

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-COMPASSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN USIM

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**Abstract:** Self-compassion is an area in positive psychology that has gained much interest among the public in recent years. It is frequently cited as a means for assisting individuals attain an enhanced and more balanced sense of psychological well-being. This study investigated the relationship between self-compassion and psychological well-being among undergraduate students at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Employing the quantitative research method, it surveyed 153 respondents from six different programs at the Faculty of Leadership and Management, namely Counseling, Da'wah and Islamic Management, Akidah and Religion Studies, Communication, New Media Communications, and Management with Tourism. For data collection, the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) measured self-compassion while 18 items from the Ryff's Psychological Well-being (PWB) scale were used to measure the level of psychological well-being. The study findings show no significant differences in self-compassion and psychological well-being in both male and female students. The study also reported a significant correlation ( $r = 0.593$ ,  $n = 153$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between self-compassion and psychological well-being among the students, indicating a robust association between the two variables. This implies that greater psychological well-being among university students would require a higher sense of self-compassion. In conclusion, responsible parties such as the higher management levels of universities and academicians should be aware of the issues and implement appropriate planning initiatives aimed at enhancing the level of self-compassion and well-being among students.

**Keywords:** *Self-Compassion, Psychological Well-Being, University Students, Mental Health*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Students at higher educational institutions face various challenges. According to Gani (2016) as cited in Kotera and Ting (2019), the financial stress of higher tuition fees, academic workload pressures, and personal and family life issues are the main contributory factors affecting the mental health of Malaysian university students. The various stressors they face might lead to an imbalance of their psychological well-being, or in a worst-case scenario, prevent them from functioning effectively in their daily routines.

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) and Seligman (2011) as cited in Homan (2016), psychological well-being is manifested in the absence of damaging human emotions and the presence of positive emotions, healthy relationships, environmental mastery, engagement, and self-actualization. On the other hand, as defined by Keyes *et al.* (2002), it is an eudaimonic well-being, where the fulfilment of human potential has been the focus (Homan, 2016). On this note, it is apparent that this is a critical aspect, especially in the context of undergraduate students to enable them to live fully functional lives without being burdened by negative emotions. Khairani, Shamsuddin and Idris (2019) mention that psychological well-being is a significant asset in one's life especially for those in lower and higher educational institutions. In this regard, it is important to ascertain and establish the underlying factors governing psychological well-being in order to develop and maintain it in a person.

Of late, the field of positive psychology, involving the study of the factors and processes that lead to persons, communities, and institutions thriving or functioning optimally (Gable & Haidt, 2005) has gained much interest and popularity. The concept of positive psychology involving factors such as self-esteem, gratitude, resilience, and compassion has been widely studied in order to explore how it would benefit individual's well-being. For example, self-esteem or a process of comparing one's own performance to a set of criteria in areas that are perceived to be important (Neff, 2003a) would potentially increase individuals' love and appreciation to themselves when comparisons are made between them and others. However, according to Damon (1995) and

Seligman (1995) as cited in Neff (2003a), scholars have questioned how individuals could be narcissistic, egocentric and less compassionate of others if they are overly focused on self-assessment and appreciation.

Scholars such as Bennett-Goleman (2001), Rosenberg (2000), Brown (1999), Wallace (1999), Hanh (1997) as cited in Neff (2003a) state that in enabling individuals to create a healthier approach towards developing positive self-relationships, psychologists have proposed and practiced new ideas such as the concept self-compassion. Neff (2003), as cited in Ying and Mohd Hashim (2016) suggests that self-compassion means “being touched by and open to one's suffering, not avoiding or disconnecting from it, generating the desire to soothe one's suffering and to heal oneself with kindness, practising non-judgmental understanding towards one's incompetence and/or non-fulfilment and imperfections, and viewing one's experience as a shared human experience.” Self-compassion is believed to have its origins in one of the main components of the Buddhist psychological perspective of mindfulness and is a key characteristic in meditation as well as in the philosophy of Buddhism itself (Neff, 2004).

Self-compassion studies have become increasingly widespread judging from the volume of research exploring the advantages of psychological health. More than 1600 papers or dissertations on self-compassion have been published since Neff's initial two studies on the subject 15 years ago, with more than half published in the previous two years (Neff, 2018). In dealing with emotional distress, individuals tend to be critical of themselves and exaggerate their feelings, and the lack of self-compassion is usually evident when handling psychological distress. The imbalance in psychological well-being that may ensue will prevent individuals from enjoying a comfortable lifestyle, especially among groups with the highest risk, namely undergraduate university students. This in-depth study examined the influence as well as the role of self-compassion in resolving issues related to the level of psychological well-being among such students.

As mentioned earlier, positive psychology contributes to the proper functioning of human beings and as such it is important that studies on self-compassion be conducted among undergraduate students. According to Ying and Mohd Hashim (2016), undergraduates are society's assets, and it is important that they develop appropriate personal strengths to allow them to

cope with stressful or unpleasant situations besides having a sense of self-compassion to enhance their psychological well-being (Homan, 2016). Taking into account the characteristics of self-compassion, it is likely that its application and development can help individuals, especially undergraduates, cope with negative emotions and maintain their psychological stability.

Findings on the differences in psychological well-being between men and women are not conclusive (Matud, López-Curbelo, & Fortes, 2019). Also, Roothman, Doret, and Marié (2003) as cited in Salleh and Mustafa (2016) note that although various means have been designed for assessing psychological well-being, research on how gender differences express themselves in that aspect is relatively lacking.

Psychological distress is prevalent among youth, particularly higher education students, who are highly susceptible to anxiety and depression. The pandemic has exacerbated this issue, as students spend more time on gadgets, affecting their psychological wellbeing. This study aims to explore the role of self-compassion in addressing psychological well-being among undergraduate students in Malaysia. It also aims to fill research gaps, particularly in the cross-cultural population of Muslim students. Self-compassion, derived from Buddhist psychology, has been studied globally but has not been studied in Malaysian Islamic university students. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the concept's impact on Malaysian students. Therefore, the objectives of the research were to identify gender differences in terms of self-compassion and psychological well-being among undergraduate students in USIM., and to investigate the relationship between self-compassion and psychological well-being among undergraduate students in USIM.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a quantitative research design using survey questionnaires to obtain data from respondents and share it through Google Forms. The data was analysed using SPSS software (Statistical Package for Social Science for Windows Version 25.0). The survey was divided into three sections. Section A related to student demographics, Section B employed the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) to measure the degree of self-compassion among the students, while Section C evaluated the level of psychological well-being using Ryff's Psychological Well-being scale.

The target population includes students from various programs of the Faculty of Leadership and Management, including Counseling, Da'wah and Islamic Management, Akidah and Religion Studies, Communication, and New Media Communication. The study was conducted using convenience sampling, with the following criteria; their accessibility, proximity to the study site, and willingness to participate. The survey was distributed to undergraduate students at the Faculty of Leadership and Management (FKP). Initially, the Krejcie & Morgan Table method was used to select the appropriate sample size, with 308 participants from various programs in the Faculty of Leadership and Management. However, due to difficulties in obtaining data from respondents, only 153 respondents participated in the study.

### **Respondents**

The sample comprised 153 first- to fourth-year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Leadership and Management (FKP) in six different programs namely Counseling, Da'wah and Islamic Management, Akidah and Religion Studies, Communication, New Media Communications, and Management with Tourism. The sample population was chosen using a convenience sampling method.

### **Instruments**

The instruments used involved a set of questionnaires covering the three sections, namely the demographics of student respondents from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, the Self-Compassion Scale developed by Kristin D. Neff (2003), and Ryff's Psychological Well-being Scale developed by Carol D. Ryff (1995).

Self-Compassion Scales are a reliable and valid tool for measuring six subscales of self-compassion. A study by Neff (2003b) found good test-retest reliability for the 26-item scale among undergraduate students. The scale has a significant but moderate correlation with other self-esteem scales, Berger Self-Acceptance Scale, Self-Determination Scale, and Basic Psychological Needs Scale. However, it was not significantly significant. Raes (2011) also reported that the scale could predict changes in depression over a 5-month period, demonstrating criterion-related validity (Homan,2016).

The short version of Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale was proven to be a reliable and valid instrument to measure the level of psychological well-being. According to a study by Lee *et al.* (2019), it was stated that the short version of Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale displayed a good reliability where the Cronbach Alpha score is 0.88. The study revealed that the aggregated subscale alphas ranged from 0.72 to 0.88, except for autonomy, which was 0.57. The same study also mentioned that the short form of the scale was shown to have good construct validity and criterion-related validity.

### **Procedure**

Data for the study was collected from respondents using an online survey questionnaire. The questionnaire related to the variables of self-compassion and psychological well-being involved in the research framework. Data on self-compassion was measured using the Self-Compassion Scale while Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale evaluated data on the psychological well-being of the students. The questionnaire was in both Malay and English. It was designed in English and translated into Malay to facilitate understanding of items by respondents as the study was basically meant for the Malaysian context.

Several protocols were followed prior to conducting the study. First, approval or permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Faculty of Leadership and Management. Following that the questionnaire was distributed to the targeted respondents using an online survey form. As the sample comprised students from the faculty their personal information such as email addresses and phone numbers were obtained from the faculty's administration department.

After the respondents' information was obtained, the questionnaire was publicised to them using various platforms such as WhatsApp and Twitter and also delivered personally through online message applications.

Once sufficient responses were obtained, the data was analysed in order to fulfil and address the objectives of the study. The data and information from the respondents were kept confidential to ensure their privacy and to secure reliable and genuine feedback to achieve accurate research findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used to analyse the data for the study. Descriptive statistical tools such as percentage, mean, and standard deviation were applied to analyse respondents' demographics such as gender, age, race, religion, status, faculty, and year of study. Inferential analysis such as the t-test and Pearson correlation was also used to analyse the data. For this research, the t-test was used to measure differences in self-compassion and psychological well-being among male and female respondents. Additionally, the Pearson correlation test was used to analyse the relationship between self-compassion and psychological well-being among the respondents.

## RESULTS

### Background Information

Table 1: Background Information of Faculty of Leadership and Management, USIM

		Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Male	46	30.1
	Female	107	69.9
<b>Course of study</b>	Counseling	68	44.4
	Akidah and Religion Studies	36	23.5
	Da'wah and Islamic Management	19	12.4
	Communication	20	13.1
	New Media Communications	7	4.6
	Management with Tourism	3	2.0
<b>Study year</b>	First year	59	38.6
	Second year	6	3.9
	Third year	18	11.8
	Fourth year	70	45.8

Table 1 shows the gender distribution of the respondents with females dominating at 69.9% (n=107) of the total compared to males 30.1% (n= 46).

In terms of course of study, respondents from the Counseling programme comprised the majority at 44.4% (n=68) of the total, while 23.5% (n=36) were from Akidah and Religion Studies, 12.4% (n=19) from Da'wah and Islamic Management, 13.1% (n=20) from Communication, 4.6% (n=7) from New Media Communications, and 2.0% (n=3) from Tourism with Management.

For year of study, first-year respondents formed 38.6 % (n=59) of the total, second-year students 3.9% (n= 6), third-year students 11.8% (n=18), and final or fourth-year students were the majority at 45.8% (n=70).

### **Gender Differences in Self-Compassion**

Table 2 shows the difference in mean scores among male (M= 86.46, SD= 9.19) and female (M = 86.75, SD= 13.65) respondents. The t-test analysis on the respondents showed no significant difference in the level of self-compassion among the genders  $t(153) = -0.132$ .  $p=0.895$ . The significant value shows  $p 0.895 > 0.05$ .

Table 2: Results of the t-test

Gender	N	df	Mean	SD	t	Sig
Male	46	151	86.46	9.19	-.132	0.895
Female	107		86.75	13.65		

### **Gender Differences in Psychological Well-being**

Table 3 shows the differences in mean scores among male (M= 82.63, SD= 15.23) and female (M = 85.23, SD= 15.59) respondents. The t-test analysis shows no significant differences in the level of psychological well-being among the genders at  $t(153) = -0.954$ .  $p= 0.342$ . The significant value is  $p 0.342 > 0.05$ .

Table 3: Results of t-Test

Gender	N	df	Mean	SD	t	Sig
Male	46	151	82.63	15.23	-.954	0.342
Female	107		85.23	15.59		

### **Relationship between Self-Compassion and Psychological Well-being**

As seen in Table 4, the relationship between self-compassion and psychological well-being among the USIM undergraduates was investigated using Pearson's correlation with the result shows a strong, positive correlation between the two variables at  $r = 0.593$ ,  $n = 153$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Table 4: Results of Correlation Testing

Self-compassion	r	Sig.
Psychological Well-being	0.593**	.000

$r < .001$ \*\*,  $< .05$ \*



## DISCUSSION

### Gender Difference in Self-Compassion

Understanding how self-compassion may alter at different stages of adolescence between genders is important given its critical role in promoting emotional well-being, the difficulties of the adolescent period, and the disparities in gender development phases. Females are more self-conscious than males during adolescence, especially in regard to changes in their physical development and their relationship with classmates and romantic partners. The idea of self-compassion may be undermined by this increased self-consciousness, especially as female adolescents get older and face more developmental issues (Hyde, Mezulis, & Abramson, 2008). Relatedly, gender-role intensification, or the pressure to fit into stereotyped sex roles that occurs during adolescence, may cause females to have lower levels of self-compassion (Hill & Lynch, 1983).

In contrast to our findings, several other studies suggest the existence of gender differences in terms of self-compassion. Most past studies often show females reporting lower levels of self-compassion compared to males (e.g. Murn & Steele (2020), Yarnell, Neff, Davidson, & Mullarkey (2018)). Other studies display different findings. For instance, Ariyani and Hadiani (2019) note that self-compassion levels among female students are somewhat higher than that of their male counterparts.

However, this study's findings are closely aligned with that of Ying and Hashim's (2016) finding which indicated no significant gender differences in self-compassion among Malaysian undergraduates. Berryhill, Harless, and Kean (2018) also note no gender differences in terms of self-compassion among male and female students in the Southeastern public university. These findings are also supported by Verma and Tiwari (2017) who suggested that both male and female undergraduate and postgraduate students do not exhibit any significant differences in this regard. In addition, Muris *et al.* (2016) cited in Bluth, Campo, Futch, and Gaylord (2017) found similar levels of self-compassion among male and female Dutch adolescents.

There were many past studies which suggested that women tend to have lower self-compassion compared to men. For instance, Ying and Hashim (2016) suggested that the sub-concept of self-compassion which is Isolation, is more frequently reported by women compared to men. However, men aslo tend to

experience low self-compassion due to conformity to male norms was found to be adversely connected with self-compassion. Previous study has shown that men who adhere to traditional masculine norms may avoid vulnerable feelings and connection with others (Railly *et al.*, 2014). The contradictal findings for gender differences in self-compassion may be vary as the cultural differences have been proposed as a possible explanation for gender differences in self-compassion (Verma & Tiwari, 2017).

However the differentiation was only found when the ages of the adolescent are compared. As the sample size of this study is rather small, it limits the generalisability of its results. Hence, a future study using adequate sample size is still warranted in order to study the differences accurately.

### **Gender Difference in Psychological Wellbeing**

This study shows undergraduate students at USIM also reporting no differences between genders. The study proved that the level of psychological wellbeing between male and female undergraduate student does not have a large gap. This matches a study using a local sample by Salleh and Mustafa (2016) showing that Kelantanese flood victims do not have any significant differences between male and female victims in their level of psychological well-being. In addition, a study on secondary school students in Thailand by Pumpuang, Vongsirimas, and Klainin-Yobas (2021) also showed no significant difference in both genders in this aspect, especially in terms of predictor and statistical measures.

However, this study contradicts Akhter (2015) who suggested that male and female students do have significant psychological well-being differences. In addition, the study by Gómez-Baya, Lucia-Casademunt, and Salinas-Pérez (2018) on health professionals in Europe showed females exhibiting lower levels of psychological well-being and physical health compared to males. Conversely, a study among children in China by Geng and He (2021) suggested that boys have lower psychological well-being compared to girls. Although there is research showing differences in psychological well-being among males and females, it has also been reported that both genders might have high scores on certain aspects of psychological well-being but lower scores in other areas.

Indeed, due to psychological and biological differences, gender differences do exist, with both genders having varying levels of life satisfaction (Akhter, 2015). Different results may ensue from these distinctions when they interact with the organisational environment or circumstances. The numerous efforts being made to empower individuals achieve self-actualization and utilise their full potential make it critical to investigate gender variations in psychological well-being. Recent studies on gender differences, including those pertaining to psychological well-being, show conflicting findings and a clear lack of agreement (Ryff & Singer, 1998; Strumpfer, 1995). A similar scenario was also seen in this study and further research is needed as the number of respondents for the genders are disproportionate.

### **Relationship Between Self-Compassion and Psychological Wellbeing**

The result of this study is parallel with and supported by Verma and Tiwari (2017) who showed that high scores on the components and concepts of self-compassion have a significant correlation with human psychological and social well-being, including overall human development. Phuoc and Nguyen (2020) also found that psychological-wellbeing is influenced by self-warmth and self-coldness among Vietnamese adolescents. Another study among adolescents in Hong Kong by Sun, Chan, and Chan (2016) showed that each component of self-compassion affects the stability of psychological well-being. On the other hand, this is supported by Homan's (2016) study on the psychological well-being of older adults where the link between inner health and depression is moderated by self-compassion.

In addition, self-compassion has proven to be a protective factor for individuals against any negative psychological issues. According to Muris and Meesters (2014), self-compassion interventions may help avoid the development of negative emotional and cognitive styles in youth, which have been connected to anxiety and depression (Marsh, Chan, & MacBeth, 2018). This is supported in the study by Marsh, Chan, and MacBeth (2018) which stated that self-compassion has a negative connection with psychological discomfort as measured by anxiety, depression, and stress among adolescents. In addition, Pullmer, Chung, Samson, Balanji, and Zaitsoff (2019) also suggested that self-compassion may be relevant in the occurrence, maintenance, and management of adolescent depression. Having adequate or higher levels of self-compassion has been proven to assist individuals in better coping with depressive symptoms. Another study by Bluth (2017) also

mentioned that older teenagers who had low and average levels of self-compassion experienced more depressive symptoms than those who had high levels of this emotion.

Theoretically, individuals with a healthy attitude toward themselves and practise self-compassion should be less susceptible to such negative outcomes. Self-compassion helps shield people from pathological signs and symptoms including anxiety and depression (e.g., Pauley & McPherson, 2010). As a powerful predictor of hedonic forms of well-being, including subjective happiness (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007), positive effects, and life satisfaction (Neff & Vonk, 2009), self-compassion also enhances other elements of positive functioning (Allen & Leary, 2010).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the relationship between self-compassion and psychological well-being among undergraduate students at USIM's Faculty of Leadership and Management. The findings show most of the students having moderate or satisfactory levels of self-compassion and psychological well-being. In addition, this study presented findings on gender difference in terms of self-compassion and psychological well-being, with no differences noted in those aspects among the students.

To conclude, self-compassion and psychological well-being are essential for individuals especially undergraduate students who constantly face stressful and challenging learning environments, such as those triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. This study shows that it is important for students to nurture a sense of self-compassion as a means to attain a higher level of psychological well-being among themselves.

## **Informed Consent Statement**

Data is accessible and there are no consent issues.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) have no conflict of interest to declare.

## **Ethics Statement**

Data is accessible and there are no ethics issues.

### **Author Contributions**

The authors designed the study/research, analyse and interpret the data, and did the final review with critical and intellectual participation in the manuscript.

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### **Data Availability Statement**

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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