



A correlational study between gender expression congruence, self-esteem, and academic engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study looks into the relationship between gender expression congruence, self-esteem, and academic engagement among third-year Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE) students at the external campus of Cavite State University. Gender Expression Congruence is the alignment of an individual's gender identification with their external expression, which is important for self-esteem, especially in transgender and gender nonconforming people. The study used a descriptive-correlational approach, with surveys administered to a sample of 165 students. The study discovered that higher levels of gender expression congruence are associated with higher self-esteem, which is substantially related to increased academic engagement. The findings highlight the necessity of encouraging true gender expression in order to boost students' self-esteem and academic participation, resulting in a more inclusive educational environment. These findings show that educational institutions should consider gender expression support as a means of increasing student engagement and well-being.

RESUMO

Este estudo analisa a relação entre congruência de expressão de gênero, autoestima e engajamento acadêmico entre alunos do terceiro ano do Bacharelado em Educação Secundária (BSE) no campus externo da Cavite State University. Congruência de Expressão de Gênero é o alinhamento da identificação de gênero de um indivíduo com sua expressão externa, o que é importante para a autoestima, especialmente em pessoas transgênero e não conformes com o gênero. O estudo usou uma abordagem descritiva-correlacional, com pesquisas administradas a uma amostra de 165 alunos. O estudo descobriu que níveis mais altos de congruência de expressão de gênero estão associados a maior autoestima, o que está substancialmente relacionado ao aumento do engajamento acadêmico. As descobertas destacam a necessidade de encorajar a verdadeira expressão de gênero para aumentar a autoestima e a participação acadêmica dos alunos, resultando em um ambiente educacional mais inclusivo. Essas descobertas mostram que as instituições educacionais devem considerar o suporte à expressão de gênero como um meio de aumentar o engajamento e o bem-estar dos alunos.

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Introduction

According to Edelman (2019), the external manifestation of one's gender identity is known as gender expression, which can normally be observed through behavior, clothing, or body characteristics. A match between gender identity and gender expression is called Gender Expression Congruence (Cuellar, 2021). People who have this congruence are more comfortable expressing themselves in a way that reflects who they are inside. However, when there is a mismatch between a person's gender expression and their identity, things would be different; there would be some sort of incongruence, which can cause distress and discomfort that could potentially lead to gender dysphoria. A mismatch between a person's gender expression and identity can also lead to feelings of inauthenticity and disconnection from oneself, which can lower their self-esteem (van den Brink, Vollman, & van Weelie, 2019).

As stated, a person's self-esteem is affected by gender expression congruence (van den Brink et al., 2019). The alignment between a person's internal identity and outward presentation has a significant impact on self-esteem, particularly for transgender and nonconforming individuals. When a person can express their true gender identity, it reduces the stress of hiding or conforming, which leads to higher self-esteem (Klein & Washington, 2023, as cited in van den Brink et al., 2019). Consequently, people who exhibit high self-esteem tend to experience less difficulties engaging socially (Nasution & Daulay, 2020). This is proof that gender expression not only affects self-esteem but also engagement as well.

Engagement, as people may know it, is the level of involvement someone has with something. It can be categorized in multiple ways, depending on the context where it was used: academics, work, or social activities. In an educational setting, academic engagement is the name given to the type of engagement that students demonstrate in learning (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Munster-Kistner, 2021). Just like engagement in general, academic engagement is also affected by gender expression congruence (Cendana, 2018). To understand this relationship, one needs to know how gender expression congruence directly affects self-esteem and academic engagement.

Objectives of the Study

This current paper aims to determine the correlation between gender expression congruence, self-esteem, and academic engagement among third-year students at the external campus of Cavite State University for the school year of 2023-2024. To be specific, those who are taking up Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE).

Specifically, it aims to:

1. Describe the level of gender expression congruence of the participants.
2. Describe the level of self-esteem of the participants.
3. Describe the level of academic engagement of the participants.

4. Determine the significant relationship between the level in terms of gender expression congruence and self-esteem.

5. Determine the significant relationship between the level in terms of academic engagement and self-esteem.

6. Determine the significant relationship between the level in terms of gender expression congruence and academic engagement.

Materials and Methods

The study will use a descriptive-correlational research design, which was designed to describe phenomenon and explore relationships between variables. A descriptive-correlational research design combines elements of both descriptive and correlational research methods (McBurney & White, 2009). The study is descriptive in nature, as it aims to provide a description of some of the characteristics that a particular population has at a specific point in time. The study is also correlational in nature since it will investigate the relationships between variables without manipulating them. In this particular study, the researchers will determine the relationships that exist between the level in terms of these three variables: gender expression congruence, self-esteem, and academic engagement. This specific research design will certainly help the researchers determine how strongly the aforementioned variables are related to one another. For clarity and accuracy of data, the research would be non-experimental, which would help the researchers examine the relationship between the variables under study without establishing cause-and-effect, which would be irrelevant to the study.

The primary source of data will be obtained through a series of surveys that will be conducted on the third-year students taking up Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE) program at the external campus of Cavite State University for the school year of 2023-2024. Students from other programs and year levels will not be included in the study due to resource and time constraints.

For efficiency, the sampling method that will be used for the study is quota sampling since it represents diverse subgroups within the population. At the same time, it will help the researchers acquire precise estimates of the correlation between variables. With the chosen sampling method, the researchers can set quotas for each section and then select members from each group until the quotas are filled.

The researchers got their sample size of 165 from a population of 218 through Raosoft, an online sample size calculator. After getting the sample size needed for the study, the researcher had set a quota for each section of their chosen population (See Table 1):

Table 1
Quotas per Section

Section	Population	Quota
BSE - English 3A	38	28
BSE - English 3B	40	28
BSE - English 3C	39	28
BSE - English 3D	35	28
BSE - Mathematics 3	18	18
BSE - Science 3	48	35
Total:	218	165

For this study, three instruments will be adopted, each will be used to measure the level of a specific variable. These three instruments are: Transgender Congruence Scale (Kozee, 2012); Rosenberg Self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965): and an adaptation of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2002).

Gender Expression Congruence. The researchers will use the Transgender Congruence Scale (TCS), an instrument from the work of Zachary Kozee (2012). Originally, the instrument was designed to determine the level of comfort a transgender individual perceives about their gender identity and its manifestations (gender expression). However, for this study, the instrument will be adopted to gauge how closely gender expression matches an individual's gender identity.

Self-esteem. Morris Rosenberg's (1965) Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) will be put to use to measure the participants' level of self-esteem. This 10-item instrument was designed to evaluate a person's sense of self-worth and acceptance of oneself. Each item that this instrument has is a statement that has something to do with a person's self-esteem that they respond to on a scale. Originally, the responses that RSES has ranges from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". However, in this study, the responses were changed to fit the study (See Table 2).

Academic Engagement. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale 9 (UWES-9) will be utilized to evaluate the level of academic engagement that the participants have. Originally, the UWES-9 had nine items and was developed to measure the engagement of employees. However, in this study, an extra item was added to the instrument to ensure insightful results, and the context of items was changed from employees to students to fit the study better.

To gauge the responses of the participants, each instrument will be using a four-point Likert scale (See Table 2).

Table 2
Points in the Likert Scale

Scale	Responses
4	Strongly Agree
3	Agree
2	Slightly Agree
1	Disagree

The researchers utilized a two-pronged approach to data collection which is in-person and online surveys. The researchers also developed a timeline for each data collection method, considering factors like the availability of the participants.

The in-person survey (Appendix B) was administered by the researchers themselves. Before each in-person survey, the research project was explained to the participants through a brief screening.

The self-administered online survey (Appendix C) was developed using Google Forms; its link was distributed through social media platforms such as Telegram and Messenger. In the online survey form, an introductory statement explains the research project and obtains consent from the participants before the survey. In addition, the online survey form includes every question that is in the questionnaire used in the in-person survey.

After the survey, the data will undergo an analysis. The researchers will use inferential statistics to draw conclusions from the responses that were gathered from the sample population. To be specific, the researchers will use the measure of central tendency (weighted mean) and the Pearson correlation coefficient to address each objective with the utmost accuracy.

Weighted Mean. The level of each variable will be determined using weighted mean. A weighted mean is frequently employed to balance the occurrence of values in a dataset. By multiplying the assigned weight with each data point value, summing them up, and dividing them by the number of data points, a more precise average is observed. This method enhances data accuracy by providing a more representative measure that considers the relative significance of each observation (Ganti, 2023). The study used arithmetic mean as it aims to describe the level of each variable (See Objectives 1, 2, and 3). With arithmetic mean or simple mean, the mean score of the respondents can be calculated and transformed into inferential interpretations (See Table 3).

Table 3
Interpretation of Scores

Scale	Verbal Interpretation	Numerical Ranges	Equivalent Interpretation
1	Disagree	1.00 - 1.75	No Level
2	Slightly Agree	1.76 - 2.50	Low Level
3	Agree	2.51 - 3.25	High Level
4	Strongly Agree	3.26 - 4.00	Very High Level

Pearson r Correlation Coefficient. Typically, Pearson r correlation coefficient is used to determine whether two variables have a linear relationship (Turney, 2022). Presented in Table 4 are the correlation values that range from -1 to +1 and their respective interpretations. This type of mathematical coefficient can be used to express in which direction the variables are related. With Pearson Correlation Coefficient, the researchers can interpret the kind of relationship that exists between variables (See Table 4). However, it must be noted that causality can never be implied by this type of correlation; thus, it is crucial to take into consideration other factors and conduct further analysis before drawing any definitive conclusions.

Table 4
Interpretation index of Pearson Correlation Coefficient

Correlation Value	Equivalent Interpretation
1.00	Perfect linear relationship
0.80 - 0.99	Very strong linear relationship
0.60 - 0.79	Strong linear relationship
0.40 - 0.59	Moderate linear relationship
0.20 - 0.39	Weak linear relationship
0.01 - 0.19	Very weak linear relationship
0	No linear relationship

Results and Discussions

This section provides the data analysis and findings from 165 BSE students at the external campus of Cavite State University who responded to a survey questionnaire. As mentioned, the objective of this current study is to look for the significant relationship between gender expression congruence, self-esteem, and academic engagement of the third-year students at the external campus of Cavite State University for the school year (S.Y.) 2023-2024. To be specific, those who were enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE) program.

1. Level of Gender Expression Congruence

Presented in Table 5 are the results of the survey on the level of gender expression congruence. Based on the data gathered, it is apparent that most of the participants are happy that they have the gender expression that they do. According to the same data collected, the majority of the respondents also seem to perceive that their gender expression and gender identity are aligned to each other. The general weighted mean that this category has is 3.24, which means that the majority of those who took part in the survey have a high level of gender expression congruence. This result aligns with the recent study made by de Vries, McGuire, Steensma, and Cohen-Kettenis (2023), where they also found the same level of gender expression congruence among their participants.

Table 5
Level of Gender Expression Congruence

Statement	Level				Mean
	Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1. My outward appearance represents my gender identity.	4	16	68	77	3.32
2. I experience a sense of unity between my gender identity and my body.	1	18	67	79	3.36
3. My physical appearance adequately expresses my gender identity.	1	17	70	77	3.35
4. I am generally comfortable with how others perceive my gender identity when they look at me.	3	20	62	80	3.33
5. My physical body represents my gender identity.	7	16	59	83	3.32
6. The way my body currently looks does not represent my gender identity.	27	26	53	59	2.87
7. I am happy with the way my appearance expresses my gender identity.	3	15	66	81	3.36
8. I do not feel that my appearance reflects my gender identity.	30	32	51	52	2.76
9. I feel that my mind and body are consistent with one another.	5	19	65	76	3.28
10. I am happy that I have the gender expression that I do.	0	14	67	84	3.42
General Weighted Mean:					3.24
Interpretation:					High level

2. Level of Self-Esteem

Presented in Table 6 is the interpretation of the survey data in relation to the participants' degree of self-esteem of the participants. The data gathered from the responses suggests that most of the participants feel that they are a person of worth, at least on the same level as others. Moreover, the data suggests that most of the participants believe that they are also fit to do things on their own, as well as most other people. The general weighted mean that this category has is 3.07, which means that the majority of the respondents exhibit a high degree of self-esteem. This result reflects existing literature published by Orth and Robins (2014), where they highlighted how self-esteem and mental health are related to one another. While the study itself does not present raw data on self-esteem scores, it highlights social factors that researchers often investigate when exploring variations in self-esteem levels, which are relevant to this study.

Table 6
Level of Self-Esteem

Statement	Level				Mean
	Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.	2	18	63	82	3.36
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.	4	23	68	70	3.24
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.	25	32	54	54	2.83
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.	4	24	65	72	3.24
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.	30	44	39	52	2.68
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.	2	24	67	72	3.27
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.	3	26	67	69	3.22
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.	12	29	63	61	3.05
9. I certainly feel useless at times.	16	40	52	57	2.91
10. At times I think I am no good at all.	15	39	57	54	2.91
			General Weighted Mean:		3.07
			Interpretation:		High level

3. Level of Academic Engagement

Presented in Table 7 are the results of the survey on the level of academic engagement of the participants. The data gathered from the responses suggests that most of the participants are proud of their studies. The general weighted mean that this category has is 3.07, which means that the majority of the participants have a high level of academic engagement. This result aligns with the study made by Lei, Cui, and Miller (2018), where they measured and reported a high level of academic engagement among their participants.

Table 7
Level of Academic Engagement

Statement	Level				Mean
	Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	
1. When I'm doing my work as a student, I feel bursting with energy.	6	34	70	55	3.05
2. I feel energetic and capable when I am studying or going to class.	5	34	76	50	3.03
3. I am enthusiastic about my studies.	3	31	73	58	3.13
4. My studies inspire me.	1	31	70	63	3.18
5. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to class.	8	39	63	55	3.00

6. I feel happy when I am studying intensely.	5	39	72	49	3.00
7. I am proud of my studies.	4	25	72	64	3.19
8. I am immersed in my studies.	4	38	70	53	3.04
9. I get carried away when I am studying.	6	36	60	63	3.09
10. In class, I am always attentive.	7	41	58	59	3.02
General Weighted Mean:					3.07
Interpretation:					High level

4. Gender Expression Congruence and Self-Esteem

Presented in Table 8 is the correlation value between gender expression congruence and self-esteem, which was found to be at exactly 0.05454. This value indicates a moderate positive linear relationship, which means that people who have a high level of gender expression congruence also exhibit a high or exceptional degree of self-esteem. This finding can be supported by the study of van den Brink, Vollman, and van Weelie (2019), which entails that a mismatch between a person’s gender expression and identity can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and disconnection from oneself, which can lower their self-esteem. Moreover, this finding can also be supported by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan 2000), which argues that people develop a sense of identity when their need for autonomy is satisfied through gender expression congruence.

Table 8
Correlation of Gender Expression Congruence and Self-Esteem

GE (x)	SE (y)	(x - \bar{x})	(y - \bar{y})	(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})	(x - \bar{x})²	(y - \bar{y})²
3.32	3.36	0.08	0.29	0.0232	0.0064	0.0871
3.36	3.24	0.12	0.17	0.0204	0.0144	0.0289
3.35	2.83	0.11	-0.24	-0.0264	0.0121	0.0576
3.33	3.24	0.09	0.17	0.0153	0.0081	0.0289
3.32	2.68	0.08	-0.39	-0.0312	0.0064	0.1521
2.87	3.27	-0.37	0.20	-0.074	0.1369	0.04
3.36	3.22	0.12	0.15	0.018	0.0144	0.0225
2.76	3.05	-0.48	0.02	-0.0096	0.2304	0.0004
3.28	2.91	0.04	-0.16	-0.0064	0.0016	0.0256
3.42	2.91	0.18	-0.16	-0.0288	0.0364	0.0256
$\bar{x} = 3.24$	$\bar{y} = 3.07$			$\Sigma = 0.2533$	$\Sigma = 0.4631$	$\Sigma = 0.7665$

$$\frac{\Sigma ((x-\bar{x})(y-\bar{y}))}{\sqrt{\Sigma (x-\bar{x})^2(y-\bar{y})^2}} = 0.5454$$

Interpretation: **A moderate positive linear relationship**

5. Academic Engagement and Self-Esteem

The correlation value between self-esteem and academic engagement turned out to be precisely 0.8218 (As shown in Table 9). This value indicates a strong positive linear relationship, which means that people who exhibit high self-esteem tend to academically engage at a high level as well. This finding can be supported by the study made by Yang, Wu, Wang, and Peng (2021), which claims that self-esteem has a significant connection to a student’s motivation and academic performance. In addition, this finding can also be supported by the study made by Bleidorn, Hopwood, and Lucas (2018) that provides evidence that self-esteem and academic engagement are correlated.

Table 9
Correlation of Academic Engagement and Self-Esteem

<i>SE (x)</i>	<i>AE (y)</i>	<i>(x - \bar{x})</i>	<i>(y - \bar{y})</i>	<i>(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})</i>	<i>(x - \bar{x})²</i>	<i>(y - \bar{y})²</i>
3.36	3.05	0.29	-0.02	0.0058	0.0871	0.0004
3.24	3.03	0.17	-0.04	0.0068	0.0289	0.0016
2.83	3.13	-0.24	0.06	0.0144	0.0576	0.0036
3.24	3.18	0.17	0.11	0.0187	0.0289	0.0121
2.68	3.00	-0.39	-0.07	0.0273	0.1521	0.0049
3.27	3.00	0.20	-0.07	0.14	0.04	0.0049
3.22	3.19	0.15	0.12	0.21	0.0225	0.0144
3.05	3.04	0.02	-0.03	0.0006	0.0004	0.0009
2.91	3.09	-0.16	0.02	0.0033	0.0256	0.0004
2.91	3.02	-0.16	-0.05	0.008	0.0256	0.0025
$\bar{x} = 3.07$	$\bar{y} = 3.07$			$\Sigma = 0.1199$	$\Sigma = 0.7665$	$\Sigma = 0.0457$

$$\frac{\Sigma ((x-\bar{x})(y-\bar{y}))}{\sqrt{\Sigma (x-\bar{x})^2(y-\bar{y})^2}} = 0.8218$$

Interpretation: A strong positive linear relationship

6. Gender Expression Congruence and Academic Engagement

Findings displayed a moderate positive linear correlation between gender expression congruence and academic engagement, with a staggering correlation value of 0.6392 (As shown in Table 10). This value indicates that people who report feeling a strong alignment between their gender identity and expression tend to also report higher levels of academic engagement. This finding can be supported by the study made by Cendana (2018), which states that a mismatch between a person’s gender expression and identity has also an effect to their engagement with others.

Table 10
Correlation of Gender Expression Congruence and Academic Engagement

GE (x)	AE (y)	(x - \bar{x})	(y - \bar{y})	(x - \bar{x})(y - \bar{y})	(x - \bar{x})²	(y - \bar{y})²
3.32	3.05	0.08	-0.02	0.0016	0.0064	0.0004
3.36	3.03	0.12	-0.04	0.0048	0.0144	0.0016
3.35	3.13	0.11	0.06	0.0066	0.0121	0.0036
3.33	3.18	0.09	0.11	0.0099	0.0081	0.0121
3.32	3.00	0.08	-0.07	0.0056	0.0064	0.0049
2.87	3.00	-0.37	-0.07	0.0259	0.1369	0.0049
3.36	3.19	0.12	0.12	0.0144	0.0144	0.0144
2.76	3.04	-0.48	-0.03	0.0144	0.2304	0.0009
3.28	3.09	0.04	0.02	0.0008	0.0016	0.0004
3.42	3.02	0.18	-0.05	0.009	0.0364	0.0025
$\bar{x} = 3.24$	$\bar{y} = 3.07$			$\Sigma = 0.093$	$\Sigma = 0.4631$	$\Sigma = 0.0457$

$$\frac{\Sigma ((x-\bar{x})(y-\bar{y}))}{\sqrt{\Sigma (x-\bar{x})^2(y-\bar{y})^2}} = 0.6392$$

Interpretation:

A moderate positive linear relationship

Conclusions

Based on the findings and interpretations, the researchers came up with the following conclusions:

First, the researchers have found out that the participants who took part in the study have a high level of gender expression congruence; the general weighted mean of 3.24 is proof of this. This result means that the majority of the respondents perceive that their gender expression and gender identity are aligned with each other. This result aligns with the recent study made by de Vries, McGuire, Steensma, and Cohen-Kettenis (2023), where they also found the same level of gender expression congruence among their participants.

Second, the researchers have found out that the majority of the participants who took part in the study exhibit high self-esteem; the general weighted mean of 3.07 is proof of this. This result means that most of the participants believe that they are also fit to do things on their own, as well as most other people. This result reflects existing literature published by Orth and Robins (2014), where they highlighted how self-esteem and mental health are related to one another. While the study itself does not present raw data on self-esteem scores, it highlights social factors that researchers often investigate when exploring variations in self-esteem levels, which are relevant to this study.

Third, the researchers have found out that the majority of the participants who took part in the study have a high degree of academic engagement; the general weighted mean of 3.07 is proof of this. This result means that the majority of the participants are proud of their studies and attentive to their classes. This result aligns with the study made by Lei, Cui, and

Miller (2018), where they measured and reported a high level of academic engagement among their participants.

Fourth, the correlation value of 0.05454 suggests that a moderate positive linear relationship exists between Gender Expression Congruence and Self-Esteem; this means that people who have a high level of gender expression congruence also exhibit high self-esteem. This finding can also be supported by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan 2000), which argues that people develop a sense of identity when their need for autonomy is satisfied through gender expression congruence.

Fifth, the correlation value of 0.8218 is proof that a strong positive relationship exists between academic engagement and self-esteem. This result means that people with high self-esteem tend to academically engage at a high level as well. This finding can also be supported by the study made by Bleidorn, Hopwood, and Lucas (2018) that provides evidence that self-esteem and academic engagement are correlated.

Last, the findings of this current study displayed a moderate positive linear correlation between gender expression congruence and academic engagement, with a staggering correlation value of 0.6392. This value indicates that people who report feeling a strong alignment between their gender identity and expression tend to also report higher levels of academic engagement. This finding can be supported by the study made by Cendana (2018), which states that a mismatch between a person's gender expression and identity has also an effect to their engagement with others.

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