

A Comparative Analysis of Self-Esteem and Rejection Sensitivity Across Generational Cohorts

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Abstract

Over the decades, the field of Psychology has explored how individuals respond to self-esteem and rejection sensitivity through their actions throughout the time. This study examines the psychological constructs among Generation Z and Millennials in South India, highlighting potential cultural and age-related differences. The investigation aims to explore the association between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity among Gen Z and Millennials aged 12 to 43. The sample size of N=300 was drawn from Gen Z and Millennials of the same age group living in Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The study utilized two psychometric tools: Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale and the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire. The data was examined with SPSS with descriptive statistics, correlation and Mann Whitney U test. The data show that there is a statistically insignificant negative association between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity. It also revealed that there is no gender difference in self-esteem and rejection sensitivity, however there is a significant difference between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity among Gen Z (12-27) and Millennials (28-43).

Keywords: Self-esteem, Rejection Sensitivity, Generation Z and Millennials

Introduction

Self-concept is the collective term for your ideas, opinions, and feelings about who you are. It's your personal perception of who you are, encompassing things like your values, personality, skills, and place in the world. It's basically the image of yourself that exists in your mind. Self-esteem defined as a positive or negative attitude toward a particular object, namely the self. (Rosenberg, 1958). Self-esteem is seen as a crucial part of one's identity and mental health, originating from William James' theories and further expanded by scholars such as Rosenberg. It has a significant impact on how people perceive themselves, interact with others, and deal with life's challenges.

The term "rejection sensitive" was coined by Horney to characterize those who respond strongly to rejection. The concept of rejection sensitivity (RS) was first proposed by Downey and Feldman in 1996. According to their definition, it is a cognitive-affective processing tendency that causes people to react strongly to rejection, perceive rejection with ease, and anxiously expect rejection. The capacity to understand rejection with ease, react emotionally, and anticipate rejection with worry is known as rejection sensitivity.

Need and Significance of the study

The investigator couldn't come across studies that focused on both rejection sensitivity and self-esteem among Gen Z and Millennials, which was identified to be a research gap to conduct more studies of the same. In this era, there exist a severe change in the generational gap between every year than before, thus depicting a tremendous change in perspectives and approaches taken by people in general. The major interest of the study was to identify how this generational change of rejection sensitivity and self esteem affects the society and how it emerges to be an indicator of societal quality.

The study of self-esteem and rejection sensitivity among Generation Z and Millennials is important because of the distinct socio-cultural and technological influences that shape these cohorts. As digital natives, both generations have increased social connectivity and exposure, which can affect their self-esteem and sensitivity to rejection in different ways than previous generations. Understanding these dynamics is critical for creating effective interventions and support systems that address their specific challenges, such as online social comparisons and bullying. The study provides insights into how self-esteem and rejection sensitivity manifest and influence mental health in these groups, which can then be used to inform mental health strategies, educational programs, and policymaking to better meet the needs of these emerging adults.

Review of Literature

Zulfiqar et al. (2023) studied psychological well-being and rejection sensitivity: moderating the influence of socio-demographics and self-esteem. Utilizing a quantitative methodology, the study gathered information from 301 participants—112 teenagers and 189 emerging adults—from Haripur, Pakistan. The results shows that high self-esteem has been shown to reduce the detrimental consequences of rejection sensitivity on psychological well-being. Also, the study found that rejection sensitivity is a substantial negative predictor of psychological well-being. The study is limited to a single geographic region (Haripur, Pakistan), which may limit the generalizability of the results. The Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire was culturally adapted, which required removing certain items that may have influenced the results.

Zeynep Set's (2019) investigated the "Potential Regulatory Elements Between Attachment Styles and Psychopathology: Rejection Sensitivity and Self-Esteem" aims to examine how attachment styles and psychopathology are mediated by rejection sensitivity and self-esteem, with an emphasis on depression and anxiety. The study used a cross-sectional design with a sample size of 340 participants. The findings show that different attachment patterns have a significant link with depression and anxiety levels, with rejection sensitivity and self-esteem serving as mediators. Individuals with insecure attachment patterns tend to demonstrate more rejection sensitivity and lower self-esteem associated with increased anxiety and hopelessness.

In 2012, Hakan et.al, conducted a paper titled "The Examination of the Relationship between the University Students' Rejection Sensitivities, Self Esteem, and Loneliness Levels". This study aims to explore the ways in which these psychological dimensions interact and vary according to gender. The study uses a sample of 1149 university students. They discovered strong correlations between higher levels of loneliness and greater self-esteem and higher rejection sensitivity. The results have implications for creating interventions that target rejection sensitivity in order to boost university students' self-esteem and lessen their feelings of loneliness.

Goncu and Sumer's (2011) study, "Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Esteem Stability, and Attributions: Mediation Pathways in Predicting Violence and Silencing the Self in Romantic Relationships," attempts

to investigate the ways in which responsibility attributions, in combination with rejection sensitivity (RS) and unstable self-esteem (USE), impact relationship violence and self-silencing behaviours. The study, which is being carried out with 177 university students in Ankara, Turkey. The results show that through responsibility attributions, RS and USE predict relationship violence and self-silencing behaviours. In particular, partner behaviour attributions link USE to violence, whereas self-behaviour attributions link RS to self-silencing.

Kathy R. Berenson and Geraldine Downey's in 2006 conducted a study on the topic, "Self-esteem and rejection sensitivity in close relationships," investigates the complex interactions between self-esteem (SE) and rejection sensitivity (RS) in the setting of intimate relationships. The goal of this chapter is to explain the processes that connect SE and relationship dynamics, using RS as a comparison framework. Their results indicate that heightened sensitivity to potential rejection is associated with both low SE and high RS, which influences relationship satisfaction, affective reactions, and behaviours. Individuals with low SE, in particular, have a negative perception of their partners and exhibit depressed certainty, whereas those with high RS use proactive attempts to avoid rejection, which can occasionally weaken the relationship.

Method

Objectives

- To study the relationship between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem among Gen Z and Millennials
- To study the gender differences on rejection sensitivity and self-esteem among Gen Z and Millennials
- To study the difference between rejection sensitivity and self-esteem in Gen Z (12-27) and Millennials (28-43)

Variables and Operational definitions

The phrase "**self-esteem**" refers to an individual's perception of their own worth or value. It expresses how much someone values something.

Rejection sensitivity is a psychological trait defined by the tendency to anticipate, detect, and react intensely to signs of rejection in social situations.

Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant relationship between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity among Gen Z and millennials

H02: There is no significant difference between self-esteem among Gen Z and Millennials

H03: There is no significant difference between rejection sensitivity among Gen Z and Millennials

H04: There is no significant difference between Self -esteem in males and females among Gen Z and Millennials

H05: There is no significant difference between Rejection sensitivity in males and females among Gen Z and Millennials

Sample

A convenient sample of 300 individuals who falls in the age range 12-47 of Gen Z and Millennials can be drawn from Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu can be participated in the study. The sample was equally divided as Gen Z and Millennials i.e, 150 Gen Z and 150 Millennials. Google forms can be circulated via

online platforms to collect the data considering the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Before data collection, consent can be obtained from the participants, in the case of minors the parent’s consent will be obtained. After this, the scoring and statistical analysis can be performed.

Inclusion Criteria

- Individuals with access to social media or online platform
- Individuals of age range between 12-43

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals with severe mental health issues, head injuries
- Individuals who have previously participated in a similar study related to rejection sensitivity and self-esteem within the last 6 months may be excluded to avoid biased responses.
- Individuals with below the age group of 12 and above 43 are also excluded.

Tools for the study

Morris Rosenberg developed the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) in 1965. It measures both positive and negative thoughts about oneself in order to determine an individual's sense of self-worth. The Likert scale has a score of 4, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale contains internal consistency (Guttaman scale of reproducibility) = .92 and test- retest reliability (Correlation)= .85 &.88. Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, Adult Version(A-RSQ) by Downey & Feldman,1996), is an adaptation of the RSQ that consist of 18 hypothetical statements. The tool having the internal consistency(alpha)=.89(for each administration) and test-retest reliability (Spearman- Brown coefficient) =.91 to evaluate rejection sensitivity in adult samples.

Research Design and Statistical Technique

A quantitative research approach with a descriptive study design was used. The data were collected using the simple sampling method. SPSS was used to determine the correlation and differences between variables based on gender and generation (age).

Results

The first hypothesis is tested using the Spearman's rank correlation method. The hypotheses states that, “There is no significant relationship between and self-esteem and rejection sensitivity among Gen Z and Millennials”

Table 1 Spearman’s Correlation between Self- Esteem and Rejection Sensitivity

Variables	N	M	SD	1	2
1.Self-Esteem	300	30.05	3.52	-	
2. Rejection Sensitivity	300	10.10	2.90	-.255**	-

**p < 0.01 (two-tailed)

Table 1 shows Spearman correlation between self- esteem, rejection sensitivity. The corresponding mean and SD values of 30.05 and 3.52 for self -esteem, 10.10 and 2.90 for rejection sensitivity. The results

indicate that there is a weak, negative, and statistically significant association between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity, with a 'r' value of -.255 and a significant p value of .000, which is less than .01. Hence, we reject the null hypotheses.

The second hypothesis is, "There is no significant difference between self-esteem among Gen Z and Millennials"

Table 2 Mann Whitney U table on Self- Esteem based on age with Mean, SD, Mean Rank, Z value and Significance value

Self-Esteem	Gen Z (12-27)			Millennials (28-43)			Z	Sig Value
	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	Mean	SD	Mean Rank		
	29.26	3.483	130.94	30.83	3.483	168.94	-3.816	.000

Table 2 depicts the difference in self-esteem according to age. The inferred results show that there is a significant difference in self-esteem dependent on age, as the significance value is .000 and the Z value is -3.816, with a mean, SD, and mean rank of 29.26, 3.483, and 130.94 for Generation Z and 30.83, 3.483, and 168.94 for Millennials. Hence, we reject the null hypotheses.

The third hypothesis is, "There is no significant difference between rejection sensitivity among Gen Z and Millennials.

Table 3 Mann Whitney table on Rejection Sensitivity based on age with Mean, SD, Mean Rank, Z value and Significance value

Rejection Sensitivity	Gen Z (12-27)			Millennials (28-43)			Z	Sig. Value
	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	Mean	SD	Mean Rank		
	10.58	2.94	163.61	9.63	2.79	136.48	-2.714	.007

Table 3 shows age-related changes in rejection sensitivity. The inferred results reveal that there is a considerable variance in rejection sensitivity depending on age, as the significance value is .007 and the Z value is -2.714, with a mean, SD, and mean rank of 10.58, 2.94 and 163.61 for Generation Z and 9.3, 2.79 and 136.48 for Millennials. Finally, we reject the null hypotheses.

The fourth hypothesis states that "There is no significant difference between Self -esteem in males and females among Gen Z and Millennials"

Table 4 Mann- Whitney U table on Self-Esteem based on gender with mean, SD, Mean Rank, Z value and significance value

Self-Esteem	MALE			FEMALE			Z	Sig. Value
	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	Mean	SD	Mean Rank		
	30.36	3.543	157.02	29.74	3.484	143.98	-1.307	.191

Table 4 indicates the gender difference in self-esteem. The results show that there is no significant difference in self-esteem by gender, as the significance value is .191 and the Z value is -1.307. Hence, we

accept the null hypotheses. The mean, SD and Mean rank for male are 30.36, 3.543 and 157.02 and for females are 29.74, 3.484 and 143.98 respectively.

The fifth hypotheses are “There is no significant difference between Rejection sensitivity in males and females among Gen Z and Millennials”

Table 5 Mann Whitney table on Rejection Sensitivity based on gender with Mean, SD, Mean Rank, Z value and Significance value

Rejection Sensitivity	Male		Female			Z	Sig Value	
	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	Mean	SD			Mean Rank
	9.93	2.58	147.52	10.26	3.18	153.48	-.595	.552

Table 5 shows how Rejection Sensitivity varies by gender. The inferred results show that there is no significant difference in rejection sensitivity based on gender, as the significance value is .552 and the Z value is -.595, with a mean, SD, and mean rank of 9.93, 2.58, and 147.52 for males and 10.26, 3.18, and 153.48 for females. In this scenario, we accept the null hypothesis.

Discussion

The study sought to determine the link between Self-Esteem and Rejection Sensitivity among Generation Z and Millennials. The findings suggest that rejection sensitivity and self-esteem showed a slight but statistically insignificant negative connection. According to the findings of a study titled Rejection Sensitivity, Self-Esteem Instability, and Relationship Outcomes: The Mediating Role of Responsibilities, people who are particularly sensitive to rejection are more prone to shift their opinion of themselves (Göncü & Sümer, 2011). This could be one of the reasons why, given the circumstances, there is a clear lack of accepting responsibility. Since there isn't enough data to support them, these findings also serve as a recent addition to the body of research.

This implies that people who are more confident in themselves typically have less sensitivity to rejection. This result is in line with earlier studies that show people with low self-esteem are frequently more sensitive to rejection because of underlying insecurities and a fear of social rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Higher self-worth makes a person more capable of handling rejection and preserving enduring relationships with others (Leary, 2005). These results suggest that while people become less sensitive to rejection as they become older, their sense of self-worth rises. Similar patterns have been noted in earlier research, with older people exhibiting greater levels of self-esteem as a result of their established social identities and life experiences (Orth et al., 2010). Consequently, the null hypothesis is accepted.

Similarly, there showed a significant difference in self-esteem by age, with Millennials (28-43 years) having higher self-esteem than Gen Z (12-27 years). This is consistent with longitudinal studies showing that self-esteem rises with age due to increased life experience, self-acceptance, and established personal and professional identities (Orth et al., 2018). Gen-Z, who have grown up with rapid pleasure and excessive praise from their parents, may struggle to shift to a work climate in which promotions and recognition are not as immediate. According to research, Millennials grew up with less pervasive social media influence, which may have helped them develop a more positive self-image in some situations. However, this is a generalization, and individual experiences vary greatly within each generation. Generation Z is thought to have lower self-esteem than Millennials, primarily because they are constantly

exposed to curated online identities on social media, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy and a heightened focus on comparison with others. Thus, rejecting the null hypotheses.

Furthermore, rejection sensitivity varied significantly across age groups, with Gen Z showing greater rejection sensitivity than Millennials. This finding supports previous research indicating that younger people, particularly those in adolescence and early adulthood, are more sensitive to peer evaluations and social rejection (Zimmer-Gembeck & Nesdale, 2013). Individuals' emotional regulation strategies improve with age, resulting in reduced rejection sensitivity (Ayduk et al., 2008). Younger people, particularly those in adolescence, are more sensitive to potential rejection from others. This tendency tends to decrease as people age, so older adults may experience it less intensely than younger people. This is probably because of developmental factors like growing social awareness, the development of self-esteem, and shifting social priorities as one ages. Thus, rejecting the null hypotheses.

In addition, there isn't a significant gender differences in self-esteem among Millennials and Gen Z. In support of the gender similarities theory, Hyde observed that gender differences had either no effect at all or a very slight effect on the majority of the psychological variables examined over the course of hundreds of years of research (APA, 2005). While some research suggests that males have slightly higher self-esteem than females due to socialization patterns and cultural expectations (Kling et al., 1999). This could be attributed to changing gender roles and a greater societal emphasis on self-empowerment across genders. Thus, accepting the null hypotheses.

Finally, rejection sensitivity did not differ significantly across genders. While researchers have discovered no significant gender variations in mean levels of rejection sensitivity earlier in adolescence (Downey, Lebolt, et al., 1998; Sandstrom, et al., 2003), not much research has been conducted on such differences in late adolescence, when men are most vulnerable to rejection. The single study of rejection sensitivity in late adolescence found no significant gender differences; however, the sample size was large (e.g., 14-21 years of age: Harper et al., 2006), which may have limited the study's ability to detect gender differences associated with specific developmental transitions. Thus, we accept the null hypotheses.

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity among Generation Z and Millennials. The findings demonstrated a statistically significant, though weak, negative relationship between self-esteem and rejection sensitivity. Furthermore, there were substantial disparities in self-esteem and rejection sensitivity across the two generational cohorts, with Millennials having higher self-esteem and lower rejection sensitivity than Generation Z. Gender differences did not have a significant effect on self-esteem or rejection sensitivity. These findings emphasize the need of taking generational differences into account when studying mental health and development.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for understanding Gen Z and Millennials' psychological well-being, especially in the digital age, when social media plays a big role in influencing self-perception and rejection sensitivity. The findings indicate that tailored therapies to promote self-esteem and regulate rejection sensitivity could be advantageous for Generation Z, who may be more prone to these concerns as a result of their considerable exposure to digital settings. Educators, mental health providers, and legislators can use these findings to develop more effective mental health support measures that are customized to the unique issues that each generation faces.

Limitations

- The study's participants were selected using a convenient sampling.
- Online questionnaires may impact participants' attentiveness, leading to inaccurate responses.
- The study was conducted only in South India, which may limit its applicability to other regions or cultures.

Suggestions for future research

- Using a probability sampling, strategy could improve fidelity.
- Examine both positive and negative digital interactions to investigate how social media influence self-esteem and rejection sensitivity and compare how these effects vary between Generation Z and Millennials.

Ethics followed

- Respondents provided consent before the study began, with minors requiring parental consent.
- The participants' personal information and responses were kept private.
- Participants' anonymity was protected during the study.
- Data were used only for research purposes.

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