

Exploring Self-Love among University Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Self-love is a fundamental concept in psychology and well-being, encompassing the ability to accept, appreciate, and care for oneself unconditionally. Self-love involves nurturing a positive relationship and acknowledging worth. This multifaceted study aimed to explore the concept of self-love through thematic analysis, identifying its core themes and sub-themes. A qualitative research design was employed using open-ended questionnaires (50) and semi-structured interviews (6) with participants. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis among university students. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of self-love, highlighting its dimensions and aspects. The effects of self-love on mental health, including cultivating and balancing self-love, are discussed, along with their importance and the positive and negative influences of self-love. The findings have implications for promoting self-love and well-being in various contexts, including counselling, education, organizations, and social services.

KEYWORD:

Self-Love, Thematic analysis, University Students, Mental Health.

1 | INTRODUCTION

We have a favorable view of ourselves when we love ourselves very much. Showing concern and knowing one's value and dignity is a sign of acknowledgement of one's identity, which is called self-love. Self-love encompasses not only loving ourselves but also our thoughts and emotions about ourselves. This study described the phenomenology of self-love, how it promotes our culture, and how it prevails in university students. In 1956, psychologist and social philosopher Erich Fromm recommended that loving yourself is different from being proud, selfish, and self-absorbed, which means loving and taking responsibility for ourselves. Self-love is a trial of knowing one's innate value, drugging yourself with courtesy and respect, and organizing self-development and welfare (Tandon, 2019). It also indicates admiration, approval, and cultivating yourself, comprehensive emotions of grace, empathy, and regard for yourself (Neff, 2003). Expanding on these ideas, Fatima et al. (2025) found that individuals who actively seek meaning in life often do so by nurturing inner acceptance and emotional responsibility. Self-love is an evolving journey of self-

discovery, moral reflection, and purposeful living rather than self-indulgence. This view complements Fromm's notion that self-love involves ethical self-care and personal accountability. It suggests that when individuals value themselves meaningfully, they are more likely to engage in intentional behaviors that support not only their psychological growth but also contribute positively to others' well-being.

It is a problematic invention. Throughout history, opinions on self-love have been divided as "good" versus "bad". A categorical thematic evolution involves a preoperative pattern.

a) Self-contact means giving attention to yourself.
b) Self-acceptance means having peace with yourself.
c) Self-care means being protective and kind to yourself (Henschke & Sedlmeier, 2023). Self-care is a significant part of promoting self-love. To put this in another way, while both fizzer and rubbing are different ways of giving love to yourself, it is not important how you assemble it (Cooks-Campbell & Serrano, 2024). It is a type of self-admiration that builds from our actions, and it promotes physical, psychological, and spiritual growth (Khoshaba, 2012). It is all about rating yourself as a human being who is worthy of love and respect.

According to Jan Bransen's in 2015, self-love is essential for self-acknowledgement. That argument is very close to a simultaneous philosophical discussion on self-acknowledgement. In this research, it is significant for the person to examine the limits of their own reliable company mindlessly. His research reveals a notable discrepancy between self-admiration and ethics.

Studying self-love is essential because it prepares us to face immeasurable thoughts. Self-love facilitates self-assessment and enables us to engage with our past, thereby giving it new meaning and importance (Swanton & Nietzsche, 2020). It is a method of self-care that allows us to support our physical, psychological, and spiritual growth. Self-love means giving yourself high respect for your happiness and pleasure. Self-love also includes prioritizing one's own needs and welfare without thinking about others. It means setting high standards, and it is a new approach because every person has a different way of taking care of themselves. Understanding the importance of self-love is an essential step for an individual to maintain mental health (Jeffrey-Borenstein, 2020).

The concept of self-love can also be traced back to ancient philosophical traditions. In Greece, philosophers like Aristotle describe the importance of loving yourself. He differentiates between the proper loving yourself, which is a cardinal virtue, and self-centeredness, which is seen as an immorality. In his concept of self-love, loving oneself involves recognizing one's importance and engaging in righteous acts that significantly impact an individual's life, benefiting both oneself and others (Annas, 1989). In a similar vein, Javaid et al. (2025a) emphasized that authentic self-love is grounded in personal values, emotional awareness, and purposeful living. Their findings revealed that individuals who practice self-love in this ethical and value-oriented manner tend to experience greater inner peace, psychological strength, and emotional fulfilment. These insights align with the Aristotelian view, where self-love is not indulgent but serves as a moral compass, guiding individuals toward a balanced and meaningful life.

The 20th century is also considered very important in the understanding of self-love. In the 20th century, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory shed light on the concept of selfishness, specifically highlighting self-love or self-absorption, which can lead to various issues (Freud, 1914). Like this, many other 20th-century philosophers, like Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, also spread light on the more positive aspects of self-love. Maslow, in 1943, added self-respect as an essential element in his hierarchy of needs, showing that loving yourself is necessary for accomplishing one's full potential. Rogers, in 1951, explained total positive perspectives of self-love and stated that it is

also essential for one's personal growth and self-actualization.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (2000) tells us that self-love is very important for the completion of basic mental needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This theory also discusses how loving yourself motivates an individual's internal and mental well-being. In alignment with this perspective, Javaid, Lodhi, and Kamran (2024a) explored how happiness is conceptualized across cultures and emphasized the central role of inner self-acceptance and value-driven living in the emotional lives of young adults. Religion, spirituality, and cultural beliefs often shape how individuals perceive self-worth and self-love, influencing their pursuit of psychological well-being. Participants who viewed self-love as a moral and spiritual responsibility were more likely to report inner satisfaction, stable identity, and stronger interpersonal bonds. This reinforces SDT's emphasis on the internal processes that drive well-being and highlights how self-love, when supported by cultural and spiritual frameworks, can enhance autonomy and foster sustainable happiness across diverse contexts.

Self-love plays a significant role in the lives of people who have feelings of inferiority to minimize negative emotions. On a tiny scale, such studies were conducted on the population of Pakistan. But the primary focus was on balancing self-love with self-care. This study explores the phenomenon of self-love among university students. Students are the representatives of a country, but their studies may be affected if they do not know their worth. Self-love gives us both physical and mental health, so we have to take care of both our mind and body to feel the pleasures of life that make us strong.

Research Question

What is self-love, its effect on students' lives, and how do they perceive it?

Objectives of the study

- Understanding how self-love affects the lives of university students
- Examining how students cultivate self-love
- Analyzing students' point of view on how they balance self-love

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research paradigm to investigate the phenomenon of self-love. Thematic analysis was used as the analysis approach, with semi-structured interviews (6) and open-ended questionnaires (50) as the data collection method. A convenient sample of university students, aged eighteen and above, was selected as participants.

Procedure

To explore the phenomenology of self-love, a qualitative interview method was employed. The researcher conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews with participants, encouraging them to share their personal experiences and perspectives on self-love. To ensure anonymity, participants' identities were not disclosed, and dummy codes were used to refer to each interview. The data collected during the interviews were kept confidential and used solely for this study.

After the interviews, participants were debriefed on the purpose of the questionnaire and the scope of the research. Their responses were then separated and analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. This involved coding the data, identifying emerging themes and sub-themes, and interpreting the findings to meet the objectives of the study.

The qualitative data analysis process allowed for a rich and nuanced exploration of the phenomenon of self-love, providing valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. By using thematic analysis, the researcher was able to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data, shedding light on the complex and multifaceted nature of self-love.

3 | FINDINGS

Thematic analysis was employed to collect the qualitative data. This method is utilized for understanding texts, group discussions, and survey response transcripts. It enables researchers to understand people's thoughts, experiences, and knowledge derived from qualitative data. One of the problems with thematic analysis is its subjectivity, as the entire analysis rests on the researcher's judgement. Therefore, it's essential to conduct an unbiased analysis. Thematic analysis can be done in two ways. One is inductive, where themes emerge from data, and the other is deductive, where preexisting theory informs the coding process. According to Braun and Clarke, a theory-driven approach, known as the deductive approach, involves anticipating. The following themes emerged through analysis of interviews.

Understanding self-love

The first theme is understanding of self-love. It includes how students understand their worth and show gratitude towards themselves. The following sub-themes have emerged.

Care and Appreciation

This is very helpful to reduce your stress level, lowering your risk of illness and even boosting energy. In your daily life, a single and small act of self-care can add up to make a big impact.

"Practice of caring for and valuing oneself. It involves recognizing your worth." (PN.18)

Prioritizing Well-being

It means prioritizing yourself by giving time to what brings you happiness and improves your life, and also maintaining both your mental and physical health by practicing self-love.

"It is about taking care of your mental and physical health, and I think it is most important because our quality of life depends on this." (PN.17)

Personal Growth

Setting self-improvement goals and learning new things that make you perfect, overcoming challenges with patience, and needing a meaningful life that makes you successful in a society.

"Understanding yourself as a person and then harboring a conducive mentality for growth." (PN.10)

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is being aware of your thoughts, emotions, and actions and understanding how they align with your values and goals.

"Not to force ourselves to compromise for others, always not to degrade ourselves for others. Rather to prefer or prioritize ourselves in everything." (PN.4)

Shaping emotions

Influencing how you connect with others and feel about them. It is essential for mental health concerns to engage in self-reflection and support, and to manage your feelings and emotions in a way that makes you happy and feel good. "If you don't love yourself, then you can't love others." (PN.5)

Importance of self-love

Self-love is essential to understanding student worth. The following sub-themes have emerged.

Life satisfaction

Feeling happy with the quality of life and satisfied with things both personally and professionally. Do things that give you satisfaction and don't worry about what others think about you.

"it is about not ignoring yourself to please others, and it is important for your happiness and satisfaction." (PN.20)

Self-empowerment

It involves feeling strong and confident in yourself, believing in your abilities, and having control over your own life. Make positive changes and achieve your goals in your life.

"It encourages us to take care of ourselves." (PN.7)..

Cultivating Self-love

It involves how students cultivate a positive and appreciative relationship. The following sub-themes have emerged.

Practices Self-care

We can practice self-care by enjoying a balanced meal to fill our bodies. Practice relaxation techniques like hobbies (reading books, listening to music, sleeping) and journal your feelings.

"Make time for activities that nourish your joy and relaxation like hobbies, exercising, and pampering yourself."(PN.18)

Positive self- talk

Positive self-talk is a powerful inner dialogue that helps people to think optimistically, build resilience and develop a more compassionate relationship with themselves. "Challenge negative self-discussion. Self-critical thoughts were replaced with positive and empowering affirmation."(PN.18)

Setting Boundaries

Creating and maintaining boundaries is a fundamental aspect of self-care. It helps create a clear guideline on how you would like to be treated. Set healthy boundaries by saying no to things that do not align with your worth or deplete your energy, and say yes to what brings you joy.

"Say no to things that don't match with your values or drain energy. Prioritize your needs." (PN.18)

Social support network

An asocial support system is a vital network that consists of caring individuals, including friends, family, and peers, who provide emotional and practical support and also promote wellbeing.

"Make friends who appreciate you and feel you love. Spending time with family." (PN.10, 12)

Mindfulness

We may prioritize our well-being and improve our overall quality of life by setting up boundaries, getting enough sleep, exercising, eating correctly, interacting with others, disconnecting, engaging in hobbies, and practicing mindfulness.

"It plays a crucial role for me to cultivate self-love in my life. You cultivate self-love in your life by giving priority to yourself. Think positively and do positive things in your life. Trust yourself" (PN.14, 15)

Embracing Individually

You can accept yourself fully, embracing both the parts you like and the parts you don't. It is essential to realize that all these things are working together to make you the unique person that you are.

"Use some encouraging words or treat myself with some delicious food for my successful work."(PN.1)

Influence of self-love

It encourages students to adopt positive behavior while reducing harmful behavior. The following sub-themes have emerged from the influence of self-love.

Confidence boost

We can increase our confidence by improving our speech and style, participating in outstanding activities, and making an effort to be more social.

"When you practice self-love, you start to believe in yourself and your abilities. This boosts your confidence, which can help you tackle challenges and take on new opportunities with a positive mindset."(PN.18)

Self-acceptance

When we accept ourselves fully as we are, we feel free from the burdens of self-criticism, how people criticize us and think about us, and the negative self-talk that they make.

"Instead of focusing on faults, I began to appreciate them as a part of what makes me unique." (PN.14)

Inner peace

Inner peace brings a sense of calm and clarity. This also helps us to prioritize our goals and move forward with confidence and determination.

"By practicing self-love, I noticed a significant shift in my overall well-being and happiness. I felt more balanced, fulfilled, and better equipped to handle life's challenges."(PN.18)

Role of self-love in mental health

It involves how students can cultivate feelings of happiness, gratitude, and connection with others in a positive state.

Calm negative thoughts

The harmful habit of negative self-talk can arise from struggles with depression, low self-confidence, anxiety, and feeling happy and confident in your attentions with them.

"It is critical to calm down the storm of negative thoughts and overthinking within yourself."(PN.14)

Face traumatic events

Traumatic events can lower your confidence, leaving you feeling vulnerable, powerless, and unworthy. The people who face traumatic events may experience personality and identity crises.

"It helps you to stay strong, get even if you have a traumatic event or such in a disputing event, causes you to understand oneself better, so you easily cope with any problem." (PN.6).

Social Media's Impact on self-love

Social media has a significant impact on the lives of students. Negative and positive sub-themes have emerged.

Negative influence of self-love

The more we focus on our own needs, the more likely we are to feel uncomfortable and feel lower than others, leading to feelings of loneliness and inferiority, which affect our mental health.

"They often portray unrealistic standards of beauty, success, and happiness, which can lead us to compare ourselves to others and feel inadequate."(PN.18)

Positive Influence of Self-love

Self-love has a positive influence when you have a positive self-image and do not compare yourself with others, which leads to the feeling of inferiority.

"Dwells a positive and encouraging thinking when people listen to and watch motivating videos relating to fitness, awareness about mental health, and videos relating to the improvement of the lifestyle within the socioeconomic range." (PN.3)

Balancing Self-love

Self-love can be balanced in students' lives by seeking feedback, practicing self-reflection, and setting realistic goals.

Seeking Feedback

Feedback is the constructive evaluation of your work. When you receive feedback, you gain a clear understanding of your performance, including what you're doing well and where you can improve, also helping you to refine your skills and take pride in your accomplishments.

"Judge yourself and live more in reality than the imagination, and always seek feedback about yourself from others and be ready for criticism. Reflect on your weakness and try to overcome them."(PN.14)

Practicing Self-reflection

This means to describe and evaluate your thoughts, feelings and actions. Trying to understand yourself with a calm mind requires honest actions and emotions to probe, but it will also clarify your understanding.

"Take time to reflect on your actions, behavior and choices and acknowledge areas where you can improve and hold yourself accountable for your actions."(PN.18)

Setting Realistic Goals

Choose the targets that you believe you can achieve with your current abilities and resources. By adopting this, you'll increase your confidence,

motivation and focus and boost your opportunity for success.

"It is about acknowledging one's strengths and weaknesses while continuously striving to improve and grow."(PN.15)

Encouraging others to Practice self-love

Students can practise self-love through sub-themes, such as listening to others, sharing their own experiences and motivating and appreciative.

Listening to others

When listening to others, a person hears what they are saying with full attention, trying to understand their meaning, and builds trust and connections with them.

"I can help others by listening to them without any judgment."(PN.14)

Motivating and Appreciative

Motivating your employees through appreciation and praise will lead to a happier and more productive work environment, making a positive impact on your surroundings.

"We can encourage others by asking them about their personal experiences, giving examples, and motivating them."(PN.12)

Sharing own Experience

The act of individuals conveying their personal experiences, insights, lessons, and observations to others, often to give knowledge and understanding.

"By sharing my experiences with them and by providing support, and maybe by sharing helpful resources from where they can seek help."(PN.14)

4 | DISCUSSION

Self-love is a vital aspect of an individual's life, and university students are no exception. The pursuit of self-love among university students is crucial for their overall well-being and success. This study aimed to explore how self-love affects university students' lives, how they cultivate self-love, and how they balance it.

The primary objective of the study is to describe the understanding and articulation of self-love and how it affects the lives of university students. It is crucial as it has a profound impact on their mental health, academic performance, relationships, and overall happiness. Thematic analysis revealed that students who practice self-love tend to have higher self-esteem and confidence, better stress management and resilience, improved relationships with peers and family, increased motivation and academic achievement, and enhanced overall well-being. Javoid et al. (2025b) emphasized in a qualitative exploration of happiness that self-acceptance, gratitude, and

emotional awareness were central themes in the lived experiences of happy individuals. University students who prioritized self-compassion and internal validation were found to navigate academic pressures more constructively and sustain meaningful social connections. Similarly, Javaid, Chen, and Ramzan (2024b) highlighted that first-year students often experience elevated stress levels due to academic transitions. However, those who reported stronger self-concept and emotional support systems including elements of self-love were better equipped to manage these stressors. Studies have consistently demonstrated that cultivating self-love promotes self-acceptance, which empowers students to effectively cope with negative thoughts and emotions, thereby reducing the likelihood of developing mental health concerns like anxiety and depression (Neff, 2003; Seligman, 2011).

In addition, participants cultivate self-love in various ways, including engaging in self-care practices such as exercise, meditation, and hobbies, practicing positive self-talk and affirmations, setting boundaries and prioritizing their own needs, engaging in activities that bring joy and fulfilment, practicing self-compassion and self-forgiveness, and surrounding themselves with positive influences and supportive networks. These practices align with research findings that self-compassion and setting boundaries are essential components of psychological resilience and well-being, as highlighted in studies with Neff and Genner (2013) and Schmutk and Ruff (1997). Students also emphasized the importance of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-expression in cultivating self-love. By embracing their imperfections and rejecting societal pressure to conform, students can develop a more positive and compassionate relationship with themselves. Research literature supports the notion that engaging in self-care activities can also have a positive impact on mental health and well-being, as evidenced by the research conducted by Brown and Ryan (2003) and Kabat-Zinn (1994).

Furthermore, balancing self-love is essential for university students, as it allows them to prioritize their own needs and well-being without neglecting other aspects of their lives. Students achieve this balance by prioritizing self-care and making time for self-love practices, setting realistic goals and expectations, practicing self-compassion (Neff, 2003), and understanding their strengths and weaknesses. Engaging in activities that bring them joy; making time for their hobbies, passions, and creative pursuits, and spending time with supportive people who uplift and encourage them. Learning to say "no" to things that drain their energy and say "yes" to things that fill them up. Accepting that nobody is perfect and its okay to make mistakes. Social media may have both positive

and negative effects on students' self-perception and self-love, which is crucial for maintaining self-love, as it offers inspiration and support as well as unrealistic comparisons and cyberbullying (Vogel et al., 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015).

In line with this, Javaid, Kamran, and Sajid (2024c) found that gratitude and well-being were strongly interconnected, particularly when viewed through the lens of spiritual and cultural practices among Muslim and non-Muslim university students. Their study revealed that students who engaged in gratitude practices whether through prayer, reflection, or daily mindfulness were more likely to maintain emotional balance, recognize their intrinsic worth, and sustain a healthy level of self-love. These findings underscore the importance of integrating culturally grounded emotional practices into students' lives to enhance their psychological well-being and resilience.

By engaging in active listening, sharing personal experiences, and offering motivation and support, students can create a positive community that promotes self-love and acceptance. Moreover, hosting workshops, recommending books and articles, and sharing resources on mental health can help peers develop a deeper understanding of self-love and its importance in maintaining overall well-being (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff & Mc Gehee, 2010).

5 | Conclusion

Students are the power of society. They can make or break society. Their mental health is important to address. This study explored the phenomenon of self-love among university students, with the objectives to assess self-love levels, examine its impact, and explore students' perceptions on overcoming negative emotions. This open-ended questionnaire data, which was analyzed using thematic analysis, revealed its themes and sub-themes. Important themes were understanding, importance, cultivating, influence, role in mental health, social media impact, balancing, overcoming self-love, and encouraging others to practice self-love. It was concluded that careful consideration of the events in a student's life can help to identify the possible reactions. By prioritizing self-love, students can foster resilience, well-being, and academic success, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more productive society.

Implication

Well-being Programs

Focusing on self-love in well-being programs helps people develop a positive and loving relationship with themselves. This leads to a more sustainable approach to wellbeing, where people feel better mentally and emotionally. People can be more engaged and motivated to take care of themselves, and also improve

their relationships. They feel more confident, and overall, they feel happier and more satisfied with life.

Education

When students practice self-love, they experience a range of positive outcomes that impact their academic journey and beyond. Self-love boosts confidence and motivation, leading to improved academic performance. Self-love education also helps students develop a positive mindset, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression, and also promoting overall mental well-being. Self-love also encourages a supportive and positive classroom culture where students feel comfortable and build strong relationships with their peers and teachers. Accepting their strengths, weaknesses, and emotions, students develop better self-awareness and self-regulation skills. Overall, prioritizing self-love in education empowers students to grow holistically and achieve success in all areas of life.

Counselling

In counselling, the counsellors can help clients to develop self-acceptance, self-awareness, and self-compassion, leading to improved mental health outcomes. Helpful to reduce self-criticism and negative self-talk in clients. Empower clients to take ownership of their lives, make positive changes and pursue their goals, and also help clients develop effective coping mechanisms and resilience. Self-love leaders build empathy and communication skills. Overall, self-love is a powerful tool in counselling, leading to more effective therapy and improved client outcomes.

Limitations and Suggestions

In the future, for better outcomes, more techniques can be used in combination. The questionnaire was difficult to complete, and some people didn't respond correctly. Data collected from the same culture, but in the future, it can be collected from different cultures. University students were included in this study. Teachers, peers, and parents' groups might be involved in the study to provide a clear and accurate comparison.

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