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**Exploring Self-Esteem among Mothers of School-Aged Children
in Perak, Malaysia**

Aziah Ismail, Rahimi Che Aman*, Nor Shafrin Ahmad, Lim Hooi Lian

**Corresponding Author*

School of Educational Studies,
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

aziah@usm.my, rahimi@usm.my, sham@usm.my, hlim@usm.my
Tel: 0129794029

Abstract

This study examines the self-esteem of 444 mothers with school-aged children in Perak, Malaysia. Findings show a moderate level of self-esteem overall, with significantly higher scores among educated and employed mothers. Age showed no significant effect. The results highlight the emotional challenges faced by mothers and the need for supportive policies and further research.

Keywords: maternal self-esteem; Rosenberg scale; maternal demographics

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1.0 Introduction

Self-esteem is a fundamental psychological construct that shapes an individual's perception of self-worth, competence, and overall value (Stets & Lee, 2021). For women, particularly those who are mothers to school-aged children, self-esteem is crucial not only in personal well-being but also in parenting practices, relationship dynamics, and social involvement. The responsibilities of motherhood, which often intersect with societal expectations, cultural norms, and economic demands, can significantly impact a woman's psychological health (Schmidt et al., 2023). In Malaysia, people frequently position mothers as the cornerstone of family life, responsible for nurturing children's academic progress, managing household affairs, and contributing to family income, especially in dual-income households.

This multi-faceted role, while integral, can lead to internal conflicts, stress, and self-doubt—particularly when societal expectations do not align with a mother's aspirations or when adequate support systems are lacking. Furthermore, the rapid pace of modernization, changing family structures, and the pervasive influence of social media have introduced new challenges to the concept of maternal identity. Mothers are often exposed to idealized portrayals of motherhood, which can distort their self-perception and contribute to feelings of inadequacy (Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2002). These evolving dynamics warrant scholarly attention to understand how mothers internalize these pressures and how they affect their self-esteem.

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Despite increasing research on women's mental health, studies specifically focusing on the self-esteem of mothers—especially those raising school-aged children—are sparse in the Malaysian context. Most available literature tends to focus on broader aspects of female empowerment or adolescent self-esteem, leaving a gap in our understanding of maternal psychological well-being. Recognizing this, the current study aims to investigate the level of self-esteem among mothers in Perak, Malaysia, and examine whether variables such as educational attainment, employment status, and age impact their self-perception.

2.0 Literature Review

Self-esteem, a term popularized by Morris Rosenberg in 1965, refers to a person's overall evaluation or appraisal of their worth. It encompasses both affective and cognitive components, how much individuals like themselves and how competent they believe they are. Self-esteem is recognized as a cornerstone of mental health and psychological resilience. Individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to navigate challenges confidently, maintain positive relationships, and set and pursue meaningful goals. Conversely, low self-esteem significantly correlates with greater vulnerability to depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, and dysfunctional interpersonal behaviour (Orth & Robins, 2019).

For women, factors such as gender roles, socioeconomic conditions, cultural expectations, and interpersonal relationships actively shape self-esteem, making it more than just an individual attribute. In patriarchal societies, where people often confine women's roles to domestic spheres or judge them based on their effectiveness as wives and mothers, external factors shape their perception of self-worth rather than it being internally anchored. The psychological burden borne by mothers, especially those juggling multiple roles, can erode self-confidence and contribute to chronic stress. Leerkes and Crockenberg (2002) emphasized that maternal self-efficacy—a closely related construct— affects not only parenting styles but also a mother's belief in her competence, which in turn affects her self-esteem.

In the Malaysian cultural context, familial obligations and community norms often reinforce traditional gender roles. A mother's value is often assessed based on her ability to raise successful children, maintain a harmonious household, and adhere to socially sanctioned norms. These cultural imperatives can place undue pressure on mothers, leading to self-criticism when they fail to meet expectations. Hassan & Alavi (2024) highlighted that Malaysian mothers often experience guilt and emotional strain in balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly when support from spouses or extended families is lacking.

Empirical studies suggest that employment and education are critical in shaping women's self-esteem. Employed women often report a heightened sense of purpose and economic agency, which enhances their self-perception (Norliza et al., 2016). However, working mothers may also face significant role strain, particularly when workplace demands conflict with familial responsibilities. The dual expectations of excelling professionally and being a devoted caregiver can create emotional dissonance, which can reduce self-esteem despite professional achievements.

Similarly, educational attainment is associated with increased self-confidence and broader life opportunities. Educated women tend to exhibit greater autonomy, more liberal attitudes toward gender roles, and better problem-solving skills, all of which contribute to a higher sense of self-worth (Stets & Lee, 2021). On the other hand, women with lower educational backgrounds may feel disadvantaged in navigating social and economic challenges, particularly in contexts where academic success is significantly related to parental capability.

Age is another factor often linked to self-esteem, though findings revealed inconsistent results. Ogihara and Kusumi (2020) found that self-esteem generally increases during adulthood and stabilises later, suggesting that life experiences and accumulated wisdom can buffer against self-doubt. However, in some cultures, ageing women may feel marginalized or less valued, which can diminish their sense of worth. In the context of motherhood, younger mothers may struggle with self-identity and role adjustment, while older mothers might benefit from experience but also face challenges related to ageing and societal perceptions of maternal competency.

Given these nuanced interrelations, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by explicitly focusing on mothers of school-aged children in Malaysia, this demographic that has received relatively limited scholarly focus. By examining the relationships between educational level, employment status, age and self-esteem, this study aims to identify pathways for psychological and social interventions that can empower mothers and promote familial well-being.

3.0 Methodology

This study followed a quantitative survey design to assess the self-esteem of mothers with school-aged children. The researchers used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES, 1965), which includes 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Higher scores on the RSES reflect better self-esteem. The scale consists of both positively and negatively worded items. To ensure semantic accuracy, the team translated the instrument into Bahasa Malaysia using a forward-backwards translation process. Three educational psychology experts reviewed the items for cultural relevance and conceptual clarity.

The researchers conducted a pilot test with 30 mothers to evaluate the clarity and reliability of the translated items. The scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha above .80, indicating strong internal consistency. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling table, we determined that a minimum sample size of 384 respondents was required for the population of 125,340. To ensure a sufficient rate of return, we distributed 600 questionnaires. We received 570 completed questionnaires, resulting in a 95% response rate. After screening the data, we retained 444 valid responses for analysis, exceeding the required sample size. Perak was selected as the study location due to its demographic diversity, which encompasses both urban and semi-urban populations. They applied cluster sampling

to capture variations in educational background, employment status, and age. The team analysed the data using descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA to identify differences in self-esteem across selected demographic variables.

4. Findings

The findings in Table 1 showed that the overall level of self-esteem among mothers was moderate (Mean = 3.0020, SD = 0.337). However, some negative statements received notably high agreement scores:

- "Sometimes I think I am no good at all" (M = 3.82)
- "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" (M = 3.45)
- "At times, I feel useless" (M = 4.18)
- "I tend to feel like a failure" (M = 4.24)
- "I wish I could respect myself more" (M = 2.00)

Table 1. The level of maternal self-esteem

BIL.	ITEM	Min	SP	Tahap
1.	On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	3.99	.84	High
2.	At times, I think I am no good at all.	3.82*	1.01	High
3.	I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	3.71	.83	High
4.	I am able to do things as well as most other people.	3.86	.88	High
5.	I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	3.45*	1.14	High
6.	I certainly feel useless at times.	4.18*	.93	High
7.	I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	3.79	.88	High
8.	I wish I could have more respect for myself.	2.01*	.94	Moderate
9.	All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	4.24*	1.04	High
10.	I take a positive attitude toward myself.	4.31	.83	High
Self-esteem (overall)		3.0020	.337	moderate

These results indicate that although respondents expressed some positive self-perceptions, underlying feelings of inadequacy and failure were prevalent, signalling a need for psychological support and self-affirmation strategies. The one-way ANOVA results in Table 2 further elucidated the influence of demographic factors on self-esteem levels:

- **Educational Level:** A significant difference was found among mothers with different educational backgrounds ($F = 9.207$; $p = .001$), suggesting that those with higher education levels tend to report stronger self-esteem.
- **Employment Status:** Statistically significant differences were observed between groups of mothers with varying employment statuses ($F = 7.556$; $p = .001$), with employed mothers showing higher levels of self-esteem, likely due to increased independence, financial security, and social engagement.
- **Age Groups:** No significant difference in self-esteem was detected across age categories ($F = 0.339$; $p = .852$), indicating that age does not significantly influence maternal self-esteem in this study population.

Table 2: One-Way ANOVA results

Demographic factors	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Education	3	200.070	9.207	.001*
Employment	2	168.321	7.556	.001*
Age	4	7.820	.339	.852

These findings highlight the influence of social and educational contexts on mothers' psychological well-being and offer guidance for targeted interventions.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This study highlights the psychological vulnerability experienced by mothers of school-aged children in Perak, Malaysia, with findings indicating a moderate overall level of self-esteem. The elevated scores on negative self-perception items suggest that many mothers are grappling with internalized doubts, a sense of inadequacy, and diminished self-worth despite also endorsing some positive views of themselves. These contradictory self-perceptions reflect the complex and often ambivalent experiences of motherhood in contemporary society.

Significantly, the study identified educational attainment and employment status as important factors. Mothers with higher levels of education and those who are employed demonstrated significantly higher self-esteem. These findings are consistent with global research indicating that socioeconomic empowerment is critical in bolstering psychological resilience and self-perception. Employment not only provides financial autonomy but also enhances social networks and personal fulfilment. Likewise, higher education contributes to greater awareness, critical thinking, and confidence, which together serve as buffers against self-devaluation (Stets & Lee, 2021).

Conversely, the study found no significant difference in self-esteem across age groups, suggesting that age alone may not determine a mother's self-view. This finding highlights the importance of examining demographic variables and considering the broader cultural, familial, and psychological contexts that influence maternal self-esteem.

In light of these findings, there is an urgent need for multi-level interventions aimed at supporting mothers. Based on these findings, stakeholders should invest in accessible education and employment opportunities for mothers as strategic interventions to enhance their self-esteem and psychological resilience. Policies supporting lifelong learning and flexible work arrangements can further empower women in balancing personal and professional roles. Policymakers, educators, mental health professionals, and community organizations should collaborate to develop programs that offer emotional support, parenting education, career guidance, and opportunities for social engagement. The stakeholders should tailor such initiatives to respect cultural values while promoting a more holistic and empowered image of motherhood.

Future research should extend this work by using mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to capture the evolving nature of maternal self-esteem. Moreover, qualitative studies can offer richer insights into the lived experiences and inner narratives that underpin self-esteem in different familial and cultural contexts. Addressing this gap can contribute to more comprehensive strategies that elevate not only the psychological well-being of mothers but also the developmental outcomes of the children they raise.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study made a significant contribution to the field of psychology by identifying how socio-demographic factors, such as education and employment, influence maternal self-esteem, particularly within the Malaysian cultural context.

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