The Effectiveness of Self-Encouragement Training on the Homesickness in Non-Native University Students

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Abstract

Aim: The present study aimed to determine the effectiveness of self-encouragement training on the homesickness (including longing for family, desire to return home, maladjustment, feelings of loneliness, yearning for familiar people and environments) in non-native university students.

Method: This research employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test–post-test control group. The statistical population consisted of all first-year non-native university students residing in university dormitories at the Islamic Azad University of Ardabil. From this population, 30 university students were selected through purposive sampling and randomly assigned to an experimental group (n=15) and a control group (n=15). Data were collected using the Homesickness Questionnaire developed by Van Vliet (2001). The experimental group received 10 sessions of self-encouragement training based on the encouragement training Shwanker's model (1979). Self-encouragement training is a psychological intervention aimed at enhancing resilience and reducing negative emotions by promoting self-acceptance, recognizing personal strengths, and fostering a positive outlook on life. Data analysis was conducted using multivariate covariance analysis (MANCOVA) via SPSS software, version 26.

Findings: The results showed that the self-encouragement Training significantly reduced the level of homesickness (longing for family, desire to return, maladjustment, loneliness, and yearning for familiar people and environments) in the experimental group. Specifically, the post-test mean scores of homesickness and its subcomponents significantly decreased after the intervention (p<0.01).

Conclusion: The self-encouragement training significantly reduced feelings of homesickness and its related components among non-native university students. This finding demonstrates the effectiveness of this psychological intervention in improving emotional adjustment and alleviating longing for family and familiar environments. Therefore, it can be considered an effective approach for providing psychological support to migrant or non-native university students.

Keywords: Self-Encouragement Training, Homesickness, Non-Native University Students.

Introduction

One of the most critical decisions made by students and their families is choosing an academic path after completing compulsory education. The significance of this decision lies in its potential to shape students' educational trajectories and influence their future employment prospects. Opting for one path over another may limit opportunities for further academic advancement or restrict access to specific career fields that require certain qualifications (Sánchez-Gelabert et al., 2024). Becoming a university student marks the beginning of a new journey toward academic, intellectual, and personal growth, where individuals are exposed to new knowledge, intellectual challenges, and social experiences. This phase serves as a bridge between adolescence and adulthood, fostering responsibility, independence, and life skills.

For non-native university students, migrating for university studies presents a dual experience. On the one hand, it offers opportunities for academic advancement, personal independence, and exposure to diverse cultures; on the other hand, it entails challenges such as homesickness, loneliness, and adjustment to a new environment (Freimuth & Dobson, 2021). This transition tests students' psychological and social capacities and can become a catalyst for deep personal development. The first year of university enrollment poses the most intense stress for non-native university students, as "transitioning to a new environment is considered one of the most daunting phases in an individual's life" (Alasmari, 2023). These students, who temporarily leave their familiar culture, often experience stress due to changing conditions and must cope with language barriers, cultural differences, unfamiliar social norms, homesickness, and alienation (Alasmari, 2023; Mubasheer & Bano, 2023; Clemente-Suárez, 2020).

Homesickness has been defined as a state of intense longing caused by separation from loved ones and one's home environment (Wang & Mafa, 2024). While multicultural support within educational institutions offers several benefits, it is essential to acknowledge that students' lives can be affected by cultural inequalities, language challenges, and separation from family and friends (Wilson et al., 2023). Leaving a familiar environment and entering a new one can lead to homesickness in almost anyone, regardless of the reason for relocation. Accordingly, students pursuing higher education away from home often experience homesickness when separated from their families and friends (Mohamud & Madderla, 2024). If host institutions fail to address the unique needs of non-native university students, they may experience loneliness and even symptoms of acculturative stress—such as depressive disorders, anxiety, chronic joint/back/limb pain, fatigue, appetite changes, gastrointestinal issues, sleep disturbances, identity crises, and substance abuse (Lau et al., 2019; Rivas et al., 2019).

To prevent these negative outcomes, institutions must implement frameworks and strategies that provide social, financial, academic, and psychological support for non-native university students (Arthur, 2017). One potentially effective strategy is self-encouragement training, which can significantly reduce feelings of loneliness and homesickness among non-native university students. This approach fosters positive self-

talk and enhances internal resilience, enabling students to better manage the emotional challenges of adapting to a new environment. Such an intervention not only reduces the intensity of alienation but also promotes mental well-being and academic adjustment (JanaAbadi & Sangdel, 2022).

Encouragement is a form of positive feedback focused on effort rather than outcomes, signaling to the individual that they do not need to be perfect to be accepted (Rostami et al., 2024). Self-encouragement involves teaching individuals how to draw positive energy to strive for growth and excellence while appreciating their efforts and believing in their capabilities. Self-belief and confidence serve as pathways to transformation, aiming to enhance self-esteem (Liu et al., 2018). As a psychological intervention, self-encouragement training can effectively reduce homesickness in non-native university students by promoting positive self-attitudes, a stronger sense of belonging, and improved coping skills. Through consistent practice, individuals learn to develop internal support systems when facing loneliness, alienation, and anxiety related to academic migration (Kishi et al., 2023).

Self-encouragement enables individuals to experience positive emotions, plan more effectively for future challenges, and cultivate a sense of belonging that fosters satisfaction with one's value within a community. Although the world is filled with both positive and negative emotions, how individuals interpret these emotions reflects their life perspective (Mosayebi et al., 2021; Ghadampour et al., 2018). In this process, individuals are taught to motivate themselves toward improvement, appreciate their humanity, highlight their strengths, and value their efforts (Nemati Chalavi et al., 2022). Self-encouragement enhances courage, determination, and acceptance of personal flaws while facilitating the discovery of effective strategies for dealing with physical and emotional stress. It also fosters social connection and interaction (Alisofi et al., 2018; Farnam & Shirazi, 2018).

As the number of non-native university students increases, homesickness has emerged as a significant psychological challenge with potential consequences such as academic decline and reduced mental health. Self-encouragement training, as a means of reinforcing internal resources and coping skills, may help mitigate this feeling. Therefore, examining the effectiveness of this training on homesickness among non-native university students is essential to provide both practical and scientific solutions to improve their well-being. Accordingly, the main research question is: Is self-encouragement training effective in reducing homesickness among non-native university students?

Methods

Population, Sample, and Sampling Procedure

The present study was an applied research with a quasi-experimental design employing a pretest-posttest control group format. The statistical population consisted of all first-year non-native university students residing in dormitories at Islamic Azad University, Ardabil branch, during the 2018–2019 academic year. Based on the Loneliness Scale questionnaire and in collaboration with expert psychologists, a purposive sample of 30 students was selected and randomly assigned to the experimental group (n = 15) and

control group (n = 15). Ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants about the general objectives of the study prior to the intervention, assuring confidentiality and privacy of their data, and emphasizing that participation would not involve any financial risk. Participants were also assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Schwenker's (1979) self-encouragement training intervention was implemented for the experimental group in 10 weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes. One week after the intervention, both groups completed the Loneliness Scale questionnaire again.To analyze the effectiveness of the self-encouragement training on the sense of loneliness among non-native university students, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted using SPSS software. Data collection was performed using the specified questionnaire instrument.

Homelessness Questionnaire (HQ): The instrument employed was the Homesickness Questionnaire, developed by Van Vliet (2001) and validated in Iran by Azhe'i et al. (2008). It consists of 39 items with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = slightly, 2 = moderately, 3 = somewhat, 4 = highly, 5 = very highly). The total score ranges from 39 to 195. Seven items (4, 5, 10, 13, 15, 18, 33) are reverse scored. The instrument measures five dimensions: Homesickness for family (items 24, 26, 21, 13, 14, 19, 22, 23), Desire to return to homeland (31, 33, 30, 32, 35, 37), Unfamiliar environment (3, 4, 1, 9, 12, 6, 28, 5), Feeling of loneliness (10, 7, 8, 11), Homesickness for people & environment (20, 17, 18, 16). Domain scores were calculated by summing relevant items, and the overall homesickness score was the sum of all subscale scores. Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was reported as 0.85 by Van Vliet (2001). Azhe'i et al. (2008) reported alpha coefficients for each subscale ranging from 0.80 to 0.90, and 0.92 for the total scale. Subscale alphas were: family homesickness (0.86), loneliness (0.79), homesickness for people (0.64), unfamiliar environment (0.82), and desire to return home (0.87).

Procedure

Initially, participants were grouped based on their homesickness scores, and those with high levels were invited to join the training. Subsequently, 30 students were selected through purposive sampling and randomly assigned to the experimental group (n = 15) and the control group (n = 15). The study followed a pretest-posttest control group design. In the pretest phase, both groups completed the homesickness questionnaire.

The experimental group then received self-encouragement training (details below), while the control group received no intervention during this period. After completing the intervention, both groups completed the questionnaire again in the posttest stage.

Self-Encouragement Training Protocol

The intervention was adapted from Schwenker's (1979) encouragement training sessions, with modifications by the researcher. This training was conducted by Soheila Sabahi, a Master's graduate in General Psychology, with the assistance of Dr. Ali Sheykholeslami. The training consisted of 10 weekly sessions, each lasting 90 minutes (Salimi-Begestani et al., 2015). The primary goal of the sessions was to reduce homesickness in non-native university students. A detailed session-by-session protocol was implemented, outlining objectives and activities for each meeting.

Table1. Self-Encouragement Training Protocol

Session	Objective	Content	Homework
1	Establishing connection and emotional engagement; introducing the concept of encouragement and teaching encouraging behaviors and traits	Introduction of the therapist, familiarizing group members with each other, stating group rules, explaining the concept of encouragement	Identify five encouraging behaviors in interactions with others; practice relaxation exercises
2	Exploring individual dynamics and teaching the concept of goal-directed human behavior	Describing humans as creative, selective, and autonomous decision-makers; all behaviors have goals. Individuals possess freedom and choice	Write down all personal goals and aspirations and specify conditions needed to achieve them
3	Introducing and challenging life tasks and the courage to accept one's imperfections and encourage others	Accepting imperfection as part of human growth; participants introduce three close persons who are encouraging and note their strengths and ways they provide encouragement	Introduce three close encouraging people; record their strengths and how they encourage
4	Learning affectionate thinking and self-encouragement	Teaching encouragement skills such as acceptance, showing faith and trust, noticing and discovering positive traits in others, paying attention to unique interests	Hold encouragement sessions three times a week focusing on admirable traits of members
5	The impact of speaking negatively about others on individuals' interpersonal relationships, leading to a decline in social interest and the emergence of emotional distress.	Regarding the negative effects of certain behaviors on interpersonal relationships, such as gossip, detailed explanations are provided.	An assignment requires participants to attempt to avoid gossip and to describe the occasions when they have successfully refrained from engaging in it, which they will then share with the facilitators.
6	Gossip leads individuals to self-awareness, promotes self-encouragement, and fosters the development of positive relationships with others.	Training steps on self-encouragement and explanations regarding creating positive and constructive interactions with others are provided.	Participants are asked to write about their strengths, positive qualities, and encouraging statements about themselves.
7	Gaining insight and establishing internal dialogue, expressing encouraging identity statements, and expanding these are the goals of session six.	Training focuses on internal dialogue and creating an identity narrative aimed at achieving personal goals.	A homework assignment is given to participants, requiring them to read their own narrative aloud once or three times a day.
8	Examination of the Role of the Self in Difficult Situations,	In this session, participants examine their role in	Each individual describes three problematic situations

		difficult situations involving the creation and resolution of problems. They engage in research and analysis related to these challenges. By acknowledging this concept, participants learn that they cannot change others but can only change themselves.	(e.g., conflicts in communication, etc.) and identifies their own role as both the creator and perpetuator of these difficulties. They then continuously analyze these roles. With the aid of personal capabilities and by utilizing their own influence and role, participants work toward resolving these problems.
	Recognition of Goal Barriers, and Utilization of God in These Situations.		
9	Examination of Lifestyle, Early Memories, Self-Image, and the Role of the Self in Challenging Situations.	Examination of Lifestyle, Early Memories, Self-Image, and the Role of the Self in Challenging Situations.	Participants are asked to recall three pleasurable childhood memories and identify the underlying foundations of what currently brings them feelings of happiness or affection in their present lives.
10	Exploration of Individual Dynamics, Recognition and Confrontation of Fundamental Life Errors, and Evaluation of Previous Sessions.	This evaluation includes a discussion of concepts that most significantly influence the participants' decision-making processes. It explores what still preoccupies their thoughts, what memories have been recalled, and how these memories have constructively affected them.	The exercise of gently grappling with failures and doubts is conducted using an empty chair technique. In this exercise, each participant addresses their own inner critic and engages in a heartfelt dialogue with this self. This process is carefully facilitated to promote self-awareness and constructive emotional processing.

Findings

The sample in the present study consisted of 30 non-native university students. In this section, descriptive indices such as mean and standard deviation for the research variable, sense of alienation, and its components (i.e., homesickness for family, desire to return to the homeland, adaptability, feelings of loneliness, and nostalgia for familiar people and environments) are presented. These data are reported separately for both experimental and control groups, in two phases: pre-test and post-test, and are shown in Table2.

Table2. Descriptive statistics of the components of alienation by group and test stage

Variable	Stage	Experimental Group			Control Group		
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD
Homesickness for family	Pre-test	15	29.66	2.12	15	29.73	2.08
	Post-test	15	24.06	2.12	15	30.30	2.17
Desire to return to homeland	Pre-test	15	26.73	1.48	15	26.00	2.75
	Post-test	15	19.66	1.98	15	25.53	2.50
Maladaptation	Pre-test	15	25.20	3.83	15	21.60	2.19
	Post-test	15	20.80	2.14	15	21.13	1.76
Feeling of loneliness	Pre-test	15	14.53	1.80	15	14.13	1.59
	Post-test	15	8.80	2.59	15	13.53	1.12
Nostalgia for familiar people/places	Pre-test	15	17.13	1.30	15	17.00	1.06
	Post-test	15	11.46	2.06	15	17.06	1.09
Total sense of alienation	Pre-test	15	113.25	4.80	15	108.46	5.82
	Post-test	15	87.78	6.69	15	107.26	3.91

As observed in Table2, the mean and standard deviation of the "Homesickness for Family" component in the experimental group at the pre-test stage were 29.66 and 2.12, respectively; for the control group at the pre-test stage, 29.73 and 2.08; for the experimental group at the post-test stage, 24.06 and 2.12; and for the control group at the post-test stage, 30.30 and 2.17. The mean and standard deviation of the "Inadaptability" component for the experimental group at the pre-test stage were 25.20 and 3.83; for the control group at the pre-test stage, 21.60 and 2.19; for the experimental group at the post-test stage, 20.80 and 2.14; and for the control group at the post-test stage, 21.13 and 1.76. The mean and standard deviation of the "Feelings of Loneliness" component in the experimental group at the pre-test stage were 14.53 and 1.80; in the control group, 14.13 and 1.59; in the experimental group at the post-test stage, 8.80 and 2.59; and in the control group at the post-test stage, 13.53 and 1.12. The mean and standard deviation of the "Homesickness for Familiar People and Environment" component for the experimental group at the pre-test stage were 17.13 and 1.30; for the control group, 17.00 and 1.06; for the experimental group at the post-test stage, 11.46 and 2.06; and for the control group, 17.06 and 1.09. Finally, the mean and standard deviation of the overall "Sense of Alienation" score in the experimental group at the pre-test stage were 113.25 and 4.80; in the control group, 108.46 and 5.82; in the experimental group at the post-test stage, 87.78 and 6.69; and in the control group, 107.26 and 3.91.

For data analysis, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used. Prior to conducting MANCOVA, the underlying assumptions were examined. To assess the normality of the data distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed, which showed that the distribution of the variables in both the pre-test and post-test stages was normal. Levene's test was applied to test the homogeneity of variances, and the results confirmed that this assumption was met. Additionally, Box's M test was conducted to evaluate the equality of covariance matrices. Since the significance level was greater than

0.05, the assumption of equality of covariance matrices was supported. Therefore, the use of MANCOVA was justified based on these findings.

Table3. Multivariate Tests Results (MANOVA) Comparing Posttest Scores of Homesickness Components between Experimental and Control Groups

Test	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	0.94	60.87	5	19	0.001	0.49
Wilks' Lambda	0.06	60.87	5	19	0.001	0.49
Hotelling's Trace	16.02	60.87	5	19	0.001	0.49
Roy's Largest Root	16.02	60.87	5	19	0.001	0.49

As shown in Table3, the results of the multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) indicate that all four multivariate test statistics — Pillai's Trace (F = 60.87, p < .001), Wilks' Lambda (F = 60.87, p < .001), Hotelling's Trace (F = 60.87, p < .001), and Roy's Largest Root (F = 60.87, p < .001) were statistically significant. These findings suggest that, after adjusting for pretest differences, the linear combination of the dependent variables was significantly influenced by the independent variable. In other words, the results of the MANCOVA show that the intervention method (self-encouragement training) had a significant effect on the combined dependent variables, and there is a meaningful difference between the groups.

Table4. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) for Comparing the Mean Scores of Homesickness Components between Experimental and Control Groups

Source	Dependent Variable	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	Effect Size (η^2)
Group	Missing Family	219.34	1	219.34	100.68	0.001	0.61
	Desire to Return Home	254.13	1	254.13	90.45	0.001	0.59
	Maladjustment	171.71	1	171.71	38.22	0.001	0.62
	Feeling of Loneliness	125.37	1	125.37	37.19	0.001	0.62
	Missing Familiar People and Environment	159.06	1	159.06	77.85	0.001	0.67
Error	Missing Family	50.10	23	2.18			
	Desire to Return Home	64.62	23	2.81			
	Maladjustment	103.32	23	4.49			
	Feeling of Loneliness	77.52	23	3.37			
	Missing Familiar People and Environment	46.99	23	2.04			

As shown in Table4, after adjusting for the pre-test scores, the difference between the experimental and control groups is statistically significant at the 0.01 alpha level for all components of homesickness. Therefore, the research hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of self-compassion training on homesickness (including missing one's family, desire to return home, maladjustment, feeling of loneliness, and missing familiar people and environments) among non-native university students are supported. The results confirm that the experimental group showed significantly lower levels of homesickness components in the post-test compared to the control group.

Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the effectiveness of self-encouragement training on the sense of homesickness among non-native university students. The findings indicate that self-encouragement training significantly reduced various components of homesickness (including longing for family, desire to return home, feelings of alienation, loneliness, and nostalgia for familiar people and environments) among the non-native university students participants. Statistical analysis revealed a significant difference between the adjusted post-test means of the experimental and control groups concerning the components of homesickness. Specifically, the self-encouragement intervention led to a marked decrease in homesickness indicators within the experimental group.

These results align with previous research conducted by Rostami et al. (2024), Kishi et al. (2023), JanaAbadi and Sangdel (2022), AliSofi et al. (2018), Ghadampour et al. (2018), and Farnam and Shirazi (2018). The present findings can be understood within the conceptualization of homesickness as a well-documented phenomenon among non-native university students, traditionally regarded as a negative psychological experience (Wang & Mafa, 2024). Homesickness, often considered an avoidant emotional state, can be defined as "a psychological response to the absence of loved ones and familiar environments," typically experienced as stress or discomfort due to separation from one's home, whether the separation is actual or anticipated (McConnon & Adarkwah, 2023).

Feelings of isolation and lack of social support necessary for adapting to a new environment may evoke stress and melancholia. The experience of homesickness often exacerbates stress levels in non-native university students (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). Therefore, interventions such as self-encouragement training, a psychotherapeutic technique aimed at fostering self-regulation and interpersonal connection, can assist students in establishing supportive interactions and reducing feelings of homesickness and loneliness (Mohamud & Madderla, 2024).

Self-encouragement training functions as a fundamental component in various developmental processes, acting as a catalyst for effectively resolving difficulties. This practice has the potential to cultivate satisfaction amidst challenges, facilitate skillful decision-making, and enhance innovative problem-solving strategies. Moreover, it can bolster morale, instill optimism, and foster resilience and confidence (Saljughi & Sadeghi, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when students faced heightened stress,

loneliness, and homesickness, self-encouragement techniques were employed to alleviate these symptoms with positive outcomes (Tefera et al., 2023).

Further interpretation of these findings suggests that self-encouragement training positively influences psychological resilience and social well-being in students. It is associated with processes such as motivation, hope, and incremental support, which collectively prepare students to overcome distressing and alienating experiences while facilitating social adaptation (JanaAbadi & Sangdel, 2022). Empirical evidence supports the direct effects of self-encouragement training on stress, distress, and homesickness reduction (Akbarzadeh et al., 2022). Consequently, self-encouragement interventions can be broadly applied to promote the psychological well-being of students.

Conclusion

Theoretically, the effectiveness of self-encouragement training in alleviating homesickness among non-native university students can be explained by self-regulation theories (Zimmerman, 1999). Through self-encouragement skills, individuals gain control over their emotional and cognitive responses, enabling them to manage stressors and challenges effectively and reduce homesickness and anxiety. Overall, the findings affirm that self-encouragement training has a meaningful positive impact on reducing homesickness in students separated from their familiar environments and families.

Overall, with self-encouragement training, the capability of the study group was enhanced in the components of this training, which include goal-setting, establishing positive relationships with others, coping with basic life challenges and imperfections, and identity expressions related to self-encouragement and role advancement in challenging situations. This important factor led to an increase in participants' self-esteem levels. In summary, the results of the present study indicate the partial effectiveness of self-encouragement training on students' sense of pride. Given that students with lower self-esteem and weaker social relationships benefited from this training by developing greater optimism, more positive and friendly attitudes, and a reduction in negative emotions, this in turn resulted in improved well-being, more effective coping behaviors, and higher self-confidence for participation in community activities. Consequently, individuals perceive themselves as valued and accepted by others, which ultimately reduces feelings of loneliness and fosters an increase in social interest, positive interpersonal relationships, and affectionate thinking. These components can serve as an emotional resource for individuals, as they learn how to self-determine, thereby reforming their beliefs and experiences, and altering their self-perceptions and abilities, leading to improved well-being. The present study demonstrates that the reduction of feelings of pride and the increase of desirable social behaviors may be due to the active and verbal participation of individuals in group sessions, which focused on identifying solutions to problems and promoted adaptive behaviors and constructive responses.

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