AGE AND GENDER PATTERNS OF SELF-ESTEEM AMONG YOUTH IN KOSOVO

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem is a widely investigated variable, across different countries and cultures. Levels of self-esteem seem to vary across cultures, and also cultural similarities and differences have been reported in several studies. Some aspects of age and gender differences seem to be universal across cultures. The aim of the present study was to assess age and gender patterns of self-esteem among Kosovo youth. The study sample included 4303 participants (four subsamples), 45.5% male and 54% female. The mean age of participants was 16.57 years (SD=2.99). The measuring instrument was the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale Albanian translation. Results indicated a slightly but not significantly higher level of self-esteem for men. The gender difference reached significance only for the age groups 18 to 22 years old and 23-29-years old. The study revealed developmental trajectories of self-esteem and gender patterns which are comparable to findings from other countries, although with some slight differences. Findings requires further investigation, particularly as regards the presence of any cohort effects in the findings. The study represents an important contribution to the investigation of self-esteem in Kosovo, and provides several directions for further research particularly as regards gender or developmental studies.

Keywords: *self-esteem, age, gender, youth, Kosovo*

INTRODUCTION

Tracing of the literature shows that self-esteem is a widely investigated variable, across different countries and cultures. A recent Google scholar search with the key-word "self-esteem" brought up over 2,160,000 results. Despite the extensive scientific research involving this variable, several scholars have argued on the need for further research especially due to inconsistencies in terms of operational definitions, measurement, demographic patterns, socio-cultural differences, or developmental trends [1], [2].

Self-esteem researchers consider this construct as a basic human need with different levels including global, and situational self-esteem. Also, self-esteem is considered as an indicator of how valued and accepted people feel or as an

indicator of the state of our relationships with others. One of the most widely accepted definitions of self-esteem refers to the way individuals feel about themselves, as well as their overall value or attitude toward themselves [1]. In recent years, the emphasis has shifted to various aspects of self-esteem, as several efforts have been made to further break down and categorize this variable [2]. For instance, contingent self-esteem [3] refers to feelings about the self as related to external sources of perceived standards and expectations.

Tafarodi and colleagues (2002) have proposed a self-esteem model including self-competence and self-liking; self-competence is mainly cognitive and refers to self-efficacy beliefs of the individual (beliefs of being good at certain tasks) while self-liking refers to the emotional pathway, i.e., internal feelings, mostly affected by social relevance [4], [5]. Tafarodi and colleagues reported cultural differences in the two dimensions; self-competence was higher in individualistic cultures while self-liking was higher in collectivistic cultures [5]. From a quick review of the literature for the needs of this paper we find that levels of self-esteem seem to vary across cultures, and also cultural similarities and differences have been reported in several studies. A well-known international study by Schmit & Allik (2005) reported that although positive self-esteem is culturally universal, self-esteem scores seem to be generally higher in Western cultures (individualistic) as compared to Eastern cultures (collectivistic) [5].

As regards measuring instruments, probably the most widely used across different countries and cultures is the Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. The scale has been used in comparative studies and meta-analyses. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [6] allows for positive versus negative classification within the global score [4], [5]. This two-factor model has been supported by Kaplan and Pokorny (1969) who classified negatively worded items as self-derogation and positively worded items as self-enhancement [7]. The two-factor model has been largely criticized and several researchers claim that positive and negative self-esteem are merely an artifact of item wording and therefore the classification is artificial. Even so, the scale has been widely used for describing age or gender patterns from a developmental approach across different cultures; findings have not always been coherent and some contradictory results have been also reported [8].

Research investigating patterns of self-esteem by age, has produced developmental trajectories which show higher levels of self-esteem in early adolescence, and the trend significantly changing after age 15. The drop in self-esteem after age 15 reaches the lowest scores between 18-22 years old particularly for girls (see [9], [10]). Similarly, Bleidorn et al (2016) have reported that self-esteem is relatively high in childhood, before dropping during adolescence and increasing once more during young adulthood before declining in old age [11].

As regards gender, research studies generally agree on self-esteem levels being higher among men as compared to women, but the trend varies with age.

The meta-analysis of Kling and colleagues (1999) found that the gender gap was more pronounced in adolescence, and gradually seemed to fade away with age [12]. Similar findings have been reported by Bleidorn et al. (2016) who reported that the trajectories emerging in adolescence persist throughout early and middle adulthood before narrowing down and even disappearing in old age [11]. Helwig and Ruprecht (2017) reported a small gender gap in self-esteem in young adulthood which completely disappeared by old age [8]. Other studies have reported on a relatively small gender gap in self-esteem from the end of adolescence to middle adulthood [11] or even no significant gender differences at all [13]. A more recent study (Ogihara,2020) concluded that that developmental gender differences in self-esteem appear to be small or absent but clearly more important among women than men [14].

Some aspects of age and gender differences seem to be universal across cultures (e.g., the universal gender gap in adolescence has been found in all 171 countries investigated by Helwig & Ruprecht (2017) [8]. Nonetheless, there are also cultural specificities such as baselines, typical levels of self-esteem, or life span trajectories which seem to differ across countries [8]. Explanations were provided in terms of socio-economic, socio-demographic factors, gender equality issues, cultural values etc.

To summarize together with eminent experts in the field, it might be argued that although self-esteem has been widely investigated there is still a need for a better understanding of factors that explain individual differences in self-esteem during the life span.

A systematic literature review on self-esteem and well-being in Kosovo (Fanaj & Melonashi,2014) concluded that self-esteem values were comparable to other Balkan countries [15]. As regards gender differences, only one of the reviewed studies reported higher self-esteem for boys as compared to girls; other studies have reported no gender differences. Nonetheless, research focusing on developmental trends of self-esteem in Kosovo is missing. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to assess age and gender patterns of self-esteem among Kosovo youth, Research questions included: 1. What are self-esteem levels among youth, 10-29 years old in Kosovo? 2. What are the age and gender patterns across the different dimensions of self-esteem among youth in Kosovo?3. What is the developmental trajectory of self-esteem and what gender patterns can be identified? 4. How do the findings on self-esteem compare to other countries (are there any cultural differences)?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The study sample included 4303 participants, 45.5% male and 54% female. The mean age of participants was 16.57 years (SD=2.99). Composition by age

group was as follows:3.7% 10-12 years old, 66.4 % 13-17 years old, 25.8 % 18-22 years old and 2.8 % 23-29 years old (1.3 % information on age was missing). The division into age groups is done based on the division proposed in the study by Helvig & Ruprecht (2017). The sample includes four different subsamples including: 41 participants from a youth center in Lipjan, 3436 participants from middle and high schools, 641 participants from public and private universities and, 185 participants from the Mental Healthcare unit for children and adolescents in Prizren.

Measuring instrument

The measuring instrument was the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale [6]. This is the most widely used scale in self-esteem studies, across different countries and cultures. The scale includes 10 items assessing self-respect and self-acceptance and all items are rated on a Likert Scale [1- strongly agree; 2- agree;3-disagree; 4- strongly disagree] [6]. Five items are reversely scored and the sum score for global self-esteem ranges from 10 to 40. A higher total score indicates higher global self-esteem. Scores below 25 indicate low self-esteem [6].

Procedure

In the 3 subsamples involving children and adolescents informed consent was asked from their parents prior to the administration of the questionnaire. In the subsample involving schools, approval was asked from the school directors too, who held subsequent briefings with teachers. In the subsample involving university students, participants provided informed consent themselves. The paper and pencil questionnaire were administered to participants in the classrooms and sufficient time was allowed for answering. Research assistants were present during the whole process, in order to answer any questions, provide clarification and finally collect the questionnaires.

RESULTS

Results showed that the mean value for self-esteem in the study samples was 26.72 (SD=4.53). 28.3 % of the sample (29.3 % of men and 27.5 % of women) were classified with low self-esteem. In terms of age groups, only 16.3% of 10-12-year-old had low self-esteem, as compared to 28.2% of 13-17-year-olds, 29.9% of 18-22-year-olds and 33.3% of 23-29-year-olds (see Table.1).

Despite findings that men report slightly higher scores as compared to women, Mann-Whitney test revealed no significant gender differences in self-esteem scores ($Md_{females}$=27, N=2303; Md_{males}=27, N=1957; Z=-1.393, p<.16).

Kruskal-Wallis analysis revealed significant differences by age groups X2 (3, n=4243) =42.226, p<.00; whereas scores were higher in the early adolescence

group (Md=29) as compared to the middle adolescence group (Md=27), late adolescence group (Md=26) and youth group (Md=27).

Mann-Whitney test revealed significant gender differences in self-esteem scores in the age group 18-22 years old ($Md_{females}$=26, N=612; Md_{males}=27, N=484; Z=-2.057, p<.04) and 23- 29 years old ($Md_{females}$=45, N=2303; Md_{males}=27, N=75; Z=-2.900, p<.00; whereas males scored significantly higher.

Table 1. *Sample characteristics - number, percentages, total self-esteem and dimensions mean (author survey, own source)*

	No.	%	SRES Mean	Positive	Negative	Self-competence	Self – liking
Gender							
Male	1960	45.5	26.82	14.69	12.13	13.69	13.13
Female	2304	53.5	26.63	14.86	11.77	13.56	13.06
Age-groups							
10 -12	160	3.7	29.01	15.64	13.37	14.94	14.07
13-17	2858	66.4	26.59	15.03	11.56	13.57	13.00
18-22	1109	25.8	26.72	14.17	12.56	13.58	13.14
23-29	120	2.8	26.65	14.04	12.61	13.53	13.11
Cut-off self-esteem level							
Low self-esteem	1218	28.3	21.38	10.34	11.04	10.79	10.59
Normal self-esteem	3081	71.6	28.84	16.55	12.29	14.75	14.09

Positive-negative dimensionality of self-esteem among youth

As regards the positive-negative dimensions, results showed that the mean value for the positive dimension was 14.79 (SD=4.23) while the mean value for the negative dimension 11.93 (SD=3.52) (see Table.2). There was a significant negative correlation between the two dimensions (r=-.314, p<.00) which did not differ depending on gender. However, some differences were found in terms of age groups. More specifically, a significant positive correlation was found between the two dimensions in the 10-12-year-old group (r=.239, p<.00). However, the correlation was negative in the 13-17-year-old group, and non-significant in the 23-29-year-old group.

Mann-Whitney test revealed significant gender differences in negative dimension scores ($Md_{females}$=27, N=2304; Md_{males}=27, N=1958; Z=-3.049, p<.00)

with males having higher mean ranks but no significant gender differences in positive dimension scores. Kruskal-Wallis analysis revealed significant differences in positive scores by age group X2 (3, n=4245) =52.960, p<.00; as the early adolescence group scored higher (Md=16) than all other groups. Kruskal-Wallis analysis also revealed significant differences in negativity by age groups X2 (3, n=4245) =108.992, p<.00; as the age group of early adolescence scored higher (Md=14) than middle adolescence group (Md=11), late adolescence group (Md=12) and youth group (Md=13).

Mann-Whitney test revealed significant gender differences in positivity scores in a) age group 10 to 12 year old ($Md_{females}$=16, N=87; Md_{males}=15, N=73; Z=-2.339, p<.01), whereas females scored significantly higher; b) age-group 13 to 17 year old ($Md_{females}$=16, N=1534; Md_{males}=16, N=1299; Z=-2.247, p<.02) whereas females scored significantly higher and c) age group 23 to 30 year old ($Md_{females}$=12, N=45; Md_{males}=16, N=75; Z=-2.517, p<.01; whereas males scored significantly higher. Mann-Whitney test revealed significant gender differences in negativity scores by age group 13 to 17 years ($Md_{females}$=11, N=1534; Md_{males}=12, N=1299; Z=-2.819, p<.00) whereas males scored significantly higher.

Table 2. *Positive-Negative dimensionality of self-esteem among youth based on gender and age group (author survey, own source)*

	Positive		Negative	
Age-groups	Male	Female	Male	Female
10-12 yr	14.95	16.23	13.29	13.44
13-17 yr	14.84	15.18	11.75	11.40
18-22 yr	14.32	14.00	12.74	12.42
23-29 yr	14.68	12.98	13.00	11.96

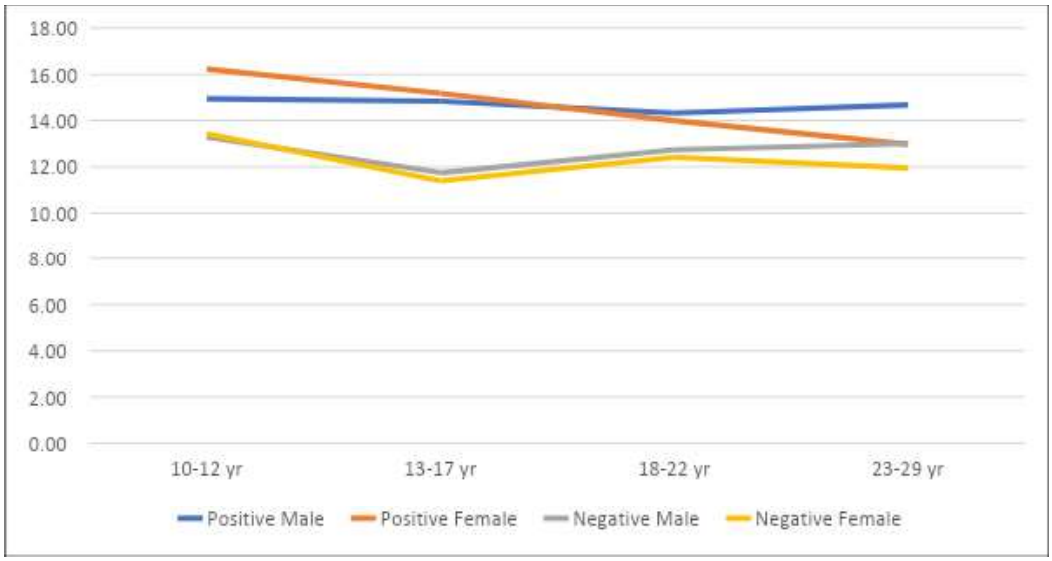

Fig. 1. *Graphical display of Positive-Negative dimensionality of self-esteem among youth based on gender and age group (author survey, own source)*

Self-competence/self-liking dimensionality of self-esteem among youth

As regards the self-competence/self-liking dimensions results showed that the mean value for self-competence was M=13.62 (SD=2.64) while that for self-liking was M=13.09 (SD=2.63) (see Table.3). The two dimensions correlate positively (r=.47, p<.00) and correlations were found for both genders and across all age-groups. Mann-Whitney test revealed no significant gender differences in self-competence and self-liking dimensions. Kruskal-Wallis analysis revealed significant differences by age group in self-competence, X2 (3, n=4244) =39.293, p<.00; whereas 10–12-year-old (Md=15) had the highest scores). Kruskal-Wallis analysis revealed significant differences by age group in self-liking, X2 (3, n=4246) =29.924, p<.00; whereas 10–12-year-old (Md=14) had the highest scores as compared to the other age groups.

Mann-Whitney test revealed significant gender differences in self-competence scores in the age group 18 to 22 years ($Md_{females}$=14, N=612; Md_{males}=14, N=484; Z=-2.032, p<.01) and 23 to 30 year old ($Md_{females}$=13, N=45; Md_{males}=14, N=75; Z=-2.417, p<.04; whereas males scored significantly higher.

Mann-Whitney test revealed significant gender differences in self-liking scores in the age group 23 to 30 year old ($Md_{females}$=13, N=45; Md_{males}=14, N=75; Z=-2.189, p<.02; whereas males scored significantly higher.

Table. 3. *Self-competence/self-liking dimensionality of self-esteem among youth based on gender and age group (author survey, own source)*

Age groups	Self-competence		Self-liking	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
10-12 yr	14.53	15.29	13.70	14.38
13-17 yr	13.59	13.55	13.00	13.00
18-22 yr	13.77	13.41	13.29	13.01
23-29 yr	14.11	12.58	13.56	12.36

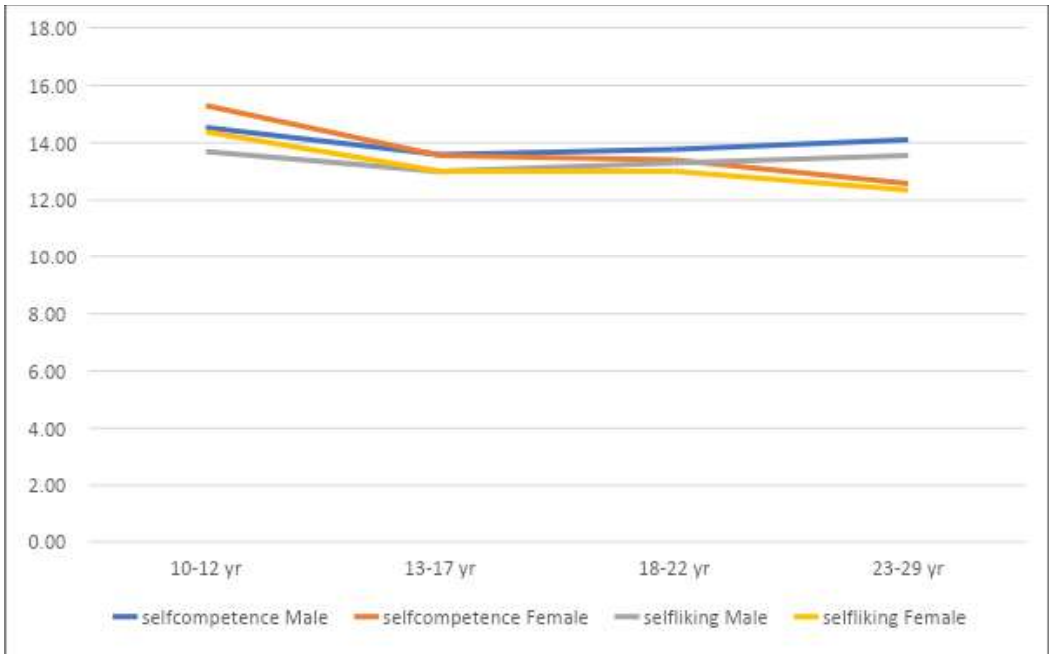

Fig. 2. *Graphical display of self-competence/self-liking dimensionality of self-esteem among youth based on gender and age group (author survey, own source)*

Developmental patterns of self-esteem

Results showed that the mean value for self-esteem in early adolescence (10-12 year olds) is 27.64 (SD=4.39), that is higher than middle adolescence (13-17 years) 26.28 (SD=4.46), late adolescence (18-22 years) 26.68 (SD=4.74) and young adults (23-29 years) 27.37 (SD=4.77) (see Table.4 and 5). Kruskal-Wallis analysis confirmed significant differences by age groups X2 (3, n=4243) =42.226, p<.00; as early adolescence group scored higher (Md=29) than middle adolescence group (Md=27), late adolescence group (Md=26) and youth group (Md=27) (see Table.4). Therefore, self-esteem tends to decrease from early to mid-adolescence, and then increase again from late adolescence towards young adulthood. This developmental pattern was present even when the analysis was performed separately by gender. However, gender comparisons revealed significant differences in self-esteem only in the age group 18-22 years old and 23-29 years old, as men had significantly higher scores than women Md=27 while females Md=26 (18-22 yrs.) and Md=24 (23-29 yrs.). As might be noted, the self-esteem decrease is more pronounced among women even in late adolescence and early adulthood, where men are clearly in advantage.

Table 4. *Self-esteem among youth based on gender and age group (author survey, own source)*

Age -groups	Male	Female	Sig.
10-12 yr	28.23	29.67	.060
13-17 yr	26.59	26.57	.795
18-22 yr	27.05	26.42	.040
23-29 yr	27.68	24.93	.004

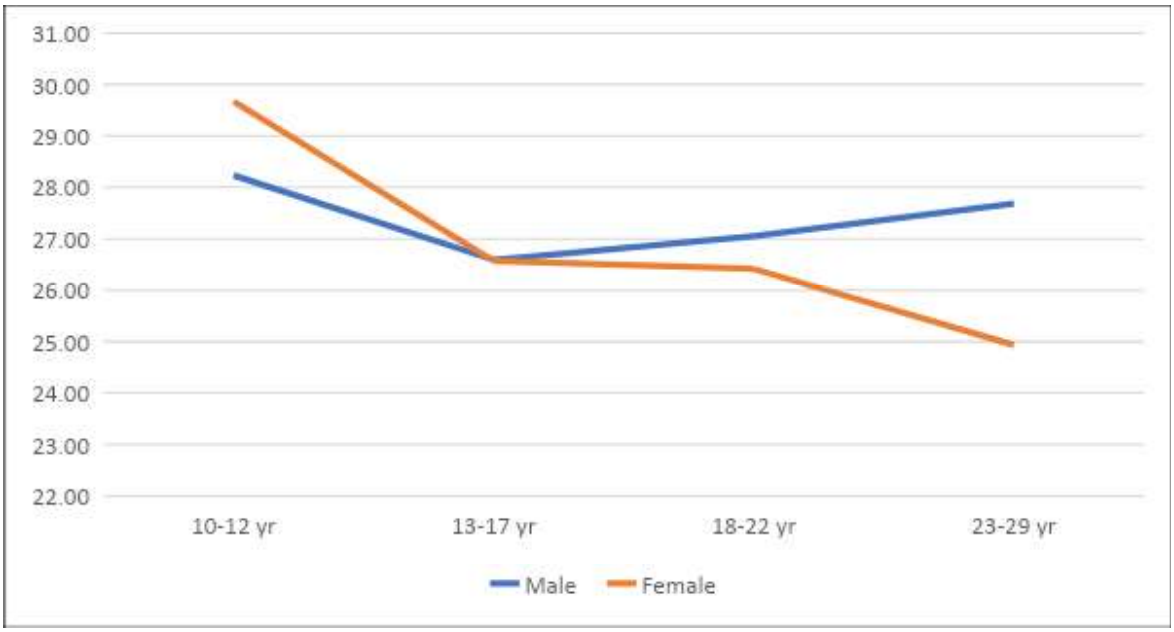

Fig. 3. *Graphical display of self-esteem among youth based on gender and age group (author survey, own source)*

Table 5. *Total self-esteem and positivity/negativity dimensions based on gender, age groups (author survey, own source)*

	RSES	SD	Positivity	Negativity	Pos-Neg	rPosNeg
Total sample	26.72	4.58	14.79	11.93	2.86	-.31*
Male	26.81	4.76	14.68	12.13	2.55	-.24*
Female	26.62	4.41	14.85	11.77	3.08	-.35*
10-12 yrs	29.01	4.96	15.64	13.36	2.28	.23*
13-17 yrs	26.59	4.42	15.03	11.56	3.47	-.36*
18 - 22 yrs	26.72	4.75	14.17	12.56	1.61	-.21*
23 -29 yrs	26.65	4.97	14.04	12.61	1.43	.09

Sig.=significance (p)

Pos-Neg= difference between two dimensions

rPosNeg=Correlations

Table 6. *Total self-esteem and self-competence/self-liking dimensions based on gender, age groups (author survey, own source)*

	Self-Competence means	Self-Competence SD	Self-liking means	Self-Liking SD	r
Total sample	13.62	2.64	13.09	2.63	.47*
Male	13.68	2.73	13.13	2.7	.51*
Female	13.56	2.56	13.05	2.57	.43*
10-12 yrs	14.94	2.79	14.07	2.77	.58*
13-17 yrs	13.57	2.55	13.00	2.56	.46*
18 - 22 yrs	13.58	2.74	13.14	2.74	.46*
23 -29 yrs	13.53	3.09	13.11	2.79	.42*

Sig.

r=coeficient

Cross country comparisons of self-esteem

The findings of the present study were compared with those reported by Schmitt & Allik, (2005) and are provided in tables 7 and 8. Mean values for self-esteem in the present sample are lower as compared to other countries, except for Japan. In terms of comparisons by age group, mean values for self-esteem were higher in the present sample for almost all age groups, except for 18-22-year-old men and 23-29-year-old women for Europe/Central Asia (see Table. 9).

Regarding dimensionality, the positive-negative difference index in the present sample is the highest as compared to other countries and also the correlation between the dimensions is negative, while all other countries had positive correlations (see Table.7). As regards self-competence and self-liking scores, as can be noted in table 8 only Japan revealed slightly lower scores than Kosovo. However, correlations between dimensions were moderate, and comparable to other countries, apart from Turkey (weak correlation) (see Table. 8).

Table 7. *Total self-esteem and positivity/negativity dimensions / cross country comparisons Source: own source & Schmitt & Allik, (2005) [5]*

Country	RSES	SD	Pos	Neg	Pos-Neg	rPosNeg
Kosovo	26.72	4.58	14.79	11.93	2.86	-.31
Austria	31.78	4.68	16	15.8	0.3	.63
Croatia	31.94	4.12	16.6	15.4	1.2	.61
Greece	31.29	4.76	16.4	14.9	1.6	.65
Serbia	33.59	4.99	17.4	16.2	1.3	.57
Slovenia	31.74	4.72	16.8	14.9	1.9	.59
Turkey	32.14	4.97	17	15.2	1.8	.65
Japan	25.5	4.37	13.1	12.4	0.8	.60

Table 8. *Self-competence/self-liking self-esteem dimensions / cross-country comparisons Source: own source & Schmitt & Allik, (2005) [5] & Bleidorn et al (2016) [11]*

Country	Self-Competence means	Self-Competence SD	Self-liking means	Self-Liking SD	r	IND
Kosovo	13.62	2.64	13.09	2.63	.47	
Austria	16.04	2.55	15.76	2.67	.61	55
Croatia	16.93	2.02	15.07	2.62	.57	33
Greece	16.81	2.24	14.34	3.06	.61	35
Serbia	17.6	2.18	16.05	3.32	.63	25
Slovenia	17.13	2.37	14.6	2.88	.62	27
Turkey	17.09	2.58	14.4	2.19	.37	37
Japan	13.33	2.51	12.3	2.36	.61	46
Albania						20

Table 9. *Total self-esteem by age-group:Kosovo vs.Europa/Central Asia. Source: own source & Helvig & Ruprecht (2017) [8]*

Age groups	10-12 year		13-17 year		18-22 year		23-29 year	
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Europa/Central Asia	29.2	NA	22.82	25.69	25.31	27.26	26.91	26.89
Kosovo	29.66	28.23	26.57	26.59	26.42	27.05	24.93	27.68

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present study was to assess age and gender patterns of self-esteem in adolescents and young adults in Kosovo. The study revealed developmental trajectories of self-esteem and gender patterns which are comparable to findings from other countries, although with some slight differences.

As regards gender patterns, results indicated a slightly but not significantly higher level of self-esteem for men. Although these findings are not in line with most existing research in the field [12] there have been some studies also reporting no significant differences [13]. The gender difference reached significance only for the age groups 18 to 22 years old and 23-29-years old. Indeed, one of the most important findings of the present study is the pattern of decreasing self-esteem with increasing age (highest rates in the category 10-12-year old's and dropping with age). This finding is in line with existing research (see Chung et al, 2017; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005) [9], [10]. However, there is a clear gender pattern for this result, appearing very differently for men and women. Men and women in the age group 13-17 years old both report lower self-esteem as compared to the 10-12-year-old group. However, among men there is no further drop in self-esteem beyond this age; indeed, both age groups 18-22-year old's and 23-29-year old's report higher self-esteem as compared to 13-17-year olds. Conversely among females, the drop-in self-esteem starting in 13-17-year-old group, continues further, as 18-22-year old's and 23-29-year old's report lower levels of self-esteem. These findings indicate a very different trajectory from that reported in robust studies such as that by Bleidorn et al (2016) [11]. Helvig & Ruprecht (2017) explain such 'unconventional findings' through cultural elements, which influence lifespan trajectories [8]. However, it should be mentioned that even in the Helvig & Ruprecht (2017) study self-esteem scores for women increase before age 20, while in the present study there is no such evidence at least until age 29 [8]. This finding might be explained in terms of the gender specific developmental pressure and tasks in late adolescence and early adulthood, e.g., it is not uncommon that women leave high school before graduation, or get married and start a family at this age. It might be speculated that cultural pressure might negatively influence both self-competence and self-liking components of self-esteem, as women struggle to meet social expectations for their gender role. Nonetheless, this interpretation requires further investigation, through qualitative studies which might focus on women's perceptions of their identities within the specific cultural context.

As regards cross-country comparisons, the study showed that mean values for self-esteem in the present sample were lower as compared to other countries, except for Japan. However, this comparison should be carefully considered, because of the methodological differences between the studies (i.e., Schmitt & Allik,2005) [5]. Even so the mean reported value for self-esteem, might be considered above the theoretical average, i.e., positive self-esteem value which has been replicated across cultures (Schmitt & Allik, 2005) [5].

In terms of country comparisons by age group, results of the present study are slightly higher across all categories as compared to a similar study with the same age groups by Helwig & Ruprecht (2017) [8]. An interesting finding is that mean values for self-esteem were higher in the present sample for almost all age groups (except for 18-22-year-old men and 23-29-year-old women for Europe/Central Asia). Regarding dimensionality, the positive-negative difference

index in the present sample is the highest as compared to other countries and also the correlation between the dimensions is negative (all other countries reported positive correlations). Schmitt and Allik (2005) explain such contradictory findings by cautioning against direct cross-cultural comparisons, particularly because negatively word items might be interpreted differently across nations [5].

Although Kosovo mostly holds collectivistic values, self-competence scores are higher than self-liking scores and only Japan revealed slightly lower scores than Kosovo. This finding requires further investigation, particularly as regards the presence of any cohort effects in the findings. Indeed, authors caution the interpretation of findings strictly in developmental terms due to the cross-sectional and not longitudinal character of the study. Moreover, other limitations include sample selection procedures, and subsampling diversity due to context. Despite these limitations, the present study represents an important contribution to the investigation of self-esteem in Kosovo and provides several directions for further research particularly as regards gender or developmental studies.

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