

The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Loneliness Among Indonesian National Armed Forces Retirees

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Abstract

Retirement requires individuals to transition from a structured military environment to a more flexible civilian lifestyle. This change may increase psychological vulnerability, such as lower self-esteem and greater loneliness. This study examines the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness among retired members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces. Using a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from 106 retired personnel of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, selected through purposive sampling. The Self-Liking and Competence Scale-Revised (SLCS-R) and the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS) were used to measure self-esteem and loneliness, and data were analyzed with Pearson Product-Moment correlation. The results show a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and loneliness ($r = -0.569$; $p < 0.05$), indicating that higher self-esteem corresponds with lower loneliness. These findings highlight self-esteem as a protective factor in post-service adjustment and emphasize the need for support programs that strengthen self-esteem to help reduce loneliness and promote successful adaptation to civilian life.

Keywords: loneliness, retired Indonesian national armed forces, retirement, self-esteem

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INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian National Armed Forces is a state defense institution with a central role in safeguarding national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and public security, as regulated under *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 34 Tahun 2004* (Law Number 34 of 2004). Indonesian National Armed Forces personnel are trained and assigned to operate within highly structured, disciplined, and hierarchical systems, where obedience, collective identity, and mission-oriented behavior form the core of military culture. Throughout their service, members internalize organizational norms and routines that shape both their professional roles and personal identities. Given this context, the transition to retirement constitutes a substantial shift from a regulated military environment to a more flexible civilian life, making retirement not merely an administrative process but a psychologically and socially impactful life event (Tanzilla et al., 2023).

Retirement regulations and age limits within the Indonesian National Armed Forces are governed by *Undang-Undang Nomor 3 Tahun 2025 tentang Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (Law Number 3 of 2025 about the Indonesian National Armed Forces). These regulations stipulate structured retirement ages: 55 for enlisted personnel and non-commissioned officers, 58 for officers up to colonel, and 60 to 63 for higher-ranking officers based on star level. Additional extensions for four-star officers may be granted through presidential decrees. Individuals who received retirement decrees before the enactment of this law continue to follow the provisions of *Undang-Undang Nomor 34 Tahun 2004*. Such structured and compulsory retirement frameworks mean that personnel may retire regardless of their psychological readiness or socioeconomic circumstances, leading to abrupt lifestyle changes that affect well-being (Tanzilla et al., 2023). For many retirees, this shift marks a profound transition that reduces their social status, alters their daily routine, and requires adjustment to new social expectations.

Studies on Indonesian National Armed Forces retirees have consistently highlighted the psychological and social challenges associated with the transition to civilian life. During this period, retirees face major changes in their daily routines, social environments, and social roles within the community (Astriwardhany & Purnamasari, 2021). Wulandari & Rahmawan (2024) found that many retirees express concerns about the loss of authority, rank, and long-standing routines, which affect how they perceive their self-worth. Alqasimi & Wahyudi (2025) reported that middle-ranking officers commonly feel empty, unproductive, socially hesitant, and disconnected from their communities after retirement. Some even withdraw socially, feel undervalued, or regret their past indicators linked to loneliness. Their findings also showed that some retirees withdraw from social interactions due to feelings of inadequacy and regret, such as emotional responses strongly associated with loneliness. These patterns demonstrate that retirement affects not only financial conditions but also psychological and social functioning, confirming previous findings that post-retirement adjustment requires navigating drastic changes in identity and social roles (Nurmayunita, 2021).

International research shows similar patterns. Guthrie-Gower & Wilson-Menzfeld (2022) found that former military personnel in the United Kingdom often experience loneliness and social isolation long after transitioning to civilian life, driven by identity loss and difficulty adapting to civilian norms. A large-scale study by Straus et al. (2022) involving 4,050 U.S. veterans reported that 56.9% experienced loneliness, with 19.7%



stating they often felt lonely. Lwi et al. (2023) found that more than half of U.S. veterans experience loneliness, often not due to lack of social contact but due to negative self-beliefs shaped during or after military service. Veterans with PTSD symptoms, especially negative mood and cognition alterations, reported higher loneliness even with adequate social support (Resna et al., 2022).

Preliminary, informal interviews with 10 Indonesian National Armed Forces retirees also revealed difficulties adjusting to civilian life. Many participants described retirement as a confusing and anxiety-provoking transition marked by the loss of daily structure, reduced motivation, and changes in family and social roles. They also reported missing the camaraderie, routines, and strong sense of belonging found in military communities, noting that civilian environments often felt unfamiliar and less supportive. This loss of both social connection and shared identity contributed to feelings of emotional distance and detachment. Such experiences align with Gierveld (1998) explanation that loneliness arises from deficiencies in the quality or quantity of social relationships.

Loneliness is defined as a subjective, distressing experience arising from a perceived lack of connection with others (Chen et al., 2022). Schafer et al. (2024) found that higher levels of loneliness among veterans are associated with declines in physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environmental comfort. Their findings emphasize that loneliness affects not only emotional health but also broader aspects of life. Several factors contribute to loneliness, including self-esteem, shyness, social skills, relocation, social support, personality traits, and socioeconomic conditions (Putri et al., 2024). Although multiple factors play a role, self-esteem emerges as a central psychological construct closely associated with loneliness, especially among individuals experiencing major life transitions.

Reitz (2022) defines self-esteem as an individual's evaluation of personal worth. Within military environments, self-esteem is deeply shaped by structured roles, symbolic hierarchies, uniformity, shared missions, and recognition embedded within military culture (Heward et al., 2024). Military identity forms the foundation of self-esteem because it provides purpose, belonging, and a sense of personal importance. When this identity remains intact, individuals maintain psychological stability and a strong sense of self-worth. However, retirement disrupts this identity structure, potentially lowering self-esteem and increasing susceptibility to loneliness. Individuals who struggle to redefine their identity outside the military context may experience difficulties adjusting emotionally and socially to civilian life.

Empirical studies confirm this relationship. Sharma & Prince (2023) found that retirees with low self-esteem tend to experience greater loneliness, whereas those with higher self-esteem feel less lonely. A longitudinal study by Ong et al. (2024) involving 2,441 U.S. veterans also found that low self-esteem consistently predicts higher loneliness over time, whereas high self-esteem is associated with stable, low levels of loneliness. Given the substantial psychological and social changes faced by Indonesian National Armed Forces retirees, understanding the interplay between self-esteem and loneliness is essential. Although research on military retirees in Indonesia has examined retirement adjustment broadly, few studies have specifically examined how self-esteem contributes to loneliness in this population.



Despite extensive international research, most existing studies focus on Western veterans whose cultural contexts differ significantly from Indonesia's collectivistic and hierarchical social structure. Research specifically examining self-esteem and loneliness among retired Indonesian National Armed Forces personnel remains limited, leaving a gap in understanding how these psychological constructs interact within Indonesia's unique socio-cultural and institutional context. This gap highlights the need for empirical research that addresses the distinct experiences of Indonesian military retirees. Therefore, to address this gap, this study aims to examine the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness among retired members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces using a quantitative correlational approach.

METHOD

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness among retirees of the Indonesian National Armed Forces. A correlational approach was used because it enables researchers to assess the direction and strength of associations between psychological variables without manipulating conditions. The participants consisted of 106 Indonesian National Armed Forces retirees selected through purposive sampling, which enabled the inclusion of individuals who met specific study-related criteria. The inclusion criteria were being officially retired from active military service and providing voluntary consent to participate. The sample comprised retirees from various ranks and service durations.

Self-esteem was measured using the Self-Liking and Competence Scale–Revised (SLCS-R) developed by Tafarodi & Swann (2001). This instrument consists of 16 items that assess two dimensions: self-liking and self-competence, using a 4-point Likert scale. Higher scores reflect higher levels of self-esteem. The SLCS-R has been widely applied in psychological research and is known for its strong reliability and validity (Bai et al., 2022). Loneliness was assessed using the De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DJGLS), an 11-item instrument that captures both emotional and social aspects of loneliness. Responses are provided on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater loneliness. The DJGLS is recognized internationally for its robust psychometric properties and suitability for adult populations.

Data collection was conducted online using Google Forms. Participants were first presented with an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses, and the voluntary nature of participation. After signing the consent form, participants completed a demographic section, followed by the SLCS-R and DJGLS questionnaires. All responses were collected anonymously to ensure privacy and minimize response bias. Data analysis was performed using SPSS. Before testing the hypothesis, assumption checks were conducted, including normality using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test and linearity using the Test for Linearity. After confirming that the data met these assumptions, the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness was analyzed using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation, which is appropriate for examining associations between continuous variables under parametric conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results



The data analysis was conducted on 106 retired members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces who completed the research questionnaire. Descriptive statistics for both variables were calculated to provide an initial overview of the participants' psychological conditions during the retirement period. As shown in Table 1, self-esteem scores ranged from 35 to 57, with a mean of 43.47 and a standard deviation of 4.87, indicating that most respondents had moderate self-esteem, reflecting a reasonably positive but not fully optimal self-evaluation following their transition out of military service. Loneliness scores ranged from 20 to 32, with a mean of 26.82 and a standard deviation of 2.57, suggesting that most participants experienced moderate levels of social and emotional loneliness. These descriptive trends are consistent with findings reported in the original thesis, which highlight that retired military personnel commonly experience psychological adjustments, including identity changes, reduced social engagement, and shifts in daily routines, as they adapt to civilian life.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables (N = 106)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Self-Esteem	35	57	43.47	4.87
Loneliness	20	32	26.82	2.57

To further understand the distribution of psychological conditions among participants, score categorization was conducted using the mean and standard deviation as reference points to classify respondents into high, moderate, and low levels of self-esteem. As presented in Table 2, the majority of participants (68.9%) fell within the moderate category, indicating that most retirees generally maintain an acceptable sense of self-worth despite the substantial life changes associated with retirement. Meanwhile, 15.1% were categorized as having high self-esteem, suggesting that fewer retirees possess strong confidence, resilience, and a stable sense of personal value, likely developed through long-term military experiences and effective personal adjustment. Conversely, 16% of participants were classified in the low self-esteem category, indicating a notable group who may be struggling with self-doubt, reduced competence, or diminished social significance after leaving the structured, hierarchical military environment. This distribution illustrates that although most retirees retain a relatively positive self-view, a considerable proportion continue to face internal challenges related to identity loss and role transitions, emphasizing the importance of understanding how retirement impacts self-perception among former Indonesian National Armed Forces personnel.

Table 2.

Categorization of Self-Esteem Scores (N = 106)

Category	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
High	< 38.60	16	15.1%
Moderate	38.60–48.34	73	68.9%
Low	> 48.34	17	16.0%

Similarly, loneliness scores were categorized to provide a clearer picture of the social and emotional experiences of retired Indonesian National Armed Forces personnel, as shown in Table 3. The results indicate that 70.8% of participants fell within the moderate loneliness category, suggesting that most retirees experience a noticeable but



not overwhelming sense of social and emotional disconnection during their adjustment to civilian life. Meanwhile, 16% reported high levels of loneliness, highlighting a group of individuals who may be experiencing significant emotional isolation, reduced meaningful interactions, and difficulty forming or maintaining social bonds outside the military environment. In contrast, 13.2% were categorized as having low loneliness, indicating that a smaller portion of retirees have successfully adapted to post-retirement social dynamics, maintained adequate social ties, or developed effective coping strategies. Overall, this distribution reflects how the transition away from the structured and tightly bonded military community, combined with changes in daily routines, decreased contact with former peers, and the need to adjust to new interaction patterns in civilian society, can contribute to varying degrees of loneliness among retirees.

Table 3.

Categorization of Loneliness Scores (N = 106)

Category	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
High	< 24.25	17	16.0%
Moderate	24.25–29.39	75	70.8%
Low	> 29.39	14	13.2%

Hypothesis testing using Pearson's Product-Moment correlation revealed a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.569$ with $p = 0.000$, indicating a statistically significant negative relationship between self-esteem and loneliness, as shown in Table 4. This result demonstrates that retirees with higher levels of self-esteem are more likely to report lower levels of loneliness. In contrast, those with lower self-esteem tend to experience greater emotional and social isolation. The magnitude of the coefficient falls within the moderate range, indicating a meaningful, substantial association between the two psychological variables rather than a trivial or incidental one. This finding supports the theoretical understanding that self-esteem serves as an important psychological resource during major life transitions, helping individuals maintain social engagement, confidence, and perceived self-worth. Conversely, when self-esteem is diminished, such as after the loss of military identity, rank-based recognition, and daily social interaction, retirees may become more vulnerable to negative self-perceptions that heighten feelings of loneliness. Overall, the correlation analysis confirms the study's hypothesis and aligns with previous research emphasizing the central role of self-esteem in shaping emotional well-being during retirement.



Table 4.
 Correlation Matrix between Dimensions of Self-Esteem, Dimensions of Loneliness, and Total Scores of Both Variables

Variables	Self-Liking	Self Competence	Emotional Loneliness	Social Loneliness	Self-Esteem (Total)	Loneliness (Total)
Self-Liking	1	.529**	-.614**	.272**	.916**	-.599**
Self-Competence	.529**	1	-.344**	.124	.825**	-.360**
Emotional Loneliness	-.614**	-.344**	1	-.674**	-.572**	.780**
Social Loneliness	.272**	.124	-.674**	1	.240*	-.063
Self-Esteem (Total)	.916**	.825**	-.572**	.240*	1	-.569**
Loneliness (Total)	-.599**	-.360**	.780**	-.063	-.569**	1

Note:

N = 106. $p < .05^*$, $p < .01^{**}$ (two-tailed).

A correlation matrix was computed to examine the relationships between the two dimensions of self-esteem (Self-Liking and Self-Competence) and the two dimensions of loneliness (Emotional Loneliness and Social Loneliness). As shown in Table X, Self-Liking showed a strong negative correlation with Emotional Loneliness ($r = -.614$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants who felt less positive about themselves tended to experience greater emotional isolation. Self-Liking also showed a moderate positive correlation with Social Loneliness ($r = .272$, $p = .005$), although this pattern may reflect differences in scoring direction across the subscales. Self-Competence was moderately and negatively associated with Emotional Loneliness ($r = -.344$, $p < .001$), suggesting that individuals who felt less competent were more likely to feel emotionally disconnected from others. In contrast, Self-Competence was not significantly related to Social Loneliness ($r = .124$, $p = .207$).

For the total scores, self-esteem was strongly and negatively associated with overall loneliness ($r = -.569$, $p < .001$), visually confirming the general trend that individuals with higher self-esteem tend to report lower levels of loneliness. Emotional Loneliness showed a strong positive correlation with Loneliness total ($r = .780$, $p < .001$), whereas Social Loneliness did not correlate significantly with the total loneliness score ($r = -.063$, $p = .521$). These findings collectively indicate that emotional aspects of loneliness are more strongly connected to self-esteem, particularly Self-liking, than social aspects of loneliness, suggesting that feelings of emotional disconnection may be more closely tied to how individuals view and evaluate themselves.



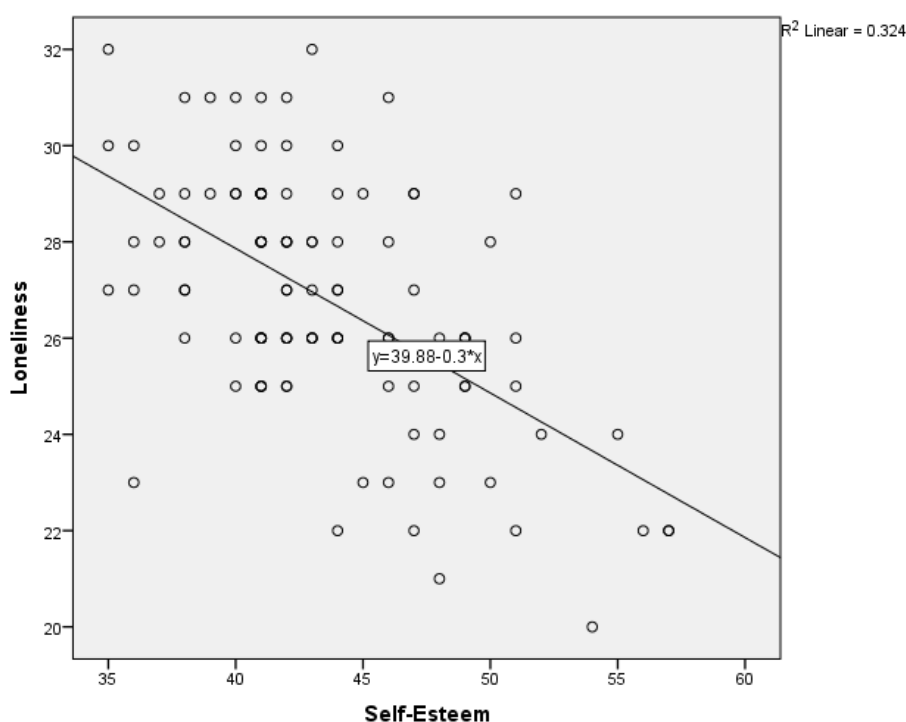


Figure 1. Scatter Plot Showing the Linear Relationship between Self-Esteem and Loneliness

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and loneliness among retirees of the Indonesian National Armed Forces. This relationship suggests that retirees with higher self-esteem tend to experience lower loneliness. In contrast, those with lower self-esteem tend to feel more socially and emotionally isolated. These results reinforce the theoretical understanding that self-esteem plays a central role in shaping individuals' emotional responses and social engagement during major life transitions (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001; Peplau & Perlman, 1984). The transition to retirement entails major changes in social roles, routines, and identity, which can affect one's sense of self-worth. When retirees possess strong self-esteem, they adapt more effectively to these changes and maintain healthier emotional well-being.

The result aligns with the psychological challenges commonly experienced by Indonesian National Armed Forces retirees during their transition into civilian life. As described in previous studies, retirement often involves the loss of authority, structured routines, and a strong sense of belonging that were deeply embedded in military culture (Wulandari & Rahmawan, 2024). Many retirees no longer hold formal positions of responsibility, which previously reinforced their sense of competence and status. Similarly, Alqasimi & Wahyudi (2025) found that retirees, particularly those from mid-level officer ranks, often report feeling empty, unproductive, and hesitant to socialize because they no longer view themselves as having significant roles in society. These forms of negative self-evaluation are consistent with indicators of low self-esteem, which may intensify feelings of loneliness.



Moreover, international research also supports these results. Studies on veterans in Western contexts report similar patterns loneliness is associated with negative self-perceptions and emotional withdrawal (Lwi et al., 2023). Loneliness among veterans is not solely a consequence of reduced social interaction but is often associated with negative self-beliefs. This aligns with the results of the current study, where self-esteem appears to be a significant psychological factor influencing retirees' vulnerability to loneliness. Retirees with low self-esteem may interpret social situations more negatively, avoid new interactions, or feel unworthy of forming new connections, all of which increase feelings of loneliness. Conversely, those with higher self-esteem may approach social interactions with greater confidence and adaptability, helping them maintain emotional resilience after retirement.

Among Indonesian National Armed Forces retirees, the moderate levels of self-esteem and loneliness recorded in this study further illustrate that many are navigating a transition period marked by mixed emotional states. While they maintain some positive self-regard, they simultaneously face challenges in rebuilding social networks outside the disciplined structure of military life. Furthermore, the correlation strength ($r = -0.569$) suggests that although self-esteem is an important factor, it is not the sole determinant of loneliness. This opens opportunities for future research to explore additional predictors such as social support systems, coping strategies, community engagement, family dynamics, and mental health conditions like depression or anxiety. Nevertheless, the current findings underscore that self-esteem remains a central predictor and a vital component of psychological well-being among Indonesian National Armed Forces retirees.

Overall, the results affirm that the transition from military to civilian life involves deep psychological adjustments that affect both self-esteem and social connectedness. Programs designed to support retirees, such as pre-retirement counseling, peer support groups, reintegration training, and community involvement initiatives, may help strengthen self-esteem and reduce loneliness. Enhancing self-worth and rebuilding social identity can provide retirees with the resilience needed to navigate the emotional complexities of post-military life.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that self-esteem is negatively associated with loneliness among retired members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces, with emotional loneliness showing a stronger relationship with self-esteem dimensions than social loneliness. These findings support previous evidence from international contexts while providing the empirical data examining this association specifically among Indonesian military retirees. By addressing the research gap identified in the introduction, this study contributes a new understanding of psychological adjustment in retirement within a largely understudied population in Indonesia. In practice, the results highlight the importance of interventions to strengthen personal self-worth and reduce emotional isolation among retirees. The findings also suggest that emotional loneliness may be a more sensitive indicator of psychological vulnerability in this group. Future research should expand these findings by testing mediation models, such as whether social support explains the link between self-esteem and loneliness. Additionally, further work should



explore moderation models, including whether the length of retirement influences the strength of these relationships.

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