

DIMENSIONS OF SELF-ESTEEM IN NORTH MACEDONIAN YOUTH: SELF-ACCEPTANCE, MOTIVATION, AND EMOTIONAL PEACE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Self-esteem represents a key aspect of the psychological development during adolescence and the emerging adulthood. Existing evidence indicates that the higher self-esteem is associated with the greater wellbeing, emotional stability, and resilience. Despite this, cross-cultural patterns remain insufficiently examined, particularly within the Southeast Europe. The aim of this study was to explore the latent structure of self-esteem and to assess age- and gender-related differences among adolescents and young adults in North Macedonia.

Subjects and methods: The study included 510 participants (285 females and 225 males) recruited from high schools and universities in Skopje, North Macedonia. Self-esteem was measured using a culturally adapted version of the Janis–Field Scale. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to evaluate the proposed three-factor model. Internal consistency, regression analyses, and demographic comparisons were conducted using RStudio.

Results: The three-factor model showed excellent fit indices (CFI = 0.992; TLI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.047), supporting the validity of the structure comprising Self-Acceptance, Motivation, and Emotional Peace. Self-Acceptance emerged as the strongest predictor of overall self-esteem ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). A small gender difference was identified, with males reporting slightly higher self-esteem scores; however, the effect size was not substantial. Age-related analyses indicated a modest decline in self-esteem among the older participants, with university students exhibiting greater variability in scores compared to the high school students.

Conclusion: The findings support a stable multidimensional structure of self-esteem among adolescents and emerging adults in North Macedonia. The results indicate subtle demographic influences and underscore the importance of culturally validated instruments when assessing psychological constructs. These outcomes may inform future educational and mental health initiatives aimed at strengthening youth wellbeing in the region.

Keywords: self-esteem, adolescence, emerging adulthood, confirmatory factor analysis, mental health

INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is commonly described as an individual's subjective evaluation of personal worth, encompassing perceptions of value and competence [Branje et al., 2021]. Rather than a fixed personality trait, it develops through continuous interpersonal experiences and social interactions

that shape how individuals define themselves within relational and societal contexts [Stets & Burke, 2014]. Contemporary theoretical perspectives conceptualize self-esteem as a multidimensional construct involving both self-liking and perceived competence, reflecting a level of complexity that

extends beyond a single global measure [Tafarodi & Swann, 2001].

Adolescence marks a particularly sensitive developmental stage for the formation and fluctuation of self-esteem, driven by rapid biological, cognitive, and social transitions [Branje et al., 2021]. Findings from large-scale longitudinal studies indicate that self-esteem generally increases from adolescence into adulthood, supporting the notion that it remains developmentally fluid rather than stable during earlier life phases [Orth et al., 2018]. Early levels of self-esteem have also been shown to predict later psychological functioning, underscoring the relevance of examining self-esteem during this period [Hirsch & Dubois, 1991].

A substantial body of evidence links low self-esteem with internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and overall psychological distress [Keane & Loades, 2017; Martínez-Casanova et al., 2024; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013]. Among adolescents, low self-esteem has further been associated with emotional vulnerability and suicidal ideation [Dhillon & Mehra, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019]. In contrast, higher self-esteem is consistently related to greater emotional stability, subjective well-being, and adaptive coping [Diener et al., 2018; Du et al., 2017]. Taken together, these findings indicate that self-esteem extends beyond a simple self-perception of worth and functions as an important psychological marker associated with broader emotional health and wellbeing [Harris & Orth, 2020; Keane & Loades, 2017].

Cultural context plays a significant role in shaping the development and expression of self-esteem. Research has demonstrated variation across family dynamics, community environments, and educational systems, suggesting that sociocultural factors influence both the level and manifestation of self-esteem [Nguyen et al., 2019; Obeid et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2016]. Consequently, instruments developed in other cultural settings require validation before being applied to new populations, particularly when assessing adolescents.

Psychometric validation, including confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), has become a key methodological approach for evaluating the structure and reliability of self-esteem measures [Du et al., 2017; Hank & Baltes-Götz, 2019; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001]. These analyses help establish construct validity and allow researchers to assess measurement stability across demographic variables such as age and gender.

Despite the extensive international research, evidence from the Southeastern Europe remains limited, with particularly little data originating from North Macedonia. Expanding research in this context may offer a clearer understanding of how cultural and demographic factors shape self-esteem during adolescence and emerging adulthood, and may support the development of targeted educational and mental health interventions for the youth.

The present study therefore aimed to assess the latent structure, reliability, and demographic correlates of self-esteem among adolescents and young adults in North Macedonia using confirmatory factor analysis and latent regression modeling.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants and Procedure

The study included 510 participants (285 females, 225 males; $M = 18.4$, $SD = 3.2$) recruited from high schools and universities in Skopje, North Macedonia. Recruitment took place between March and May 2025 through in-class announcements. Participation was voluntary, and the questionnaires were completed individually during classes under researcher supervision. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. The responses were anonymized following the completion and were entered into an electronic database for statistical analysis.

Instrument

Self-esteem was assessed using a 20-item questionnaire adapted from the Janis–Field Feelings of Inadequacy Scale (Janis & Field, 1959). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “not at all” to 5 = “yes, surely”), with higher scores reflecting higher self-esteem. The instrument was translated and culturally adapted for use in North Macedonia using a forward–backward translation procedure. The internal consistency for the final version was strong (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.91$).

Ethics Approval and Consent

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision). Ethics approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU). All

participants provided written informed consent. Participation was anonymous, and no identifying information was collected.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using RStudio (Version 4.3). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the demographic characteristics and the overall self-esteem scores. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was applied to evaluate the proposed three-factor structure (Self-Acceptance, Motivation, Emotional Peace). Model fit was assessed using χ^2 , the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR).

Multiple regression models were used to determine the contribution of each latent dimension to total self-esteem. The covariance analysis examined the relationships among the latent factors, and the latent regression modeling was applied to explore the effects of age and gender. Data visualization was performed using the ggplot2 and semPlot packages.

RESULTS

A total of 510 participants (285 females, 225 males) completed the self-esteem questionnaire. The analyses were conducted to examine the group-level differences, factorial validity, and the latent relationships among the identified dimensions of self-esteem. The results are

presented sequentially, beginning with the descriptive sample characteristics, followed by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) outcomes, latent regressions, and correlational modeling.

The age distribution of the participants across the educational settings reflected the expected cohort differences. As shown in Figure 1, the younger respondents were predominantly high school students, whereas the older participants were primarily university students.

Demographic and group-level characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The mean age of the sample was 18.4 ± 3.2 years, with most participants aged ≥ 20 years (57.1 %). Females accounted for 55.9 % of the cohort. Self-esteem scores were higher among the high school students and the younger participants compared to the university students.

As visualized in Figure 2, female and male participants demonstrated similar distributions of the total self-esteem scores, with a small but consistent median advantage among males.

Further comparison by study institution (see Figure 3) revealed overlapping confidence intervals between male and female participants, suggesting minimal gender-based variability in the mean self-esteem across educational levels.

The CFA model was constructed to test the hypothesized three-factor structure of self-esteem, consisting of Self-Acceptance, Motivation, and Emotional Peace. The standardized factor loadings are depicted in Figure 4, confirming that all items loaded strongly (≥ 0.6) on their respective latent constructs.

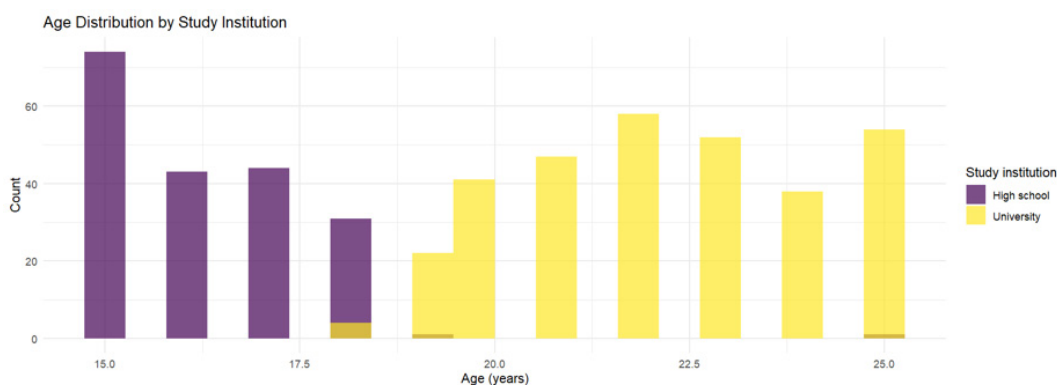
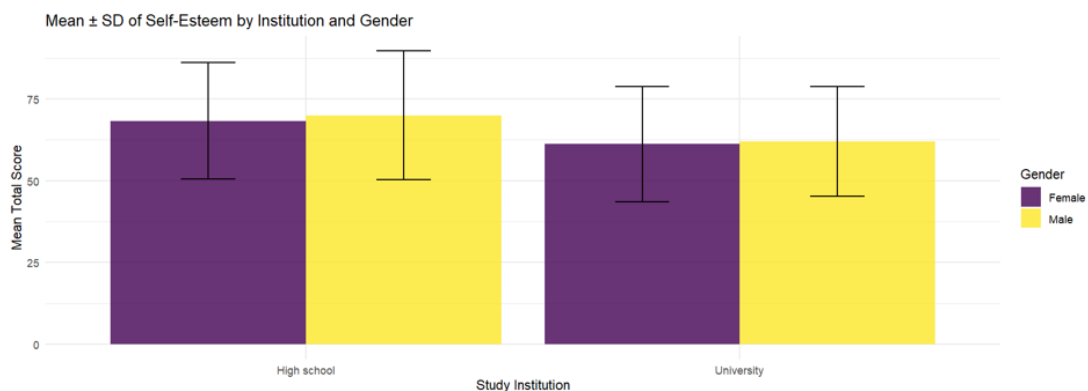


Figure 1. Age distribution by study institution. Younger participants predominantly attended high school, while older respondents were university students, confirming the expected cohort differentiation

Table 1. *Sample characteristics and group-level self-esteem scores*

Variable	Category	N	%	Mean (Self-Esteem Total / Age)	SD
Age (years)	≤ 16	117	22.9	69.1 / 15.4	20.6 / 0.5
	17–19	102	20.0	68.2 / 17.8	15.0 / 0.8
	≥ 20	291	57.1	61.1 / 22.6	17.2 / 1.7
Gender	Female	285	55.9	63.9	17.8
	Male	225	44.1	65.9	18.3
Study institution	High school	194	38.0	69.0	18.8
	University	316	62.0	61.6	17.2
Self-esteem means (by gender × institution)	Female – High school	129	25.3	68.3	17.8
	Female – University	156	30.6	61.2	17.6
	Male – High school	65	12.7	70.0	19.7
	Male – University	160	31.4	62.0	16.7

**Figure 2.** *Distribution of total self-esteem scores by gender. Female and male participants showed similar distributional shapes with slightly higher medians among males***Figure 3.** *Mean ± SD of total self-esteem by study institution and gender. Overlapping error bars indicate minimal gender-based variation across educational levels*

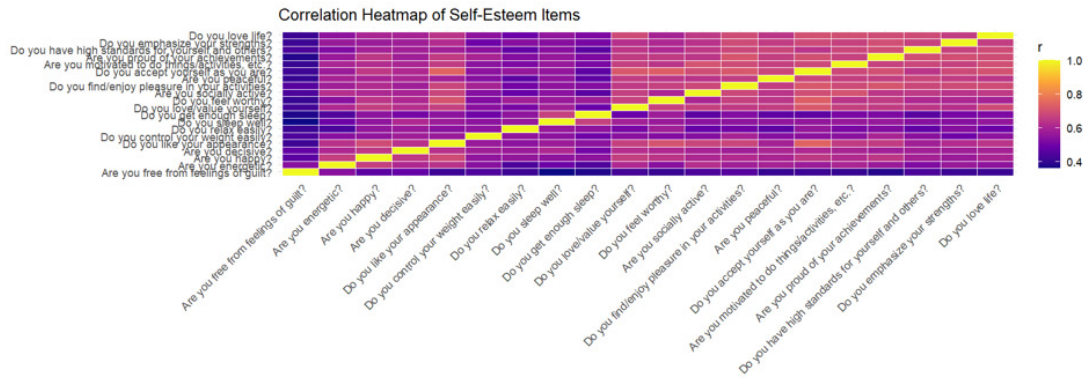


Figure 4. Standardized factor loadings for the three-factor CFA model of self-esteem items. All items demonstrated strong loadings (≥ 0.6), supporting factorial stability

Model fit indices (Table 2) indicated excellent overall fit: $\chi^2(24) = 50.84$, $p = 0.001$, CFI = 0.992, TLI = 0.988, RMSEA = 0.047 (90 % CI 0.029–0.065), and SRMR = 0.020. All values met or exceeded the commonly accepted benchmarks, supporting the validity of the three-factor model.

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis – model fit indices

Fit Index	Value	Benchmark
χ^2 (df = 24)	50.84 ($p = 0.001$)	Non-significant preferred
CFI	0.992	≥ 0.90
TLI	0.988	≥ 0.90
RMSEA (90% CI)	0.047 (0.029–0.065)	≤ 0.06
SRMR	0.020	≤ 0.08

A visual representation of the structural model is provided in Figure 5, where latent variables are shown as ellipses and observed indicators as rectangles. The diagram emphasizes the conceptual coherence between latent dimensions and their observed measures.

Distributions of the latent factor scores are presented in Figure 6. The three dimensions exhibited overlapping yet distinct distributions, reflecting balanced construct variability within the sample.

Table 3 reports standardized factor loadings for all items across the three latent dimensions. Loadings ranged between 0.64 and 0.87 (all $p < 0.001$), supporting internal consistency and construct validity.

Multiple regression analysis results (Table 4) examined the total self-esteem as predicted by the three latent factors identified in the confirmatory factor analysis model: Self-Acceptance, Motivation, and Emotional Peace. The model accounted for approximately 59% of the variance in total self-esteem, with Self-Acceptance emerging as the strongest and most consistent predictor of global self-esteem.

Covariance analysis (Table 5) demonstrated strong and statistically significant correlations among the latent factors, with standardized coefficients ranging from 0.945 to 0.993 ($p < 0.001$).

Inter-factor associations and demographic predictors were also explored. Figure 7 visualizes the relationship between age, gender, and total self-esteem scores, indicating a subtle downward trend with increasing age but no significant moderation by gender.

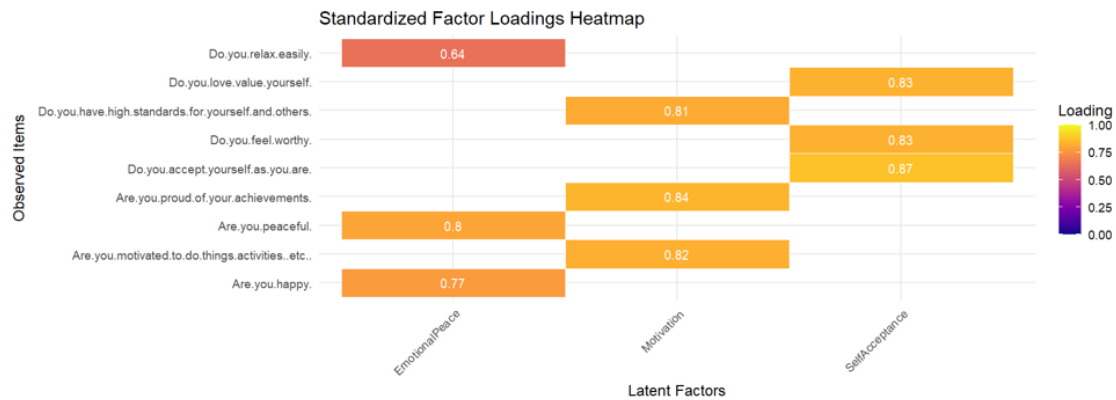


Figure 5. Standardized factor loadings for the three-factor CFA model of self-esteem items. All items demonstrated strong loadings (≥ 0.6), supporting factorial stability and internal consistency across the Emotional Peace, Motivation, and Self-Acceptance domains

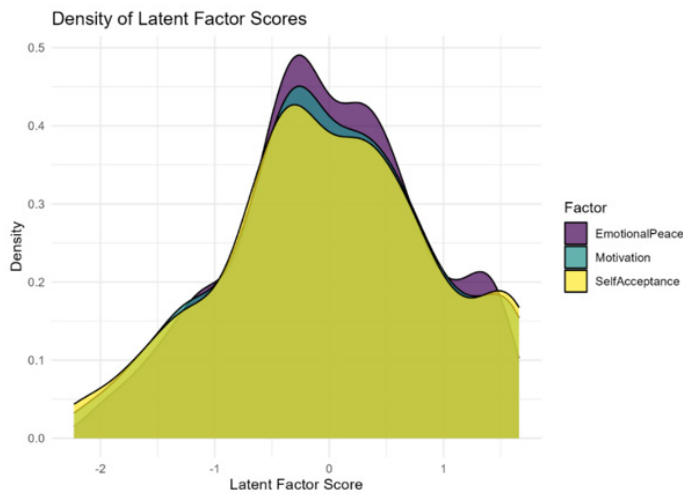


Figure 6. Density of latent factor scores (Self-Acceptance, Motivation, Emotional Peace). Overlapping curves suggest a balanced construct distribution across participants

Table 3. Standardized factor loadings of the three-factor CFA model

Latent Factor	Item	Standardized Loading	p value
Self-Acceptance	Do you love/value yourself?	0.83	< 0.001
	Do you accept yourself as you are?	0.87	< 0.001
	Do you feel worthy?	0.83	< 0.001
Motivation	Are you motivated to do things?	0.82	< 0.001
	Are you proud of your achievements?	0.84	< 0.001
	Do you have high standards for yourself and others?	0.81	< 0.001
Emotional Peace	Are you happy?	0.77	< 0.001
	Are you peaceful?	0.80	< 0.001
	Do you relax easily?	0.64	< 0.001

Table 4. Multiple regression predicting total self-esteem from Latent Factors

Predictor	β	SE	t	p
Self-Acceptance	0.68	0.05	13.5	< 0.001
Motivation	0.43	0.06	7.2	< 0.001
Emotional Peace	0.29	0.07	4.3	< 0.001

Model summary: $R^2 = 0.59$, $F(3, 506) \approx 120.8$, $p < 0.001$

Table 5. Covariances between Latent Factors (Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model)

Latent Pair	Estimate	SE	z	p	Standardized Correlation
Self-Acceptance $\leftrightarrow$ Motivation	0.862	0.068	12.67	< 0.001	0.945
Self-Acceptance $\leftrightarrow$ Emotional Peace	0.823	0.066	12.55	< 0.001	1.000
Motivation $\leftrightarrow$ Emotional Peace	0.791	0.064	12.45	< 0.001	0.993

Model summary: $\chi^2(24) = 50.84$, $p = 0.001$; CFI = 0.992; TLI = 0.988; RMSEA = 0.047 (90 % CI: 0.029– 0.065); SRMR = 0.020

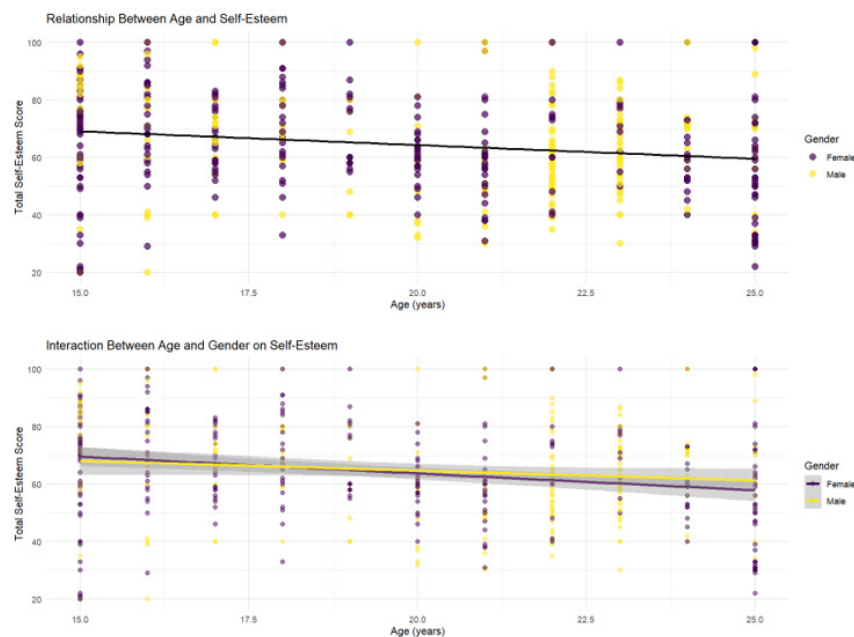


Figure 7. Relationship between age, gender, and total self-esteem scores. Top panel: Scatterplot showing the overall trend of total self-esteem across age. Bottom panel: Interaction plot indicating a mild, non-significant decline in self-esteem with age across both genders, with overlapping confidence intervals suggesting minimal moderation by gender

In contrast, Figure 8 highlights the distribution of self-esteem by study institution, showing broader variability among university participants.

Further latent regression analyses (Table 6) revealed that age positively predicted Motivation ($\beta = 0.041$, $p < 0.001$), while males scored marginally lower on this factor compared with females ($\beta = -0.084$, $p = 0.020$).

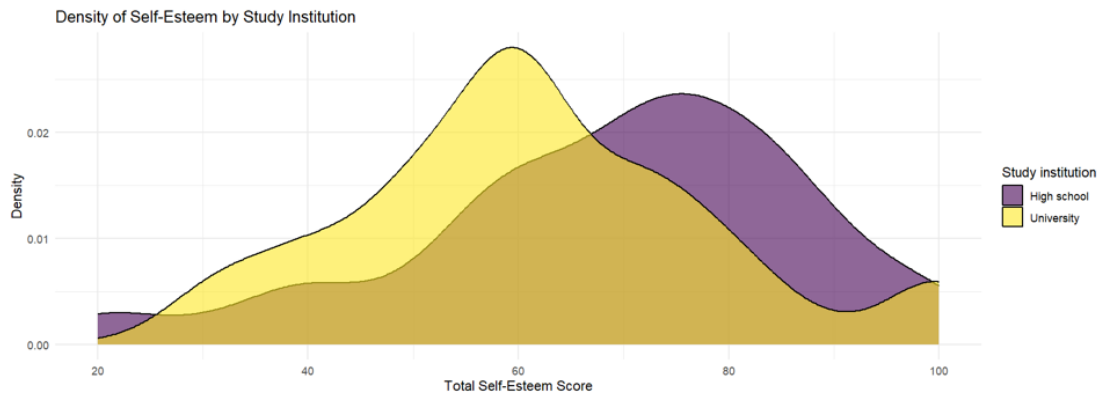


Figure 8. Density distribution of total self-esteem scores by study institution (high school vs. university).
University participants displayed broader score variability and a slightly lower peak mean compared to high school students, indicating contextual differences in self-esteem related to educational transition

Table 6. Age and gender predictors of motivation (Latent Regression Model)

Variable	β	SE	t	p
Age (years)	0.041	0.010	4.10	< 0.001
Gender (M = 1, F = 0)	-0.084	0.037	-2.30	0.020

Model summary: $R^2 = 0.06$, $F(2, 507) \approx 16.2$, $p < 0.001$

Finally, the relationship between the Self-Acceptance latent factor and the total self-esteem scores is shown in Figure 9. The strong positive linear association further supports the central role of self-acceptance in shaping the overall self-esteem.

Taken together, the findings support the factorial stability, internal consistency, and

construct validity of the three-factor self-esteem model. The latent structure demonstrated strong associations with the overall self-esteem and modest but meaningful relationships with the demographic variables such as age and gender, providing a solid empirical basis for the subsequent discussion.

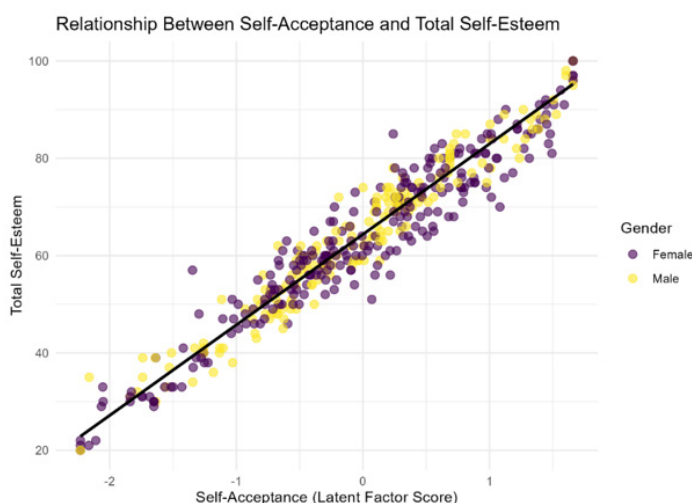


Figure 9. Correlation between the latent Self-Acceptance factor and the total self-esteem scores, illustrating a robust positive linear association

DISCUSSION

The present findings provide new insight into the structure and correlates of self-esteem among adolescents and emerging adults in North Macedonia. The study confirmed a three-factor latent structure comprising Self-Acceptance, Motivation, and Emotional Peace, with excellent model fit and high internal consistency. This is consistent with the contemporary theoretical perspectives suggesting that self-esteem is better conceptualized as a multidimensional construct rather than a single global measure [Tafarodi & Swann, 2001]. The strong and consistent standardized loadings across factors further support the internal coherence of the adapted scale and align with the psychometric trends reported in the cross-cultural validation studies using similar analytical approaches [Du et al., 2017; Hank & Baltes-Götz, 2019].

A key finding was the pronounced predictive influence of Self-Acceptance on overall self-esteem. This pattern aligns with the developmental research emphasizing the role of perceived self-worth and internal validation as central processes in identity formation during adolescence [Branje et al., 2021]. Longitudinal studies similarly show that increases in self-acceptance are associated with improvements in emotional stability and autonomy across developmental periods [Orth et al., 2018]. Rosenberg's foundational work also positions self-acceptance as the core evaluative component of global self-esteem, with motivational and affective dimensions functioning as secondary expressions of self-evaluation [Rosenberg et al., 1995]. The strong correlations among the three latent factors observed in this study further suggest an integrated meaning-making process characteristic of late adolescence and early adulthood. These findings are further supported by recent regional evidence demonstrating that emotional regulation capacities and adaptive coping styles are closely intertwined with self-perception and psychological resilience in youth populations [H & N, 2026].

Minor gender differences were observed, with males reporting slightly higher self-esteem; however, the effect size was small. This finding aligns with the meta-analytic research showing modest but consistent gender variation, with girls often demonstrating greater self-critical tendencies and emotional sensi-

tivity during adolescence [Keane & Loades, 2017; Martínez-Casanova et al., 2024; Moksnes & Espnes, 2013]. The small magnitude of the gender gap in this sample may reflect shifting sociocultural expectations in which norms surrounding confidence, emotional expression, and achievement are becoming more balanced across genders [Nguyen et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2016]. Comparable observations in the region suggest that expanded educational access, increased social equity, and evolving gender roles may be contributing factors in reducing these differences [Obeid et al., 2019].

Age-related results showed a slight decline in self-esteem among older participants. Although subtle, this pattern differs from longitudinal findings indicating a gradual increase in self-esteem from adolescence into adulthood [Orth et al., 2018; Rosenberg et al., 1995]. Several contextual factors may help explain this deviation. The transition to university settings introduces increased academic expectations, new social contexts, and shifts in perceived competence factors that can temporarily challenge self-evaluation and emotional confidence [Bennert et al., 2025]. Furthermore, socioeconomic uncertainty and broader societal transitions characteristic of the post-transition economies may intensify the psychological pressure during the emerging adulthood, influencing evaluative judgments and perceived self-efficacy.

Connections between self-esteem and mental health outcomes documented in previous research provide additional context for interpreting these results. Earlier studies consistently report associations between lower self-esteem and emotional vulnerability, psychological distress, and reduced wellbeing [Dhillon & Mehra, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019; Stets & Burke, 2014]. In line with this, meta-analytic evidence indicates that trauma exposure and stress-related psychopathology are associated with measurable cognitive and emotional impairments, including disruptions in memory and self-referential processing [Sulejmani & Pop-Jordanova, 2026]. The greater variability observed among university-aged participants in the present study may therefore reflect a developmental period characterized by heightened self-monitoring, comparative evaluation, and identity consolidation, consistent with patterns reported in Scandinavian and Asian cohorts [Diener et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019].

A key contribution of this research is its regional relevance. Although self-esteem has been widely examined internationally, empirical evidence from the Southeastern Europe remains scarce. Cross-cultural studies highlight that sociocultural norms, family dynamics, and educational expectations shape the development of self-esteem [Obeid et al., 2019; Patton et al., 2016]. The strong psychometric performance of the adapted scale in this study suggests conceptual alignment with established international models, while the demographic patterns observed reflect context-specific influences that warrant further investigation. These findings underscore the value of the localized validation rather than direct transfer of externally developed instruments [Hank & Baltes-Götz, 2019; Tafarodi & Swann, 2001].

Strengths and Implications

Methodologically, the use of confirmatory factor analysis and latent regression modeling strengthens the validity of the findings and provides a rigorous analytical framework in a context where structured validation research remains limited. The results have potential implications for early mental health screening, educational programming, and preventive interventions aimed at supporting emotional wellbeing.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. Its cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretation and does not allow examination of developmental change over time. Future longitudinal research would help clarify how life transitions, academic milestones, and social environments influence self-esteem across developmental stages. Expanding sampling to include diverse regions and socioeconomic backgrounds would also strengthen generalizability.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the findings support a stable multidimensional structure of self-esteem among adolescents and emerging adults in North Macedonia, with demographic variation reflecting both established developmental patterns and context-specific influences. By combining

cross-cultural psychometric validation with demographic modeling, this study adds meaningful evidence to the broader literature on youth wellbeing and offers a foundation for future psychological and public health initiatives.

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Резиме

ДИМЕНЗИИ НА САМОДОВЕРБАТА КАЈ МЛАДИТЕ ОД СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА: САМОПРИФАЌАЊЕ, МОТИВАЦИЈА И ЕМОЦИОНАЛЕН МИР

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Вовед: Самодовербата претставува клучен аспект на психолошкиот развој во адолесценцијата и раната зрелост. Постојните докази укажуваат дека повисокото ниво на самодоверба е поврзано со поголема психичка благосостојба, емоционална стабилност и резилентност. И покрај тоа, интеркултурните обрасци остануваат недоволно истражени, особено во регионот на Југоисточна Европа. Целта на оваа студија беше да се испита латентната структура на самодовербата и да се проценат разликите поврзани со возраста и полот кај адолесценти и млади возрасни лица во Северна Македонија.

Испитаници и методи: Во студијата беа вклучени 510 испитаници (285 жени и 225 мажи), регрутирани од средни училишта и университети во Скопје, Северна Македонија. Самодовербата беше проценета со културолошки адаптирана верзија на скалата Janis–Field. За евалуација на предложениот трифакторски модел беше применета конфирматорна факторска анализа (CFA). Внатрешната конзистентност, регресионите анализи и демографските споредби беа спроведени со користење RStudio.

Резултати: Трифакторскиот модел покажа одлични индекси на вклопување ($CFI = 0,992$; $TLI = 0,988$; $RMSEA = 0,047$), со што се потврди валидноста на структурата составена од самоприфаќање, мотивација и емоционален мир. Самоприфаќањето се покажа како најсилен предиктор на вкупната самодоверба ($\beta = 0,68$, $p < 0,001$). Беше утврдена мала полова разлика, при што мажите пријавиле нешто повисоки вредности на самодоверба; сепак, големината на ефектот не беше значајна. Анализите поврзани со возраста укажаа на умерено намалување на самодовербата кај повозрасните испитаници, додека студентите покажаа поголема варијабилност на резултатите во споредба со средношколците.

Заклучок: Наодите поддржуваат стабилна мултидимензионална структура на самодовербата кај адолесцентите и кај младите возрасни лица во Северна Македонија. Резултатите укажуваат на суптилни демографски влијанија и ја нагласуваат важноста на културолошки валидираните инструменти при процената на психичките конструкти. Овие сознанија може да придонесат кон идни образовни и менталноздравствени иницијативи насочени кон зајакнување на благосостојбата кај младите во регионот.

Клучни зборови: самодоверба, адолесценција, рана зрелост, конфирматорна факторска анализа, ментално здравје