

Construction and application of a self-siege scale among Secondary School Students in the City of Mosul

Mohammed Hashim Taha Sulaiman AL-Ogaidi ^{1,*} and Mohammed Saeed Noori Al-Nuaimi ²

¹ Department of Educational and Psychological Sciences, College of Education for Humanities, University of Mosul.

² Directorate General of Education, Nineveh Governorate.

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Abstract

The present study aimed to construct a Self-Siege Scale and to administer it to secondary school students in the city of Mosul, drawing on the model of Robert W. Firestone, Lisa Firestone, and Joyce Catlett (2013). In its final form, the scale consists of 30 items distributed across six dimensions: imitation of parental psychological defenses, conflicting-values conflicts, negative self-views, conformity to societal expectations, interpersonal relationships and dynamics, and identity conflicts, with five items per dimension (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 153).

The sample used for item analysis and construct validity comprised 399 male and female students, whereas the final administration sample comprised 600 students (300 males and 300 females). The psychometric properties indicated that the scale possesses face validity at an expert-agreement rate of 95% and test-retest reliability of 0.80. Item discrimination and internal-consistency analyses supported the retention of all thirty items, with item-total correlation coefficients ranging from approximately 0.375 to 0.534.

Administration of the scale revealed a sample mean of 62.14 (SD = 12.22) against a hypothetical mean of 60, $t(599) = 4.29$, $p < 0.001$, with a small effect size ($d = 0.18$). A statistically significant difference was found in favour of males ($M = 63.34$) compared with females ($M = 60.94$), $t(598) = 2.42$, $p = 0.016$, $d = 0.20$. The study concludes that the scale is suitable for research use, while clarifying that the findings do not indicate a markedly elevated level of self-siege, but rather a limited exceedance of the hypothetical mean.

Keywords: Self-Siege; Psychological Measurement; Secondary Stage; Firestone Model; Psychometric Properties; City of Mosul.

1. Introduction

The self is a central psychological structure formed through continuous interaction with the environment, developing into an internal system of needs, capacities, and self-perceptions that provides continuity and distinctiveness. Its development requires psychological differentiation from parents and movement towards autonomy, enabling individuals to perceive themselves as separate and responsible entities (Marcia, 1980, p. 159).

This developmental process may be disrupted by **self-siege**, or internal entrapment, in which individuals feel imprisoned by negative thoughts, emotions, and constraints that prevent change or escape from stressful situations. Such experiences weaken personal agency and are associated with defeat and psychological helplessness, leaving individuals trapped within a distressed self (Gilbert et al., 2004, p. 31). Firestone's model explains this condition through the internalisation of the "critical inner voice," a destructive pattern derived from parental attitudes, psychological

* Corresponding author: Mohammed Hashim Taha Sulaiman AL-Ogaidi

defences, and emotional behaviours. This voice functions as a false internal security system that restricts authentic potential through harsh self-criticism and withdrawal from goal-directed activity (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 14).

Social pressures and expectations may intensify self-siege by imposing patterns of compliance and creating conflicts in values and identity. When adolescents cannot reconcile their personal capacities and beliefs with externally imposed commitments, they may experience role confusion and construct their identity around pleasing others rather than expressing the authentic self (Miller, 2011, p. 10). This issue is particularly important during the secondary stage, when adolescents seek psychological independence, formulate future roles, and make consequential decisions. Disturbance in the balance between autonomy and the internal constraints produced by early socialisation may generate anxiety and instability in self-concept (Erikson, 1968, p. 16).

The local context increases the importance of this problem. Studies conducted in Mosul found that university students displayed twisted thinking—including catastrophic thoughts, negative filtering, dismissal of contradictory evidence, and unreliable prediction—at levels exceeding the hypothetical mean, with a strong positive association between twisted and radical thinking (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Dulami, 2025). A later study similarly found that younger university students recorded a mean score of 64.45, compared with a hypothetical mean of 60. This result was attributed to high academic expectations, competitive environments, and socialisation processes that reproduce parental intellectual stereotypes (AL-Ogaidi, 2026d, p. 3985). These findings correspond with Firestone's explanation of the internalisation of parental attitudes and suggest that the distorted cognitive patterns besieging the self may begin during the secondary stage, while identity is still developing.

Accordingly, there is a pressing need for a precise, locally appropriate instrument to measure self-siege among secondary school students in Mosul. Developing a psychometrically sound measure would clarify the dimensions of this psychological construct and its effects on identity development, while helping educators and counsellors provide appropriate psychological support.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The research problem takes shape in the emergence of a state of self-siege among secondary school students, manifested through the complex interplay between internalized parental influences and the internal conflicts generated by the critical voice. Adolescents find themselves caught between compliance with social pressures and the expectations of those around them, on the one hand, and their desire to form an independent identity, on the other, which produces a negative view of the self and complications in interpersonal relationships that impede psychological equilibrium (Blatt, 2008, p. 18).

A further facet of the problem lies in the difficulty of measuring this psychological construct in the local environment of the city of Mosul, given the absence in the local educational field of a rigorously constructed instrument grounded in contemporary theoretical frameworks addressing the “anti-self” and the defensive processes that impede growth. This lack of research-oriented assessment tools makes it difficult to identify students in whom value conflicts intersect with inherited psychological defenses.

What sharpens this gap is that the recent movement of instrument construction in the local environment has been directed almost exclusively towards university students and towards cognitive rather than self-related constructs. Locally standardised scales have been built, by means of theoretical bridging, for reckless thinking (AL-Ogaidi, 2025, p. 167), repetitive thinking (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026, p. 6532), health thinking (AL-Ogaidi, 2026a, p. 2032), and intellectual gluttony (AL-Ogaidi, 2026b, p. 901), while a contextual thinking test was constructed for students of the College of Education for Humanities (AL-Ogaidi, 2026c, p. 1158). Notwithstanding the accumulation these instruments represent, they measure patterns of information processing rather than the state of the self that lies behind them, and none of them was directed to the secondary stage, at which psychological differentiation and identity formation are decided. The present study proceeds from this twofold gap: the gap of the construct and the gap of the educational stage.

In light of the foregoing, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the level of self-siege among secondary school students in the city of Mosul?
- Are there statistically significant differences in the level of self-siege attributable to gender (males/females)?

1.2. Significance of the Study

The theoretical significance of the study lies in its provision of a precise operational definition of the concept of self-siege in the Iraqi environment, based on the model of Firestone, Firestone, and Catlett (2013). It also contributes to

enriching the psychometric literature through the construction of a 30-item scale distributed across six dimensions: imitation of parental psychological defenses, conflicting-values conflicts, negative self-views, conformity to societal expectations, interpersonal relationships and dynamics, and identity conflicts (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 153).

Its applied significance lies in placing a scientific measurement instrument in the hands of researchers, educational counsellors, and specialists in psychology, enabling them to monitor levels of self-siege among secondary school students. The scale assists in understanding how internal conflicts and external pressures affect the student's personality, thereby opening new avenues for developing counselling programmes that support psychological differentiation and positive identity formation, without claiming that the scale constitutes an instrument for clinical diagnosis.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The present study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To identify the level of self-siege among the members of the final administration sample.
- To determine the significance of the difference in the level of this siege between males and females.

1.4. Delimitations of the Study

The present study is delimited substantively to the concept of self-siege and its psychometric dimensions, and its human delimitations are confined to secondary (preparatory) stage students of both sexes. Its spatial delimitations comprise the secondary and preparatory schools affiliated with the Nineveh Directorate of Education in the city of Mosul, with fieldwork conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year.

1.5. Definition of Terms

- **Firestone et al. (2013):** “a state of psychological entrapment resulting from the individual's internalization of the ‘critical inner voice’, which is formed from parental attitudes and their destructive psychological defenses, thereby confining the individual within cognitive and emotional patterns that impede psychological differentiation and personal growth” (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 14).
- **Operational definition:** self-siege refers to the total score obtained by the respondent through his or her answers to the thirty items of the scale. A three-point response format was adopted, such that the theoretical range of scores extends from a minimum of 30 to a maximum of 90, with a hypothetical mean of 60.

2. Theoretical Framework and Previous Studies

This section addresses the theoretical roots of the development and differentiation of the self, and the manner in which identity and values are formed amid the interaction between the desire for autonomy and the parental and social influences that constrain authentic self-expression (Leary & Tangney, 2011, p. 154).

The self represents a system of the individual's beliefs and perceptions concerning his or her characteristics and capacities; it develops through experience and social appraisals, thereby influencing psychological adjustment and the organization of the inner world (Baumeister, 1987, p. 529). The self is bound up with identity, which affords the individual a sense of continuity and uniqueness, whereas weak integration between values and roles leads to identity diffusion and disturbance (Abu Ghazala, 2007, p. 261). Values direct the individual's goals and behaviour: their clarity yields identity stability, whereas their disorganization impedes the capacity of the self to express its authentic aspirations (Al-Ashqar, 2012, p. 29).

Psychological differentiation denotes the individual's transition from dependence to independence in opinions and decisions, while maintaining balanced affective ties with the family (Aslan, 2016, p. 1). Differentiation requires the capacity to separate one's own thoughts and feelings from those of others, thereby assisting in the formation of psychological boundaries and a stable identity (Mahler et al., 1975, p. 4). Healthy autonomy is achieved through the combination of parental trust and respect for the adolescent's independence, whereas insufficient differentiation manifests in excessive compliance or in conflictual separation (Moon & Bahn, 2022, p. 41).

Self-siege appears when the individual's capacity for independence and differentiation is constrained, such that he or she feels helpless in the face of negative thoughts and internal or external pressures (O'Connor, 2011, p. 244).

Negative thoughts weaken personal agency, preventing individuals from translating goals and aspirations into action and heightening their sense of alienation from the self (Gilbert & Allan, 1998, p. 104). The critical inner voice plays a

principal role in self-siege: it is formed through the internalization of negative parental attitudes and the imitation of their defenses, and it produces a split between the real self and the growth-impeding anti-self (Firestone, 1992, pp. 115, 131).

Social expectations and the continual search for the approval of others further reinforce the loss of the voice of the self and the sacrifice of personal needs and aspirations (Pyszczynski et al., 2015, p. 10). Reliance on rigid external standards produces a gap between the individual's authentic self-knowledge and the identity displayed before others, thereby disrupting healthy psychological development (Shahar, 2008, p. 92).

Self-siege thus expresses a conflict between the real self and the anti-self-generated by the pressures of socialization and social conformity, such that the individual's decisions become driven by the avoidance of guilt or shame rather than by free will (Harter, 2002, p. 382).

The cognitive mechanisms through which this siege is sustained have been described in the local literature under designations proximate to those employed here. Twisted thinking has been defined as patterns of distortion of reality that malform the individual's perception of the world without his or her awareness, among which negative filtering and the dismissal of contradicting evidence operate as the very machinery by which harsh self-judgements are protected from disconfirmation (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Dulami, 2025). Repetitive thinking, in turn, supplies the temporal dimension of the process: the recurrent return of intrusive ideas to consciousness and the prolonged focus upon unresolved stressors, which converts a passing self-critical thought into a settled cognitive structure (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026, p. 6530). Read within the Firestone framework, these two patterns may be regarded as the manner in which the critical inner voice acquires content and continuity: content through distortion, and continuity through repetition. Conversely, health thinking — characterised by intellectual flexibility, optimism, self-awareness, and the capacity to manage crises (AL-Ogaidi, 2026a, p. 2030) — and contextual thinking, understood as awareness of the mental set and the ability to control it when confronting a task (AL-Ogaidi, 2026c, p. 1156), describe the opposite pole, which stands close to what the present study terms psychological differentiation.

2.1. The Model of Firestone et al.

The model of Firestone and colleagues (2013) rests on an integrative vision combining psychoanalytic and existential perspectives, and centres on differentiation as the foundation of healthy psychological development. It posits a conflict between the “real self”, representing the authentic aspect that strives for love, work, and the attainment of goals, and the “anti-self”, which is formed through the internalization of negative parental and social messages. The anti-self-expresses itself through a critical inner voice that undermines self-esteem and imposes thoughts and defenses limiting autonomy and distancing the individual from genuine goals, thereby producing self-siege. Liberation from it requires distinguishing authentic values from internalized ideas, recovering psychological independence, and building a coherent identity (Firestone et al., 2013, pp. 2, 14, 153).

2.2. Dimensions of Self-Siege

The six dimensions of the Self-Siege Scale were defined operationally in the present study by derivation from the theoretical frameworks of the Firestone et al. (2013) model, with the aim of translating the existential and psychoanalytic conceptions of psychological differentiation into a measurable psychometric structure. These dimensions seek to capture the multiple manifestations experienced by secondary school students when they find themselves constrained by internal and external forces that prevent the attainment of psychological independence, generating a sense of entrapment and a loss of the capacity for free action (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 153).

2.2.1. Imitation of parental psychological defenses

Operationally, this dimension refers to the student's adoption of the defense mechanisms and psychological orientations that the parents employed in coping with their own pressures, such that the student comes to reproduce inherited emotional patterns that do not express an authentic response to situations. This imitation constitutes an unconscious means of preserving the “fantasy bond” with the parents, granting the student a spurious sense of security at the cost of the capacity for psychological differentiation (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 153).

This dimension is linked to self-siege among secondary school students through the arrest of their emotional development: instead of developing personal coping skills commensurate with the challenges of adolescence, the student is besieged within an obsolete internal “security system” devised by the parents. This defensive internalization constrains ego flexibility and prevents the adolescent from exploring new ways of engaging with his or her own world, rendering the student a prisoner of a past he or she did not choose (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 154).

2.2.2. Conflicting-values conflicts

This dimension expresses the state of tension experienced by the student as a result of a deep gap between the personal values he or she has begun to form during the search for identity and the standards and values imposed by the familial or social environment. Such conflicts arise when adolescents feel that adopting independent values may expose them to the loss of acceptance or arouse feelings of guilt towards internalized parental authority (Miller, 2011, p. 10).

Self-siege appears here in the form of “coerced commitment” to values in which the student does not believe, producing a state of value alienation. This discordance impedes the student's ability to make clear decisions about the future, as he or she becomes caught between the desire to express the real self and the fear of shattering the idealized image drawn by others, thereby disrupting the course of psychological differentiation (Abu Ghazala, 2007, p. 261).

2.2.3. Negative self-views

This dimension represents the echo of the “critical inner voice” through which the student directs harsh and destructive judgements towards his or her academic abilities, personal worth, and physical appearance. These negative orientations are not innate; they are the product of the internalization of distorted perceptions and hostile attitudes received from caregivers in childhood, which are transformed in adolescence into a continuous internal assault (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 14).

The relation of this dimension to self-siege is embodied in the fact that such thoughts operate as cognitive constraints that prevent the student from attempting or pursuing his or her goals, since the “critical voice” supplies perpetual justifications for failure and withdrawal. This cognitive siege lowers self-efficacy, as the student feels imprisoned within a distorted image of the self, which deprives him or her of the opportunity to discover genuine potential (Gilbert & Allan, 1998, p. 104).

Local field evidence supports the centrality of this dimension. Among university students in Mosul, negative filtering thoughts and thoughts dismissing evidence emerged as functioning components of twisted thinking, whereby attention is confined to a single negative detail while the individual's positive record is set aside (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Dulami, 2025). This is precisely the cognitive mechanism by which the critical inner voice preserves the negative self-view against contrary experience, and it is what the items of the present dimension seek to capture at the secondary stage.

2.2.4. Conformity to societal expectations

This dimension focuses on the student's excessive tendency to comply with social norms and the expectations of those around him or her at the expense of personal needs, in pursuit of validation and a sense of belonging. This striving to please others leads to the development of a “false self” that outwardly conforms to society but lacks substance and personal integrity (Pyszczynski et al., 2015, p. 10).

Such conformity reinforces self-siege among secondary students through the “loss of voice”: the student becomes unable to express opinions that contradict the social consensus for fear of isolation. This external siege, transformed into an internal constraint, prevents adolescents from exercising their right to individuality and leads them to live lives delimited by paths prescribed in advance by society, thereby impeding the construction of an independent identity (Harter, 2002, p. 382).

The weight of this dimension in the Iraqi environment is illuminated by a finding reported for reckless thinking among students of the Faculties of Education in Mosul, whose mean (58.22) fell below the hypothetical mean of the scale, a result attributed to strong familial cohesion and well-established social standards operating as external regulatory systems that govern individual conduct (AL-Ogaidi, 2025, pp. 171–172). Such external controls perform a protective function insofar as they restrain impulsive behaviour; yet the same controls, once internalised as a condition of acceptance, are what the present study measures under conformity to societal expectations, since the boundary between socially guided conduct and the surrender of the voice of the self is a fine one.

2.2.5. Interpersonal relationships and dynamics

This dimension addresses the difficulties the student encounters in building healthy and balanced relationships with peers and others, resulting from the projection of internal conflicts and insufficient differentiation onto these interactions. Such relationships are frequently characterized either by excessive dependence or by avoidance and withdrawal, reflecting the student's failure to maintain clear psychological boundaries between the self and others (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 153). Self-siege appears in this context when relationships become a source of anxiety and threat rather than support, as the student feels “besieged” within relational dynamics that reproduce patterns of

parental rejection or control. This results in an inability to communicate effectively, driving the student towards a psychological isolation that intensifies the sense of internal entrapment and of being unable to escape stressful situations (Gilbert & Allan, 1998, p. 115).

2.2.6. *Identity conflicts*

This dimension refers to the state of diffusion and disturbance in self-perception experienced by the student when he or she is unable to integrate roles and aspirations into a coherent and continuous identity. These conflicts arise from insufficient psychological differentiation, which leads adolescents to feel that their identity is not “their own” but rather a disordered amalgam of internalized influences that do not express their authentic reality (Marcia, 1980, p. 159).

Identity conflict is fundamentally bound up with self-siege: the student finds himself or herself caught in a phase of “role confusion”, lacking a clear vision of who he or she is or where he or she is heading. This ambiguity of identity represents the apex of psychological siege, as adolescents feel confined within a present that neither connects them to their past nor prepares them for their future, thereby disrupting all attempts at growth and independence (Erikson, 1968, p. 16).

2.3. **Overlap and Interrelations among the Dimensions**

The six dimensions adopted in the present scale interact within a system of reciprocal influence. The imitation of parental psychological defenses and the internalization of negative self-views contribute to the formation of the “anti-self” and the critical inner voice, which in turn drives the student towards excessive conformity to societal expectations in order to avoid rejection or feelings of inferiority; this, in turn, intensifies conflicts of values and identity and the disturbance of interpersonal relationships and dynamics. These conflicts feed the negative view of the self and weaken the student's capacity for differentiation and for forming independent values and identity. Internal constraints thus combine with external pressures to constitute a composite state of self-siege that impedes psychological growth and the pursuit of genuine goals (Firestone et al., 2013, pp. 1, 154).

2.4. **Previous Studies**

2.4.1. *First: Arabic studies*

- **Lebbachi (2020):** This study aimed to examine the relationship between identity crisis and antisocial behaviour among secondary school pupils, adopting a descriptive method. The sample comprised pupils from secondary schools in the city of M'sila, Algeria, and an identity-crisis scale was employed. The findings indicated a positive relationship between identity crisis and antisocial behaviour. It relates to the present study in its examination of the obstacles to identity development among secondary students (Lebbachi, 2020, p. 131).
- **Hussein Mishari Mohammed (2025):** This study aimed to determine the effect of the loss of meanings of existence and dogmatic sense on open-mindedness and closed-mindedness among sixth-year preparatory students, following a descriptive-analytical method. The sample comprised 223 male and female students in Wasit Governorate, and a researcher-constructed 83-item scale was employed. The results revealed a significant effect of loss of meaning on psychological closedness. It relates to the present study in its treatment of the concepts of entrapment and psychological constraint among preparatory-stage students (Hussein Mishari Mohammed, 2025, p. 1124).
- **AL-Ogaidi and Al-Dulami (2025):** This study aimed to reveal the level of twisted and radical thinking and the relationship between them among university students, adopting a descriptive method with a stratified random sample of 400 second-year male and female students at the University of Mosul, using two tests constructed for the purpose. The findings indicated that the students possess twisted thinking as well as radical thinking, and that a strong direct relationship obtains between the two patterns ($r = 0.78$). It relates to the present study in documenting the cognitive distortions that supply the critical inner voice with its content among students of the same local environment (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Dulami, 2025).
- **AL-Ogaidi and Al-Salih (2026):** This study aimed to construct and apply a Repetitive Thinking Scale among students of the Faculties of Education for Humanities and Pure Sciences, following a descriptive method with a sample of 400 male and female students and a 24-item scale built through theoretical bridging. The results showed that the mean of the students' scores (55.20) fell below the hypothetical mean (60), a finding interpreted as mental flexibility and adaptation to a changing university environment. It relates to the present study methodologically, in its procedures for constructing a locally standardised scale, and conceptually, in its treatment of the recurrence of thought as a mechanism sustaining internal constraint (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026, p. 6537).

- **AL-Ogaidi, Abdul-Aziz, and Ridha (2026):** This study aimed to verify the effect of an educational programme on developing social intelligence among preparatory-stage female students, adopting the experimental method with an equivalent-groups design on a sample of 60 fourth-preparatory female students in the centre of Nineveh Governorate, using a programme of twenty lessons and a social intelligence test. The results demonstrated a statistically significant effect of the programme in favour of the post-administration and of the experimental group. It relates to the present study in addressing the same educational stage and the same local environment, and in demonstrating that the psychological and social capacities of students at this stage are amenable to development through structured intervention (AL-Ogaidi et al., 2026, p. 241).

2.4.2. *Second: Foreign studies*

- **Oleś et al. (2020):** This study aimed to explore the relationship between types of inner dialogue and the functions of self-talk, adopting a descriptive method. The sample comprised university students from Poland and the United States, and inner-dialogue measures were employed. The findings revealed considerable overlap between critical inner dialogues (the critical voice) and maladjustment. It relates to the present study in elucidating the dynamics of the inner voice that imposes a siege upon the self (Oleś et al., 2020, p. 110).
- **Šoková et al. (2024):** This study aimed to analyse cycles of critical inner dialogue and the strategies used to cope with them, following a qualitative method (in-depth interviews). The sample comprised 20 adult participants, and six types of “inner critic” were identified. The findings indicated that the critical voice appears in forms such as “not good enough for others” or “the hated self”. The study informs the present research by supporting the operational dimensions of the Self-Siege Scale, particularly those pertaining to negative self-views (Šoková et al., 2024, p. 179).

2.5. **Commentary on Previous Studies**

The previous studies varied in their objectives and samples. The studies of Lebbachi (2020) and Hussein Mishari Mohammed (2025) addressed identity crisis, loss of meaning, and psychological closedness among secondary and preparatory stage students, whereas the studies of Oleś et al. (2020) and Šoková et al. (2024) investigated inner dialogue and the inner critic among university students and adults. Most adopted a descriptive method, with the exception of Šoková et al., who followed a qualitative approach.

Their findings demonstrated an association between identity crisis, loss of meaning, and the critical inner voice, on the one hand, and manifestations of maladjustment and psychological constraint, on the other. The present study benefited from them in specifying the dimensions of the Self-Siege Scale and in formulating its items, and is distinguished by the construction of a multidimensional instrument and its administration to secondary school students in the city of Mosul.

The local studies added to this review occupy an intermediate position between the two foregoing groups: they share with the Arabic studies their environment and population, and with the foreign studies their concern with the inner cognitive processes that constrain the individual. They differ from the present study in two respects that define its contribution: their populations were drawn predominantly from the university stage, and their instruments measured patterns of thinking rather than the structure of the self — with the exception of the experimental study of AL-Ogaidi et al. (2026), which shares the present study’s stage and environment but pursues a developmental rather than a psychometric aim.

2.6. **Position of the Present Study among Previous Studies**

The present study is situated at the intersection between studies addressing psychological differentiation and those focusing on self-siege. It is distinctive in constructing a local scale for the city of Mosul based on the integrative Firestone (2013) model. What distinguishes this study is its provision of a psychometric structure comprising six precisely delineated dimensions that cover the aspects of psychological siege from its parental roots through to the contemporary identity conflicts of adolescents.

The study is likewise situated as a further step in a line of locally standardised instrument construction associated with the University of Mosul (AL-Ogaidi, 2025, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026), from which it departs by shifting the object of measurement from patterns of thinking to the besieged self, and the population of measurement from the university stage to the secondary stage, where the parental roots of the siege are still proximate and its effects upon identity formation are most decisive.

3. Method

The present study adopted the descriptive method, which is appropriate to the nature of objectives directed towards constructing a psychological measurement instrument and administering it in order to describe the phenomenon of self-siege among secondary school students. This method constitutes a precise scientific means of documenting the characteristics and properties of the phenomenon under study as they exist in reality and of analysing the interactions among its variables, thereby permitting a transition from qualitative description to quantitative analysis that clarifies the levels of the phenomenon and its statistical differences (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018, p. 12).

3.1. Population

The population of the present study comprises secondary (preparatory) stage students of both sexes in the day schools affiliated with the Directorate General of Education of Nineveh in the city of Mosul, numbering 37,808 male students and 59,607 female students (This statistic was obtained from the Department of Educational Planning at the Directorate General of Education in Nineveh Governorate under letter no. 30/1/22//28597, dated 9/4/2026.). This population constitutes the human framework within which the study sought to understand the level of self-siege on the basis of the adopted theoretical model.

3.2. Samples

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the following samples were selected:

1. **Face-validity (expert) sample:** the scale in its preliminary form was submitted to a panel of experts and arbitrators specializing in education, psychology, and psychological measurement, in order to judge the adequacy of the items in measuring the construct and its six proposed dimensions.
2. **Reliability sample:** the scale was administered to an exploratory sample of secondary school students (drawn from outside the final administration sample) in order to verify the stability of responses over time using the test-retest method.
3. **Item-analysis and construct-validity sample:** this sample comprised 399 male and female secondary school students in the city of Mosul. Their data were used to derive the psychometric properties of the scale, including item discrimination analysis and the computation of internal consistency (item-total and item-dimension correlations).
4. **Final administration sample:** this sample comprised 600 secondary school students in the city of Mosul, distributed equally as 300 males and 300 females. It was employed for the purpose of identifying the level of self-siege among students and of detecting the statistical significance of differences according to gender.

4. Procedures for Constructing the Self-Siege Scale

The concept of self-siege was defined on the basis of the model of Firestone and colleagues as a state of psychological entrapment arising from the critical inner voice and the anti-self, which impedes the individual's differentiation and growth. In light of the theoretical framework, the study adopted six dimensions: imitation of parental psychological defenses, values conflicts, negative self-views, conformity to societal expectations, interpersonal relationships and dynamics, and identity conflicts (Firestone et al., 2013, pp. 14, 153).

The procedure followed here — deriving the dimensions from an integrative theoretical model, submitting them to experts as the basic components of the concept, and only then formulating the items that represent them — corresponds to the method of theoretical bridging (the synthetic approach) adopted in the construction of comparable local instruments (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026, p. 6532; AL-Ogaidi, 2026b, p. 901). The present study departs from those instruments in confining itself to a single explanatory model rather than synthesising several, given the sufficiency of the Firestone framework for the construct under measurement, and in adopting six dimensions rather than four, in keeping with the greater structural complexity of the self as compared with a single pattern of thinking.

Thirty items were formulated for the scale, five per dimension, with three response alternatives. The items, dimensions, and instructions were then submitted to a panel of experts to verify their appropriateness and the soundness of their wording. Following the implementation of the suggested modifications and the retention of items achieving an agreement rate of 95%, the scale was ready for statistical analysis and for verification of its psychometric properties.

Scoring procedure. Items are scored according to their direction. For items indicating the presence of self-siege, scores of 3, 2, and 1 are assigned to the alternatives (applies to me, not sure, does not apply to me), respectively. In the case of positively worded items (expressing differentiation or psychological health), scoring is reversed so that the same alternatives receive scores of 1, 2, and 3. Given the thirty items, the minimum theoretical score on the scale is 30 and the maximum theoretical score is 90, with a hypothetical mean of 60.

5. Psychometric Properties of the Self-Siege Scale

5.1. First: Face validity

In order to verify the adequacy of the items in measuring what they were designed to measure, the definition of self-siege, its six dimensions, and the thirty items of the scale were submitted to a panel of specialist experts to judge the accuracy with which the items represented their proposed domains and the soundness of their linguistic formulation. Face validity is regarded as an important indicator of the appropriateness of the instrument for respondents and of its logical capacity to capture the phenomenon under study (Al-Zubaie et al., 1981, p. 39). The scale gained the approval of the experts with an agreement rate of 95%, which warranted the retention of all items without deletion.

This proportion falls within the range obtained in instrument-construction studies carried out in the same environment, in which expert agreement on the items ranged between 95% and 98% (AL-Ogaidi, 2025, p. 167; AL-Ogaidi, 2026a, p. 2033; AL-Ogaidi, 2026b, p. 901), which supports the adequacy of the level of agreement obtained here as a criterion for the retention of items.

5.2. Second: Item discrimination

The discriminating power of the scale items was derived in order to ascertain their capacity to differentiate between individuals with high levels of self-siege and those with low levels. The instrument was administered to the item-analysis sample of 399 male and female students, and the extreme-groups method was applied using the upper and lower 27% to represent the two groups, with each extreme group comprising 108 students (Anastasi, 1976, p. 102). Using the t-test for two independent samples, the results indicated that all thirty items were discriminating and statistically significant, with obtained t values ranging from 7.01 to 15.72, which exceed the critical value of 1.96 at the 0.05 level of significance.

The adoption of the upper and lower 27% follows the procedure established in comparable local studies, which justify this proportion on the ground that it affords the best discrimination between the two extreme groups while preserving the largest possible group size and the maximum variation between them (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026, p. 6533).

5.3. Third: Internal consistency

To ensure the homogeneity of the scale items and their coherence with the overall construct, internal consistency was computed by correlating the score of each item with the total score of the scale, thereby ensuring that all items proceed along the same course as the test as a whole (Nunnally, 1978, p. 115). The correlation coefficients ranged from approximately 0.375 to 0.534, with a mean of 0.473. When these coefficients were compared with the critical value of the correlation coefficient of approximately 0.098, all scale items proved to be significant and positive; accordingly, all thirty items were retained in the final form of the scale.

5.4. Fourth: Reliability

Reliability is an indicator of the stability of results and the accuracy of measurement when the instrument is administered repeatedly to the same sample under the same conditions. To verify this, the test-retest method was employed by administering the scale to an exploratory sample and then re-administering it after an appropriate time interval (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018, p. 158). The reliability coefficient derived by this method was 0.80, a high value confirming that the scale possesses a substantial degree of stability and dependability, rendering it suitable for administration in the main study and its results trustworthy for use in psychological research.

This value is consistent with the reliability coefficients derived by the same method for local scales addressing proximate constructs, which ranged between 0.79 and 0.86, several of them over a re-administration interval of fifteen days (AL-Ogaidi, 2026a, p. 2036; AL-Ogaidi, 2026c, p. 1158; AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026, p. 6536), which strengthens confidence in the temporal stability of the present instrument.

5.5. Final Form of the Scale

In its construction phase, the Self-Siege Scale satisfied the psychometric conditions that render it a valid scientific instrument for measurement. Its final form comprised 30 items distributed equally across six principal dimensions: imitation of parental psychological defenses, conflicting-values conflicts, negative self-views, conformity to societal expectations, interpersonal relationships and dynamics, and identity conflicts, with five items per dimension. The scale adopted three graded response alternatives — applies to me, not sure, does not apply to me — placing the total score within a theoretical range extending from a minimum of 30 to a maximum of 90, with a hypothetical mean of 60.

5.6. Final Administration

Upon completion of the item-analysis procedures and verification of the adequacy of the instrument, the final administration was carried out on a sample of 600 secondary school students in the city of Mosul, distributed equally as 300 males and 300 females. This fieldwork aimed to document the levels of self-siege among the members of the sample and to analyse the differences among them according to gender, while ensuring the inclusion of diverse schools so as to guarantee the representativeness of the research population in the city of Mosul.

5.7. Statistical Procedures

The data were processed statistically using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and the following procedures were adopted: percentages to compute expert agreement regarding face validity; the Pearson correlation coefficient to derive the internal consistency of the scale and to compute the reliability coefficient by the test-retest method; the t-test for two independent samples in the analysis of item discrimination and in the comparison of the means of males and females; and the one-sample t-test to compare the sample mean with the hypothetical mean of the scale (Nunnally, 1978, p. 115). The arithmetic mean and standard deviation were derived to describe the responses of the sample, and Cohen's d was used to measure the effect size associated with statistical significance (Anastasi, 1976, p. 102).

5.8. Ethical and Procedural Considerations

During the conduct of the fieldwork in schools, the researchers adhered to a set of ethical safeguards to ensure the integrity of the study. It was made clear that the scale was prepared exclusively for scientific research purposes, with emphasis on the confidentiality of the information provided and reassurance to students that their responses would not be seen by anyone outside the research framework. Care was also taken to keep responses anonymous by not recording students' names on the scale forms, which contributed to enhancing candour and objectivity in the expression of feelings and thoughts (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997, p. 24).

6. Results

6.1. Results relating to the first objective: "To identify the level of self-siege among secondary school students in the city of Mosul."

To verify this, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation of the scores of the 600 students on the Self-Siege Scale were computed, and a one-sample t-test was used to compare the arithmetic mean with the hypothetical mean of the scale (60). The following table presents these results:

Table 1 One-sample t-test results comparing the arithmetic mean with the hypothetical mean of self-siege scores

N	M	SD	Hypothetical mean	df	t (obtained)	t (critical)	Sig. (p)	Effect size (Cohen's d)
600	62.14	12.22	60	599	4.29	1.96	< 0.001	0.18

Note. N = 600. The critical t value is reported at the 0.05 level.

The results presented in the table above indicate that the arithmetic mean of the students' scores on the Self-Siege Scale was 62.14, which exceeds the hypothetical mean of 60 by 2.14 points. Using the t-test, this difference proved statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, since the obtained t value (4.29) exceeds the critical value (1.96).

When the effect size was measured using Cohen's d, the value obtained was 0.18, indicating a small effect. Accordingly, the result may be interpreted as showing that secondary school students in the city of Mosul possess a level of self-siege that exceeds the hypothetical mean by a limited margin. This level cannot be described as very high in the psychometric

sense; rather, it is slightly above the hypothetical mean, indicating the incipient presence of internal psychological pressures and constraints that impede self-differentiation, though these have not reached the stage of acute siege.

To illustrate the distribution of the sample's scores relative to the hypothetical mean, the following figure presents the illustrative normal curve of the scores:

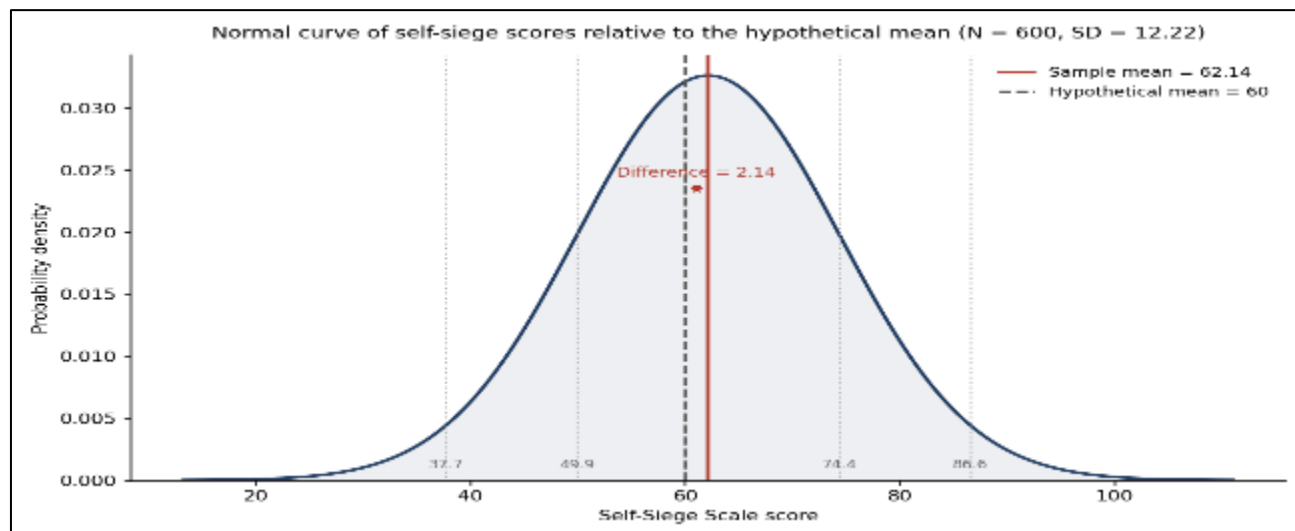


Figure 1 Illustrative normal curve of self-siege scores in relation to the hypothetical mean of the scale.

6.2. Results relating to the second objective: “To identify the difference in the level of self-siege between male and female secondary school students in the city of Mosul.”

To verify this, a t-test for two independent samples was used to compare the mean scores of males with those of females. The following table presents these results:

Table 2 Independent-samples t-test results comparing the means of males and females on self-siege scores

Gender	N	M	SD	Mean difference	df	t (obtained)	t (critical)	Sig. (p)	Cohen's d
Males	300	63.34	12.42	2.40	598	2.42	1.96	0.016	0.20
Females	300	60.94	11.93						

Note. The critical t value is reported at the 0.05 level.

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the arithmetic mean of the males' scores was 63.34 (SD = 12.42), whereas the arithmetic mean of the females' scores was 60.94 (SD = 11.93). Comparing the obtained t value of 2.42 with the critical value of 1.96 shows that the former exceeds the latter, signifying a statistically significant difference between the sexes in the level of self-siege at the 0.05 level.

Considering the two-arithmetic means, it is evident that the difference favoured the males; that is, male students possess a level of self-siege higher than that of their female counterparts by a margin of 2.40 points.

Notwithstanding this statistical significance, the value of Cohen's d was 0.20, which is classified as a small effect size. This indicates that the differences between the sexes, although real in statistical terms, are limited in practical terms, and that this difference should therefore not be overstated or regarded as a substantial gap in personality structure between the sexes at this educational stage.

7. Discussion

7.1. Discussion of the First Objective

The results showed that the mean level of self-siege among students (62.14) exceeded the hypothetical mean (60) by a limited yet statistically significant margin. This may be interpreted in light of the model of Firestone and colleagues as indicating that some students experience a relative weakness in differentiation, resulting from the conflict between growth motives and the anti-self-formed by parental influences and the critical inner voice, in addition to conflicts of identity and values and the societal expectations that may constrain their psychological independence (Firestone et al., 2013, pp. 2, 14).

Nevertheless, the small effect size ($d = 0.18$) indicates that self-siege did not reach an acute level but was only slightly above the hypothetical mean, and may reflect developmental pressures associated with the adolescent stage. This finding is partially consistent with the study of Hussein Mishari Mohammed (2025), which revealed manifestations of psychological closedness and loss of meaning among preparatory-stage students, thereby underscoring the importance of fostering differentiation and psychological independence among students (Hussein Mishari Mohammed, 2025, p. 1124).

This limited exceedance may be read against the background of results obtained for proximate constructs in the same environment. Students of the Faculties of Education in Mosul were found to possess health thinking at a level above the hypothetical mean, marked by a positive outlook, intellectual flexibility, and self-awareness in managing the crises they face — a finding attributed to the city's cultural diversity and to its experience of crisis and reconstruction, which functioned as a natural laboratory for the development of crisis management (AL-Ogaidi, 2026a, p. 2037); and they were found not to possess repetitive thinking, its absence being interpreted as adaptation to a changing environment (AL-Ogaidi & Al-Salih, 2026, p. 6537). Taken together with the present result, these findings suggest that self-siege in this environment operates alongside adaptive capacities that curtail its escalation, which may help to explain why the mean exceeded the hypothetical mean without reaching an acute level. This reading remains interpretive, since the two sets of results were obtained from different stages and samples and were not related to one another empirically.

7.2. Discussion of the Second Objective

The results showed statistically significant differences in self-siege in favour of males ($M = 63.34$) compared with females ($M = 60.94$). This may be attributed to males' exposure to social pressures that impel them to conceal their feelings and to conform to roles characterized by strength, which reinforces the critical inner voice and conflicts of identity and values and limits their psychological independence (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 153).

A convergent indication is provided by the contextual thinking test administered to students of the College of Education for Humanities, on which a statistically significant difference emerged in favour of females ($M = 13.412$) over males ($M = 10.423$), interpreted as a higher capacity among female students for awareness of the mental set and for control over it (AL-Ogaidi, 2026c, p. 1161). Since such awareness is the cognitive counterpart of psychological differentiation, the direction of the difference reported there accords with the direction obtained here, in which the males recorded the higher level of siege. It should be noted, however, that the comparison is drawn across two different stages and two different instruments, so that the convergence is indicative rather than confirmatory.

Nevertheless, the small effect size ($d = 0.20$) indicates that the difference between the sexes is practically limited, and that both share the experience of self-siege and the effects of parental defenses and social expectations. Counselling programmes should therefore target the psychological processes common to both sexes, while taking into account the pressures specific to each (Firestone et al., 2013, p. 154).

7.3. Implications for Counselling Practice

The interpretation of self-siege as a developmental and modifiable state rather than a fixed disorder finds support in local experimental evidence: an educational programme of twenty lessons administered to fourth-preparatory female students in the centre of Nineveh Governorate produced a statistically significant improvement in social intelligence in favour of the experimental group, together with the recommendation that such skills be integrated into school curricula and that teachers and educational counsellors be trained to employ them (AL-Ogaidi et al., 2026, pp. 241–242). Since several dimensions of the present scale — conformity to societal expectations, interpersonal relationships and dynamics, and negative self-views — bear directly upon the skills targeted by programmes of this kind, the Self-Siege Scale may serve as a pre- and post-administration indicator for evaluating counselling interventions at the secondary stage.

8. Conclusions

1. Secondary school students in the city of Mosul exhibit a level of self-siege that exceeds the hypothetical mean by a limited margin, indicating the presence of psychological constraints arising from an incomplete process of psychological differentiation.
2. The Self-Siege Scale, with its six dimensions, constitutes a psychometrically sound instrument capable of detecting the internal conflicts and external pressures faced by students in the local environment.
3. There are statistically significant differences in favour of males in the level of self-siege, reflecting slight variations between the sexes in the manner in which societal expectations and parental defenses are internalized.
4. The small effect sizes obtained confirm that self-siege represents a developmental and adaptive phenomenon among students rather than a deep-seated disorder, and is therefore amenable to change through educational interventions.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this article.

Statement of ethical approval

The study was conducted with the required official approvals from the relevant educational authorities. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the scientific use of data were ensured.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation was voluntary.

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