare two means, and Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient was used to assess correlation. The level of statistical significance was taken as $\alpha = .05$ ($p < .05$).

1.2. The procedure

Data collection was conducted online, using Google Forms. A link to the questionnaire was shared through various online community groups. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, and potential respondents were informed before answering. Once a sufficient number of responses were collected, the link to the questionnaire was deactivated. Initially, 102 responses were collected, however, one participant did not meet the age criterion (18-60 years), resulting in a final sample size of.

1.3. Participants

Participants were between 19 and 60 years of age with a mean of $M = 30.89$ ($SD = 11.60$). The majority (71.29%) were women. Most respondents resided in rural areas (32.67%) and small towns (31.68%). The majority (76.24%) were in a romantic relationship, with slightly more than half (50.65%) in a formally recognized relationship (e.g., marriage). Relationship duration ranged from 3 months to 42 years ($M = 10.95$ years, $SD = 10.88$ years).

7 M. Laguna, K. Lachowicz-Tabaczek, I. Dzwonkowska, *Skala samooceny SES Morrisa Rosenberga – polska adaptacja metody*, “Psychologia Społeczna,” 2 (2007), nr 2, pp. 164-176.

2. Results

Initial analyses compared the study variables across gender groups. Despite some observed differences, no statistically significant differences ($p > .05$) were found between women and men. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 1.

Next, the collected variables were analyzed in terms of relationship status. Analyses revealed that individuals in relationships were significantly ($U = 2.17, p = .030$) more likely to perceive themselves as attractive ($M = 3.81, SD = 0.93$) compared to single individuals ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.16$). However, no significant difference in self-esteem levels was found between those in relationships and those who were single. The results are presented in Table 2.

Subsequently, participants were compared based on the type of relationship (formal/informal). A significant difference ($U = 2.90, p < .01$) was observed only in the perception of feeling attractive in the eyes of one's partner. Individuals in informal relationships reported a higher sense of being attractive in the eyes of their partner ($M = 4.66, SD = 0.48$) compared to those in formal relationships ($M = 4.15, SD = 0.84$). The results of the analyses are displayed in Table 3.

Finally, correlations between the study variables studied and age, relationship duration, and size of residence were examined. Analysis revealed that, among women, age

Table 1. Comparative analysis of variables in groups by gender

Variable	Gender				<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
	Male		Female			
	M	SD	M	SD		
A sense of being attractive in the eyes of your partner	4.37	0.78	4.53	0.51	−0.48	.63
Seeing yourself as an attractive person	3.60	1.03	3.90	0.94	−1.29	.20
Self-assessment (Rosenberg's SES)	29.21	5.78	31.48	5.26	−1.74	.08

Table 2. Comparative analysis of variables across groups by relationship status

Variable	Relationship status				<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
	Person in a relationship		Single			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Seeing yourself as an attractive person	3.81	0.93	3.29	1.16	2.17	.03
Self-assessment (Rosenberg's SES)	30.13	5.64	29.00	5.94	0.69	.49

Table 3. Comparative analysis of variables in groups by type of relationship

Variable	Type of relationship				<i>U</i>	<i>p</i>
	Formal		Non-formal			
	M	SD	M	SD		
A sense of being attractive in the eyes of your partner	4.15	0.84	4.66	0.48	2.90	<.01
Seeing yourself as an attractive person	3.90	0.82	3.71	1.04	−0.53	.60
Self-assessment (Rosenberg's SES)	30.92	5.22	29.32	6.00	−1.74	.16

was negatively correlated with the sense of being attractive in the eyes of one's partner ($\rho = -.63, p < .001$) but positively correlated with overall self-esteem ($\rho = .28, p < .01$). These correlations were not observed among men. Similarly, relationship duration was negatively associated with feelings of attractiveness in the eyes of one's partner ($\rho = -.56, p < .001$) but was not associated with self-esteem. In contrast, size of residence was weakly associated with both perceptions of being attractive to one's partner and self-perceived attractiveness, primarily among those in formal relationships. The data are presented in Table 4.

3. Discussion

Self-esteem significantly influences many aspects of an individual's life, including daily functioning. The investigated the relationship between self-esteem and subjectively perceived attractiveness, considering the role of interpersonal relationships. The study found no significant association between self-esteem and age. Similar conclusions were drawn in previous research conducted by Natalia Mirska.⁸ Who suggests that the lack of correlation in this age group may be due to the wide age range. Young adults entering adulthood often exhibit higher self-esteem compared to those approaching retirement and experiencing significant life transitions. Research indicates that men generally report higher self-esteem than women, even more evidently above the threshold age of 40, as suggested in the research by Hubert Kupiec.⁹ This study does not indicate such a relationship, potentially due to the limited number of male participants. Individuals in relationships reported higher level of self-perceived attractiveness. A similar relationship was observed

8 N. Mirska, *Podatność wiktyimizacyjna a samoocena i optymizm*, "Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i Praktyka," 2009, nr 1-2, pp. 137-152.

9 H. Kupiec, *Płeć jako moderator samooceny młodzieży dostosowanej i niedostosowanej społecznie*, "Resocjalizacja Polska," 7 (2014), pp. 117-134.

Table 4. Spearman correlation analysis (Spearman's rho)

Spearman correlation		General	Gender		Relationship status		Type of relationship	
			Female	Male	In a relationship	Single	formal	Non-formal
Age of respondents	Seeing yourself as an attractive person	-.53***	-.63***	-.06	-.53***	—	-.42***	-.36***
	Seeing yourself as an attractive person	.06	.10	.09	.01	-.01	-.21	.05
	Self-assessment (Rosenberg's SES)	.28**	.38**	.18	.28**	.22	.08	.32
Duration of relationship	Seeing yourself as an attractive person	-.44***	-.56***	.02	-.44***	—	-.46**	-.19
	Seeing yourself as an attractive person	-.13	-.03	-.32	-.13	—	-.23	-.20
	Self-assessment (Rosenberg's SES)	.02	.09	-.31	.02	—	.01	-.16
Size of the place of residence	Seeing yourself as an attractive person	.25*	.23	.30	.25*	—	.38*	.11
	Seeing yourself as an attractive person	.21*	.23	.01	.25*	.01	.46*	.07
	Self-assessment (Rosenberg's SES)	.07	.19	-.33	.10	-.06	.31	-.08

* $p < 0,05$, ** $p < 0,01$, *** $p < 0,001$

by Jacek Śliwak et al., who proposed that individuals in relationships receive more feedback about themselves, which may contribute to a greater sense of self-esteem and attractiveness.¹⁰ The analysis found that individuals in informal relationships reported a higher sense of being attractive than those in formal relationships. This contrasts with finding by Wioletta Tuszyńska-Bogucka et al., who suggested that stronger interpersonal connection between partners in informal relationships may lead to higher self-esteem across various domains.¹¹ This study also found that self-esteem tends to increase with age while perceived attractiveness decreases, particularly for women and those in relationships. Similar relationships have been observed in studies indicating that self-esteem increases between the ages of 25 and 60, potentially due to increasing economic stability, career advancement, and a greater stability in family and emotional life.¹² This study also the relationship between city size and perceived attractiveness, both in one's own eyes and in the eyes of one's partner. This correlation was particularly pronounced among those in formal relationships. Katarzyna Nowak's research indicates that individuals from rural areas tend to have lower self-esteem compared to those living in urban environments.¹³ Yolanda Peña et al. suggests that this may be attributed to the influence of modern culture, which is often more prevalent in cities, and may promote self-comparison and potentially diminish self-esteem.¹⁴ The analyses of relationship duration and self-esteem showed no significant correlations. However, a negative correlation was observed between feelings of attractiveness and relationship duration. This is consistent with the finding of Maciej Ostrowski and Nikola Skoczylas,¹⁵ who reported no clear association between relationship duration and self-esteem levels. They suggest that a positive association may exist between self-esteem and relationship quality rather than duration.

Building and maintaining relationships plays a crucial role in our lives, affecting both our emotional well-being and self-perception. The impact of relationships on self-esteem is undeniable. When we surround ourselves with supportive and appreciative individuals, our self-esteem is nurtured. Compliments, expression of appreciation, and even simple

10 J. Śliwak et al., *Poziom samooceny u osób korzystających z różnych form internetu*, "Studia Socialia Cracoviensia," 9 (2017), nr 2, pp. 129-149, <https://doi.org/10.15633/ssc.2460>.

11 W. Tuszyńska-Bogucka, J. Bogucki, D. Dziduch, *Satysfakcja i poczucie własnej wartości u kobiet w różnych typach związków*, "Przegląd Badań Edukacyjnych," 2 (2014), nr 17, pp. 69-85, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/PBE.2013.013>.

12 N. Branden, *6 filarów poczucia własnej wartości*, tłum. H. Dąbrowska, Łódź 2016, p. 86.

13 K. Nowak, *Poziom samooceny wychowanków młodzieżowych ośrodków socjoterapeutycznych*, "Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, sectio J – Paedagogia-Psychologia," 35 (2022), nr 3, pp. 171-191, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/j.2022.35.3.171-191>.

14 Y. Peña, M. Pech, E. Angulo, *Self-Esteem, in Students of Yucatan, Mexico*, "Psychology," 10 (2019), issue 4, pp. 411-423, <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2019.104028>.

15 M. Ostrowski, N. Skoczylas, *Stabilność samooceny a jakość związku romantycznego*, "Ogrody Nauk i Sztuk," 9 (2019), pp. 259-266, <https://doi.org/10.15503/onis2019.259.266>.

gestures of approval serve as a reminder of our value and strengths. The people with whom we interact often reflect our positive qualities, contributing to a deeper understanding of our self-worth. Relationships also influence our sense of attractiveness. When we feel accepted and appreciated by others, we are more likely to perceive ourselves as attractive. Positive relationships foster self-confidence, which is an attractive quality in itself. Furthermore, close relationships motivate us to prioritize self-care, both emotionally and physically, which further enhances our sense of self-worth.

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