

Received: January 2, 2024
Accepted: April 25, 2024
<http://dergipark.org.tr/rep>

e-ISSN: 2602-3733
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June 2024 • 8(1) • 103-113

Research Article

<https://doi.org/10.54535/rep.1413533>

The Mediating Role of Relationship Satisfaction Between Authenticity and Self-Esteem in Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

This study examines the mediating role of relationship satisfaction in the relationship between relationship authenticity and self-esteem of individuals in romantic relationships. Mediation analysis was conducted in this study using a correlational design. The study group consisted of 512 individuals, 370 females and 142 males. The findings revealed that relationship satisfaction played a partial mediating role in the relationship between relationship authenticity and self-esteem. These findings were discussed in the light of the related literature.

Key Words

Romantic relationship • Self-esteem • Relationship satisfaction • Authenticity

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Citation: Kurt, A. A., & Akbay, S. E. (2024). The mediating role of relationship satisfaction between authenticity and self-esteem in romantic relationships. *Research on Education and Psychology*, 8(1), 103-113.

Introduction

Throughout various stages of human life, there are certain developmental tasks that emerge and need to be addressed. It is a well-known fact that as childhood comes to an end and adolescence begins, establishing close relationships becomes a prominent task among these. While the qualities of close relationships vary, it can be said that romantic relationships, especially in adolescence, take center stage. It is known that having a healthy romantic relationship has positive effects on an individual's life. Some studies have shown that one of these effects is on self-esteem. In their study, [Luciano and Orth \(2017\)](#) found that individuals in romantic relationships experienced an increase in their self-esteem. Furthermore, it has been revealed that continuing such a relationship for at least one year leads to even greater improvements in self-esteem.

The concept of self-esteem is widely discussed in the field of social psychology, with various definitions in different contexts. Among the accepted definitions of self-esteem, [Rosenberg's \(1979\)](#) description stands out. According to Rosenberg, self-esteem is generally defined as an individual's positive evaluation of themselves. Other definitions in the literature approach self-esteem in the context of "sense of power," "inner-out self-esteem," "sense of competence," and "self-evaluation-worth" ([Mruk, 2006](#)). When examining these different definitions, it becomes evident that self-esteem definitions primarily emphasize two aspects: competence and worth ([Gecas, 1982](#)). An individual's perceptions of their competence and worth concerning themselves can be considered important in developing an authentic self. In their study, [Tolman and Porche \(2000\)](#) found that individuals with low levels of authenticity also had low self-esteem. This finding suggests that authenticity is closely related to self-esteem, as individuals who can honestly and freely express themselves in their relationships are more likely to have higher self-esteem.

Although authenticity is emphasized as a personality trait, the capacity to behave authentically arises from a person feeling safe when expressing themselves honestly in interactions with others ([Gouveia et al., 2015](#)). [Harter \(2002\)](#) defines authenticity as an individual's ability to explain themselves in terms of their internalized values, emotions, and desires. Authenticity in a relationship, as defined by [Lopez and Rice \(2006\)](#), is described as a relational schema that supports the benefits of mutual and accurate sharing of one's true self with a partner, despite risks such as personal discomfort, partner disapproval, or relationship instability. This definition expands on the four dimensions of authenticity put forward by [Kernis and Goldman \(2006\)](#): an individual's awareness of their own inner motives, emotions, and cognitions; the ability to evaluate oneself impartially despite others' opinions; acting in accordance with one's values rather than expectations; and engaging in open and honest interactions with others, enabling one to express their true self. Being authentic in a relationship fosters healthy communication, which is a significant factor affecting relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships ([Meeks et al., 1998](#)). Therefore, it is believed that individuals who can be authentic in their relationships will experience greater satisfaction in their romantic relationships ([Downing, 2008](#)).

Relationship satisfaction is one of the most critical factors for the healthy functioning of a romantic relationship. While there are various definitions of relationship satisfaction in the literature, [Hendrick's \(1988\)](#) definition stands out. According to Hendrick, relationship satisfaction involves an individual's evaluation of their emotions, thoughts,

and behaviors related to the romantic relationship they are in. Interaction theory suggests that individuals determine their relationship satisfaction by comparing their current relationship with various alternative options (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Sabatelli (1988) similarly suggests that relationship satisfaction emerges as a result of the interaction between an individual's expectations of the relationship and their partner's behaviors. Examining these definitions, it becomes evident that relationship satisfaction is primarily based on subjective evaluations and explains the happiness individuals derive from their relationship and the bonds they work to build.

In light of this literature, it is thought that the role of relationship satisfaction in the relationship between self-esteem and authenticity is crucial. With this research, romantic relationships and the dynamics within them, which involve many complex variables, can be better understood. Additionally, it is believed that this study will create practical applications and research fields for practitioners in the field. The variables examined in the context of romantic relationships can also be applied to different types of close relationships. Particularly in today's context where individuality is emphasized in relationships, this study, which will serve as a situation assessment regarding this matter, will help us better understand the relationship between self and relationships. In this context, the aim of this research is to examine the mediating role of authenticity in the relationship between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction for individuals.

Method

This section provides information about the research model, the study group, the data collection tools, and the data analysis processes.

Research Model

In this study, a relational design was employed. According to Heppner and others (2013), relational designs are used to investigate the relationships between two or more variables. The causal relationships between the variables of the study, which are authenticity in the relationship (predictor variable), relationship satisfaction (mediator variable), and self-esteem (outcome variable), were assessed through mediation analysis.

Study Group

The study group that participated in this research consists of 512 individuals (370 females and 142 males) who are in romantic relationships. The age range of the group is between 17 and 55 ($\bar{X} = 32.20$). The study group was formed using a convenience sampling method, where individuals easily accessible for responding to measurement instruments are selected (Cohen et al., 2007). Data was collected via Google Forms platform and participants was asked about their relationship experience initially. If participant candidate didn't have any romantic relationship experience whatsoever, platform redirected them last page of the form.

Data Collection Tools

Personal Information Form: A Personal Information Form prepared by the researchers was used to describe the study group (such as age, gender and current relationship status) and collect data about the independent variables to be used in the study.

Authenticity in Relationship Scale: The Authenticity in Relationship Scale (AIRS), developed by [Lopez and Rice \(2006\)](#), was adapted to Turkish by [Akbat \(2015\)](#). This scale consists of a total of 23 items, measuring honesty (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 15, 18, and 22) and impartiality (items 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, and 23). The response categories for the scale are marked on a 9-point rating scale, ranging from "not at all descriptive" (1 point) to "very well descriptive" (9 points). Items 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, and 23 are reverse-scored. Scores for the honesty subscale can range from 11 to 99, while scores for the impartiality subscale can range from 12 to 108. Total scores can be obtained from the scale, with scores ranging from 23 to 207. The increase in the scores obtained from the scale indicates an increase in the tendency of individuals to behave authentically in their relationships. As a result of the adaptation study, Cronbach's α coefficient for the whole scale (23 items) was found to be .82; $\alpha = .76$ for the first factor with 11 items and $\alpha = .79$ for the second factor with 12 items. The reliability coefficients obtained by dividing the scale into two halves are as follows; .72 for factor 1, .75 for factor 2 and .80 for the total. In this study, Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient for the whole scale was .87.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Short Form) was used to determine individuals' perceptions of their self-worth. This scale was developed by [Rosenberg \(1965\)](#) and adapted to Turkish by [Çuhadaroğlu \(1986\)](#). The scale consists of 10 items, with an equal number of positive and negative statements, measured on a 4-point Likert scale. Higher scores on the measurement tool indicate higher self-esteem. [Çuhadaroğlu \(1986\)](#) reported the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale as 0.76. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was found to be 0.82.

Relationship Assessment Scale: The Relationship Assessment Scale, developed by [Hendrick \(1988\)](#), was adapted to Turkish by [Curun \(2001\)](#) to measure the satisfaction individuals derive from their romantic relationships. This 7-item scale consists of 5 positive and 2 negative items, measured on a 7-point Likert scale. Higher scores on the scale indicate higher relationship satisfaction. In the adaptation study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was reported as 0.88. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was found to be 0.85.

Procedure

The application was conducted via Google Forms on the internet, and data was collected only from voluntary individuals. Before the application, basic information about the purpose of the research and the measurement instruments was provided to individuals, and their consent was obtained. The data collection process took approximately fifteen minutes.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients were used for data analysis. When examining kurtosis and skewness values, it was observed that the data in the study exhibited a normal distribution (kurtosis = -0.25, skewness = -0.26 for self-esteem; kurtosis = -0.31, skewness = -0.54 for authenticity in the relationship; kurtosis = -0.70, skewness = 0.27 for relationship satisfaction). In the research, the statistical significance of the mediated effects in the tested model was examined using the approach based on Ordinary Least Squares Regression and the Bootstrap Method, using software developed by [Hayes \(2012\)](#). Bootstrapping is an intensive computation method that involves

repeatedly drawing samples from the data set and estimating the indirect effect in each resampled data set (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). This way, "bootstrapping" serves as a resampling process that is assumed to represent the population of the original sample (Byrne, 2010, p. 330). Additionally, as an inferential process, the Bootstrap confidence interval is superior to the Sobel test (Hayes, 2012) and offers a lower Type 1 error rate (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Therefore, this method was chosen for the study because it allows for controlling covariate variables that may potentially influence the relationships between variables. The Bootstrap analyses of the study were conducted using the "Multiple Mediation Model 4" through the PROCESS Macro. The statistical significance of the mediating role of the mediator variable was examined on 5,000 bootstrap samples. In the study, authenticity in the relationship was the independent variable, relationship satisfaction was the mediator variable, and self-esteem was the dependent variable. In the model testing in the study, variables such as "gender, age, and relationship status" were assigned as control variables (covariates) as they might potentially affect the relationships between variables. The significance level in the study was set at .05. IBM SPSS 20.0 software was used for data analysis.

Findings

To describe the relationships between variables in the study, Pearson correlation analysis was employed. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results for self-esteem, authenticity in the relationship, and relationship satisfaction variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics and pearson correlation coefficient values for the variables of the study

Variables	X	Sd	1	2	3
1. Authenticity in the Relationship	153.50	27.74	-		
2. Relationship Satisfaciton	35.13	9.12	.54**	-	
3. Self-Esteem	32.09	4.52	.25**	.29**	-

When examining Table 1, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation values for the study group are as follows: for authenticity in the relationship, $X= 153.50$, $Ss=27.74$; for relationship satisfaction, $X= 35.13$, $Ss= 9.12$; and for self-esteem, $X= 32.09$, $Ss= 4.52$. The results of the correlation analysis conducted in the research indicate the following significant relationships: A positive and significant correlation between authenticity in the relationship and relationship satisfaction ($r= .54$, $p<.01$). A positive and significant correlation between authenticity in the relationship and self-esteem ($r= .25$, $p<.01$). A positive and significant correlation between relationship satisfaction and self-esteem ($r= .29$, $p<.01$).

The findings from this study, which investigated the mediating role of relationship satisfaction between authenticity in the relationship and self-esteem, are presented in Figure 1.

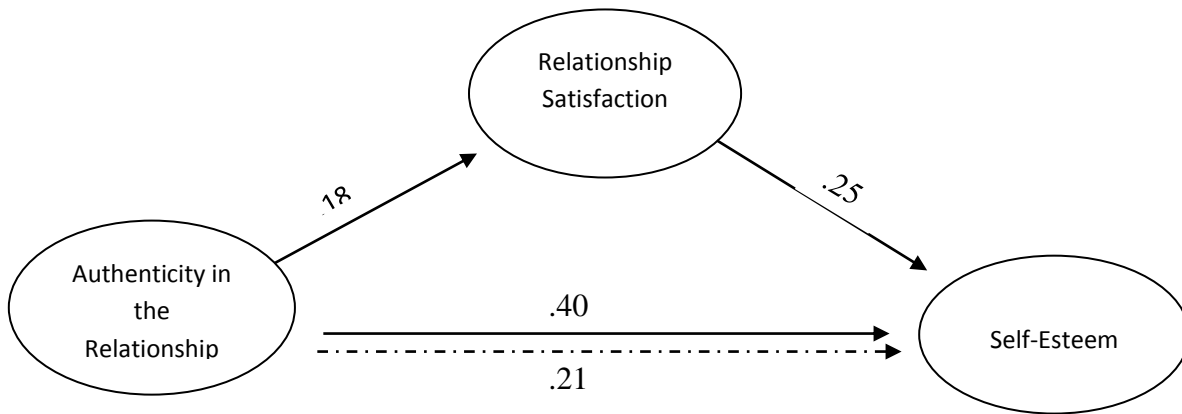


Figure 1. Mediation role of relationship satisfaction between authenticity in the relationship and self-esteem, with unstandardized beta values. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

When examining Figure 1, it can be observed that the total effect of the authenticity in the relationship variable on the self-esteem variable ($c = .40$, $SH = .07$, $t = 5.85$, $p < .001$) is significant. Additionally, the direct effect of authenticity in the relationship on relationship satisfaction ($B = .18$, $SH = .02$, $t = 14.64$, $p < .001$) is also significant. When looking at the direct effect of the mediator variable, relationship satisfaction, on self-esteem ($B = .25$, $SH = .03$, $t = 4.47$, $p < .001$), it is clear that the effect is significant.

When authenticity in the relationship and the mediator variable, relationship satisfaction, are included in the analysis together, the relationship between authenticity in the relationship and self-esteem in terms of direct effects has weakened, and the significance value has decreased somewhat ($c = .21$, $SH = .12$, $t = 2.56$, $p < .001$). In light of these results, it can be said that relationship satisfaction mediates the relationship between authenticity in the relationship and self-esteem. Furthermore, the entire model is significant ($F_{(2,509)} = 27.74$, $p < .001$), explaining 30% of the total variance in self-esteem.

The indirect effects of authenticity in the relationship on self-esteem through relationship satisfaction are provided in Table 2.

Table 2.

Indirect effects of relationship authenticity on self-esteem through relationship satisfaction

Effects	Product of Coefficients				Bootstrap	
	Point Estimation	SE	z	p	95% BCa Confidence Interval	
					Low	High
Indirect Effect	.0919	.0052	4.2696	.000***	.0098	.0300
Total Effect	.4011	.0704			.0271	.0545
Direct Effect	.2093	.1241			.0049	.0370

$N = 702$, $k = 5000$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ BCa: Bias corrected and accelerated 5000 bootstrap samples, which have been adjusted to account for bias in the results.

In the research, the results indicate that the estimations were evaluated and corrected for bias within a 95% confidence interval based on 5000 bootstrap samples. When examining Table 2, it is observed that the indirect effect of authenticity in the relationship on self-esteem through relationship satisfaction (the difference between total and direct effects/c-c') is statistically significant (point estimate= -.0919 and 95% BCa CI [.0098, .0300]). It has been determined that relationship satisfaction plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between authenticity in the relationship and self-esteem.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the mediating role of relationship satisfaction in the relationship between individuals' authenticity in relationships and self-esteem. The findings suggest that the experiences individuals accumulate throughout their lives can influence their self-esteem. This study provided evidence that self-esteem is associated with authenticity in relationships, highlighting that self-esteem is not solely about self-evaluation but is also closely related to the quality of one's relationships. This finding is in line with the sociometer theory proposed by [Leary and Baumeister \(2000\)](#), which suggests that self-esteem is not only about self-evaluation but also tied to the quality of our interactions with others.

This study similarly showed that self-esteem is related to authenticity, which is based on self-evaluation, but relationship satisfaction, in other words, the quality of our relationships with others and our perception of it, has an impact on self-esteem. A study by [Heppner et al. \(2008\)](#) found that experiencing authenticity, autonomy, and competence throughout the day has a positive effect on self-esteem. Similarly, this study shows that authenticity in relationships is positively related to self-esteem. In the same study ([Heppner et al., 2008](#)), it was discussed that being able to establish intimacy with others, in other words, being able to connect with others predicts self-esteem. It can be argued that the ability to establish this closeness is closely related to satisfaction in the relationship. The relationship between satisfaction and self-esteem, which is one of the important points emphasized by this research, is supported by the research conducted by Heppner et al. We can discuss the structure that emerged here with the emphasis that romantic relationships have an important place among the sources that the individual feeds his/her self-esteem throughout his/her life.

[Zeigler-Hill et al. \(2011\)](#) found that men with unstable self-esteem have more positive evaluations of their romantic relationships. The authors suggest that these individuals regulate their self-esteem and related feelings through their romantic relationships. The results of our study show that an individual's ability to reveal himself/herself in a relationship, that is, to be authentic, also provides emotional balance as it positively predicts self-esteem. In other words, it can be said that the direct and indirect effects of individuals' authenticity on self-esteem are parallel to Zeigler-Hill et al.'s study in a different dimension.

[Wang \(2015\)](#) examined the mediating role of relationship satisfaction in the relationship between power and self-esteem. According to Wang, while power predicts self-esteem, relationship satisfaction and authenticity make a significant contribution to this prediction. Although Wang's results are in parallel with this study, they provide different clues about the relationships within the model in question. Considering power as an individual's perception of being able to influence and change others, the study, referring to the work of [Kipnis \(1972\)](#), emphasized that

individuals who have power, that is, who have the perception that they can influence others, also have high self-esteem. Based on this definition, the study concluded that relationship satisfaction and authenticity play a mediating role in the relationship between power and self-esteem. Although the current study reveals similar results, it is thought that the studies on the power variable put forward by Wang can be addressed within the romantic relationship.

Swann and Bossom (2010) argue that close relationships are one of the most important sources of self-esteem. As the sociometer theory suggests, establishing close relationships is one of the main criteria in self-evaluation. This individual evaluation stems from the person's innate need to establish relationships. In this study, it was similarly concluded that the self-esteem of individuals who are in romantic relationships increases, as well as the increase in the satisfaction that the individual receives from the relationship while expressing himself/herself comfortably and openly in these relationships contributes to this effect. We can argue that these results obtained within the framework of the model are effective on self-esteem not only by having a relationship, but also by authenticity and satisfaction in the relationship that will increase the quality of the relationship in question, as supported by the literature.

As a result, this study revealed that self-esteem, which is defined as the positive self-evaluation of individuals, is predicted by the concepts of authenticity in relationship and relationship satisfaction in individuals in romantic relationships. In addition, within the proposed model, it has been observed that the ability of individuals to be authentic in the relationship, namely, to express their own selves without any reservations within the relationship, partially mediated the impact on self-esteem, while relationship satisfaction also played a partial mediating role. We believe it is appropriate to discuss that the findings support the notion that the obstacle to individuals behaving authentically in romantic relationships is the fear of harming the relationship. Furthermore, it could be argued that when this risk is acknowledged and an environment conducive to authentic behavior is established, supported by relationship satisfaction, it may provide genuine support for self-esteem.

Accordingly with the result of this study, field workers such as psychological counselors, psychologist and psychotherapist could conduct self-esteem as a variable in their therapy sessions. Especially in couples therapy processes, concepts of self and self-esteem are not often addressed on an individual basis, with practitioners typically focusing on the systems within which couples operate. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that the concept of self-esteem be approached more carefully in therapy sessions addressing romantic relationship problems, including couples therapy. Particularly because individuals who have not completed the process of differentiation of self may struggle to express authenticity in relationships, and this situation is thought to be directly related to self-esteem, it is believed that practitioners' focus on the relationship between systemic approach concepts and self-esteem could be beneficial. Additionally, researchers working in the field of close relationships are recommended to conduct experimental studies aimed at developing authenticity. Finally, reevaluating the concept of self-esteem within the framework of systemic approach principles could create an important area for future research.

Ethical Statement

It is declared that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical

standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. There is no conflict of interest in the research. The authors received no financial support for the authorship, research, and/or publication of this article.

Author Contributions

First author: Data collection, introduction, discussion

Second Author: Data collection, data analysis, method, findings

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest for this study.

Funding

No funding was received for this study.

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