



Self-Compassion as a Predictor of Academic Stress in Emerging Adults

Angel Gupta, *Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University*

Noida, Uttar Pradesh, India

angelgupta283@gmail.com

Abstract: The present study examined the relationship between self-compassion and academic stress among emerging adult students. Academic stress is a prevalent concern during emerging adulthood, yet limited research has explored self-compassion as a potential protective factor, particularly within the Indian context. A quantitative research design was employed using correlation and regression analyses on a sample of 200 undergraduate and postgraduate students selected through convenience sampling. Self-compassion was measured using the Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form (SCS-SF), and academic stress was assessed using the Educational Stress Scale of Adolescents (ESSA). Results revealed a significant negative correlation between self-compassion and academic stress ($r = -.287$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher self-compassion is associated with lower levels of academic stress. Regression analysis further demonstrated that self-compassion significantly predicted academic stress, accounting for 8.2% of the variance ($R^2 = .082$). These findings suggest that self-compassion functions as a protective psychological resource against academic stress among emerging adults. The study highlights the potential value of incorporating self-compassion-based interventions within educational and counseling settings to promote student well-being and improve developmental outcomes.

Keywords: *Self-Compassion, Academic Stress, Emerging Adulthood, Students, Mental Health*

1. Introduction

Academic stress is a significant concern among emerging adult students, as they navigate increasing academic demands alongside developmental transitions. Emerging

adulthood, typically defined as the period between 18 and 25 years, is characterized by identity exploration, instability, and heightened personal responsibility (Arnett, 2000). During this stage, students are required to manage academic expectations, career-related decisions, and personal development simultaneously, which can contribute to elevated levels of stress.

Academic stress has been widely documented among university students and is often associated with examinations, workload, and performance pressures (Misra & McKean, 2000). Prolonged exposure to such stress can negatively impact psychological well-being, self-esteem, and academic functioning (Pascoe et al., 2020). Given these adverse outcomes, it is important to identify psychological resources that may help students cope more effectively with academic challenges. This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining self-compassion as a potential protective factor against academic stress among emerging adults, with implications for improving student well-being.

One such resource is self-compassion. Self-compassion refers to an individual's ability to treat oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance during times of failure or distress rather than engaging in harsh self-criticism (Neff, 2003). Research suggests that individuals with higher levels of self-compassion tend to demonstrate better emotional regulation, resilience, and adaptive coping strategies (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Additionally, self-compassion has been linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety, and negative affect, as well as improved psychological adjustment (Neff & Germer, 2013).

Despite growing evidence supporting the role of self-compassion in psychological well-being, limited research has examined its relationship with academic stress among emerging adult students, particularly within the Indian context. Furthermore, students often respond to academic challenges with self-criticism, fear of failure, and rumination, which may intensify stress and hinder effective coping (Compas et al., 2017). Understanding whether self-compassion can serve as a protective factor against academic stress is therefore of both theoretical and practical importance.

The present study aims to examine the relationship between self-compassion and academic stress among emerging adult students and to determine whether self-compassion significantly predicts academic stress. By focusing on within the Indian context, this study contributes to the developmental psychology literature by exploring a positive psychological resource within a culturally relevant context.

Importantly, the findings of this study have potential applied implications for improving student well-being. Identifying self-compassion as a protective factor may inform the development of psychological interventions, counseling programs, and educational

strategies aimed at reducing academic stress and promoting healthier adaptation among students in higher education.

A growing body of research highlights self-compassion as a key psychological resource that supports emotional regulation and adaptive coping. Self-compassion, conceptualized as treating oneself with kindness, recognizing shared human experiences, and maintaining balanced awareness of negative emotions, has been consistently associated with improved psychological well-being (Neff, 2003). Individuals high in self-compassion are more likely to employ adaptive coping strategies such as acceptance and cognitive reappraisal, which reduce emotional distress and promote resilience (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012).

From a theoretical perspective, self-compassion can be understood within frameworks of emotional regulation and stress appraisal. According to the transactional model of stress, psychological stress arises when perceived demands exceed perceived coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Self-compassion may function as an internal coping resource that modifies individuals' appraisal of stressful situations, enabling them to respond with reduced self-criticism and greater emotional balance.

Academic stress, on the other hand, is widely recognized as a significant psychological concern among university students. It is commonly associated with academic workload, performance expectations, time constraints, and uncertainty regarding future outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that high levels of academic stress are linked to negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression, burnout, sleep disturbances, and reduced academic performance (Pascoe et al., 2020). Behavioral factors such as procrastination and ineffective time management further contribute to heightened stress levels (Nayak, 2019).

Empirical studies have increasingly explored the relationship between self-compassion and stress-related outcomes. Findings suggest that self-compassion is negatively associated with psychological distress and plays a buffering role in stressful contexts. Students with higher levels of self-compassion tend to exhibit lower levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, as well as greater resilience and well-being (Neff & Germer, 2013). Intervention-based research further supports this relationship, indicating that self-compassion training can lead to improvements in emotional functioning and reductions in maladaptive perfectionism and stress responses.

With respect to academic settings, emerging evidence indicates that self-compassion is inversely related to academic stress and burnout. Students who respond to academic challenges with self-kindness rather than self-criticism report lower perceived stress and

better adjustment to academic demands. Self-compassion has also been found to mediate the relationship between stress and well-being, suggesting that it reduces the negative impact of academic pressure on psychological outcomes (Poots & Cassidy, 2020).

Although international research has extensively examined these associations, studies within the Indian context remain limited. Existing Indian research has largely focused on academic stress and its consequences, or on self-compassion in relation to general mental health, rather than examining the direct relationship between these constructs. Furthermore, many studies have been conducted within specific student populations, such as medical or nursing students, limiting generalizability to broader emerging adult populations.

Taken together, the existing literature suggests that self-compassion may serve as a protective psychological factor that mitigates the adverse effects of academic stress. However, there remains a need for empirical investigation examining this relationship within diverse cultural contexts, particularly among emerging adult students in India. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates whether self-compassion is significantly associated with and predictive of academic stress, thereby contributing to the understanding of psychological resources that support student well-being and developmental outcome.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample consisted of 200 emerging adult students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs across different academic disciplines. Participants were aged between 18 and 25 years, corresponding to the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. A non-probability convenience sampling method was employed to recruit participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in a college or university, within the specified age range, and able to comprehend English. Responses that were incomplete or did not meet these criteria were excluded from analysis.

2.2 Measures

Self-Compassion: Self-compassion was assessed using the Self-Compassion Scale–Short Form (SCS-SF; Neff, 2003). The scale consists of 12 items measuring components such as self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, along with their negative counterparts. Responses are recorded on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater levels of self-compassion. The scale has demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity in student populations.

Academic Stress: Academic stress was measured using the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA; Sun et al., 2011). The 16-item scale assesses multiple dimensions of academic stress, including workload pressure, examination anxiety, academic self-expectation, and study-related tension. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived academic stress.

2.3 Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey administered via Google Forms. Participants were provided with information about the study, including its purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality assurances, before providing informed consent. The survey included demographic questions followed by the two standardized scales. The questionnaire link was distributed through online student groups, and participation took approximately 5–10 minutes. Data collection was conducted over a period of one month, resulting in 200 valid responses.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines for research involving human participants were followed. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and no identifying information was collected. The data were used solely for academic purposes.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using statistical software after initial screening and cleaning. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to assess levels of self-compassion and academic stress. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the variables. Additionally, simple linear regression analysis was performed to determine whether self-compassion significantly predicted academic stress. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

3. Results

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression to examine relationships between variables. The level of significance was set at $p < .05$.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Self-Compassion and Academic Stress

Variable	N	Mean	SD
Self-Compassion	200	36.83	6.29
Academic Stress	200	52.71	10.33

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of self-compassion and academic stress among emerging adult students. The mean score of self-compassion was 36.83 (SD = 6.29), whereas the mean score of academic stress was 52.71 (SD = 10.33).

Correlation Analysis

The relationship between self-compassion and academic stress was examined using Pearson correlation.

Table 2. *Correlation between Self-Compassion and Academic Stress*

Variable	1	2
Self-Compassion	-	-.287**
Academic Stress	-.287**	-

Note. N = 200. **p < .001. 1 = Self-Compassion ; 2 = Academic Stress.

As shown in Table 2, a significant negative correlation was found between self-compassion and academic stress. $r = -.287$, $p < .001$.

Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether self-compassion significantly predicted academic stress among emerging adult students.

Table 3. *Model Summary of Regression Predicting Academic Stress from Self-Compassion*

MODEL	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	F	p
1	-.287	.082	.078	17.78	< .001

Note. N = 200.

Table 3 presents the regression model predicting academic stress from self-compassion. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 198) = 17.78$, $p < .001$, explaining 8.2% of the variance in academic stress ($R^2 = .082$).

Table 4. *Regression Coefficients Predicting Academic Stress*

PREDICTOR	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	70.07	4.18	-	16.78	< .001
Self-Compassion	-0.47	0.11	-.287	-4.22	< .001

Note. Dependent variable: Academic Stress.

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between self-compassion and academic stress among emerging adult students and explored whether self-compassion predicts academic stress. The findings provide important insights into the role of self-compassion as a psychological resource during a developmentally demanding period.

The results indicated that both self-compassion and academic stress were present at moderate levels among participants. This pattern is consistent with the developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood, a phase marked by identity exploration, uncertainty, and increasing academic and personal responsibilities. During this stage, individuals may fluctuate between self-acceptance and self-criticism, which can explain moderate levels of self-compassion. Similarly, academic demands, performance expectations, and future-related concerns contribute to moderate levels of academic stress commonly observed in student populations (Pascoe et al., 2020).

A significant negative relationship was found between self-compassion and academic stress, indicating that students with higher levels of self-compassion tend to experience lower academic stress. This finding aligns with existing research suggesting that self-compassion functions as a protective factor against psychological distress (Neff, 2003; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Individuals who respond to challenges with self-kindness rather than harsh self-criticism are less likely to engage in maladaptive cognitive patterns such as rumination and fear of failure. Instead, they are more likely to interpret difficulties as part of the learning process, thereby reducing emotional distress.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated that self-compassion significantly predicted academic stress, highlighting its role as a meaningful psychological resource. Although the proportion of variance explained was modest, the findings suggest that self-compassion contributes to students' ability to manage academic demands. This is consistent with previous research indicating that self-compassion enhances emotional regulation, resilience, and adaptive coping strategies, which in turn reduce stress and improve psychological adjustment.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be understood within the framework of emotional regulation and cognitive appraisal theories. Self-compassion promotes a balanced awareness of negative experiences and reduces the tendency toward self-criticism and over-identification with failure. As a result, students are better able to regulate their emotional responses to academic challenges and maintain psychological stability.

The findings also have important applied implications. Given that self-compassion is

a modifiable psychological construct, interventions aimed at enhancing self-compassion may help reduce academic stress and promote student well-being. Educational institutions and counseling services can incorporate self-compassion-based programs, workshops, and interventions to support students in managing academic pressure more effectively.

Overall, the present study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the protective role of self-compassion in the context of academic stress among emerging adult students, particularly within the Indian context. These findings underscore the importance of integrating positive psychological resources into strategies aimed at improving developmental and educational outcomes.

5. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between self-compassion and academic stress among emerging adult students. The findings revealed that self-compassion is significantly and negatively associated with academic stress, indicating that students with higher levels of self-compassion tend to experience lower academic stress. Additionally, self-compassion was found to be a significant predictor of academic stress, highlighting its role as a protective psychological resource.

These findings emphasize the importance of self-compassion in promoting emotional regulation and psychological well-being in academic contexts. Given that self-compassion is a modifiable construct, interventions aimed at enhancing self-compassion may help students manage academic pressures more effectively. The study contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating the relevance of self-compassion in understanding academic stress among emerging adults, particularly within an underrepresented cultural context.

5.1 Constraints on Generality

The findings of this study are specific to emerging adult students aged 18–25 years and may not generalize to other age groups or populations. The use of convenience sampling limits the representativeness of the sample, and the reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases. Additionally, the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretations of the observed relationships. The findings are most applicable to similar educational and cultural contexts and should be interpreted with caution when generalized beyond these conditions.

5.2 Declaration of AI-assisted writing

The author used AI-assisted tools for language refinement and formatting support. All intellectual content, analysis, and interpretation are solely the responsibility of the author.

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