

Innovations

Self-Esteem: An Inquiry for Improving Employability of ODL Students

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Abstract

Borrowing from Cooley's theory of looking-glass self, and Mead's symbolic interactionism theory, literature review explored the role of social interactions in higher education in shaping an individual's specific social behaviours, and in developing self-esteem and 21st century skills along with content knowledge. All these qualities in an individual are deemed necessary for thriving in the unprecedented, complex and constantly evolving machine and human centric industry 4.0 and 5.0. This study explores the development of self-esteem as a social construct in the context of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). The study becomes relevant considering that these skills cannot be nurtured in isolation, and ODL specialises in asynchronous, personalised, and self-paced learning where students are geographically and temporally distant from their instructors and fellow learners. The statistical analysis was performed using ANOVA and CFA on the data collected from 390 IGNOU students pursuing under graduation and post graduation. ANOVA was instrumental in establishing the claim of the two theories in terms of the role of social interactions in fostering self-esteem. The ANOVA results showed a significant correlation of the variables representing social interaction with the attributes of self-esteem revealed by CFA having maximum variance.

Keywords: *Self esteem, 21st century skills, ODL, Industry 5.0, Social-Interaction, Symbolic-Interactionism, Employability*

1. Introduction

Industry 4.0, where technology and innovation intertwined is fast evolving as Industry 5.0 promising even more intricate human-machine collaboration. The dynamics of the ever evolving industry and workplace demand a comprehensive skill set comprising of technical and affective competency — encompassing interpersonal skills, adaptability, ability to resolve conflicts, foster relationships, and skills of social analysis and leadership. All these collectively constructs the concept of emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) for an individual shaping a personality built on self-concept.

Self-esteem aligns closely with these skills as a non-negotiable asset, forming a cornerstone for personal and professional growth that can yield remarkable influence in this competitive industry, where automation and

artificial intelligence are altering job dynamics. When individuals believe in their own capacity to learn and evolve, it fuels a sense of self-worth increasing their adaptability to embrace change more readily, take ownership and sustain their employability. They view obstacles or challenges as opportunities for growth rather than considering it as an insurmountable barriers. This outlook allows them to pivot with agility and navigate their path with the mental resilience supporting their personal development, and also positively influence the organisations they are associated with (Coetzee, 2008).

The socialisation theories by Cooley and Mead explain the development of self-concept and self-esteem through socialisation. Socialisation is a psychosocial process driven by interactive communication which helps an individual to receive and interpret all social messages. It facilitates internalising of social facts through social experiences enabling an individual to perform effectively all the social roles as a functioning member of the society. The methods and forms of interactions, communication and transmission within an environment is instrumental in developing self-concept and social identity. It involves building of personality comprising of attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, along with self-esteem as a meta-competency.

According to Cooley and Mead, high self-esteem is a manifestation of self-perception of being viewed positively by other people. Cooley's theory of 'looking-glass self' posits that the measure of one's own worth, values, and behaviour is dependent on perception of other's judgement about the self during social interactions, leading to a self-feeling, essentially pride or mortification. Looking glass is the key concept of Mead's symbolic interactionism, which posits that personal identity is not formed by looking inward but is based on the adopted viewpoints of other people and the social meaning constructed through interactions with other people. Primarily, the theory emphasises on the development of self-esteem which is an integral attribute of a personality and social identity. It is based on the social interaction between people, where self is not exclusive but is an outcome of social relationships. Furthermore, Mead emphasises on development of self-image or emergence of self through social information. That is, becoming self-aware by looking at self from the perspective of the significant other during social experience, and understand societal norms and expectations from self (Cooley, 2002; Mead, 1913).

Branden (1969) with his psychological perspective defined self-esteem as a value-judgment passed on oneself driven by external factors and standards. It is the form of an omnipresent feeling having a significant influence on one's thinking process impacting self-motivation, desires, goals, emotions and behaviour. He established the impact of low self-esteem with the phrase 'delivered to destruction'. Self-esteem as high or low depends on self evaluation in terms of the following two components:

- (i) self-efficacy (competent to live): belief in an ability to effectively think, learn, make correct decisions, and overcome challenges.
- (ii) self-worth (worthy of living): belief in one's right to be happy and claiming oneself to be worthy of respect.

From the sociological viewpoint Smelser (1989) identified three components to define the concept 'self-esteem':

- (a) Cognitive - will and self control over actions with an understanding of their consequences;

- (b) Affective - extent to which one experiences positivity or negativity in relation to the inherent self-traits;
- (c) Evaluative - attributing a certain degree of self-worth to perceived ideal standards.

Self-esteem is a relatively consistent sense of personal competence, which pertains to one's ability to achieve goals in a particular area of significance. Competence is regarded as a motivational concept aimed at reducing internal stress caused by imperfections. Hence, cultivation of self-esteem is a lifelong process established through a history of both successful and unsuccessful experiences during challenging circumstances in that specific context, influencing its endurance over time (Smelser, 1989).

Moreover, self-esteem is a foundational attribute that underpins many of the skills and qualities required for success in the 21st century along with content-based knowledge. Self-esteem enhances confidence, resilience, effective communication, collaboration, risk taking and adaptability, all of which are essential for thriving in the unprecedented, complex and constantly evolving machine and human centric industry:

- (i) Confidence and Innovation: Self-esteem fosters self-confidence, which is essential for innovation and creativity. Individuals who believe in their abilities are more likely to take risks, explore new ideas, and contribute innovative solutions in their workplaces.
- (ii) Resilience: Amidst rapid technological advancements, automation, and evolving job roles in Industry 4.0 and 5.0, individuals with healthy self-esteem are more resilient. They have the self-assuredness to face challenges, adapt to new circumstances, and bounce back from setbacks.
- (iii) Effective Communication: Those who value themselves are often better communicators, capable of expressing their thoughts, ideas, and emotions more clearly and assertively.
- (iv) Leadership and Collaboration: Individuals with high self-esteem work well in collaborative settings, contributing positively to team dynamics. Emerge as leaders as they tend to inspire confidence and trust in their peers.
- (v) Risk-Taking and Decision-Making: Self-esteem encourages individuals to make informed decisions and take calculated risks. It empowers them to believe in their judgment and capabilities, which is essential for effective decision-making in the today's and future workforce.
- (vi) Adaptability: In an era where job roles are evolving rapidly, individuals with healthy self-esteem are more open to learning and adapting to new skills and roles.

Academic settings in higher education plays an increasingly significant role in acquisition of self-esteem, self-respect and self-effectiveness with 21st century skills, instrumental in thriving in constantly changing and dynamic professional environments (White, 1959). Higher education, fosters social interaction through participation in diverse academic and extra-curricular activities, nurturing essential self-esteem, a quality that cannot be cultivated in isolation. In higher education, academic environment, active interactions between student-teacher, student-student, and academic activities facilitates socialisation, which along with the

acquisition of knowledge, helps students flourish and their talent thrive. This influences a student's perceptions of the self (Weidman, 2006; Aktar, 2020).

Learning environment and the quality of interactions with both teachers and peers play a significant role in shaping specific social behaviours and nurturing self-esteem. Teachers contribute to this by offering feedback and providing encouraging comments that help students identify their own competencies and evaluate self-worth. This, in turn, affects individuals perception towards self in a positive light which is fundamental to the development and maintenance of self-esteem (Ramsden, 2003). Constructive feedback from teacher as a significant other and incorporating the feedback into one's self-concept, enhance students' self-concept by affirming their competencies and abilities (Seifert and Sutton, 2009). Open communication, active participation, and peer collaboration helps learn from each other and students are more likely to feel valued and competent, boosting their self-esteem and empowers them to act with agency (Krathwohl, Bloom&Masia, 1964). Symbolic interactionism also highlights the role of social comparison, as individuals evaluate themselves in relation to their peers, and these comparisons influence self-esteem.

This study focuses on self-esteem as a social construct in the context of distance higher education, with asynchronous, personalised, and self-paced learning where students are geographically and temporally distant from their instructors and fellow learners. The enduring significance and widespread acceptance of distance education in India is evidenced in All India survey on Higher Education report revealing that ODL enrolment accounted for 11.04% of the total higher education enrolment in 2020-21. Distance education has been a crucial tool for democratising education and promoting social equality in the country. It has been empowering by educating a wider population facing various barriers, such as economic limitations, social biases and geographical constraints in accessing on-campus higher education.

This study explores the concept of self-esteem through sociological perspective of symbolic interactionism developed by George Herbert Mead. The theory underscores the importance of interactions among individuals encompassing use of symbols, interpretations, meanings, and actions, within adaptable social processes. These interactions in turn shape an individual's self-concept and self-identity with reference to the world.

2. Research Methodology

The study guided by the research question aim to objectively analyse the social reality using a quantitative approach to gain a rational perspective. The specific focus of the study was articulated in the following research question:

What diverse forms of interaction might Open and Distance Learning (ODL) strategically incorporate within pedagogical practices to cultivate and elevate self-esteem in learners?

For the purpose of answering the research question null and alternative hypotheses were formulated.

- (a) H_{01} : Active interaction with teachers has no effect on self-esteem of the student pursuing higher education in ODL mode.

H_{a1}: Active interaction with teachers has a significant effect on self-esteem of of the student pursuing higher education in ODL mode.

(b) H₀₂: Active interactions and collaboration with peers has no effect on self-esteem of the student pursuing higher education in ODL mode.

H_{a2}: Active interactions and collaboration with peers has a significant effect on self-esteem of the student pursuing higher education in ODL mode.

A structured questionnaire comprising of three distinct sets encompassing a total of 40 items was used for this study. The set of items to capture essential demographic and enrolment information were projected with predefined options drawn from a comprehensive literature review and contextually aligned with the study objectives, ensuring that respondents make relevant selections. The set of items serving as independent variables were crafted to gauge student engagement and interaction with both educators and peers. This set played a pivotal role in elucidating the various facets of student involvement in the learning process. The set of items serving as dependent variables, were to assess self-esteem as a latent construct. These items were derived from the existing scales - Collective Self-Esteem Scale developed by Luhtanen & Crocker (1992), Self-Esteem Scale by Rosenberg (1965), and State Self-Esteem scale by Heatherton & Ploivy (1991). The items were self-reflective in nature.

All the independent and dependent variables were based on 5-point Likert scale with range of degrees ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree', with 'Neutral' as a mid response. The term 'Neutral' was chosen to avoid any potential negative connotations that could be associated with other options, such as 'neither agree nor disagree', 'I don't know', 'unsure', 'undecided' or 'no opinion'.

To gather data for quantitative research, the students pursuing higher education in distance mode from Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) were chosen as respondent sample group. IGNOU has been awarded the 'Excellence for Distance Education Material' in 1999 from the Commonwealth of Learning, and has earned the global recognition as the world's largest open and distance learning institution in 2010 from UNESCO. By actively reaching out to a diverse array of individuals, particularly those hailing from marginalised segments of society, regardless of age, region, religion or gender, the university has played a pivotal role in democratising Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in India. The admission for a student remains valid for 6 years for a 3-year undergraduate (UG) program, and the admission duration ranges from 4 to 5 years, depending on the chosen specialisation for a 2-year postgraduate (PG) program (source: www.ignou.ac.in).

As claimed in IGNOU's 2022 admission prospectus over 3 million students have enrolled with the university, since its inception in 1985. As the population to be surveyed was over 2,00,000, hence using Fisher's Formula projected a target sample population of 385 to collected the data. 'Google Forms' was used to administer the survey. Link to the form was shared with IGNOU groups on WhatsApp and Telegram. The description to the survey explicitly mentioned that the survey was to be taken by the students enrolled for under-graduation and post-graduation between 2017 and 2022. The year of enrolment and the level of course were controlled variables. The analysis was conducted on 390 responses.

Data analysis was performed using ‘Analysis of Variance ’(ANOVA) to identify if interaction with teachers and peers was instrumental in nurturing self-esteem. ‘Confirmatory Factor Analysis ’(CFA) was performed to identify the variables with most variance in the data revealing important attributes explain self-esteem.

3. Research Findings

Table 1: Academic engagement of the sample group

Engagement	Independent variables	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Course content engagement	Accessing course material available on various platforms	100	0	0
	Score on assignments so far	80	18	2
	Completing assignments	74	24	2
	Understanding course content	73	23	4
Social interaction	Interacting with peers using WhatsApp or Telegram	92	8	0
	Inquire about assignments from peers	50	20	30
	Interact with peers in-person or on-line	32	20	48
	Interact with teachers to discuss subject related topics	29	21	50
	Collaborate with peers to co-learn and complete assignments together	12	6	82

The data establishes positive attitude of ODL students towards their academic performance. Their engagement with course content was 100%, academic performance in terms of understanding the course material was 73%, completion of assignments was 74%, and scoring marks was 80%. and Overall the respondent population showed high interaction with course content and held high satisfaction levels and positive attitude towards their academic performance in terms of understanding the course material, completing the assignments and marks. With reference to interactions with teachers and peers the respondents have shown limited initiative.

As presented in table 2, findings from the ANOVA analysis reveals that the four independent variables significantly affect the latent construct ‘Self Esteem’ with the significant value of $p < 0.05$.

Table 2: ANOVA revealing the correlation between cognitive engagement and self-esteem

Cognitive engagement →	Social interaction				Course engagement		
↓ Attributes of Self Esteem	Interact with teachers to discuss subject related topics	Interact with peers in-person or on-line	Inquire about assignments from peers	Collaborate with peers to co-learn and complete assignments together	Understanding course content	Completing assignments	Score on assignments so far
I see myself fitting in professional workplace	0	0	0	0	>0.05	>0.05	>0.05
Future plans and working towards it	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Able to do things as good as most other people	0	0	0	0	>0.05	>0.05	>0.05
I feel confident that about my abilities	0	0	0	0	>0.05	>0.05	>0.05
Ability to successfully manage job interview	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
It is easy for me to share my views with others	0	0	0	0	>0.05	>0.05	0
I wonder if I am regarded as success or failure	0	0	0	0	>0.05	>0.05	>0.05
Feeling towards self when compared to others at the moment	0	0	0	0	>0.05	0	>0.05
Impact of feedback from teachers and peers during discussions	0	0	0	0	>0.05	0	>0.05

The variables related to interaction with teachers to discuss subject related topics, to interact in-person or on-line with fellow students, to inquire about assignments from fellow students, and to complete assignments by getting together with fellow students, proved to have a significant effect on the self-esteem.

Ability to easily understand course material, complete assignments from the course material provided, and score good in assignments significantly affect the feeling of ability to easily share views with others and do thinks as good as most other people. Similarly, ability to easily understand course material is revealed to be significantly affecting the belief in self to successfully manage the job interview process, make future plans and work towards it.

Furthermore, to validate the model and ensure the stability of your results, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed. The existence of partial correlation in information among the variables of self-esteem was revealed as KMO value was 0.625. Chi-Square value was 675.388 on Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The significant value was lesser than 0.05 revealing that all the variables were not of same variance hence were correlated. The correlation matrix diverged significantly from the identity matrix, hence Principal Component

Analysis (PCA) was applied which revealed the variables presented in Table 3, contributing the most to the understanding of 'Self-esteem' and its measurement:

Table 3: Attributes contributing the most to the understanding of Self-esteem

Attributes of Self-esteem	Initial Eigenvalues	% of Variance	Cumulative %
Impact of feedback from teachers and peers during discussions	2.208	24.530	24.530
Able to do things as good as most other people	1.714	19.039	43.569
Feelings towards self when compared to others at the moment	1.131	12.563	56.132

The perception towards the self in the following attributes (as presented in table 2) contribute to the self-esteem in an individual:

- (b) A positive or negative feeling towards self-improvement based on feedback from teachers and peers during discussions.
- (c) A positive or negative feeling towards ability to do things as good as most other people.
- (d) A positive or negative feeling towards self when compared to others at the moment.

The data as received from the respondent group with reference to the above three self-esteem attributes is shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Perception of the respondents towards the identified attributes of Self-esteem through CFA

Attributes of Self Esteem	Positive Perception	Neutral	Negative Perception	Mean	Std. Dev.
Able to do things as good as most other people	46	34	20	1.74	0.77
Feeling towards self when compared to others at the moment	37	35	28	1.91	0.8
Impact of feedback from teachers and peers during discussions	25	32	43	2.18	0.8

Comparison of data from table 1 and table 4 reveals the similarity in agreeableness towards social interaction with teachers and peers, with positive perception towards the attributes of self esteem.

4. Hypothesis Testing

The statistical analysis (as presented in table 2 an 3) using ANOVA and CFA of the data received from sample group pursuing higher education in ODL mode revealed that the three dependent variables with maximum variance contributing towards understanding of 'Self-esteem' showed the significant value of $p < 0.05$ with four independent variables pertaining to interaction with teachers and peers. Therefore,

- (a) Discussing subject related topics with teachers facilitate interactions that significantly contribute towards the development of self-esteem of the students. Hence, null hypothesis (H_{01}) was rejected and the corresponding alternate hypothesis (H_{a1}) was accepted.

(b) Social interactions with peers in-person or on-line, inquiring about assignments from fellow students, and collaboration with peers to complete assignments significantly contribute towards the development of self-esteem of the students. Hence, null hypothesis (H_{02}) was rejected and the corresponding alternate hypothesis (H_{a2}) was accepted.

5. Discussion

The Relevance of interaction with teachers and peers for developing self-esteem in higher education has proved to be of paramount importance, particularly in the context of Industry 4.0 and the emerging Industry 5.0. Drawing upon the foundational sociological theories of Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead, the dynamics of the development of self-esteem through interactions in higher education is understood as follows:

Charles Horton Cooley's "Looking Glass Self" theory underscores the pivotal role of interactions with teachers and peers in higher education for self-esteem development. Within this context, students engage in multifaceted interactions, including discussing subject-related topics with teachers, interacting in person or online with fellow students, inquiring about assignments from peers, and collaborating to complete assignments while co-learning with peers.

These interactions serve as mirrors through which students evaluate their self-worth and competence. When teachers provide constructive feedback on academic work, it serves as a powerful mirror reflecting their proficiency and potential. Likewise, when peers engage in discussions and collaborative learning, students gauge their abilities and contributions through the feedback and recognition received from these interactions (Walters, 2007).

Attributes of self-esteem, such as one's perception of being able to perform tasks as well as most other people, are closely intertwined with these interactions. When students actively participate in subject-related discussions, they develop a sense of competency, boosting their self-esteem. Similarly, collaborating with fellow students on assignments reinforces their belief in their abilities to contribute effectively to the collective learning process (Norton, 2007).

George Herbert Mead's "Symbolic Interactionism" theory highlights the symbolic nature of interactions with teachers and peers. In this context, students engage with significant others, such as teachers who guide and mentor, and reference groups, represented by peers with whom they compare themselves.

Interactions with teachers involve subject-related discussions, seeking clarification on assignments, and receiving feedback. Through these interactions, teachers symbolically affirm students' competence, thus shaping their self-concept and self-esteem. Positive feedback from educators contributes to students' belief in their abilities and fosters a positive self-image.

Peer interactions are equally symbolic, acting as a reference point for self-comparison. When students collaborate, they compare their contributions and competence with those of their peers. Supportive and affirmative peer interactions reinforce feelings of belonging and self-worth, align with self-esteem attributes.

6. Conclusion

The study substantiates that ODL offers a unique approach to learning, emphasising flexibility and self-paced education with no compromise on content knowledge.

Cooley and Mead's theory of self-esteem and Branden's theory of self-esteem has been instrumental in analysing the role of social interactions in developing self-esteem in students pursuing higher education with ODL mode. The study reveals that an individual's ability to reflect and introspect could be cultivated and nurtured through social interactions, enabling an individual to improve social skills and make value-judgment on self, driven by external factors and standards.

In higher education, teachers and peers are the significant others play a pivotal role in providing feedback, encouragement, and validation creating a positive and supportive environment. Constructive feedback from educators encourages students to believe in their capabilities and supports the development of a positive self-concept. Students who communicate with teachers and peers, actively participate in academic discussions and collaborate with peer are more likely to feel valued and competent, boosting their self-esteem.

Equally, the recognition and validation received from peers during interactions further contribute to a sense of belonging and value within the academic community, reinforcing self-esteem. Moreover, the self-esteem attributes related to feelings towards oneself when compared to others at the moment play a critical role. When students perceive themselves as capable and valued contributors in academic discussions and collaborative assignments, their self-esteem is positively influenced. The ability to engage on par with peers and to contribute meaningfully fosters feelings of self-worth and competence.

As evidenced, social interactions with teachers and peers are instrumental in building a positive self-concept and self-esteem. It eventually enhances their employability as they become better prepared for social interactions in the workplace. Hence, creating opportunities for social interactions with teachers and peers should be a priority in ODL settings to empower students with the tools they need to be at par with on-campus students to excel in the 21st century.

7. Future Research Directions

Understanding the relevance of social interactions with teachers and peers in higher education for the development self-esteem, the recommendation for future research are as follows:

- (e) An experimental study to identify teaching approaches applied in on-campus higher education addressing both interpersonal and intrapersonal social interactions that foster meaningful connections among students and develop their self-esteem, without compromising on the asynchronous and self-paced character of ODL.
- (f) Explore the use of digital technology and platforms to facilitate social interactions in ODL asynchronous environments.

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