



Article

Academic Motivation and Self-Esteem in Irish Undergraduates:

a Mixed-Methods Approach

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Keywords

Academic motivation; self-esteem; mixed-methods; undergraduate students; thematic analysis.

Abstract

Motivation and self-esteem are often considered important aspects of students' educational experience. The present study explored the relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation among undergraduate students in Ireland. Through a mixed-methods design, this study provided insight into students' perceptions of self-esteem and academic motivation. One hundred and sixty-two undergraduates were conveniently sampled and completed an online survey. Nonparametric correlations revealed no significant relationships between self-esteem, academic motivation, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation. A thematic analysis provided insight into students' perspectives on the influence of high self-esteem on academic motivation in the face of challenges, as well as academic engagement and performance. Future research could investigate the influence of educational level on academic motivation and self-esteem to gain insights into self-esteem development. A self-esteem program for undergraduate students could be implemented to support holistic student development in higher education.

List of Abbreviations

SDT Self-Determination theory.

RSES Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

AMS-C Academic Motivation Scale College Version.

Introduction

Understanding motivation and self-esteem has helped learners overcome obstacles and maximise achievements.¹ Motivation has been extensively researched, with studies exploring the factors that influence it, including self-esteem and academic achievement.² However, despite extensive research on both constructs, a notable lack of qualitative exploration of students' perspectives in higher education, particularly in an Irish educational context, remains. This study addresses this gap by employing a mixed-methods approach to provide a multidimensional perspective on academic motivation and self-esteem. Furthermore, this study will provide practical recommendations to inform policy and program implementation in Irish higher education, thereby enhancing undergraduate students' educational experiences.

Academic Motivation

Motivation is an evolving process often influenced by personal, institutional, and societal factors.³ Academic motivation refers to the internal and external drivers that direct students' engagement toward academic tasks and encourage students to pursue their learning goals effectively.⁴ As a construct, it has been extensively studied quantitatively, often using the Academic Motivation Scale College Version (AMS-C),⁵ which remains one of the most widely applied instruments for measuring academic motivation among students. Quantitative studies employing the AMS-C have reported mixed findings regarding the relationship between academic motivation and self-esteem. Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed, using a multistage randomised sample of Iranian postgraduate nursing students, found a significant positive association between the two constructs.⁶ In contrast, Khanagar et al., drawing on a

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1. Sevgi Topçu and Marilena Z. Leana-Taşçılar, "The Role of Motivation and Self-Esteem in the Academic Achievement of Turkish Gifted Students," *Gifted Education International* 34, no. 1 (2018): 3-18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261429416646192.11>
 2. Amir Vahedian-Azimi and Malihe-Sadat Moayed, "The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Motivation Among Postgraduate Nursing Students: A Cross-Sectional Study," *International Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15, no. 2 (2021), 113-119, <https://doi.org/10.30491/ijbs.2021.2628831447>; Moses Kopong Tokan and Mbing Maria Imakulata, "The Effect of Motivation and Learning Behaviour on Student Achievement," *South African Journal of Education* 39, no. 1 (2019): 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.15700/sajev39n1a1510>
 3. Julianne C. Turner and Helen Patrick, "How Does Motivation Develop and Why Does It Change? Reframing Motivation Research," *Educational Psychologist* 43, no. 3 (2008): 119-131, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520802178441>
 4. Shiva Zeynali, Reza Pishghadam, and Azar Hosseini Fatemi, "Identifying the Motivational and Demotivational Factors Influencing Students' Academic Achievements in Language Education," *Learning and Motivation* 68 (2019): 101598, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lmot.2019.101598>
 5. Robert J. Vallerand, Luc G. Pelletier, Marc R. Blais, Nathalie M. Brière, Caroline B. Senécal, and Évelyne F. Vallières, "Academic Motivation Scale (AMS-C 28), College (CEGEP) Version," *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 52 and 53 (1992-1993), https://www.lrcs.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/emecegep_en.pdf
 6. Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed, "Self-Esteem and Academic Motivation," 117.

cross-sectional survey of Saudi Arabian undergraduate dental students, reported no significant relationship.⁷ These discrepancies may reflect methodological and contextual differences, including educational level (postgraduate vs. undergraduate), sampling approaches (randomised vs. convenience sampling), analytical methods (hierarchical regression vs. bivariate analysis), and broader cultural influences.

While the AMS-C has provided valuable insights into the dimensions of academic motivation, the majority of existing literature relies on quantitative exploration with little consideration of students' perspectives. Recent qualitative research has contributed to this gap, finding that external factors, such as support systems, online learning, and financial independence, shape students' motivation. Despite this recent contribution, the research focused on optometry undergraduates, and the findings do not reflect those of a broader student population.⁸ The lack of qualitative exploration is significant. Although academic motivation can be quantified using instruments such as Vallerand et al.'s AMS-C,⁹ Pintrich suggests that it can also be viewed as a subjective phenomenon shaped by both internal and external factors rather than being an entirely objective construct.¹⁰ As Naipal et al. note, while validated quantitative measures are useful tools, a mixed-methods approach is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of student experiences in higher education.¹¹

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a foundational framework for examining academic motivation, suggesting that intrinsic motivation emerges when the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled. Having been widely applied in psychological research, Ryan and Deci's SDT proposes that intrinsic motivation is an individual's need to carry out an act for personal gratification and enjoyment. In contrast, extrinsic motivation involves motivation driven by external rewards, such as wealth or the avoidance of punishment.¹² Ryan and Deci further argue that students who are in control of their learning (autonomy), believe in their academic capabilities (competence), and feel supported by others

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7. Sanjeev B Khanagar et al., "Assessment of Academic Motivation and Its Impact on Self-Esteem Among Saudi Arabian Undergraduate Dental Students: A Cross-Sectional Study," *Cureus* 17, no. 1 (2025): 3–7, <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.77262>
 8. Shivani Naipal et al., "Academic Motivation and Self-Concept of Undergraduate Optometry Students," *Transformation in Higher Education* 9 (2024): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v9i0359>
 9. Vallerand et al., "AMS-C 28 College Version."
 10. Paul R. Pintrich, "A Motivational Science Perspective on the Role of Student Motivation in Learning and Teaching Contexts," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95, no. 4 (2003): 681–682, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.95.4.667>
 11. Naipal et al., "Academic Motivation and Self-Concept of Undergraduate Optometry Students," 8.
 12. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 68–78, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.68>

(relatedness) are more likely to be intrinsically motivated.¹³ Meta-analyses support this, indicating that autonomous motivation is positively related to engagement and academic performance.¹⁴

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal drive to engage in academic activities for the inherent satisfaction and personal growth they provide, rather than for external rewards. Numerous studies emphasise the importance of intrinsic motivation for academic success. Sunu and Baidoo-Anu found that students with stronger academic self-concept were more likely to be intrinsically motivated, with both factors predicting academic performance.¹⁵ This suggests that internal beliefs regarding academic ability are closely linked with the desire to learn and achieve. Furthermore, Hidajat et al. highlight the dynamic nature of academic motivation and that when students' intrinsic motivation is fostered through meaningful, choice-driven, supportive learning activities, they tend to be more actively engaged in academic tasks.¹⁶ Therefore, when students perceive control over their learning, they are more likely to engage deeply and persist through challenges, reinforcing the long-term benefits of intrinsic motivation.

However, a meta-analysis by Walker et al. suggests that while intrinsic drivers such as mastery goals and learning self-efficacy predict academic performance in face-to-face settings, their predictive strength appears weaker in online and blended contexts.¹⁷ Their findings challenge the assumption that intrinsic motivation is universally predictive of performance, underscoring the importance of delivery mode and context.

Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, involves engaging in tasks because they will lead to a separate outcome, for example, good grades and recognition.¹⁸ The AMS-C divides extrinsic motivation into three forms: external regulation (motivated by external

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13. Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation From a Self-Determination Theory Perspective: Definitions, Theory, Practices, and Future Directions," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 61 (2020): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101860>
 14. Diego Vasconcellos et al., "Self-Determination Theory Applied to Physical Education: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 112, no. 7 (2020): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000420>
 15. Seth Sunu and David Baidoo-Anu, "Relationship Between Students' Academic Self-Concept, Intrinsic Motivation, and Academic Performance," *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2023): 41–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2023.2292033>
 16. Helga Graciani Hidajat, Fattah Hanurawan, Tutut Chusniyah, and Hetti Rahmawati, "Why I'm Bored in Learning? Exploration of Students' Academic Motivation," *International Journal of Instruction* 13, no. 3 (2020): 124–132, <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.20201339a>
 17. Andrew Walker et al., "Exploring the Relationships of Learners and Instructors in Online Courses," *Online Learning* 28, no. 4 (2024): 84–88, <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v28i44602>
 18. Chang Chhor et al., "The Investigation of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations Impacting EFL Students' English Language Learning," *Journal of Language and Linguistics in Society*, no. 46 (2024): 14, <https://doi.org/10.55529/jlls.46.1224>

rewards or punishment), introjected regulation (internal pressure such as guilt or ego), and identified regulation (goal pursuit aligned with personal values). While external regulation is based on external demands or rewards, identified regulation reflects goal alignment with individual values, making it a more internalised form of extrinsic drive.¹⁹

Despite its prevalence, recent research has raised questions about the effectiveness of extrinsic motivation in predicting academic outcomes, particularly in higher education. Walker et al., in a meta-analysis of 52 studies involving online and blended learners, found that extrinsic motivational variables, such as external control and achievement goals, were only weakly associated with academic performance and did not reliably predict outcomes in meta-regression models.²⁰ This highlights the limitations of extrinsic motivation as a standalone predictor and suggests the need for further research into how external factors interact with student beliefs and academic outcomes.

Self-Esteem

Maslow's hierarchy of needs positions self-esteem at the fourth level, identifying it as a core psychological component in the progression towards self-actualisation, or the realisation of personal potential. Within this framework, self-esteem influences individuals' self-perceptions of personal value and worth. Individuals with higher levels of self-esteem are typically characterised by confidence, contentment, feelings of respect, and a sense of achievement.²¹ Previous research has highlighted the role of self-esteem in shaping academic outcomes, particularly its influence on student motivation and achievement. In a sample of Turkish gifted students, Topçu and LeanaTaşçılar found significant positive relationships between self-esteem, motivation, and academic achievement, with self-esteem significantly predicting academic performance at several grade levels.²² Similarly, Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed reported that among postgraduate students, self-esteem has a strong positive effect on academic motivation.²³ However, both studies relied on quantitative analyses, offering limited insight into how students articulate their perspective on self-esteem. Few studies have addressed this gap by integrating qualitative methods.

More recent research, employing mixed-methods, has found that academic performance, social support, and personal challenges are key factors in shaping self-esteem, thereby reinforcing the value of mixed-methods approaches in exploring

19. Vallerand et al., "AMS-C 28 College Version."

20. Walker et al., "Exploring the Relationships of Learners and Instructors in Online Courses," 85–88.

21. A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–396, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>

22. Topçu and Leana-Taşçılar, "The Role of Motivation and Self-Esteem," 10.

23. Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed, "Self-Esteem and Academic Motivation," 115.

these constructs.²⁴ Similarly, Saleh et al. investigated how motivational educational environments impact nursing students' self-esteem.²⁵ Although the study confirmed that supportive settings enhance students' confidence and engagement, further investigation through qualitative analyses is warranted, given the reliance on quantitative methods. Overall, the literature on self-esteem in higher education lacks studies that involve students' voices.

Self-Esteem and Academic Motivation

The relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation is well-established. Students with stronger achievement orientation and introjected regulation, an aspect of motivation based on internal pressure, are more likely to base their self-worth on academic competence.²⁶ Similarly, Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed identified a strong association between these constructs.²⁷ Moyano, Quílez-Robres, and Pascual supported these findings after reporting a positive correlation between self-esteem and motivation for learning across several educational contexts.²⁸

Recent research by Ullah, Shahzada, and Khan further demonstrated that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are significant predictors of self-esteem, with implications for how educational institutions support student development.²⁹ Despite existing research highlighting the complex interplay between self-esteem and academic motivation, there are gaps in the literature about how students in higher education perceive these constructs.

The Present Study

This study examines the relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation within the Irish higher education context. While previous research has examined these constructs quantitatively, a gap remains in understanding how undergraduate students perceive their interactions. By adopting a mixed-methods approach,

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24. Suppalak Plysang, "Empowering University Students Through Holistic Self-Esteem Development: A Pathway to Personal and Academic Success," *Journal of Education and Learning* 14, no. 3 (2025): 197, <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v14n3p197>
 25. Manal Saleh Moustafa Saleh, Sahar Abdel-Latif Abdel-Sattar, Rahma Abdelgawad Elkalashy, Nevin Adel Amer, and Hanan Elsaid Elsabahy, "Nursing Students Engagement and Motivational Education Environment as a Requirement to Improve Students' Self-Esteem," *Egyptian Journal of Health Care* 12, no. 2 (2021): 801–815, <https://doi.org/10.21608/ejhc.2021.171355>
 26. Daniela Bergesch D'Incao Marrone and Claudio Simon Hutz, "Motivação Acadêmica E Autoestima Contingente: Relação Com Satisfação De Vida, Esperança E Otimismo," *Revista Avaliação Psicológica* 18, no. 4 (2019): 419–428, <https://doi.org/10.15689/ap.2019.1804.18868.10>
 27. Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed, "Self-Esteem and Academic Motivation," 117.
 28. Nieves Moyano, Alberto Quílez-Robres, and Alejandra Cortés Pascual, "Self-Esteem and Motivation for Learning in Academic Achievement: The Mediating Role of Reasoning and Verbal Fluidity," *Sustainability* 12, no. 14 (2020): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12145768>
 29. Hikmat Ullah, Gulap Shahzada, and Habib Nawaz Khan, "Does Academic Motivation Contribute to the Self-esteem of Students at the Graduate Level? A Case Study of Universities in the Southern Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan," *Frontiers in Education* 9 (August 12, 2024): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1337123>

this study aims to provide a more nuanced account of academic motivation and self-esteem and to inform strategies to enhance the student experience in Irish universities. It was hypothesised that self-esteem would be significantly correlated with academic motivation. In particular, significant associations were expected between self-esteem and both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In addition, the study examined how undergraduate students perceive the role of self-esteem in shaping their academic motivation, drawing on qualitative responses to highlight aspects of educational experiences that may not be fully captured by quantitative measures alone.

Method

Design

The current research utilised a mixed-methods design to explore self-esteem and academic motivation (including intrinsic and extrinsic motivation). The AMS-C and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) were selected due to their high reliability and validity.³⁰ A Microsoft Forms survey was chosen to capture undergraduate students' self-reported academic motivation and self-esteem efficiently. This method is well-suited to examining these constructs as it aligns with previous methodologies in the field.³¹ It is further justified based on the prominence of survey research in psychology.³²

The quantitative component of the study employed a correlational design to examine the relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation. Quantitative analyses examined data collected via the self-report survey, which included validated measures of self-esteem and academic motivation, as well as demographic information such as gender and year of study.

For the qualitative component, participants were asked to respond to two 'word scenarios' developed by the researcher to capture student perspectives on self-esteem and academic motivation (see Materials and Procedure section, page 15, for details). This approach was chosen to promote introspective responses while minimising social desirability (the tendency of participants to respond in a manner that aligns with societal expectations)³³ and to allow recurring themes to be identified across responses. Thematic analysis, a qualitative approach used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning across data while acknowledging

30. Vallerand et al., "AMS-C 28 College Version.";

Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400876136>

31. Naipal et al., "Academic Motivation and Self-Concept of Undergraduate Optometry Students," 1.

32. Cleo Protogerou and Martin S. Hagger, "A Checklist to Assess the Quality of Survey Studies in Psychology," *Methods in Psychology* 3 (2020): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.metip.2020100031>

33. Enrico Perinelli and Paola Gremigni, "Use of Social Desirability Scales in Clinical Psychology: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 72, no. 6 (2016): 534–551, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp22284>

the researcher’s active role in knowledge construction,³⁴ was used to analyse this data. The mixed-methods design ensured a robust exploration of self-esteem and academic motivation.

Participants

Participants were recruited between January 10 and January 31, 2024, using convenience and snowball sampling to reach a diverse sample within a limited time frame. Convenience sampling involved identifying individuals who met the study criteria through accessible means, while snowball sampling relied on participants referring others who also met the criteria.³⁵ A total of 162 undergraduates participated in the study. Of these, 116 identified as female (71.6%), 39 as male (24.1%), five as non-binary (3.1%), and two students (1.2%) preferred not to disclose their gender. Table 1 presents the number of participants by year of study. Participants who did not consent were excluded. The treatment of participants aligned with the ethical standards of The Psychological Society of Ireland and the British Psychological Society *Ethical Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research*.³⁶

Table 1: Distribution of participants by academic year.

Year of Study	n	%
First Year	38	23.5%
Second Year	35	21.6%
Third Year	37	22.8%
Fourth Year	52	32.1%
Total	162	100%

Source: Data derived from the current study’s responses (N = 162).

Materials and Procedure

Academic Motivation Scale – College Version

The AMS–C is a modified version of the Academic Motivation Scale representing college students. It is a 28-item scale designed to measure intrinsic motivation,

34. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 79–81, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

35. Robert Wall Emerson, “Convenience Sampling, Random Sampling, and Snowball Sampling: How Does Sampling Affect the Validity of Research?,” *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* 109, no. 2 (2015): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X1510900215>

36. The Psychological Society of Ireland, *Code of Professional Ethics* (October 2019), <https://www.psychologicalsocietyie/footer/Code-of-Ethics-1>;

British Psychological Society, *BPS Ethical Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research* (June 2021), <https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/ethics-guidelines-internet-mediated-research>

extrinsic motivation, and amotivation among college students.³⁷ Scores ranged from -18 (significantly low academic motivation) to 18 (significantly high academic motivation). Since the study focuses on self-determined motivation, amotivation was excluded as it reflects a lack of intention and autonomy. Previous cross-sectional research has supported the use of the AMS-C as a measure of academic motivation in higher education. Kapp et al. provided evidence for the validity of the AMS-C in a sample of first-year university students,³⁸ while Zurlo et al. similarly supported the validity of the scale in an Italian university student sample.³⁹ Although the original AMS-C uses a 7-point Likert scale, a 5-point Likert scale was used in the present study. The scale responses were retained as collected, and this adaptation is acknowledged in the 'Discussion' section. The AMS-C demonstrated acceptable internal consistency. Internal consistency refers to the extent to which items within a scale reliably measure the same underlying construct,⁴⁰ with the present study demonstrating acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The RSES assesses self-esteem using 10 items on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Obtaining the total score involves summing the values, with reverse scoring applied to items 3, 5, 8, 9, and 10. Scores ranged from zero (the lowest score) to thirty (the highest score). Plysang reported that the RSES demonstrated acceptable to strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$) among university students,⁴¹ and the present study reported $\alpha = .88$.

Qualitative 'Word Scenarios'

As part of the survey, participants were required to answer two open-ended prompts designed to capture their insights into how students' self-esteem may influence academic motivation, including students' engagement, performance, and responses to academic challenges. Participants typed their responses into a text box in Microsoft Forms. Table 2 presents the 'word scenarios' that the participants were asked.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Technology and Psychology Ethics Committee at the Institute of Art, Design + Technology (IADT). Participants

37. Vallerand et al., "AMS-C 28 College Version."

38. Adèle Kapp, Karina Mostert, and Leon De Beer, "Investigating the Appropriateness and Validity of the Academic Motivation Scale-College Version for South African First-Year University Students," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 8, no. 2 (2020): 45–58, <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v8i2.4447>

39. Maria Clelia Zurlo et al., "Assessing Motivation in University Students: Factor Structure and Psychometric Properties of the Italian Version of the Academic Motivation Scale-College (AMS-C)," *TPM: Testing Psychometrics Methodology in Applied Psychology* 30, no. 1 (2023): 43–61, <https://doi.org/10.4473/TPM30.1.4>

40. Lee J. Cronbach, "Coefficient Alpha and the Internal Structure of Tests," *Psychometrika* 16, no. 3 (1951): 297–334, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02310555>

41. Plysang, "Empowering University Students," 201.

were invited to complete an online survey. Before participation, all participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the objectives and requirements, which they were asked to read carefully. Participants could provide consent directly within Microsoft Forms. The survey included a demographic questionnaire that collected data on age, gender, and study year to ensure that participants met the eligibility criteria. The participants then completed the AMS-C, RSES, and the 'word scenarios'. An additional follow-up consent confirmation ensured that participants agreed to the use of their data. Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Table 2: 'Word scenarios' presented to participants,

Scenario	Text Shown to Participants
Scenario 1	"Imagine a student with high self-esteem. They are confident and assured in their abilities. Their self-esteem is a source of strength. How do you think their high self-esteem impacts their academic motivation, particularly when they face challenging assignments or exams?"
Scenario 2	"Imagine a student who generally has high self-esteem. These students value their abilities and believe in their potential. How do you think their self-esteem influences their motivation to engage in academic activities and perform well in their studies?"

Analytical Approach

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (Version 29). Preliminary tests confirmed the assumptions. For example, *homogeneity of variance* tests were conducted, and *normality* was assessed. Inferential statistics were used to determine whether a significant correlation existed between academic motivation and self-esteem. In the present study, statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, meaning results with a probability of less than 5% of occurring by chance were considered statistically significant, in line with the standard procedures for setting the significance level in hypothesis testing.⁴²

Qualitative responses to the two 'word scenarios' were analysed using inductive content analysis. Responses were exported into a Microsoft Word document. The researcher followed the steps outlined in Table 3. This process was data-driven and was not guided by any pre-existing coding framework. The reliability of the qualitative analysis was ensured by applying the six steps of thematic analysis, represented in Table 3.⁴³

42. Jacob Cohen, *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioural Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203771587>

43. Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," 87.

Table 3: Braun and Clarke’s Six Steps of Thematic Analysis

Phase	
Phase 1	<i>Become familiar with the data</i>
Phase 2	<i>Data coding</i>
Phase 3	<i>Develop initial themes</i>
Phase 4	<i>Expand and review initial themes</i>
Phase 5	<i>Refine, define, and name themes</i>
Phase 6	<i>Report results</i>

Source: Adapted from Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 87.

Findings and Interpretations

Quantitative Overview

This study explored the relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation among 162 undergraduate students using Spearman’s *rho* correlation, with preliminary assumption testing conducted. The analysis revealed no statistically significant association between self-esteem and academic motivation, $r_s(160) = .021$, which was not statistically significant at the .05 level (two-tailed), $p = .789$. The 95% confidence interval ranged from .138 to .179. There is insufficient evidence to suggest a significant association.

The study proposed a relationship between self-esteem and intrinsic motivation. Spearman’s *rho* correlation coefficient was $r_s(160) = .11$, which was also not statistically significant, $p = .179$. The 95% confidence interval ranged from $-.053$ to $.260$. The data did not support a statistically significant relationship. Additionally, the study proposed a relationship between self-esteem and extrinsic motivation. Spearman’s *rho* correlation coefficient indicated $r_s(160) = .09$. This was not statistically significant, $p = .262$, with a 95% confidence interval from $-.071$ to $.244$, and no significant association was observed.

These findings contrast with Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed’s study on postgraduate nursing students, which reported a positive association between academic motivation and self-esteem.⁴⁴ However, they align with the more recent findings of Khanagar et al., who found no significant relationship among undergraduates.⁴⁵ These contrasting results suggest that the relationship may be context-dependent, possibly shaped by factors such as educational level, cultural norms, or the constructs’ fluid nature within higher education settings.

44. Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed, “The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Motivation,” 117.
45. Khanagar et al., “Assessment of Academic Motivation and Its Impact on Self-Esteem,” 7.

Qualitative Overview

Qualitative analysis investigated how undergraduates perceived the influence of academic motivation and self-esteem. The responses to two 'word scenarios' were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis.⁴⁶ Figure 1 illustrates four themes derived from the responses to "Imagine a student with high self-esteem. They are confident and assured in their abilities. Their self-esteem is a source of strength. How do you think their high self-esteem impacts their academic motivation, particularly when they face challenging assignments or exams?"

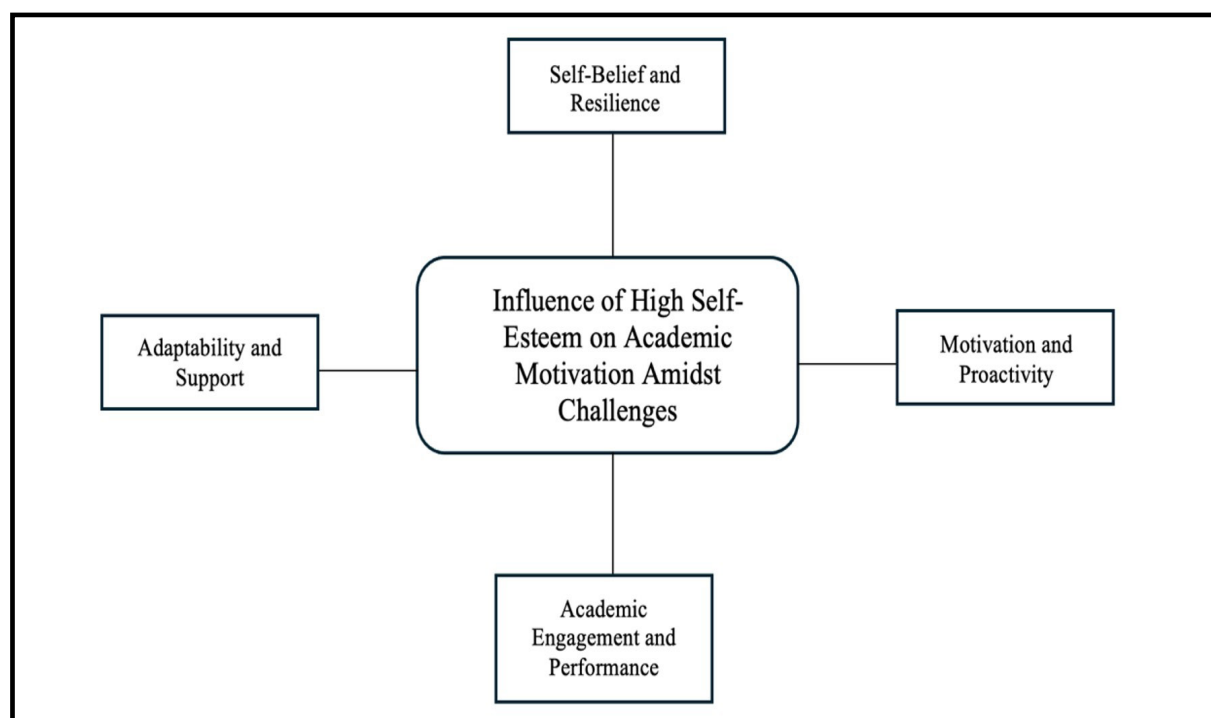


Figure 1: Diagram of Themes from 'Word Scenario' 1, Data derived from the current study's responses (N = 162).

Theme 1: Self-Belief and Resilience

This theme illustrated students' perceptions of perseverance and the power of belief. Having confidence in one's ability empowered students to navigate academic challenges and cultivate a positive mindset. High self-esteem was seen to nurture optimism, resilience, motivation, and confidence. As one participant expressed, "They are more resilient to pressure and challenges and have the knowledge that they will overcome the challenges presented," highlighting the perceived link between self-belief and resilience. The theme resonates with previous findings by Asakereh and Yousofi, who emphasised that self-perception (specifically self-esteem and self-efficacy) was significantly associated with academic achievement, with self-esteem emerging as the strongest predictor in university contexts.⁴⁷

46. Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," 87.

47. Ahmad Asakereh and Nouroddin Yousofi, "Reflective Thinking, Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement of Iranian EFL Students in Higher Education: Is There a Relationship?," *International Journal of Educational Psychology* 7, no. 1 (2018): 79–82, <https://doi.org/10.17583/ijep.2018.2896>

Theme 2: Motivation and Proactivity

This theme reflected students' attitudes towards sustained effort and academic perseverance, fuelled by a sense of capacity to succeed. Numerous participants described the benefits of being highly motivated, including completing assignments and exams efficiently, being driven to move forward, and maintaining a productive workflow. One participant explained, "They tell themselves they have the ability to go and sit difficult exams because they are motivated and have personal confidence and drive. They know they are able for the pressure," highlighting the link between motivation, confidence, and exam readiness. Another noted, "If they are motivated, they will get the assignment done more easily and not dread doing it," reflecting how motivation supports proactive engagement with academic tasks. This motivation appears internally driven, suggesting a potential connection to intrinsic motivation as described in Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory.⁴⁸ However, despite students associating high self-esteem with internal drive, the quantitative results did not support a direct statistical link, highlighting a disconnect between perception and measurement.

Theme 3: Academic Engagement and Performance

This theme reflected students' perceptions of how self-esteem shapes academic engagement and performance. Participants described how higher self-esteem fostered both confidence in educational success and a greater willingness to engage. One participant noted, "I think if a student lacked self-esteem, they wouldn't believe in themselves to excel academically and hinder their studies." Another explained, "They are more willing to participate as they feel they will succeed." This theme aligns with findings from Plysang, who found that university students with higher Grade Point Averages report higher levels of self-esteem.⁴⁹ While the quantitative results of the present study did not support a relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation, these qualitative insights suggest that students view self-esteem as foundational to their willingness to engage academically.

Theme 4: Adaptability and Support

This theme reflected the resilience of individuals with high self-esteem, noting that the ability to navigate pressure and challenges enhances adaptability. The capacity to manage stress was commonly identified as a key feature of high self-esteem. As one participant explained, "I think the person would be able to handle their stress better and wouldn't get overwhelmed easily because they know they can overcome obstacles." Another participant highlighted how self-esteem can also promote help-seeking and academic persistence, stating, "High self-esteem is a really important way to aid academic ability and motivation. In assignments and exams, these can be helped by self-belief. They feel confident to get in touch with people and seek help."

48. Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory," 72.

49. Plysang, "Empowering University Students Through Holistic Self-Esteem Development," 203.

These insights align with Naipal et al., who found that social support from peers, parents, and lecturers influenced students' motivation, with students frequently reporting that peer encouragement motivated greater effort in their studies.⁵⁰

Figure 2 illustrates four themes derived from the responses to the scenario, "Imagine a student who generally has high self-esteem. These students value their abilities and believe in their potential. How do you think their self-esteem influences their motivation to engage in academic activities and perform well in their studies?"

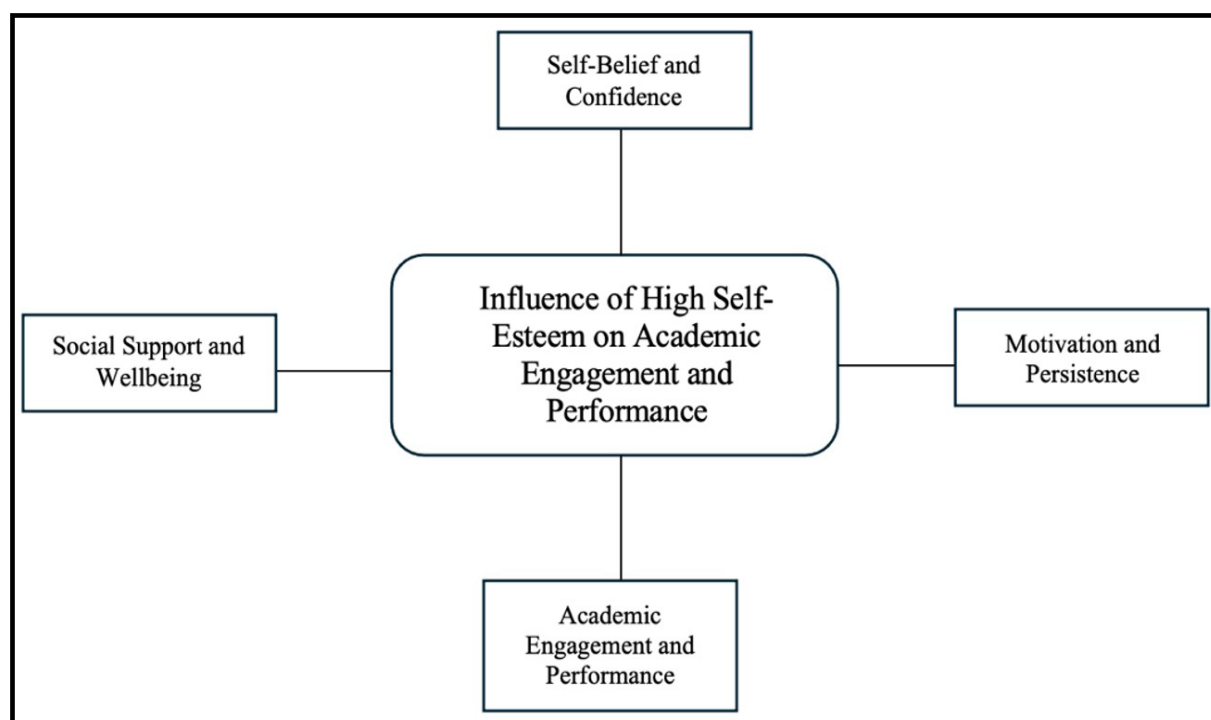


Figure 2: Diagram of Themes 'Word Scenario' Two, Source: Data derived from the current study's responses (N = 162).

Theme 1: Self-Belief and Confidence

This theme reflected the role of self-belief and confidence in academic engagement and success. Participants described how believing in one's abilities helped foster stronger academic performance and sustained motivation. As one participant noted, "As the students believe in their potential and value their abilities, I believe they are more likely to succeed and perform at a better level in academic activities." Another explained, "A strong belief in ourselves is a strong predictor of good success, and having high self-esteem would positively influence motivation and engagement in academic activities." The emphasis on internalised confidence is consistent with findings from Ullah, Shahzada, and Khan, who found that overall academic motivation was the strongest predictor of self-esteem, with intrinsic motivational components also contributing significantly to self-esteem development.⁵¹

50. Naipal et al., "Academic Motivation and Self-Concept of Undergraduate Optometry Students," 8.

51. Ullah, Shahzada, and Khan, "Does Academic Motivation Contribute to the Self-Esteem of Students at the Graduate Level?," 9.

Theme 2: Motivation and Persistence

This theme captured students' perceptions of how motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, supports persistence in academic contexts. Participants described how high self-esteem could encourage students to pursue goals based on personal standards rather than external comparison, fostering sustained effort and resilience. As one participant explained, "This student would continue to push themselves to reach their full potential and academic goals. They would also not compare their academic achievements and goals to others in their course," illustrating the link between internal drive and long-term academic engagement. Another noted, "Their positive attitude will motivate them to actively participate," reflecting how intrinsic motivation may also support everyday academic involvement.

Theme 3: Academic Engagement and Performance

This theme reflected students' perceptions of how motivation and self-esteem influence their academic engagement and performance. Participants described how confidence in one's abilities reduced hesitation and enhanced motivation to participate in educational tasks. One participant noted, "They would have motivation as they know they will most likely succeed and are not afraid to engage in academics as they are confident in their abilities." Another explained, "They are not faced with fear of failure as quickly and therefore are more motivated to engage in their studies. They get more satisfaction from doing their activities," pointing to the emotional benefits that support ongoing academic involvement.

Theme 4: Social Support and Well-Being

This theme captured participants' perceptions of how high self-esteem extends beyond academic performance to support emotional well-being and positive peer relationships. Participants described how students with high self-esteem were more likely to maintain a positive mindset and uplift others. As one participant noted, "They will do better and help their friends be motivated to do better too. If they know they have the potential, that will show through their studies," highlighting the social ripple effect of self-belief. Another explained, "I think with high self-esteem people feel better about themselves which translates to their work. Without deprecating thoughts their positivity can help motivate them," suggesting that emotional well-being plays a key role in sustaining motivation and academic engagement; this echoes Hidajat et al., who emphasised that social support can play a key role in sustaining students' academic motivation and engagement.⁵²

Discussion

This mixed-methods study investigates the relationship between academic motivation and self-esteem among undergraduate students. While quantitative analysis revealed no significant associations, the qualitative data provided rich,

52. Hidajat et al., "Why I'm Bored in Learning? Exploration of Students' Academic Motivation," 125–129.

nuanced perceptions, suggesting that the interplay between these constructs may be more complex and contextually dependent than measurable associations can capture.

The lack of a statistically significant relationship between self-esteem and academic motivation contrasts with the findings from Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed's research on postgraduate students.⁵³ However, it aligns with more recent results from Khanager et al., who reported similar outcomes when examining Saudi Arabian undergraduates.⁵⁴ The inconsistency across studies suggests that the relationship between motivation and self-esteem may be more context-dependent than previously assumed and could be influenced by additional factors not captured by quantitative measures alone. Emphasising contextual factors, such as education level, could enhance understanding of the relationship between the constructs. Future research could investigate the influence of educational level on motivation and self-esteem across diverse educational settings.

The absence of significant associations between self-esteem and both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation further complicates interpretations. Although this diverged from Moyano, Quílez-Robres, and Pascual's conclusion that both self-esteem and intrinsic motivation for learning predict academic performance,⁵⁵ the lack of direct alignment does not necessarily negate their relevance for students. The divergence of the present study highlights the importance of consistent sample characteristics when interpreting results, and further research is warranted to reaffirm the relationship among undergraduate students. Similarly, Howard et al.'s observation that external regulation did not relate to self-esteem resonates here.⁵⁶ However, there is a need to refine how extrinsic motivation is conceptualised and measured in relation to self-esteem to contribute to the nuanced understanding of motivation's complexity and dynamic nature.

Thematic analysis of students' qualitative responses adds essential depth to these findings. Participants consistently emphasised the role of internal traits such as self-belief, confidence, and resilience, suggesting that students view high self-esteem as closely tied to intrinsic motivation, despite this not being supported by the quantitative analyses. This disconnect between statistical and thematic findings underscores the complex nature of these constructs.

The theme of adaptability and support, derived from the first scenario, aligns with

53. Vahedian-Azimi and Moayed, "The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Academic Motivation," 117.

54. Khanagar et al., "Assessment of Academic Motivation and Its Impact on Self-Esteem," 7.

55. Moyano, Quílez-Robres, and Pascual, "Self-Esteem and Motivation for Learning in Academic Achievement," 7.

56. Joshua L. Howard et al., "Student Motivation and Associated Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis From Self-Determination Theory," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (2021): 1300–1323, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620966789>

Naipal et al., who found that both emotional and academic support from peers and family play a critical role in sustaining motivation.⁵⁷ This theme also partially reflects the work of Asakereh and Yousofi, who emphasised the significance of students' self-perceptions in achieving academic success at university.⁵⁸ Similarly, the overlapping themes in the present study suggest that self-belief, resilience, and confidence are key factors in helping students manage academic pressure, reinforcing the idea that high self-esteem enhances adaptability in challenging academic situations.

The qualitative findings align with Ullah, Shahzada, and Khan's emphasis on the link between self-esteem and academic motivation.⁵⁹ The first 'word scenario' produced the theme of motivation and proactivity, while the second 'word scenario' yielded a theme of motivation and persistence. In the first scenario, participants highlighted the value of academic perseverance and the role of high motivation in overcoming challenges. In the second, students described how belief in one's potential and academic capabilities could sustain goal-directed behaviour and reduce fear of failure. Despite divergence from previous findings in this study, Moyano, Quílez-Robres, and Pascual similarly identified intrinsic motivation and self-esteem as indicators of academic success, reinforcing the notion that these constructs are interrelated in complex ways.⁶⁰

Additionally, the sub-theme of academic engagement and performance in the present study reflected students' perceptions that higher self-esteem fostered confidence, reduced fear of failure and enhanced willingness to engage in academic tasks. The additional themes of self-belief and confidence, and social support and well-being, further suggest that students perceive internal confidence and positive peer interactions as key contributors to academic experiences; this is consistent with Plysang's qualitative findings that social supports function as a source of self-esteem among students,⁶¹ highlighting that supportive interpersonal contexts and self-esteem are important influences in students' educational experiences.

Despite employing different data collection methodologies, both the present study and Hidajat et al. highlighted the importance of social support for students.⁶² This was reflected in the social support and well-being theme that emerged in the present study. Participants noted that students with high self-esteem not only feel confident but also uplift others, offering motivation and encouragement to their peers. Additionally, the recurring theme of academic engagement and performance

57. Naipal et al., "Academic Motivation and Self-Concept of Undergraduate Optometry Students," 8.

58. Asakereh and Yousofi, "Reflective Thinking, Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem and Academic Achievement of Iranian EFL Students," 79–82.

59. Ullah, Shahzada, and Khan, "Does Academic Motivation Contribute to the Self-Esteem of Students at the Graduate Level?," 9.

60. Moyano, Quílez-Robres, and Pascual, "Self-Esteem and Motivation for Learning in Academic Achievement," 7.

61. Plysang, "Empowering University Students Through Holistic Self-Esteem Development," 204.

62. Hidajat et al., "Why I'm Bored in Learning? Exploration of Students' Academic Motivation," 125.

across both scenarios reinforced the perceived outcomes of high self-esteem for undergraduates and points to the multidimensional role of self-esteem across academic experiences in higher education.

The recurrence of qualitative themes offers a deeper context for understanding how students conceptualise academic motivation and self-esteem. Although no statistically significant relationships were identified, students' descriptions highlighted a strong perceived connection between these constructs. This suggests that self-esteem and motivation may operate in ways that are not easily captured by standardised quantitative measures. One possible explanation lies in the cultural and institutional context of Irish higher education, where norms or societal influences may shape students' perceptions. Despite this, the mixed-methods design was essential in uncovering these nuanced insights. While the quantitative analysis assessed the presence of relationships, the qualitative findings illuminated how students subjectively interpret academic motivation and self-esteem.

This study has limitations. Adapting the AMS-C to a 5-point Likert scale deviates from the original format and may limit comparability with prior research. Although similar adaptations have occurred in previous research,⁶³ the internal consistency observed in the present study indicates acceptable reliability of the adapted measure. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

Additionally, the sample was drawn from a single undergraduate population, limiting generalisability across contexts. Nonetheless, the findings have practical implications for student support services in higher education. While they do not call for immediate policy reform, the results highlight the value of targeted, small-scale initiatives that promote students' confidence, persistence, and engagement. Higher education institutions might consider implementing reflective activities, peer mentoring, or motivational workshops as part of their academic support offerings. For example, one potential initiative, which we have conceptualised as *EmpowerED: Empowering Students in Higher Education*, could deliver research-based workshops focused on building self-belief and resilience, while also fostering peer support and collaboration.

Future research could examine how motivation and self-esteem develop over time across different stages of higher education. Further work might also assess the impact of structured support initiatives, such as *EmpowerED*, to evaluate their effectiveness in enhancing students' academic and personal development, should such an initiative be implemented in the future. By extending this study, researchers can contribute to the creation of more responsive and supportive educational environments for undergraduate students.

63. Zurlo et al., "Assessing Motivation in University Students," 48.

Conclusion

The present study offers valuable insights into the complex nature of self-esteem and academic motivation among undergraduate students. While the quantitative findings did not support the hypotheses, the qualitative data revealed more nuanced perceptions of these constructs. Using thematic analysis, participants described beliefs about high self-esteem and academic motivation, often drawing on broader academic and personal values. Although participants were not directly asked to reflect on their own experiences, their responses nonetheless offered meaningful insight into how self-esteem and academic motivation are understood within the third-level context. These findings highlight the limitations of relying solely on quantitative methods to explore such multifaceted constructs and suggest that future research should further examine their dynamic and context-dependent nature in higher education settings.

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