Article

International Higher Education Students' Self-esteem: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT: *This article systematically reviews empirical studies on self-esteem among international students in higher education. Drawing on literature published between 2014 and 2024, a comprehensive search was conducted across four major databases—Scopus, ProQuest, PsycINFO, and Web of Science—guided by clearly defined inclusion criteria. Twenty relevant studies were identified and thematically analyzed, revealing three overarching themes: social interaction, psychological health, and sense of belonging. The findings highlight the reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and both social interaction and a sense of belonging, as well as self-esteem's role in shaping psychological well-being. While reinforcing the importance of self-esteem for international student adjustment, the review also identifies notable gaps in existing research and offers directions for the future.*

INTRODUCTION

The global higher education field is evolving, with foreign student enrollment projected to exceed eight million by 2025 (Wang et al., 2023). These students are

crucial to higher education worldwide, as they contribute to both academic prominence and financial benefits (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016). Nevertheless, studying abroad is a distinctive experience shaped by both individual and contextual aspects, presenting both positive and negative experiences, which distinguishes international students from their domestic counterparts (Tomaino et al., 2025). International students frequently report encountering challenges related to their well-being and mental health due to additional stressors, such as isolation from family and culture shock (Du et al., 2024; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2024).

Prior studies have highlighted the significance of self-esteem for higher education students, which serves as a key predictor of students' academic achievement (Neroni et al., 2022), sociocultural adjustment (Wu et al., 2024), and psychological adaptation (Fairlamb, 2022). As such, self-esteem may be especially crucial for international students, as they adapt to a new culture and strive for academic and personal success in an unfamiliar country (Dong et al., 2022; Shafaei et al., 2018). However, there is a limited understanding of how self-esteem manifests in this population, representing an important gap in research.

Research Question

A systematic review was conducted to address the following research question: What does the peer-reviewed empirical literature reveal about the self-esteem of international students in higher education contexts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to an individual's self-evaluation, reflecting their perception of their worth, abilities, and overall value (Rodríguez-Ruiz et al., 2025). It is shaped by internal factors, such as self-talk, thought patterns, and personal beliefs, as well as external influences, including one's living and working environment (Bhatt & Bahadur, 2018). Self-esteem plays a central role in shaping how individuals perceive and respond to life experiences, influencing emotional regulation, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships (Bhatt & Bahadur, 2018). For example, individuals with high self-esteem are better equipped to handle potential challenges, as their self-worth acts as a buffer against negative feedback, setbacks, or other forms of failure (Krause et al., 2021), suggesting that self-esteem may act as a vital conduit to psychological health and quality of life (Krause et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Ruiz et al., 2025).

Unique Challenges Faced by International Students

According to acculturation theory (Berry, 2005), individuals who move to a new cultural environment undergo psychological and sociocultural adaptation, which can be a challenging process (Sam et al., 2022). For example, international students may experience difficulties with academic adjustment and stress,

struggling to adapt to different pedagogies and the host university's academic environment (Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022). Sociocultural adaptation (i.e., the process of modifying behaviors to integrate into a new setting; Wu et al., 2024) is further complicated by language inadequacy, academic progression, cultural disparities, social engagement, educational financing, traditions, religious beliefs, and safety concerns (Can et al., 2021; Yılmaz & Temizkan, 2022). These challenges are often most pronounced at the beginning of international students' stay, when they must simultaneously navigate new academic expectations and social environments (Hirai et al., 2015). This highlights a cluster of academic and sociocultural challenges that may be unique to the needs of international students and reinforces the need for targeted support.

The Importance of Self-Esteem for International Students

Self-beliefs, such as self-esteem, may mitigate international students' acculturation-related challenges. For example, individuals may seek group membership to enhance self-esteem and foster a sense of belonging (Gaffney & Hogg, 2023). In turn, strong self-esteem can reinforce a positive social identity (Rivera et al., 2024), enhancing their confidence in engaging with new academic and social contexts. Additionally, self-esteem may serve as a psychological resource, enabling students to employ adaptive coping strategies to address emotional discomfort, thereby alleviating symptoms of depression, anxiety (Feng et al., 2018; Wongtongkam, 2019) and loneliness (Rossi et al., 2020). Together, these findings indicate that strong self-esteem may promote both mental well-being and successful integration, highlighting its role in mitigating the multifaceted challenges faced by international students.

METHOD

Selection criteria

A systematic review focused on empirical studies of self-esteem among international students within the context of higher education. This review followed the research synthesis process described by Cooper et al. (2019) and the 2020 PRISMA guidelines for reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The initial phase of the systematic review consisted of defining clear criteria for including or excluding studies to ensure relevance. The inclusion criteria for studies were as follows:
- Published between 2014 and 2024
- Published in the English language
- Empirical studies in peer-reviewed journals
- Focusing on the self-esteem of international higher education students

Each criterion was carefully chosen to shape the scope of this review. The selected timeframe (2014–2024) was chosen to capture the most recent and relevant research on mental health and psychological difficulties experienced by international students (Nguyen & McGregor, 2025). Only empirical studies

published in English were included to ensure consistency and accessibility. Furthermore, the review was limited to peer-reviewed empirical research to maintain methodological rigor. Articles that were nonempirical, such as literature reviews, opinion pieces, and theoretical discussions, were excluded to maintain a clear focus on original research findings. These criteria ensure that the review synthesizes high-quality, directly relevant evidence to provide a clear and accurate understanding of the topic.
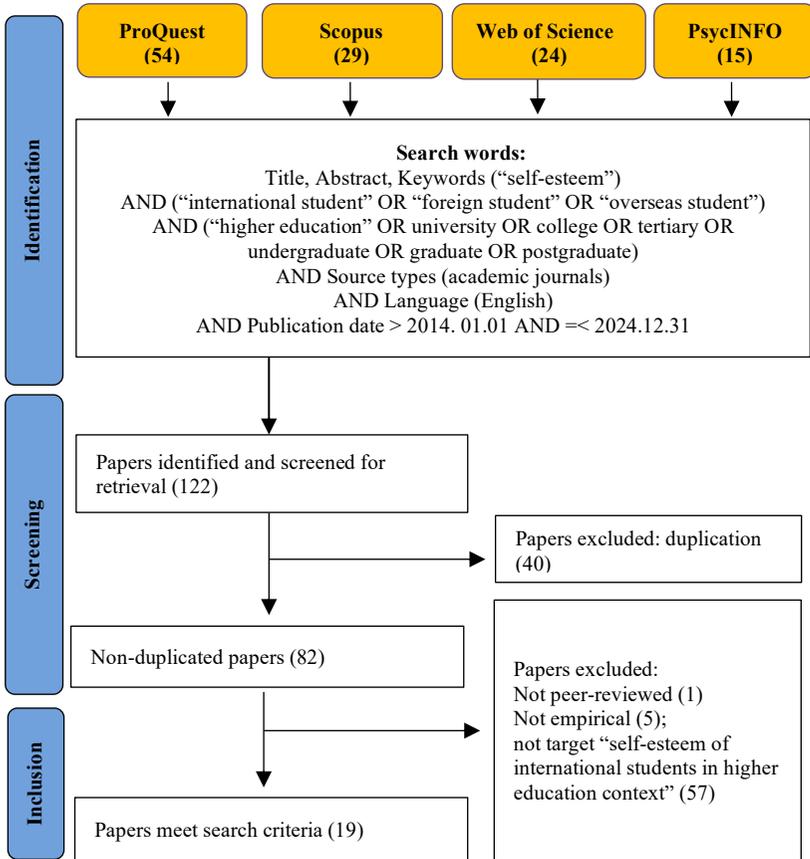
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│ ProQuest │   │  Scopus  │   │Web of Science│   │ PsycINFO │
│   (54)   │   │   (29)   │   │     (24)     │   │   (15)   │
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Identification

Search words:
Title, Abstract, Keywords ("self-esteem")
AND ("international student" OR "foreign student" OR "overseas student")
AND ("higher education" OR university OR college OR tertiary OR undergraduate OR graduate OR postgraduate)
AND Source types (academic journals)
AND Language (English)
AND Publication date > 2014. 01.01 AND =< 2024.12.31

Screening

Papers identified and screened for retrieval (122)

Papers excluded: duplication (40)

Non-duplicated papers (82)

Papers excluded:
Not peer-reviewed (1)
Not empirical (5);
not target "self-esteem of international students in higher education context" (57)

Inclusion

Papers meet search criteria (19)

Figure 1: Selection and screening process

Search strategy

We searched the following databases: ProQuest, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Web of Science. These databases were selected for their broad coverage of educational, psychological, and social science literature, making them well-suited for studies of international students and self-esteem in higher education. The following key terms

were searched within these databases to ensure maximum relevance and inclusivity: "self-esteem," AND "international student," OR "overseas student," OR "foreign student," AND "higher education," OR "university," OR "college," OR "tertiary," "undergraduate," OR "graduate," OR "postgraduate." Figure 1 illustrates the screening process of studies using the PRISMA framework.

Data extraction

The initial search across four databases yielded 122 records. After removing 40 duplicates, 82 unique records remained for screening. Title and abstract screening led to the exclusion of 1 non-peer-reviewed, 5 non-empirical papers, and 57 articles that did not focus on the self-esteem of international students in the context of higher education. This left 19 studies that met all the inclusion criteria and were included in the final review (see Table 1).

For each included study, data were extracted on authorship, study design, country of study, study sample, and primary findings. Most studies employed a cross-sectional design (13 out of 19) and predominantly utilized quantitative methods, especially participant surveys (18 out of 19). Nine of the included studies were conducted in the U.S., and many treated international students as a homogeneous group.

Data analysis

The data were synthesized and interpreted via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process began with immersion in the data, involving repeated readings of the full-text articles to develop a comprehensive familiarity with the data. The first author conducted initial coding to generate succinct, interpretive labels relevant to the research question. This was guided by an open and reflective mindset and informed by questions such as "What is being conveyed?", "How is it understood?", and "Why does it matter?" (Tuckett, 2005; Nguyen & McGregor, 2025). The first author then grouped similar codes into preliminary themes independently, which the second author then reviewed, and refinements were made collaboratively to ensure clarity, coherence, and consistency. Once all relevant data items had been coded, attention shifted to reviewing and analyzing how different codes could be combined according to their shared meaning to form themes. Potential themes were reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. As with all phases of analysis, all changes were documented and tracked. Next, each theme was carefully defined and labeled to encapsulate its underlying meaning. The final stage involved presenting the findings, accompanied by illustrative examples, to support a clear and meaningful interpretation. Although these phases are presented in a logical, sequential order, the analysis was recursive and iterative, requiring movement back and forth through the phases as necessary (Byrne, 2022).

Article

Table 1: Included Articles

Article	Authors	Study Design	Context	Findings
Felt understanding as a bridge between social identity and wellbeing among international university students	Du et al. (2024)	quantitative	UK	Feeling understood helped protect students' self-esteem
Psychological distress and everyday discrimination among Chinese international students one year into COVID-19: A preregistered comparative study	Bi et al. (2023)	quantitative	Multiple countries	Reduced self-esteem was associated with increased depression and anxiety. Discrimination negatively impacted self-esteem. High self-esteem intensified the impact of discrimination on anxiety
International student profiling framework	Rengasamy et al. (2023)	quantitative	Malaysia	Self-esteem influenced online prosocial behaviors.
Biopsychosocial factors associated with depression among U.S. undergraduate international students	Zeng et al. (2022)	quantitative	US	Higher self-esteem was linked to fewer depressive symptoms.

Cultural partner program: Enhancing intercultural interactions and transitional outcomes for international graduate level students	Dong et al. (2022)	quantitative	US	Students involved in the Cultural Partner Program experienced more positive transition outcomes, such as increased self-esteem.
Crazy rich Chinese? A mixed-methods examination of perceived stereotypes and associated psychosocial adaptation challenges among Chinese international students in the United States	Xie et al. (2021)	Mixed methods	US	Chinese students faced low self-esteem due to wealth-related stereotypes.
Cyberbullying, social stigma, and self-esteem: The impact of COVID-19 on students from East and Southeast Asia at the University of Jordan	Alsawalqa (2021)	quantitative	Jordan	Cyberbullying reduced self-esteem among East and Southeast Asian students.
Who spends too much time online? Associated factors of internet addiction among international college students in the United States	Koo et al. (2021b)	quantitative	US	Self-esteem negatively predicted internet addiction.

The first year of acculturation: A longitudinal study on acculturative stress and adjustment among first-year international college students	Koo et al. (2021a)	quantitative	US	Self-esteem was a significant predictor of acculturative stress.
The role of adult attachment in international students' acculturation process	Li et al. (2021)	quantitative	US	Attachment anxiety predicted self-esteem levels
The predicting effects of self-efficacy, self-esteem and prior travel experience on sociocultural adaptation among international students	Gebregergis et al. (2020)	quantitative	China	Self-esteem played a key role in predicting sociocultural adaptation and acted as a mediator between self-efficacy and adaptation.
Different self-attitude indicators in students and their self-realization in a university	Stanislav et al. (2020)	quantitative	Russia	Students with low self-esteem had difficulty achieving self-realization.

So close and yet thus far? Predictors of international students' socialization with host nationals	Quinton (2020)	quantitative	US	Self-esteem predicted increased social interaction with host nationals, but not with fellow international students. Self-esteem could be essential for East and Southeast Asian students in forming relationships with host nationals.
A model of psychological well-being among international students	Shafaei et al. (2018)	quantitative	Malaysia	Adjustment and attachment were closely linked to self-esteem. Self-esteem mediated the link between adjustment attitude and psychological well-being.
Stress-driven spending: Correlates of international students' adjustment strains and compulsive online buying	Lou & Byun (2018)	quantitative	US	Adjustment strains reduced international students' self-esteem, harming their happiness and causing compulsive online shopping.
Health and sexual behavior among exchange students	Petersson et al. (2016)	quantitative	Sweden	Exchange students reported high self-esteem.
beyond host language proficiency: Coping resources predicting international students' satisfaction	Mak et al. (2015)	quantitative	Australia	Self-esteem predicted personal satisfaction.

Moderating effects of perceived language discrimination on mental health outcomes among Chinese international students	Wei et al. (2015)	quantitative	US	Higher self-esteem mitigated the relationship between language discrimination and depression and anxiety.
Predictors of international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment to the context of reception while studying at Aarhus University, Denmark	Ozer (2015)	quantitative	Denmark	Social support was linked to higher self-esteem in international students. Higher self-esteem in international students was predicted by higher socioeconomic status, more social support, less discrimination, and greater emphasis on horizontal collectivism.

Data analysis

The data were synthesized and interpreted via thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process began with immersion in the data, involving repeated readings of the full-text articles to develop a comprehensive understanding. The first author conducted initial coding to generate succinct, interpretive labels relevant to the research question. This was guided by an open and reflective mindset and informed by questions such as "What is being conveyed?", "How is it understood?", and "Why does it matter?" (Tuckett, 2005; Nguyen & McGregor, 2025). The first author then grouped similar codes into preliminary themes independently, which the second author then reviewed, and refinements were made collaboratively to ensure clarity, coherence, and consistency. Once all relevant data items had been coded, attention shifted to reviewing and analyzing how different codes could be combined according to their shared meaning to form themes. Potential themes were reviewed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. As with all phases of analysis, all changes were documented and tracked. Next, each theme was carefully defined and labeled to encapsulate its underlying meaning. The final stage involved presenting the findings, accompanied by illustrative examples, to support a clear and meaningful interpretation. Although these phases are presented in a logical, sequential order, the analysis was recursive and iterative, requiring movement back and forth through the phases as necessary (Byrne, 2022).

A summary of the generated codes and themes is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Emerging codes and themes

Themes	Number of studies	Codes
Social interaction	7	prosocial behavior, bidirectional interactions, interaction enjoyment, help-seeking attitudes, culture interaction, social activities, relationships with host nationals, social competence, social expression, interaction with local people, participation in cultural events, social strain, social stigma
Psychological health	8	anxiety, distress, psychological distress, stressful situations, depression, acculturative stress, internet addiction, homesickness, satisfaction
Sense of belonging	5	inclusion, social connectedness, attachment anxiety, felt understanding, felt accepted, felt value, felt ignored.

FINDINGS

Research trends

The publication trend in self-esteem among international students from 2014--2024 shows a gradual increase in scholarly interest. Initial research activity was modest, with four studies published between 2015 and 2016—three in 2015 and one in 2016—laying a foundation for further academic inquiry. After a pause in 2017, the field experienced renewed interest in 2020, with three papers published, followed by steady growth through 2021, which culminated in a peak with five publications. This increase reflects a heightened recognition of self-esteem as a critical factor in the international student adjustment process.

Although no studies were recorded in 2017 and 2019, steady research resumed in 2020 and 2021, with two and five publications, respectively. Research activity continued in 2022 and 2023, with two studies published each year and one additional article in 2024, indicating ongoing academic engagement with the topic. The publication gaps in 2017 and 2019 may be attributed to shifting research priorities or early disruptions that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, which later impacted international student mobility and redirected scholarly focus toward online learning environments (Nguyen & McGregor, 2025). The gradual recovery in publications after 2021 likely reflects renewed interest in the psychosocial well-being of international students in the aftermath of the pandemic (Oduwaye et al., 2023).

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis revealed the presence of three themes: social interaction, psychological health, and sense of belonging.

Theme 1 - Social interaction

A common theme found across all the studies was social interaction, which is a critical aspect of the experience of international students as they navigate life in their host countries (Belford, 2017). A total of six studies suggested a bidirectional relationship between self-esteem and social interaction, indicating a mutual, two-way connection between these factors. Gebregergis et al. (2020), Quinton (2020), and Rengasamy et al. (2023) suggested that high self-esteem predicts international students' social interaction. Specifically, students with higher self-esteem are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors, helping their peers in both academic and nonacademic situations (Rengasamy et al., 2023). In addition, a high level of self-esteem increases international students' interest and motivation in social interactions with students from different cultures, such as with host nations (Gebregergis et al., 2020). In contrast, Quinton (2020) reported that higher self-esteem in international students predicted increased socialization

with domestic students but was unrelated to socialization with fellow international students.

Moreover, social interaction serves as a predictor of self-esteem (Dong et al., 2022; Lou & Byun, 2018; Ozer, 2015). Specifically, interaction with the host culture (i.e., engaging with local people, participating in cultural activities, and forming new relationships) enhances students' self-esteem (Ozer, 2015). Similarly, Dong et al. (2022) reported that facilitating cooperation (e.g., social, cultural, or athletic events) between foreign students and their domestic counterparts positively influences the self-esteem of first-year graduate international students. On the other hand, social strains, such as difficulties in interpersonal interactions, could result in reduced self-esteem (Lou & Byun, 2018).

Theme 2 - Psychological health

A second theme found across the studies was psychological health, which was categorized into negative and positive dimensions. Negative psychological health includes conditions such as anxiety, pessimism, life dissatisfaction, stress, and depression (Levine et al., 2021). Conversely, positive psychological health is characterized by attributes such as optimism, resilience, life satisfaction, and overall happiness (Bieda et al., 2019; Levine et al., 2021).

Eight papers emphasized the effect of self-esteem on international students' psychological health (Bi et al., 2023; Koo et al., 2021a; Li et al., 2021; Mak et al., 2015; Shafaei et al., 2018; Stanislav et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2015; Zeng et al., 2022). Specifically, self-esteem serves as a protector against negative psychological health among international students (i.e., anxiety, depression, and acculturative stress; Bi et al., 2023; Koo et al., 2021a; Li et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2022). Moreover, a high level of self-esteem facilitates the psychological well-being of international students, including student life satisfaction (Mak et al., 2015; Shafaei et al., 2018). However, the impact of posttraumatic stress symptoms was not significantly moderated by self-esteem (Wei et al., 2015). Additionally, low self-esteem can lead to the development of psychological distress (i.e., anxiety and language discrimination stress; Li et al., 2021; Stanislav et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2015).

Theme 3 - Sense of belonging

Another common theme was the impact of student belonging on self-esteem. The sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support; feelings of closeness; and being welcomed, accepted, valued, or respected by the campus community or peers (Strayhorn, 2018). Four articles indicated the relationship between self-esteem and a sense of belonging (Alsawalqa, 2021; Du et al., 2024; Li et al., 2021; Quinton, 2020). International students who feel accepted or valued tend to develop high self-esteem (Alsawalqa, 2021; Du et al., 2024). Furthermore, Quinton (2020) suggested that self-esteem could foster a sense of inclusion. In

contrast, international students who experience a high level of attachment anxiety (e.g., fear of rejection and abandonment, or uninvolvement; Gouin & MacNeil, 2019) or who perceive ignorance seem to have low self-esteem (Alsawalqa, 2021; Li et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION

Researchers have shown continued interest in understanding the experiences of international students (e.g., Nguyen & McGregor, 2025; Oduwaye et al., 2023). Research in this space is important, as it assists in understanding the unique challenges these students face and how best to support them to improve student wellbeing and retention. It may improve educational quality, inform policy and practice, strengthen global relations and academic competitiveness, and promote equity and inclusion in education. This review has demonstrated how self-esteem affects social interaction, psychological well-being, and sense of belonging among international students at tertiary institutions.

Thematic analysis revealed that social interaction and self-esteem reciprocally predict one another, which corresponds with Harris and Orth's (2020) meta-analysis. Specifically, their analysis revealed a prospective influence of social relationships on self-esteem across 48 samples (N = 46,231) and a prospective impact of self-esteem on social relationships across 35 samples (N = 21,995). However, previous research on this relationship has yielded mixed results. While several studies have reported positive effects across various life stages (e.g., youth and adulthood; Harris & Orth, 2020; Shang et al., 2025), others have reported no significant associations (e.g., Harris et al., 2015; Marshall et al., 2014). These inconsistencies highlighted the importance of considering contextual and methodological differences when interpreting the findings. By demonstrating this reciprocal relationship, specifically among international students, the present study contributes to the literature. This underscores the need for further exploration of how diverse social contexts within this population may shape these dynamics.

Furthermore, while research has explored the relationship between self-esteem and peer interactions among international students (e.g., Gebregergis et al., 2020; Rengasamy et al., 2023), a gap remains in understanding how self-esteem influences interactions with faculty members and local peers. Orth and Robins (2022) highlighted the importance of examining how self-esteem affects evaluations within specific relationships. For example, the effect of self-esteem is stronger for general relationships than for specific ones, such as those with parents or peers (Orth & Robins, 2022). These findings suggest that international students' self-esteem may not influence all social domains equally, especially in culturally unfamiliar settings. In addition, while it is essential to examine the impact of self-esteem on social interaction and its moderation by factors such as age (Harris & Orth, 2020; Sechi et al., 2021) and gender (Ma et al., 2022; Sechi et al., 2021), existing studies on international students have largely overlooked these aspects. Therefore, further research should investigate how these differences impact the academic experiences of international students.

Previous studies have also indicated the important role of self-esteem in predicting the psychological health of international students, corroborating Beck and Haigh's (2014) cognitive model and Pyszczynski et al.'s (2004) terror management hypothesis. While Beck and Haigh (2014) linked beliefs, such as self-esteem, to depression, Pyszczynski et al. (2004) posited that self-esteem serves as a protective factor against anxiety. Notably, these studies confirmed the positive relationship between self-esteem and psychological health within samples of international students, extending findings previously established in other populations, such as secondary students (Liu et al., 2021). Moreover, while self-esteem positively contributes to psychological well-being, there are no studies that account for third variables (e.g., social support; Szkody & McKinney, 2019) that might influence the link between self-esteem and psychological health in international students. This oversight may stem from methodological constraints, including the reliance on cross-sectional survey data that cannot capture these complex factors.

Finally, these findings on the relationship between self-esteem and perceived sense of belonging in higher education international students are consistent with studies in other populations (e.g., middle school students, senior high school students, and university students; Chen et al., 2022; Ma, 2003; Wagner et al., 2018), strengthening the evidence for the generalizability of this relationship. Additionally, findings on the impact of self-esteem on international students' sense of belonging (e.g., perceived social inclusion) are consistent with sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), which posits that self-esteem monitors social acceptance and belonging. However, previous studies have indicated that students' self-esteem and sense of belonging correlate with their inclination to pursue a certain degree (Chen et al., 2022; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015). For example, Chen et al. (2022) suggested that students specializing in the social science field had markedly higher levels of self-esteem and school belonging. Moreover, these findings fail to assess the extent to which self-esteem and school belonging constitute a transactional process between the environment and individual well-being, aligning with Sameroff's (2009) transactional model of development, which suggests a continuous influence between individuals and their environments.

IMPLICATIONS

The reciprocal relationship between social interaction and self-esteem among international students highlights the importance of comprehensive support systems. Since self-esteem can shape students' willingness to engage in social and positive interactions, in turn reinforcing self-worth, programs that promote both interpersonal connection and self-esteem may be especially effective. Therefore, universities could adopt peer mentoring and inclusive orientation activities to serve this dual purpose. Indeed, peer mentoring programs have been shown to foster a sense of belonging and promote a sense of self-worth or value by facilitating international students' interaction with peers who share similar cultural or academic experiences (Marino, 2020; Pointon-Haas, 2024).

Additionally, as self-esteem does not influence all social domains equally, universities should consider the role of faculty–student relationships in shaping the self-esteem of international students. The development of initiatives that promote inclusive teaching practices and effective communication may help address this gap. For example, implementing structured programs such as intercultural workshops and faculty-led support groups can help bridge the divide between international students and institutional resources, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus climate (Green et al., 2018; O'Leary et al., 2020; Oduwaye et al., 2023).

The findings also highlighted the mental health relevance of self-esteem. Low self-esteem may increase vulnerability to anxiety or depression. As such, universities can adopt specific programs aimed at increasing students' self-esteem, especially for low self-esteem students. Among these interventions, group-based cognitive behavioral intervention has emerged as an effective method for improving self-image and reducing harmful thought patterns (Adamson et al., 2019; Sahranavard et al., 2019). This intervention is based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a therapeutic approach in which a therapist works with a group of individuals facing similar psychological challenges (Bieling et al., 2022). Group-based settings help students connect, share experiences, and build coping skills, whereas cognitive behavioral interventions support them in reframing self-defeating thoughts to foster healthier self-beliefs (Lin et al., 2025; Sahranavard et al., 2019).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Most evidence on self-esteem among international students has come from samples in Western countries (e.g., the U.S., Canada, Denmark), even though average self-esteem levels may vary across cultures, likely because Western societies place greater emphasis on cultivating positive self-perceptions than non-Western cultures do (Sorjonen et al., 2023). As such, the findings underscore the need for more studies using samples from Asia and Africa to understand the advantages of self-esteem in these contexts. Moreover, through their review of several large meta-analyses and numerous individual studies, Orth and Robins (2022) suggested that self-esteem may have detrimental effects. As such, further research is needed to examine the potential negative outcomes of high self-esteem among international students, such as maladaptive responses (e.g., antisocial behavior; Orth & Robins, 2022; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016).

Moreover, some of the reviewed studies suggest that self-esteem influences a sense of belonging and social interaction, whereas others propose that these factors, in turn, impact self-esteem. Although these relationships are evident in the current findings, further confirmation through longitudinal research is necessary to clarify the directionality and reciprocal nature of these effects. In addition, the current study focuses primarily on the effect of self-esteem on international students, whereas previous research suggests that this relationship is bidirectional. As such, further studies should investigate the reciprocal nature of

this relationship to gain a deeper understanding of how self-esteem and psychological health mutually influence each other. Moreover, the meta-analysis of self-esteem suggested that its effect may be stronger in self-reported measures than in informant-reported measures (Orth & Robins, 2022); therefore, future research should examine this difference and its impact on international students' experiences. Finally, the review may be limited by the variability of indicators used in the included studies, highlighting the need for future research to employ clearer, more standardized measures.

CONCLUSION

This review synthesizes a decade of empirical research on self-esteem among international students in higher education. Through a systematic analysis of twenty studies, self-esteem is identified as a key psychological resource that is influenced by students' social interactions, psychological health, and sense of belonging. The review highlights the reciprocal nature of these relationships, demonstrating how higher self-esteem enables students to form meaningful connections, manage stress, and integrate into academic communities. These findings suggest that universities can support international students' well-being by implementing programs that foster self-esteem, such as peer mentoring, intercultural workshops, or faculty-led support groups, which in turn strengthen social networks and promote a sense of belonging. Moreover, it highlights important gaps in the literature, including the limited availability of longitudinal research and a lack of cultural specificity in existing studies. To advance understanding in this area, future research should employ more diverse methodologies, explore contextual influences, and consider intersectional factors that shape the self-esteem and adjustment processes of international students.

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