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IMPACT OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ON SELF-ESTEEM AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Keywords	Abstract
<i>Child Sexual Abuse, Unwanted Early Sexual Experiences, Self-Esteem, Higher Education, Victimization.</i>	Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) is a growing concern in our society; yet, while the number of documented incidents of child sexual abuse is distressing, these startling data do not represent the full number of child sexual victimisations. The present study attempts to explore the prevalence of childhood sexually abusive events among university students. The present study aims to examine the occurrence of child sexual abuse and its impact on self-esteem among university students. Ex-post-facto, the cross-sectional research design was used to collect and analyse the data for the present study. Participants (N=150) were chosen randomly from various colleges throughout Kerala. A personal data sheet, the Early Sexual Experiences Checklist, and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were used to collect data. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to analyse data. Of the participants, 31.3% indicated that they had been exposed to some form of child sexual abuse before the age of 16 years. It was found that more female N=31 (41.3%) than male N = 16 (21.3%) students reported being exposed to CSA.



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	It was found that male students who were victims of child sexual abuse had high self-esteem; on the other hand, females who were victims of child sexual abuse had low self-esteem. The results would indicate that child sexual abuse has a significant impact on self-esteem, and that sexually abused female students displayed lower self-esteem than female students who were not victims of child sexual abuse.
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Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) has gained increasing research attention due to its serious and long-lasting psychological consequences. Despite its prevalence in India, CSA remains significantly underreported. Social stigma, fear of damaging family reputation, reluctance to accuse known individuals, and lack of trust in legal and police systems often prevent disclosure (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2013). These barriers make it difficult to estimate the true magnitude of the problem. CSA is a complex phenomenon that includes a wide range of behaviours and contexts. It generally refers to any unwanted or inappropriate sexual activity involving a child, including sexual solicitation, exposure, fondling, or attempted or completed sexual intercourse by an older person. Variations in definition, frequency, and relational context contribute to challenges in studying CSA across populations (Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2019). One of the key psychological consequences associated with CSA is its impact on self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to an individual’s overall evaluation of their worth, including both positive and negative attitudes toward the self (Rosenberg, 1965, 1979; Longmore & De Maris, 1997). It has also been conceptualised as an internal indicator of perceived social acceptance and personal value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale remains one of the most widely used tools to measure this construct (Corcoran & Fischer, 2000).

Sexual abuse continues to be a sensitive and underexplored topic, particularly in non-clinical populations. Early research by Finkelhor (1979) reported prevalence rates of 19.2 per cent among female and 8.6 per cent among male college students. Later cross-national studies showed that CSA prevalence ranges from 7 per cent to 36 per cent for females and 3 per cent to 29 per cent for males, with consistently higher rates among females (Finkelhor, 1994). More global reviews confirm that CSA remains a widespread issue, affecting approximately 12 per cent to 18 per cent of girls and 5per cent to 8 per cent of boys worldwide (Barth et al., 2015; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015).

A growing body of literature highlights the long-term psychological consequences of CSA. Survivors are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and interpersonal difficulties (Hailes et al., 2019; Maniglio, 2015). Research also suggests that CSA can negatively influence self-esteem, often leading to feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame (Papalia et al., 2018). These psychological effects may persist into adulthood and influence social and emotional functioning (Abdulrehman & De Luca, 2001; Potgieter, 2000). In addition to psychological outcomes, CSA has been linked to behavioural patterns in adulthood. Some studies suggest that



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individuals with CSA histories may engage in a broader range of sexual experiences or risky sexual behaviours (Heiman & Trapnell, 1999; Lalor & McElvaney, 2010). Research on self-esteem and sexual behaviour has produced mixed findings, with some studies indicating that higher self-esteem may also be associated with greater sexual exploration among college students (Cole & Slocumb, 1995; Hollar & Snizek, 1996). Previous studies continue to emphasise variability in prevalence and experiences of CSA across contexts. For instance, Madu (2001) found that less severe forms of abuse (e.g., kissing or inappropriate touching) were more commonly reported than severe forms (e.g., intercourse). Similarly, contemporary research highlights gender differences, although findings are not always consistent across cultures (Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2019). Importantly, CSA has been consistently associated with long-term adverse outcomes across psychological, behavioural, and social domains (Finkelhor et al., 2008; Hailes et al., 2019).

Although previous research has extensively documented the prevalence and consequences of CSA, there is limited context-specific evidence focusing on university students in India. Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental period during which self-esteem plays a vital role in psychological adjustment and well-being. Understanding how early adverse experiences, such as CSA, influence self-esteem in this population is essential for informing prevention and intervention strategies. Therefore, the present study attempts to explore the prevalence of childhood sexually abusive events among university students. The present study aims to examine the occurrence of child sexual abuse and its impact on self-esteem among university students.

Methods

Procedure

The present study adopted an ex post facto, cross-sectional research design to examine the impact of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) on self-esteem among university students. This design was considered appropriate as the variables of interest had already occurred and were not subject to experimental manipulation. Data were collected from university students enrolled in various colleges across Kerala, India. Participants were selected using a random sampling technique to ensure adequate representation. A total sample of 150 students participated in the study, comprising 75 males and 75 females. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the research process. Participants were requested to respond to the study measures honestly based on their personal experiences.

Participants

The sample consisted of 150 (N = 150) higher education students from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, who completed the study questionnaire. The sample included an equal number of male (n = 75) and female (n = 75) participants. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years.



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Instruments Used

A personal data sheet and the Early Sexual Experiences Checklist (Miller & Johnson, 1991), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Corcoran & Fischer, 2000; Rosenberg, 1965) were used to collect data.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the participants were scored and organised for statistical analysis. All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 20. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarise the data. In addition, univariate analyses and tests of normality were performed to examine the distribution of the study variables. As the data did not meet the assumption of normality, non-parametric statistical methods were employed. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to examine differences in self-esteem between students who reported experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA) and those who did not. The same test was also applied to assess gender differences in self-esteem within the sample.

Results

The sample consisted of 150 participants selected randomly from various colleges across Kerala. The majority of participants (52.0%, $n = 78$) were aged 21 to 23 years. More than half of the sample (53.3%, $n = 80$) were pursuing postgraduate studies. Regarding relationship status, 50.0% ($n = 75$) of participants reported not being in a romantic relationship. Additionally, 50.7% ($n = 76$) of the participants resided in urban areas. Regarding exposure to child sexual abuse (CSA), 31.3% ($n = 47$) of the participants reported having experienced some form of CSA before the age of 16 years. A gender-wise comparison indicated that a higher proportion of female participants ($n = 31$, 41.3%) reported CSA experiences compared to male participants ($n = 16$, 21.3%).

Table 1: Results of the Mann-Whitney U test showing differences in the self-esteem of students who were victims of CSA and who were not

	Status of CSA	N	M	SD	W	Mean Rank	U	Sig.
Self-esteem	No CSA	103	21.46	3.105	.937**	83.98	1547.000	.000
	CSA	47	18.68	6.207	.908*	56.93		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$



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Table 1 depicts the results of the Mann-Whitney U test, which was conducted to examine differences in self-esteem between students who reported experiences of child sexual abuse (CSA) and those who did not. The results indicated a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between the two groups, $U = 1547.00$, $p < .001$. Students without a history of CSA reported significantly higher self-esteem ($M = 21.46$, $SD = 3.11$, mean rank = 83.98) compared to those who had experienced CSA ($M = 18.68$, $SD = 6.21$, mean rank = 56.93). The lower mean rank observed among students with CSA experiences suggests that this group had comparatively lower levels of self-esteem. This finding indicates that exposure to child sexual abuse is associated with reduced self-esteem among university students.

Table 2: Results of the Mann-Whitney U test showing differences in self-esteem among students based on gender

	Gender	N	M	SD	W	Mean Rank	U	Sig.
Self-esteem	Female	75	19.05	4.719	.985*	61.45	1759.000	.000
	Male	75	22.12	3.683	.921*	89.55		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine differences in self-esteem between male and female students (Table 2). The results indicated a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between the two groups, $U = 1759.00$, $p < .001$. Male students reported significantly higher self-esteem ($M = 22.12$, $SD = 3.68$, mean rank = 89.55) compared to female students ($M = 19.05$, $SD = 4.72$, mean rank = 61.45). The higher mean rank observed among male participants suggests that they had comparatively higher levels of self-esteem than female participants. This finding indicates that gender is significantly associated with differences in self-esteem among university students.

Table 3: Results of the Mann-Whitney U test showing differences in self-esteem among female students who were victims of CSA and who were not

	Female	N	M	SD	W	Mean Rank	U	Sig.
Self-esteem	No CSA	44	22.16	2.988	.952	53.24	1759.000	.000
	CSA	31	14.65	2.811	.862*	16.37		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$



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Table 3 depicts the Mann-Whitney U test, which was conducted to examine differences in self-esteem among female students based on their exposure to child sexual abuse (CSA). The results revealed a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between female students who reported CSA and those who did not, $U = 1759.00$, $p < .001$. Female students without a history of CSA reported significantly higher self-esteem ($M = 22.16$, $SD = 2.99$, mean rank = 53.24) compared to those who had experienced CSA ($M = 14.65$, $SD = 2.81$, mean rank = 16.37). The substantially lower mean rank among female students with CSA experiences indicates markedly lower levels of self-esteem in this group. This finding suggests that child sexual abuse has a strong negative association with self-esteem among female university students.

Table 4: Results of the Mann-Whitney U test showing differences in self-esteem among male students who were victims of CSA and who were not

	Male	N	M	SD	W	Mean Rank	U	Sig.
Self-esteem	No CSA	59	20.93	3.112	.903**	31.37	81.000	.000
	CSA	16	26.50	1.862	.760*	62.44		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As depicted in Table 4, the Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine differences in self-esteem among male students based on their exposure to child sexual abuse (CSA). The results revealed a statistically significant difference in self-esteem between male students who reported CSA and those who did not, $U = 81.00$, $p < .001$. Male students with a history of CSA reported significantly higher self-esteem ($M = 26.50$, $SD = 1.86$, mean rank = 62.44) compared to those without CSA experiences ($M = 20.93$, $SD = 3.11$, mean rank = 31.37). The higher mean rank observed among male students with CSA experiences indicates comparatively higher levels of self-esteem in this group. This finding suggests a statistically significant association between CSA and self-esteem among male students, although the direction of the relationship differs from that observed among female students.

Discussion

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is broadly defined as any sexual activity imposed on a child by an older individual, including inappropriate contact, exposure, or coercion (Maltz, 2002). Such experiences can disrupt normal psychological and social development and are associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes across the lifespan (Maniglio, 2015; Mathews & Collin-Vezina, 2019). In particular, CSA has been consistently linked to impairments in self-concept and self-esteem.



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The present study examined the prevalence of CSA and its impact on self-esteem among university students. The findings revealed that 31.3% of participants reported experiencing some form of CSA before the age of 16. A higher proportion of females (41.3%) reported CSA compared to males (21.3%). This pattern is consistent with earlier and recent literature indicating that females are more likely to experience and disclose CSA than males (Barth et al., 2015; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015; Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019).

The primary finding of the study indicated a significant difference in self-esteem between students with and without CSA experiences. Students who had experienced CSA reported lower self-esteem compared to those without such experiences. This finding aligns with a substantial body of research demonstrating that CSA is associated with negative self-evaluations, including feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness (Hailes et al., 2019; Papalia et al., 2018). From a psychological perspective, early traumatic experiences such as CSA may undermine an individual's sense of control and personal value, thereby negatively affecting self-esteem (Maniglio, 2015).

Gender differences in self-esteem were also observed in the present study. Male students reported higher self-esteem compared to female students. Furthermore, among female participants, those without CSA experiences had significantly higher self-esteem than those who had experienced CSA. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that females may be more vulnerable to the emotional consequences of CSA, including reduced self-esteem and increased psychological distress (Hailes et al., 2019; Ullman et al., 2016). Interestingly, the results among male students showed a contrasting pattern. Male students who reported CSA experiences demonstrated higher self-esteem compared to those without such experiences. Although this finding appears counterintuitive, it may be interpreted in light of coping mechanisms and gender socialisation processes. Some studies suggest that males may engage in defensive self-enhancement, denial, or externalising coping strategies, which can result in inflated or preserved self-esteem despite adverse experiences (Krahé & Berger, 2017; Easton et al., 2019). Additionally, underreporting and differences in the perception of abuse may influence these findings. Therefore, this result should be interpreted with caution and warrants further investigation.

The findings of the present study contribute to the growing body of literature on CSA by highlighting its differential impact on self-esteem across genders. Overall, the results suggest that CSA is associated with lower self-esteem, particularly among female students, while the relationship among male students may be more complex and influenced by sociocultural and psychological factors.

Conclusion

This study examined the prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) and its impact on self-esteem among university students. A substantial proportion of students reported CSA, with higher prevalence among females. CSA was significantly associated with lower self-esteem, indicating its



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lasting negative impact on psychological well-being. Gender differences were observed, with males reporting higher self-esteem overall. While female students with CSA reported lower self-esteem, an unexpected pattern emerged among males, where those with CSA reported higher self-esteem, suggesting possible differences in coping or reporting. These findings highlight the need for greater awareness, early intervention, and institutional support for survivors.

Implications

The findings of this study have important practical and theoretical implications. First, they highlight the need for early identification and psychological support for students who have experienced child sexual abuse (CSA). Educational institutions should provide accessible counselling services and trauma-informed interventions to promote self-esteem and overall well-being. Second, the observed gender differences suggest that interventions should be sensitive to gender-specific experiences and coping patterns. Programs aimed at improving self-esteem should consider these differences to enhance effectiveness. Finally, the study underscores the importance of increasing awareness about CSA and reducing stigma to encourage reporting and help-seeking. Future research should further explore the mechanisms linking CSA and self-esteem, particularly in diverse cultural contexts.

Limitations

The present study has certain limitations. First, the use of self-report measures may have introduced recall bias and social desirability effects, especially given the sensitive nature of child sexual abuse (CSA). Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causal relationships between CSA and self-esteem. Third, the study focused only on CSA experiences before the age of 16 and did not consider the severity, frequency, or context of abuse. Finally, the sample was limited to students from colleges in Kerala, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other populations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that educational institutions implement trauma-informed counselling services to support students with histories of child sexual abuse (CSA). Programs aimed at improving self-esteem and psychological well-being should be made accessible to students. Awareness campaigns should be conducted to reduce stigma and encourage reporting and help-seeking behaviour. Gender-sensitive interventions are also recommended, considering the differences observed between male and female students. Future research should use longitudinal designs and include larger, more diverse samples. It is also recommended to examine factors such as severity of abuse, coping strategies, and social support to better understand the relationship between CSA and self-esteem.



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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed to the development of this manuscript. SG and KH conceptualised the initial review and led the development of the manuscript. SG and KH conducted the methodological analysis of the reviewed studies and contributed to drafting the manuscript. Dr Samuel George ¹, Consultant Psychologist & PGT Psychology, Carmel School, Peyad.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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