



## Self-esteem of black university students: a comparative study

## Autoestima de universitárias negras: um estudo comparativo

## Autoestima de estudiantes universitarios negros: un estudio comparativo

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To analyze and compare self-esteem levels among university students based on skin color. **Methodology:** This is a cross-sectional, quantitative study conducted at a higher education institution in the interior of the state of Mato Grosso, with the participation of 100 regularly enrolled university students. Data were collected through a semantically validated questionnaire developed by the researchers, addressing perceptions of aspects of physical appearance and self-image. Analyses included descriptive statistics and the chi-square test. **Results:** Sixty-five percent of participants reported satisfaction with their self-esteem; however, there was a significant association between dissatisfaction with skin color and being a Black woman ( $p=0.018$ ). **Conclusion:** Social aesthetic pressure, intensified by frequent use of social media, negatively impacts self-esteem and body image, especially among Black women. The relationship between dissatisfaction with skin color and the internalization of Eurocentric beauty standards highlights the urgency of actions aimed at valuing ethnic-racial diversity and promoting mental health in the university environment.

### DESCRIPTORS:

Students; Self Concept; Black People; Health Mental.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Analisar e comparar os níveis de autoestima entre universitárias a partir da variável cor da pele. **Metodologia:** Estudo transversal, de abordagem quantitativa, realizada em uma instituição de ensino superior no interior do estado de Mato Grosso, com a participação de 100 estudantes universitárias regularmente matriculadas. Os dados foram coletados por meio de um questionário elaborado pelos pesquisadores, validado semanticamente, abordando a percepção sobre aspectos da aparência física e autoimagem. As análises incluíram estatística descritiva e teste do Qui-quadrado. **Resultados:** Observou-se que 65% das participantes relataram satisfação com sua autoestima; no entanto, houve associação significativa entre insatisfação com a cor da

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pele e ser mulher negra ( $p=0,018$ ). **Conclusão:** A pressão estética social, intensificada pelo uso frequente das redes sociais, impacta negativamente a autoestima e a percepção corporal, sobretudo entre mulheres negras. A relação entre a insatisfação com a cor da pele e a internalização de padrões eurocêntricos de beleza evidencia a urgência de ações voltadas à valorização da diversidade étnico-racial e à promoção da saúde mental no ambiente universitário.

**DESCRITORES:**

Estudantes; Autoimagem; População Negra; Saúde Mental.

**RESUMEN**

**Objetivo:** Analizar y comparar los niveles de autoestima en estudiantes universitarios según el color de piel. **Metodología:** Estudio cuantitativo transversal, realizado en una institución de educación superior del interior del estado de Mato Grosso, con la participación de 100 estudiantes universitarios matriculados regularmente. Los datos se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario validado semánticamente, desarrollado por los investigadores, que abordó las percepciones de aspectos de la apariencia física y la autoimagen. Los análisis incluyeron estadística descriptiva y la prueba de chi-cuadrado. **Resultados:** El 65% de los participantes reportó satisfacción con su autoestima; sin embargo, hubo una asociación significativa entre la insatisfacción con el color de piel y ser mujer negra ( $p=0,018$ ). **Conclusión:** La presión estética social, intensificada por el uso frecuente de las redes sociales, impacta negativamente la autoestima y la imagen corporal, especialmente entre las mujeres negras. La relación entre la insatisfacción con el color de piel y la internalización de estándares de belleza eurocéntricos resalta la urgencia de acciones dirigidas a valorar la diversidad étnico-racial y promover la salud mental en el entorno universitario.

**DESCRITORES:**

Estudiantes; Autoimagen; Población Negra; Salud Mental.

## INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is a central psychological construct, understood as the subjective evaluation that the individual makes of himself, encompassing dimensions of self-image, self-worth and self-acceptance. This is an aspect closely related to emotional well-being and psychosocial functioning, whose formation results from a dynamic process, influenced by life experiences, social interactions, received feedback and cultural identity. In this sense, self-esteem is not limited to an individual trait, but also reflects social and symbolic conditions that shape the way a person perceives himself and positions himself in the world. Recognized as a fundamental variable for life satisfaction and mental health, self-esteem is an important indicator of quality of life and psychosocial adaptation<sup>(1)</sup>.

The levels of self-esteem can vary between low, medium and high, expressing different ways of relation of the subject with himself. Individuals with high self-esteem tend to accept responsibility for their actions, demonstrate greater ability to take reasonable risks and reveal greater perception of control over one's own life, including in the adoption of health behaviors. In contrast, low self-esteem often manifests itself in doubts about one's own worth, insecurity and constant need for external validation, reflecting weaknesses in personal confidence. Self-esteem at the intermediate level shows greater oscillation, marked by moments of self-approval interspersed with episodes of self-criticism and

rejection<sup>(2)</sup>.

In the university context, self-esteem acquires special relevance, since it is directly linked to academic performance, persistence in studies and personal development of students. Research indicates that positive levels of self-esteem contribute to greater intrinsic motivation, resilience to academic challenges and better adaptation to institutional demands. In contrast, reduced self-esteem has been associated with adverse effects on mental health, including symptoms of anxiety, depression and impairment of academic self-efficacy<sup>(3,4)</sup>.

However, the analysis of self-esteem among university students cannot disregard the social markers that cross the academic experience. Skin color and the attributes associated with blackness are central elements of personal identity, situated in a historical context marked by racial inequalities and structural discrimination. Evidence indicates that individuals belonging to ethnic-racial minority groups, especially black women, face greater obstacles in their trajectory, often subjected to stereotypes, prejudices and social exclusion. This reality directly impacts their self-image and self-esteem, which may weaken or strengthen them, depending on the coping strategies and social support available<sup>(2,5)</sup>.

Eurocentric patterns of beauty and behavior, historically legitimized as a social reference, play a significant role in the construction of self-esteem, especially among racially marginalized populations. The imposition of ideals based on white phenotypic characteristics, such as light skin color, straight hair and specific facial features, reinforces the devaluation of black bodies and identities, feeding feelings of inferiority and exclusion. This process, in addition to impacting the individual self-image, perpetuates symbolic inequalities that are reflected in students' academic and social experiences, making self-esteem not only a subjective issue, but also a reflection of racial hierarchies rooted in society<sup>(5,6)</sup>.

Thus, understanding self-esteem in university students requires considering not only individual factors, but also the social determinants that structure opportunities, recognitions and conditions of belonging. A healthy self-esteem has a positive impact on academic performance, participation in extracurricular activities and interpersonal interactions, favoring a more satisfactory and inclusive educational path<sup>(3)</sup>. In contrast, low levels of self-esteem can intensify emotional difficulties, demotivation, procrastination and low tolerance for criticism, compromising both learning and university stay<sup>(5)</sup>.

Therefore, it is essential to investigate the disparities in the levels of self-esteem among university students and identify the factors that influence them, especially in socially vulnerable groups. This understanding enables the formulation of psychosocial support strategies, as well as more inclusive and equitable educational policies, aimed at promoting a welcoming university environment, fair and able to enhance the integral development of all students<sup>(2)</sup>. This research seeks to contribute to the development of educational interventions and policies more inclusive and sensitive to the specific needs of students,

aiming to promote a more welcoming and empowering university environment for all its members.

## **OBJECTIVE**

Analyze and compare the levels of self-esteem among university students from the variable skin color.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

This is a cross-sectional, analytical study with quantitative approach, conducted in an institution of higher education in the state of Mato Grosso, guided by the tool Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE)<sup>(7)</sup>.

### **Study location and period**

Conducted in a private higher education institution, located in a municipality in the interior of the state of Mato Grosso. Data collection took place between the months of May to August 2024.

### **Population or sample**

The sample by convenience was composed of women regularly enrolled in one of the higher education courses of the institution studied.

### **Data collection**

The data were obtained by means of a questionnaire on the use of social networks and the perception about self-esteem being built by the researchers and semantically validated by members of the research group in mental health and research collaborators. The instrument was divided into two components, the first with items related to socioeconomic profile, demographics and academic characteristics, the second related to perception about self-image, self-worth and self-esteem.

### **Data analysis**

After data collection, they were inserted in the statistical program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0, using double typing to enable the verification of potential inconsistencies during the preparation of the database. For the descriptive analysis of continuous variables, mean and standard deviation were used, while categorical variables were expressed by means of relative and absolute frequencies. To verify the existence of an association between the gender variable and the perception of self-image and self-esteem (outcome), the chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ) was used, being adopted a 95% confidence level and statistical significance value  $p < 0.05$ .

## Ethical aspects

This study respected the ethical precepts of Resolution n. 466/12 of the National Health Council, guaranteeing the anonymity of each participant. The study project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee, under number 6.030.808 and Ethical Presentation and Appreciation Certification (CAAE) n. 67498523.7.0000.5587. All participants had their participation preceded before accepted by signature to the Free and Informed Consent (FIC).

## RESULTS

100 regularly enrolled university students participated in the survey. The sample was composed mostly by students of non-white skin color (70%), who had some religion (92%), were employed (56%), satisfied with the course (89%), without failures in the previous semester (85%), who used social networks more than five days a week (96%), less than 8 hours daily (72%), were more active on the networks in the morning or afternoon (53%) and used social networks for more than five years (90%).

As for the variables related to the degree of satisfaction of university students with aspects related to their physical appearance, 65% were satisfied with their self-esteem, 79% satisfied with their hair, 67% with their skin and 84% with their mouth. Table 1 sought to investigate the statistically significant correlations with skin color, and it is possible to infer that black university students do not feel satisfied with their skin ( $p = 0.018$ ).

**Table 1.** Bivariate analysis among the variables of satisfaction with specific aspects of physical appearance and skin color in university students. Brazil, 2024. (n= 100)

Variables	Skin color		$p$
	Not white	White	
Satisfaction with skin			0.018*
Yes	42 (42%)	25 (25%)	
No	28 (28%)	5 (5%)	
Satisfaction with mouth			0.560
Yes	59 (59%)	25 (25%)	
No	11 (11%)	5 (5%)	
Satisfaction with hair			0.551
Yes	55 (55%)	24 (24%)	
No	15 (15%)	6 (6%)	

\* Significance level ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Table 2 shows the variables related to the self-esteem of the university participants, thus showing that there were no statistically significant correlations.

**Table 2.** Bivariate analysis among self-perception variables on satisfaction with physical appearance and skin color in university students. Brazil, 2024. (n= 100)

Affirmations	Skin color		
	Not white	White	p value
I often feel satisfied with my self-image.			0.126
Disagree	27%	16%	
Agree	43%	14%	
I consider myself satisfied with my self-esteem.			0.228
Disagree	33%	11%	
Agree	37%	19%	
When I compare myself to others, I feel dissatisfied with my self-image.			0.332
Disagree	33%	12%	
Agree	37%	18%	
I have difficulty liking my photos when I don't use image modification tools.			0.270
Disagree	38%	19%	
Agree	32%	11%	
Undergoing some cosmetic surgery procedure would make me feel more satisfied with my self-image.			0.525
Disagree	20%	8%	
Agree	50%	22%	

\* Significance level (p<0.05).

Among the 70 black university women interviewed who composed the sample, the descriptive analysis revealed relevant aspects related to self-image perception and the impacts of social standards. It was found that 43% of the participants reported dissatisfaction with their own self-image, while 33% said they believe they deserve less recognition than other women because of their appearance. In addition, 55% reported dissatisfaction when comparing themselves with other people, and 43% reported difficulty in appreciating their photographs when they do not go through editing or image modification features. It was also found that 44% of the interviewees perceive that their self-image is directly influenced by the beauty patterns disseminated in social media. Regarding aesthetic practices, 39% reported having already performed hair straightening procedures as a strategy for seeking social acceptance, and 17% highlighted that racial inequality impacts their daily experience in the university space.

## DISCUSSION

This research compared the levels of self-esteem among university students based on skin color. The findings of this research show discrepancies in relation to the profile described in the literature, which characterizes the Brazilian university public as mostly composed of white women, at the final stage of graduation, without employment and with low religious participation<sup>(2,8)</sup>. Unlike this pattern, there was a greater representation of black female students, in different academic stages, reconciling studies with

work and maintaining religious ties. This difference may be related to the expansion of policies for access to higher education, such as racial and social quotas, and the strengthening of ethnic-racial identities in the academic space<sup>(9)</sup>.

The results indicated a correlation between the dissatisfaction of black university students with their skin color. This finding is correlated with that produced by the current literature, which points to the historical influence of bleaching policy, which was expressed in the biopsychosocial, political and economic integration through miscegenation and the imposition of European civilizational standards. This process contributed to the construction of an exclusionary society, in which the black population became associated with backwardness and social degradation, fostering stigma and high levels of discrimination and dissatisfaction with self-image among black individuals<sup>(10)</sup>.

In line with the findings regarding the academic dissatisfaction with their self-image, the scientific literature evidences a high prevalence of discontent among students about how they perceive and evaluate their own body. As described by different authors, the awareness of the reality of racism triggers in the black individual a psychic apparatus marked by constant sense of vigilance and persecution directed to corporality. Such consciousness triggers processes of self-observation and regulation, in which the subject is compelled to confront himself with the white identity ideal, socially instituted as a normative and desirable reference<sup>(11)</sup>.

A research on the impacts of racism on the self-esteem of young black women in Brazil showed that the simultaneous presence of structural racism and sexism significantly compromises the self-esteem and mental health of this group, manifesting itself in greater exposure to work overload, violence, isolation and psychological disorders. Despite the existence of public policies aimed at equity, barriers to access to health services persist, reinforcing historical inequalities. In this context, cultural and collective initiatives and the adoption of decolonial perspectives are presented as strategies for resistance and promotion of belonging and personal appreciation<sup>(12)</sup>.

In another survey also carried out in the national territory, but this time in the university context, it was observed that approximately 93% of the women interviewed wished to modify at least three areas of the body with almost 39% presenting eating disorders<sup>(13)</sup>. These data show the incessant search for an ideal of beauty often unattainable, negatively impacting the health of students.

The search for patterns of beauty, which vary over time and between cultures, is present since childhood and reflects a society that values appearance over essence. To conform to an ideal of whiteness, it became common among the black community to modify hair and skin in an attempt to "improve" appearance. While this behavior provided relief for some, for others it represented subjection and humiliation, reflecting the rejection of such practices and resistance to changing natural characteristics to conform to white patterns<sup>(14)</sup>.

In this context, the experiences of frustration, anguish and anger resulting from the perception of difference in relation to whiteness can result in feelings of rejection and hostility directed at the black body. In a similar survey, authors identified that 72.9% of participants reported being the target of critical or offensive comments on social networks, or having witnessed such situations. In addition, 70.6% stated that their reputation, or that of others, was damaged by defamations related to skin color<sup>(15)</sup>.

Research indicates that individuals with low self-esteem often experience vulnerability to social comparisons, especially in virtual environments such as social networks. This phenomenon can intensify feelings of inadequacy and personal dissatisfaction, since the constant contact with idealized patterns generates a perception of own devaluation<sup>(2,13,16)</sup>. Therefore, low self-esteem acts as a factor that amplifies the negative effects of online social exposure, compromising emotional well-being.

Following this line of reasoning, a survey conducted with university students from a higher education institution in Asia, it was noticed that only 23.3% of the students showed agreement between their perceived body image and the real one. These results suggest that continuous exposure to idealized images of "perfect" bodies can lead to negative comparisons and harm self-esteem, affecting the way a person sees himself as well as his academic development<sup>(16)</sup>.

Students with low self-esteem have a high incidence of mental distress, including symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress, considered significant challenges to global public health. These injuries directly impact the academic trajectory and personal well-being, putting students at a disadvantage compared to those with more structured self-esteem<sup>(15-17)</sup>.

Although it is reasonable to assume that disadvantaged groups and social discrimination have reduced self-esteem compared to groups without such experiences as presented by numerous studies, research has revealed contradictory results, especially in relation to the black female population. The strength of racial identity, understood as a feeling of belonging and attachment to one's own race, can act as a protective factor, allowing them to recognize discrimination as an external oppression, and not as personal failure, favoring a more positive perception of themselves in adverse contexts (2,18). In this sense, universities and other higher education institutions have an essential role to stimulate and promote practices that strengthen the self-esteem and racial identity of students, favoring inclusion, belonging and equity in the academic environment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study presented limitations, such as low representativeness, because the population was composed of students from a municipality in the interior of Mato Grosso, all enrolled in a university center, but not interfering with the feasibility of the study, and another fragility was the lack of adherence of students, providing a low n, covering less than 50% of the academic population.

## **Contributions to the area of Nursing, Health or Public Policy**

Based on this perception, it is inferred that this study becomes potentially necessary, since when comparing the levels of self-esteem among university girls based on skin color, reveals significant insights about the complex interactions between racial identity, standards of beauty and mental health. Thus, this research is presented as a potential tool to guide social and educational interventions, aiming at the appreciation of diversity and the construction of a more inclusive and healthy academic environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The identification of the correlation between dissatisfaction with skin color and the internalization of Eurocentric beauty patterns reinforces the need for a critical look at how these dynamics affect young women's self-esteem. This study not only contributes to understanding the experiences of black women in the academic environment, but also highlights the importance of promoting a positive racial identity as a mechanism for resistance and empowerment.

The development of self-esteem and the elaboration of positive identities by university girls discriminated are fundamental for the construction of effective citizenship spaces. Identity is a phenomenon that manifests itself both within the individual and in its social representations and collective culture. Thus, it can be said that fostering self-esteem and promoting the appreciation of racial identities are crucial steps for strengthening citizenship and social inclusion, contributing to the formation of a more just and equitable society. This understanding highlights the importance of strategies that encourage self-acceptance and diversity, particularly among historically marginalized groups, as a form of resistance and empowerment.

It is concluded that the aesthetic pressure exerted by society has significant impacts on self-esteem and body perception, especially among women. The incessant desire to achieve unrealistic beauty standards leads to a damaging cycle of body dissatisfaction, negative social comparisons and even eating disorders and identity. Thus, it is crucial to develop actions and strategies within the academic environment to mitigate the harms caused by racism towards black university students.

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