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The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress among Young Adults in Malaysia

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This study looked into the relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress among young adults in Malaysia, addressing a research gap where limited empirical evidence exists on this association within the Malaysian context. A total of 100 (50 males, 50 females) young adults were recruited using a convenience sampling method. Respondents completed a questionnaire that measured their self-esteem and psychological distress namely Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). Data were analysed using Pearson Correlation and Independent Sample t-Test. Findings indicated a statistically significant moderate negative relationship between self-esteem and psychological distress, $r(98) = -.46, p < .001$. This finding aligns with Cognitive Vulnerability-Stress Model and Beck's Cognitive Theory which suggest that individuals with higher self-esteem possess more effective emotional regulation strategies, thereby reducing their susceptibility to psychological distress. Meanwhile, results showed no significant gender differences in psychological distress, $t(98) = .17, p > .05, d = .03$. This suggests that male and female young adults exhibit similar psychological distress, possibly due to evolving gender roles, comparable coping mechanisms, and limitations related to the sample size and narrow age range. Mental health professionals and educators are encouraged to implement self-esteem enhancement programs as a preventative approach to reducing psychological distress. In conclusion, the study reinforces the significance of self-esteem as a protective factor and calls for integrative mental health frameworks that address self-concept in young adult populations. These findings have practical implications for clinical practices, educational programs, and public health policies aiming to support youth mental well-being in Malaysia.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Psychological Distress, Young Adults, Malaysia