



# Relationships between Self-Esteem, Anxiety, Life Orientation, and Forgiveness among University Students

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**Abstract.** A variety of psychological issues, including increased stress, anxiety, depression, and adjustment issues, are common among university students. They might experience unfamiliar circumstances and struggle with issues related to their life orientation, anxiety, and sense of self or self-esteem. They also face some decisions and difficult circumstances that determine their life orientation. One of them is the ability to forgive. Therefore, this research aims to present an analysis of the relationship between self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation, and forgiveness among students at university. The research subjects consisted of 89 university students aged 20 to 26 years. Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale was used to gauge the degree of self-esteem. The Generalised Anxiety Disorder Self-Report Scale was used to measure anxiety. The Enright Forgiveness Inventory-30 was used to measure forgiveness between people, and the Life Orientation Scale was used to measure life orientation. The results showed significant correlations between self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation and forgiveness. Self-esteem is a significant predictor of forgiveness among students. The implications of the study were also discussed.

**Keywords:** Self-esteem, Forgiveness, Anxiety, Life orientation, Meaning mindset.

## 1. Introduction

Numerous significant characteristics apply to university students. University students are typically in a stage of emerging adulthood, experiencing a transition from adolescence to adulthood, from the perspective of developmental transition. As people navigate identity exploration, increased independence, and goal setting for their education, careers, and personal lives, this time is characterised by significant changes and difficulties. They might examine various roles, values, and beliefs and query and hone their cultural and personal identities. Their social, academic, and personal lives may all be integrated as part of this process. As a result, these students may experience a range of psychological difficulties, such as higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and adjustment problems [1]. Additionally, they might go through novel situations and face difficulties relating to their life orientation, anxiety, and sense of self. Briefly, they must make decisions and deal with difficult circumstances that will determine their life path.

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The ability to forgive is one of the important decisions in life. As a result, the purpose of this study is to present an analysis of the relationship between self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation and forgiveness among university students.

## 2. Literature Review

To date, a lot of attention is paid to the topic of self-relationship in psychology. Regarding this terminology, they used terms such as self-concept, self-image, self-worth, or self-esteem. The concept of self-esteem has many theoretical accounts (see, e.g., [2] [3][4][42][5]. Rosenberg (1965) defined self-esteem as global self-worth including positive and negative feelings or evaluations about self [6]. The generalized global perception of self-esteem became the object of much research because of the significant relationship between self-esteem and other constructs related to mental health [7]. The research examined self-esteem and personality traits [8] [4] academic performance [9] [10], quality of life [11], mindset [12] [13], and meaning of life [14]. From among findings, high self-esteem is a result of achieving school performance and not vice versa and a high level of self-esteem increases good school performance.

Self-esteem has a strong correlation to happiness and high self-esteem leads to experiencing greater happiness [2][41]. A low level of self-esteem negatively correlates with anxiety and depression [15] and it is the best predictor of greater sadness [16]. Anxiety is a normal and adaptive response that helps individuals prepare for potential dangers and cope with challenging situations. However, when anxiety becomes excessive, persistent, and interferes with daily functioning, it can be considered an anxiety disorder.

Frankl's model [17] distinguishes two different basic life orientations: The meaning mindset and the success mindset. This model is extended by Wong [18], according to which one way of life is to live a virtuous, meaningful life and the other way of life is to live a happy, successful life less focused on global problems, humanity, or injustice. During life, we must face some decisions and difficult circumstances that determine our life orientation. One of them is the ability to forgive.

Forgiveness is a moral virtue, and its basic essence is to accept the fact that the victim has been treated unfairly. The role of the victim is to try to get eliminated, leave resentment, and get rid of the desire for revenge toward someone who hurt the victim. The last and most important part of the basic essence of forgiveness is to offer a gift of mercy, generosity, and love toward that person [19]. Increasingly authors focused on forgiveness in education in the school environment (see, e.g., [20] [21] [22]. The findings show that forgiveness counselling or education in forgiveness has positive effects. Other research examined students who learned and applied knowledge about forgiveness and found that results showed forgiveness offers a tendency to reduce negative emotions and anger. Further studies have shown that forgiveness education or Forgiveness Therapy improves emotional health (see, e.g., [23][24][25][26] and physical health [27]. Another study found that forgiveness education improves academic functioning and school performance [28]. The study among Persian, Azeri, and Kurdish students has shown that forgiveness education lowers ethnic prejudices [29]. Vice versa suppression of anger or keeping of resentment inside can lead to negative thoughts,

negative behaviour, depression, anxiety, low level of self-esteem, or diseases ([30] [31] [32]. Experiencing trauma can result in emotional and behavioural dysregulation [31] and academic difficulties [33].

To evaluate this relationship, it was hypothesized that (1) a) There is a significant relationship between self-esteem and anxiety. b) There is a significant relationship between self-esteem and life orientation. c) There is a significant relationship between self-esteem and forgiveness. d) There is a significant relationship between anxiety and forgiveness. e) There is a significant relationship between life orientation and forgiveness. (2) Self-esteem is expected to predict the likelihood of forgiveness in people, suggesting that people who have positive self-esteem may be more likely to forgive others.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Participants**

A self-administered online questionnaire was used to gather quantitative data. A self-administered online questionnaire was used to collect data online for one week, from October 14 to October 20, 2022. A total of 114 responses were collected from Google form, however, 25 responses were excluded for further analysis due to invalid responses. Eventually, only 89 data could be further analysed. The survey included validated scales for measuring life orientation, forgiving others, anxiety, and self-worth. Participants informed consent was obtained before their participation, and clear instructions were given to them. The online data collection method made it convenient for participants, protected their privacy and confidentiality, and reduced any potential biases brought on by in-person interactions.

#### **3.2 Measures**

The study has a quantitative exploratory-verification character. The questionnaire battery was composed of scales, supplemented in the introduction with questions aimed at ascertaining sociodemographic data. For the measurement of the level of self-esteem, Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale RSES from Rosenberg (1965) was used [6]. The scale has 10 items to which the respondent answers on a 4-point Likert scale. The scale is unidimensional and measures global self-worth. The level of anxiety was measured using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder self-report Scale GAD-7 [34]. The scale consists of 7 items that asked respondents how often, over the last 2 weeks, they were bothered by the problems and 1 item for assessing the duration of anxiety symptoms. For the measurement of the meaning mindset, the Life Orientation Scale from Wong [34] [44] was used, which reflects a meaning mindset with a strong positive emphasis on moral excellence and altruism. For the measurement of the degree of forgiveness, The Enright Forgiveness Inventory-30 EFI-30 from Enright et al., [35] was used. The 30-item EFI-30 scale consists of 6 independent scales and reflects the total score of effect, Behaviour and Cognition. The overall score of forgiveness is the result of their

three scales. The part of the tool for measuring forgiveness is The Pseudo Forgiveness scale for internal validation and the independent Forgiveness Item for convergent construct validation.

### 3.3 Data analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaire battery were analysed using the statistical program JASP. Descriptive statistics were calculated for sociodemographic data and self-esteem, anxiety, forgiveness, and life orientation scores. The Spearman correlation coefficient was used to analyse the relationships between variables. The Shapiro-Wilk test was used for normality and ANOVA for multiple linear regression analysis.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Demographic background of respondents

89 students from Multimedia University in Malacca, Malaysia, made up our research sample. 64 females (71.9%) and 25 males (28.1%) were included in the sample. With a mean age of 21.76 and a standard deviation of 1.19, the participants' ages, which ranged from 20 to 26 years old, suggest a relatively constrained age range and a uniform distribution of ages within the sample.

### 4.2 The overall level of self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation, and forgiveness

The results of descriptive statistics and reliability analysis have shown, as presented in Table 1, that the internal consistency of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale is .81, for Generalized anxiety disorder self-report Scale, is .91, for Life Orientation Scale is .70 and for The Enright Forgiveness Inventory-30 is .97. According to descriptive analysis variables GAD-7 and EFI-30 did not have a normal distribution and RSES, LOS had a normal distribution. The range for RSES is 10-40 points and the participants scored in the range of 16-37 ( $M=26,51$ ;  $SD=4,25$ ;  $N=89$ ). In the self-report scale of anxiety, 28 participants (31,46%;  $N=89$ ) reached a cut point of 5, which can be interpreted as representing a mild level of anxiety. 17 (19,1%) participants reached the cut point of 10, as interpreted as representing a moderate level of anxiety, and 12 (13,48%) participants reached the cut point of 15, which can be interpreted as a severe level of anxiety. After internal validation through the Pseudo Forgiveness Scale, 25 participants who scored 22 or higher on this scale were eliminated.

Table 1: The mean, standard deviation, median range, and Cronbach's alpha

<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i><math>\alpha</math></i>
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Self-esteem	26,51	4,25	26	16-37	.81
Anxiety	8,09	5,23	7	0-21	.91
Life Orientation	3,54	0,6	3,43	2,14-4,86	.70
Forgiveness	102,48	30,97	105	33-171	.97

### 4.3 Relations among self-esteem, anxiety, forgiveness, and life orientation

Correlation analysis showed that self-esteem medium negatively correlated with anxiety ( $r_s = -.380$ ,  $p < .001$ ), strongly positively correlated with life orientation ( $r_s = .555$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and weakly positively correlated with forgiveness ( $r_s = .287$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Anxiety had a weak negative correlation with forgiveness ( $r_s = -.221$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and medium negative correlation with life orientation ( $r_s = -.407$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Life orientation medium positively correlated with forgiveness ( $r_s = .301$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlations among self-esteem, anxiety, forgiveness, and life orientation

		1	2	3	4
1 Self-esteem	Spearman's rho	-			
	p-value	-			
2 Anxiety	Spearman's rho	.380***	-		
	p-value	< .001	-		
3 Life Orientation	Spearman's rho	.555**	-.407***	-	
	p-value	< .001	< .001	-	
4 Forgiveness	Spearman's rho	.287**	-.221*	.301**	-
	p-value	0.006	0.037	0.004	-

#### 4.4 Self-esteem as a Predictor of Forgiveness

Table 3 shows the model summary of ANOVA for regression analysis results. The first line of the model summary shows the 'null model'. The second line is about the model with predictor self-esteem. The model suggests that self-esteem explains about 10% of the variance of forgiveness.

Table 3: Model Summary - Forgiveness

<b>Model Summary - Forgiveness</b>				
<b>Model</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>RMSE</b>
1	0.000	0.000	0.000	30.970
2	0.316	0.100	0.090	29.547

#### ANOVA

<b>Model</b>	<b>Sum of Squares</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>p</b>
2	8450.646	1	8450.646	9.680	0,003
	75953.579	87	873.030		
	84404.225	88			

*Note.* The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

Table 4 shows the summary of the regression coefficients: the null model corresponds to the model we have previously analysed (predicting forgiveness by self-esteem). Self-esteem is a significant predictor of forgiveness among students.

Table 4: Coefficients Model

## Coefficients

Model	Unstand- ardized	Standard Error	Stand- ardized	t	p
1 (Inter- cept)	102.483	3.283		31.218	< .001
2 (Inter- cept)	41.305	19.912		2.074	0.041
Self-es- teem	2.308	0.742	0.316	3.111	0.003

*Note.* The following covariate was considered but not included: Anxiety, Life orientation.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 The overall level of self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation, and forgiveness

The study aimed to assess the overall level of self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation, and forgiveness. The sample scored a little more than moderate score, which can be interpreted as a sample of university students who have an above-average level of self-esteem. Similar findings were found among undergraduate students in Malaysian Universities [36].

Almost 31.5% of participants reached the cut point of 5 on the self-report scale of anxiety, which can be interpreted as representing a mild level of anxiety. 19% of participants reached a moderate level of anxiety and 13.5% of participants reached a severe level of anxiety. The findings regarding the level of anxiety showed an increased level of anxiety among students as compared to other research [34] [37], but not to such a high level of anxiety as was manifested among students during the COVID-19 pandemic [38]. It is believed that the consequences of the pandemic may still lead to an increased level of anxiety, also since the data collection was carried out during the start of the in-person form of study at the university after a long period of the pandemic.

In the scale for measuring the life orientation, the decision must be made to eliminate 3 reverse items because of the reliability of measuring. These 3 items confused the participants. Reasons for confusion could be caused by Muslim or other religions, international Malaysian culture, or the English language which is official but still not the native language of Malaysian country. The findings suggest that participants in this study experience a moderate-meaning mindset with a medium emphasis on moral excellence and altruism.

## 5.2 Relations between self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation and forgiveness

The results of the relations have shown a moderately strong negative correlation between self-esteem and anxiety. The findings are consistent with the results of a meta-analysis that analysed 18 longitudinal studies focused on the relationship between self-esteem and anxiety [15]. It can be concluded that lower self-esteem leads to higher anxiety or higher anxiety leads to lower self-esteem because the relationship is symmetric in both directions. Furthermore, there is a strong positive relationship between self-esteem and life orientation and a moderately strong negative relationship between life orientation and anxiety. A high level of self-esteem leads to a meaningful mindset and a virtuous life oriented to higher moral perfection. Conversely, a higher level of anxiety can lead to a lower level of the meaning mindset. Respectively, the thinking focused on personal success and benefits, less oriented on humanity, justice, and global issues.

## 5.3 Self-esteem as a Predictor of Forgiveness

Partially surprising were the results of linear regression showed that the covariates anxiety and life orientation were considered but not included. The findings suggest that only self-esteem explains about 10% of the variance of forgiveness. Hypothesis (2) Self-esteem is expected to predict the likelihood of forgiveness in people. Self-esteem is a significant predictor of forgiveness, which was confirmed and supported by previous studies [39]. Furthermore, examining the explicit and implicit evaluation of oneself in relation to the forgiveness of others, participants with secure self-esteem were found to be more likely to initiate injury than participants with defensive (i.e., high explicit) self-esteem [40]. The opposite is the research of Freedman and Enright [23], who implemented a randomized design of experimental and control groups of women who survived incest. The authors found that women who received a psychological forgiveness intervention had increased levels of self-esteem after the intervention. The same increase in self-esteem levels occurred even after the control group began the forgiveness intervention program. Hypotheses (2) Self-esteem is expected to predict the likelihood of forgiveness in people were confirmed.

## 6 Conclusion

The findings revealed a strong relationship between life orientation, anxiety, forgiving others, and self-esteem. Self-esteem is a significant predictor of forgiveness among students. The research sample, however, is not representative, which is the study's limitation. The method of data collection is yet another restriction. By completing an online form, denied access to all the information that could have been gauged if the respondents were approached face-to-face. Due to this reason, 25 data collected have to be excluded for further analysis. In future, the researcher would consider obtaining a more detailed analysis of relationships to be a benefit of this research study. It is also suggested to investigate the overall level of self-esteem, anxiety, life orientation, and forgiveness later after the end semester and compare these results since the current study



was investigating the variables at the beginning of the semester. At the same interest, it would study forgiveness and other variables before, during, and after (post) forgiveness in education or consultation.

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