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SELF-ESTEEM, GENDER COMMUNICATION PATTERNS, AND OPPOSITE-SEX FRIENDSHIP ACCEPTANCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS DIAGNOSED WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN UGANDA.

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress in Uganda. A correlational design was adopted, with 159 adolescents (aged 13–19 years) purposively selected from secondary schools and health centers. Standardized instruments, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Gender Communication Pattern Scale, and the Opposite-Sex Friendship Acceptance Scale, were administered. Data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and multiple regression. Results revealed significant positive correlations between opposite-sex friendship acceptance and self-esteem ($r = .222, p < .01$) as well as gender communication patterns ($r = .632, p < .01$). Together, self-esteem and gender communication patterns significantly predicted opposite-sex friendship acceptance, accounting for 39.2% of the variance, $F(2,156) = 51.85, p < .01$. However, gender communication patterns emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = .631, p < .01$), while self-esteem showed no unique contribution ($\beta = .003, p > .05$). The findings suggest that effective communication skills are critical for building and maintaining cross-gender friendships among distressed adolescents, while self-esteem alone may be insufficient. Counselling interventions should therefore prioritize communication skills training, alongside self-esteem enhancement, to promote positive peer relationships and psychosocial adjustment in this population.

Keywords: Self-esteem, Gender communication patterns, Opposite-sex friendship acceptance, Adolescents, Psychological distress

Introduction

Adolescence is widely recognized as a formative stage of human development, marked by profound biological, psychological, and social transformations (Uktamovna, 2025). The physical changes associated with puberty represent some of the most salient of these transitions, exerting long-term influence on adjustment as young people navigate a social context that attaches value and meaning to such changes (Eivers & Kelly, 2020). One critical feature of this stage is the reorganization of peer relationships. Adolescents increasingly interact with members of the opposite sex, making the acceptance of opposite-sex friendships a pivotal developmental task with important implications for psychological well-being (Grygiel et al., 2022).

Although much of the scholarship on opposite-sex interactions in adolescence has centered on romantic relationships, often framed as a preparatory stage for heterosexual dating (Donaldson, 2022;

Connolly et al., 2023), non-romantic friendships between boys and girls are equally significant. These friendships can be conceptualized either as extensions of the broader pubertal and sexual maturation process (Loviska, 2023) or as important components of adolescents' peer networks that foster development independent of romantic involvement (Connolly et al., 2023). Previous studies indicate that opposite-sex friendship acceptance (OSFA) can be both a resource of development and a risk situation (Nurius et al., 2021; Belfiore et al., 2024). In contrast, these friendships may offer adolescents the companionship, emotional support, and social enrichment (Costello et al., 2023). Similarly, they can also lead the youth into risky behaviours, including the initiation of smoking among girls, but on other aspects, they can protect them, including decreasing alcohol consumption in boys (Morojele et al., 2021). Therefore, OSFA is a multifaceted and sophisticated process of development that should be examined further.

The topicality of OSFA is increased due to the fact that it is discussed regarding psychological distress (PD), which has become a worldwide health issue. It is demonstrated that mental health issues in adolescents have led to the impairment of productivity, an increase in exposure to poverty, and poor developmental outcomes (Nurius et al., 2021). Mental disorders that are lifetime in adolescents aged 13 to 18 are still particularly high in the United States, where depressive symptoms frequently intertwine with the problem of difficulties in keeping interpersonal relationships (Belfiore et al., 2024). In sub-Saharan Africa, and Uganda specifically, the situation is particularly concerning. Uganda has one of the youngest populations globally, with children and adolescents constituting over half of the population. Many of these young people live under conditions of chronic poverty (38%) and experience disproportionately high rates of depression (33–39%) (Jones Harden & Slopen, 2022; Nakphong et al., 2024). Recent studies indicate that Ugandan school-going adolescents reporting emotional disorders are more likely to be female, and those with severe psychological distress are significantly more likely to experience chronic illness compared to their peers without distress (Anyanwu, 2023; Bobholz et al., 2025; Anguzu et al., 2025). Furthermore, adolescents in mixed-sex schools report significantly higher levels of distress compared to those in single-sex schools, highlighting the influence of social environments on vulnerability (Özdere, 2023). Among high-risk groups, such as HIV-positive adolescents in Kampala, the prevalence of psychological distress remains particularly high (Kiirya, 2025). Despite these findings, empirical data linking the prevalence of PD with adolescents' ability to maintain or accept opposite-sex friendships remain virtually absent at both the global and regional levels.

The limited scholarship in this area is striking given the well-documented importance of friendship quality for adolescent adjustment. Studies consistently demonstrate that positive friendship characteristics such as companionship, intimacy, and constructive conflict management are associated with enhanced subjective well-being, life satisfaction, and happiness. Conversely, negative peer interactions predict outcomes such as depressed mood and psychological distress (Luo et al., 2024; Zhang & Li, 2024). However, much of the research examining opposite-sex peer involvement has focused on romantic relationships, leaving non-romantic OSFA relatively underexplored (Forster, 2021). Methodological limitations also persist, particularly the scarcity of longitudinal studies and the failure to investigate mediators and moderators that might explain how friendship quality affects well-being (Alsarrani et al., 2022). Scholars have emphasized the need to employ more sophisticated statistical approaches, such as structural equation modeling, to examine these indirect pathways and mechanisms (Alsarrani et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of identifying both intrapersonal resources, such as self-esteem, and interpersonal factors, such as gender communication patterns, in predicting successful OSFA among adolescents experiencing PD.

One of the most researched intrapersonal resources is self-esteem, which can be described as an assessment of an individual of his or her overall worth and value (Rosenberg, 1965; Batchelder and Hagan, 2023). Greater happiness, life satisfaction, and resilience to maladaptive outcomes (depression, antisocial behavior and eating disorders) have always been linked to greater self-esteem (Muris and Otgaar, 2023). Low self-esteem, on the contrary, is associated with the psychological vulnerability, academic issues, poor health status, and restricted economic prospects in adulthood (Ogunbowale et al., 2025). Notably, social relationships influence and define self-esteem. Such acceptances as peer acceptance, in turn, have been established to have a protective effect on global self-esteem, particularly in those cases when parental proximity is poor (Wang, 2022). Recent longitudinal data indicate that the relationship between quality of friendship and later well-being is mediated by self-esteem, especially in girls (Luijten et al., 2023). These results indicate the gendered processes of the self-esteem and emphasize the necessity to consider its impact on the acceptance of the same-sex friendships by adolescents in situations when psychological distress is common.

Gender communication patterns (GCPs) constitute a critical interpersonal factor shaping OSFA. GCPs are systematic differences in communication styles rooted in socialization processes, cultural norms, and broader power dynamics (Nawaz et al., 2024). Girls and women are typically socialized to adopt indirect, collaborative, and relationship-oriented communication strategies, which emphasize empathy and relationship maintenance (Vedmed, 2024). In contrast, boys and men often employ more direct, task-oriented, and self-focused styles aimed at asserting authority and control (Liyanagamage, 2024). These gendered patterns not only shape how adolescents initiate and sustain friendships but also influence conflict resolution and relationship quality (Rudolph & Dodson, 2022). Communication differences carry implications for mental health as well. For example, exposure to rigid gender norms has been associated with increased depressive symptoms among adolescents (Cambia et al., 2025), while the cognitive and linguistic processing of conflict has been shown to predict broader psychological outcomes (Brothers et al., 2022). Consequently, examining the role of GCPs in OSFA offers valuable insights into how adolescents cognitively and behaviorally manage these relationships in the face of distress.

Adolescence is a period of heightened vulnerability, particularly in contexts such as Uganda where the burden of psychological distress is severe (Bobholz et al., 2025). Opposite-sex friendship acceptance remains an underexplored but critical component of adolescent development, with the potential to serve as either a protective or risk factor depending on the adolescent's gender and social context (Varanakakis, 2025). The existing literature highlights clear research gaps, including limited attention to non-romantic OSFA, insufficient exploration of mediating mechanisms, and a lack of focus on adolescents with psychological distress. Addressing these gaps requires an examination of how intrapersonal resources such as self-esteem and interpersonal dynamics such as gender communication patterns contribute to successful opposite-sex friendship acceptance. By clarifying these mechanisms, this study aims to advance understanding of adolescent social development and mental health, with particular relevance for vulnerable populations in low-resource contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The overarching purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress in Uganda. The study was guided by the following specific purposes:

1. To determine the nature of the relationship among self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress.
2. To examine the joint contribution of self-esteem and gender communication patterns to the prediction of opposite-sex friendship acceptance.
3. To assess the relative contribution of self-esteem and gender communication patterns in explaining variance in opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress.

Research Questions

The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What type of relationship exists between self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress?
2. What is the joint contribution of self-esteem and gender communication patterns to the prediction of opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress?
3. What is the relative contribution of self-esteem and gender communication patterns to opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The study adopted a **correlational research design**, which is appropriate for examining the nature and strength of relationships among psychological and social variables without manipulating them (Ge, 2023). This design was chosen because it allows the researcher to establish associations between self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress.

Participants

The target population consisted of adolescents aged **15–19 years** who had been clinically identified or reported by school counsellors as experiencing psychological distress. A total of **159 participants** (78 males and 81 females) took part in the study. The sample size was considered adequate for correlational and regression analyses, as recommended by Manly et al., (2024), who suggest that sample sizes exceeding 100 are suitable for multivariate statistical procedures.

Sampling Technique

The purposive sampling technique was used to select the adolescents who were distressed psychologically since the study aimed at targeting individuals in this group. Purposive sampling is also a good fit in the studies on mental health when the researcher must have a certain diagnostic or psychosocial criterion of inclusion (Tao et al., 2024). The participants were identified and recruited by means of school counsellors and mental health professionals, where ethical considerations and voluntary participation were involved.

Measures

This study had three standardized instruments:

Self-Esteem: Measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) which is a 10 item scale widely validated in measuring the global self-worth. The responses were assessed using a 4-point likert

scale (ranging between strongly agree and strongly disagree), with the higher the rating, the more self-esteem an individual has. The RSES has been found to be reliable and valid between cultures (Fekih-Romdhane et al., 2023).

Gender Communication Pattern: The scale is evaluated using the Gender Communication Scale (Myers et al., 2024), which measures the compatibility of communication styles of individuals with gender expectations and norms of relationships. There was a 5-point Likert scale of items rated. The scale has been tested and is valid among adolescents with high internal consistency ($\alpha > .80$).

Opposite-Sex Friendship Acceptance: Measured using the **Opposite-Sex Friendship Acceptance Inventory (OSFAI; developed by the researcher)**, which was adapted from existing peer acceptance and friendship quality measures (Bukowski et al., 1994). The instrument included 12 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater acceptance in opposite-sex friendships. Content validity was established through expert review, and pilot testing confirmed acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 25). Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were first computed to provide a general summary of participants' responses. To answer the research questions, a series of inferential statistical procedures were employed. Pearson's product-moment correlation was conducted to examine the relationships among self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance. In addition, multiple regression analysis was utilized to assess the joint contribution of self-esteem and gender communication patterns in predicting opposite-sex friendship acceptance. Standardized beta weights obtained from the regression model were further examined to determine the relative predictive power of each independent variable. This analytic approach aligns with the recommendations of Hoyt et al., (2008), who emphasized that correlational and regression analyses provide robust techniques for exploring associations and predictive relationships among psychological constructs.

Result

Research Question 1: What type of relationship exist between self-esteem, gender communication pattern and opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress

Table 1: Zero-order correlation summary of variables under investigation

Variables	Mean	St.dv	1	2	3
Opposite-sex friendship Acceptance	27.277	3.888	1.00		
Self-esteem	27.248	4.763	0.222**	1.00	
Gender communication pattern	26.261	3.446	0.632**	0.347**	1.00

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 reveals that there is a significant relationship between opposite-sex friendship acceptance and self-esteem ($r=0.222$, $p<0.01$) and gender communication pattern ($r=0.632$, $p<0.01$) among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress. This implies that high influence of opposite-sex friendship acceptance will increase gender communication pattern and self-esteem among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress

Research Question 2: What is the joint contribution of self-esteem and gender communication pattern on opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress?

Table 2: Regression summary showing joint contribution of self-esteem and gender communication pattern on opposite-sex friendship acceptance

R=0.632	Adj R²=0.392				
R²=0.399	Std error=3.032				
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	953.47	2	476.73	51.85	0.00
Residual	1434.36	156	9.19		
Total	2387.82	158			

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 reveals that there is a significant joint contribution of self-esteem and gender communication pattern to the prediction of opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed of psychological distress. Regression coefficient $R=0.632$, $R^2=0.399$, $Adj\ R^2=0.392$. When the two factors are combined, they account for 39.2% variance in opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed of psychological distress. However, the remaining percentage (60.8%) accounts for the change in opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents that are beyond this study. Therefore, self-esteem and gender communication pattern jointly predicted opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress; $F(2,156)=51.85$, $p<0.01$.

Research Question 3: What is the relative contribution of self-esteem and gender communication pattern on opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress?

Table 3: Regression summary showing relative contribution between independent variables on the Dependent variable

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	8.523	2.016		4.228	0.000
Self-esteem	0.002	0.054	0.003	0.042	0.966
Gender communication pattern	0.712	0.075	0.631	9.536	0.000

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 reveals that one out of the two factors (gender communication pattern) is a significant predictors of opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress. The most potent predictor of opposite-sex friendship acceptance is gender communication pattern ($\beta=0.631$, $t=9.536$, $p<0.01$) except self-esteem ($\beta=0.003$, $t=0.042$, $p<0.01$). This implies that gender communication pattern will increase the tendency of opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress by 63.1%.

Discussion of Findings

The present study investigated the relationship between self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance (OSFA) among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress. Findings from the correlation, regression, and relative contribution analyses provide

meaningful insights into the interplay of intrapersonal and interpersonal variables in shaping adolescents' social development under conditions of vulnerability.

Relationship among Self-Esteem, Gender Communication Patterns, and Opposite-Sex Friendship Acceptance

The results of the correlation showed that the OSFA correlated with self-esteem ($r = .222, p < .01$) and gender communication patterns ($r = .632, p < .01$) significantly. This result explains that adolescents who possess higher self-esteem and more favorable communication styles have a high chance of gaining acceptance in opposite-sex friendships. The positive correlation between self-esteem and friendship acceptance falls into the previous literature indicating that self-esteem is a resource that enhances peer relationships and leads to general well-being (Harris and Orth, 2020). It also reflects the opinion that such adolescents who have a positive self-concept feel more confident about social relationships and are, therefore, more likely to initiate and maintain cross-sex friendships (Harris & Orth, 2020; Leaper, 2023).

Simultaneously, the correlation with gender patterns of communication is stronger, which indicates the role of interpersonal relationships in the development of OSFA. This confirms the conclusions of Oz-Soysal et al., (2024), who pointed to the idea that positivity, openness, and guarantees are the hallmarks of high-quality cross-sex friendships in communication. It is also close to the study that the capacity of adolescents to communicate effectively with each other contributes to intimacy and decreased conflict in friendships, implicitly leading to acceptance (Hartup, 2022). It is noteworthy that the results reinforce the idea presented by Nawaz et al. (2024) that gender-based communication styles are determinant of the social and emotional performance in adolescents.

Joint Contribution of Self-Esteem and Gender Communication Patterns

The regression analysis further demonstrated that self-esteem and gender communication patterns jointly accounted for 39.2% of the variance in OSFA. This is consistent with the view that adolescent friendships are shaped by both intrapersonal resources and interpersonal competencies (Kunčická, 2024). The finding also echoes Gómez-López et al. (2019), who noted that both individual psychological resources and relationship processes predict adolescent well-being.

However, the relatively high explanatory power of the model (nearly 40%) is noteworthy in a field where social outcomes are often influenced by multiple, overlapping variables. This underscores the salience of combining psychological and communicative factors when examining OSFA, particularly in populations dealing with psychological distress. The finding extends prior research, which has often examined these predictors in isolation, by demonstrating their combined predictive capacity in a vulnerable adolescent population.

Relative Contribution of Self-Esteem and Gender Communication Patterns

When considered independently, the results showed that only gender communication patterns significantly predicted OSFA ($\beta = .631, t = 9.536, p < .01$), whereas self-esteem did not make a significant contribution ($\beta = .003, t = 0.042, p > .05$). This suggests that, while self-esteem may facilitate general social adjustment, it is adolescents' communication styles that most strongly determine their ability to establish and maintain opposite-sex friendships in the context of psychological distress.

This finding contrasts with previous studies that emphasized the predictive role of self-esteem in adolescent peer relationships (Ofodile et al., 2025). One possible explanation for this divergence lies in the specific characteristics of the sample. Adolescents experiencing psychological distress may struggle to translate self-perceptions of worth into effective social behavior without the mediating influence of

communication skills. In such contexts, interpersonal abilities may play a more immediate role in shaping peer acceptance than internalized self-evaluations.

The dominance of communication patterns as a predictor is consistent with gender and communication research. Oshotse (2025) observed that gendered styles of communication are not only distinct but also highly consequential for the quality of interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Stark et al., (2021) argued that the ability to manage conflict, convey openness, and express empathy is central to adolescents' capacity to sustain meaningful friendships across gender lines. By highlighting communication patterns as the stronger predictor, the current study reinforces the importance of equipping adolescents with relational skills, particularly in high-stress environments where psychological distress may undermine confidence and self-worth.

Integrating the Findings with the Broader Literature

Taken together, these findings extend existing literature in three significant ways. First, they affirm the role of self-esteem in supporting adolescent peer relationships, while also suggesting that its influence may be secondary to communication patterns in populations struggling with psychological distress. Second, they highlight the explanatory power of combining intrapersonal and interpersonal predictors when examining adolescent friendship acceptance. Third, they provide empirical support from a Ugandan context, where little prior work has examined the predictors of OSFA in relation to psychological distress (Omongot, 2022). The findings also challenge assumptions in earlier studies that emphasized the primacy of self-esteem in shaping adolescent friendships (Sandelson, 2023). Instead, they suggest that communication competence shaped by gendered norms and socialization processes may be a more critical determinant of cross-sex friendship outcomes, particularly when adolescents face elevated psychological and contextual stressors.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between self-esteem, gender communication patterns, and opposite-sex friendship acceptance among adolescents diagnosed with psychological distress. The results revealed that both self-esteem and gender communication patterns were positively associated with opposite-sex friendship acceptance, but gender communication patterns emerged as the strongest predictor. Together, the two variables accounted for 39.2% of the variance in opposite-sex friendship acceptance, with communication patterns contributing significantly, while self-esteem did not show a unique effect.

These findings underscore the centrality of interpersonal skills, particularly communication styles shaped by gender norms, in determining adolescents' ability to form and sustain opposite-sex friendships within the context of psychological distress. While self-esteem provides an important intrapersonal foundation, it appears that effective relational communication plays a more immediate and influential role in achieving friendship acceptance in this group. The study therefore contributes to the growing body of literature highlighting the interplay of personal and interpersonal resources in adolescent psychosocial adjustment, while offering fresh insights from an African context where empirical research in this area remains limited.

Implications for Counselling

The findings carry several implications for counselling practice:

- 1) Since gender communication patterns were the strongest predictor of opposite-sex friendship acceptance, counselling interventions should emphasize training in communication

competencies. Techniques such as role-playing, assertiveness training, and active listening exercises can help adolescents practice openness, empathy, and conflict resolution, thereby improving their interpersonal acceptance.

- 2) Although self-esteem alone did not significantly predict opposite-sex friendship acceptance, it was positively correlated with it. Counsellors should therefore combine self-esteem building interventions with communication training. This dual approach can help adolescents translate improved self-perceptions into effective social behaviours.
- 3) Given the influence of gender communication patterns, counselling programs should include psychoeducation on how societal gender norms shape interaction styles. Helping adolescents critically reflect on these norms may reduce stereotypes, enhance mutual understanding, and promote healthier opposite-sex relationships.
- 4) Group counselling offers adolescents opportunities to practice and receive feedback on their communication patterns in a supportive environment. Peer-based interventions may also foster acceptance and reduce the isolation commonly associated with psychological distress.
- 5) Since communication norms are culturally grounded, counsellors must adapt interventions to align with local practices, values, and expectations. Tailoring communication-skills training to the Ugandan context, for example, will ensure greater relevance and sustainability of counselling outcomes.
- 6) The findings highlight the importance of early intervention. School counsellors can integrate friendship skills training into life-skills curricula, equipping adolescents with relational competencies before psychological distress compounds social challenges.

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