

Exploring Self-Compassion in Early Adolescents: Evidence From a Vietnamese Urban School Sample

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Abstract

Self-compassion has emerged as a key psychological resource that helps adolescents navigate emotional challenges and school-related stress. Despite increasing international attention, empirical research on self-compassion among early adolescents in Vietnam remains limited. This study aims to examine the overall level and subcomponent profile of self-compassion in Vietnamese lower secondary school students and to explore differences based on gender, grade level, family socioeconomic status, and academic achievement. A total of 385 students (grades 6–9) from public schools in Ho Chi Minh City participated in the study. The Vietnamese version of the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (SCS-Y; Neff et al., 2021) was administered. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, independent samples t-tests, and one-way ANOVA to explore patterns and group differences. The findings revealed that students reported moderate levels of self-compassion, with positive subcomponents (common humanity, mindfulness, and self-kindness) scoring significantly higher than negative ones (self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation). Gender differences were significant, with male students reporting higher self-compassion than females ($p < .01$). Grade-level differences emerged only in self-judgment, with older students exhibiting lower self-criticism. No statistically significant differences were found in overall self-compassion by family socioeconomic status or academic performance. Vietnamese adolescents demonstrate a relatively balanced self-compassion profile, with strengths in mindfulness and common humanity. The findings highlight the importance of incorporating gender-sensitive and developmentally appropriate interventions to foster self-compassion during adolescence. Educational and psychological support systems should consider integrating self-compassion training to promote emotional resilience in school environments.

Keywords: self-compassion, adolescents, lower secondary students, Vietnam

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Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental period marked by profound emotional, cognitive, and social changes. During this stage, individuals begin to establish identity, face increased academic and interpersonal pressures, and develop more complex emotional awareness (Bosacki, 2016). In educational settings, adolescents are particularly vulnerable to internalizing stressors, which can manifest as self-criticism, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Given these challenges, self-compassion (SC) has emerged as a potentially protective psychological resource that supports emotional regulation and enhances adolescents' well-being (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Neff, 2003a).

Self-compassion is defined as the ability to relate to oneself with kindness and understanding during moments of struggle, failure, or perceived inadequacy (Neff, 2003a). Rather than engaging in harsh self-judgment, individuals with high levels of self-compassion are more likely to offer themselves emotional support and to recognize that suffering and imperfection are shared human experiences. Neff's theoretical model outlines six interrelated components of self-compassion: self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification (Neff, 2003a, 2016, 2023). These elements reflect both positive and negative poles of the construct, enabling researchers to capture a nuanced profile of how individuals relate to themselves under stress.

Extensive research in Western contexts has demonstrated that self-compassion is inversely associated with anxiety, depression, and self-criticism, while positively linked with resilience, emotional regulation, and psychological well-being (Inwood & Ferrari, 2018; Neff, 2016). Among adolescents, self-compassion is generally found to be at a moderate level, with higher scores observed in the positive dimensions (common humanity, mindfulness, and self-kindness) than in the negative ones (self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation) (Bluth et al., 2018). Importantly, self-compassion has also been shown to act as a buffer against external stressors, including discrimination and bullying, and to moderate the impact of negative experiences on adolescents' self-esteem and social functioning (García del Castillo-López, 2025; Sari & Nurhidayah, 2025).

Despite these promising findings, research on adolescent self-compassion in non-Western, collectivist societies remains scarce, particularly in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, where academic achievement and social conformity are highly emphasized in schools, adolescents may face additional pressures that influence their internal emotional narratives. However, empirical data on self-compassion among Vietnamese adolescents, especially middle school students, are lacking. Most existing studies in Vietnam have focused on university students or adult populations (Dang & Trinh, 2025; Duc et al., 2022), while research specifically targeting early adolescents using age-appropriate instruments such as the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (Neff et al., 2021) is still limited. This gap underscores the importance of contextually grounded research that considers developmental stage, cultural values, and educational structure.

In addition to measuring general levels of self-compassion, it is essential to explore how sociodemographic variables such as gender, grade level, socioeconomic status (SES), and academic performance relate to adolescents' self-compassion profiles. International studies have yielded mixed findings regarding these associations. For instance, several studies have found that female adolescents tend to report lower levels of self-compassion, particularly in the negative subdomains such as self-judgment and isolation (Chio et al., 2025; Hubbard,

2023). Similarly, age-related declines in self-compassion during adolescence have been attributed to increased self-awareness and academic/social comparison (Hinrichs, 2021). On the other hand, research suggests that SES and academic achievement may not significantly influence self-compassion, given that it is primarily shaped by psychological and interpersonal factors rather than material or performance-based outcomes (Marsh et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2021).

The present study contributes to the growing body of international literature on adolescent self-compassion by examining its manifestation among lower secondary school students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Using the SCS-Y, we aim to provide a comprehensive profile of students' self-compassion levels across its six subcomponents. Moreover, we analyze differences in self-compassion across key demographic variables, gender, grade level, family economic status, and academic achievement, to better understand how individual and contextual factors may shape self-related attitudes during early adolescence.

Hypothesis Development

Self-Compassion Level and Subcomponent Patterns

Research indicates that adolescents typically exhibit moderate levels of self-compassion, with higher scores in the positive components (e.g., self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity) and lower scores in negative ones (e.g., self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation) (Bluth et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2021). These differences suggest that while adolescents are capable of empathizing with themselves, they remain vulnerable to harsh self-criticism and emotional over-identification.

We therefore hypothesize:

H1: Middle school students will exhibit moderate levels of self-compassion, with positive subcomponents scoring higher than negative ones.

Gender and Grade-Level Differences

Several studies have documented gender differences in self-compassion, with female adolescents reporting lower overall self-compassion, often due to higher self-judgment and internalization of negative social feedback (Hubbard, 2023; Yarnell et al., 2015). Additionally, older adolescents may show reduced self-compassion due to increased academic and social pressures during the transition to high school (Hinrichs, 2021).

Hence, we propose:

H2: Self-compassion will differ significantly by gender and grade level, with female and older students scoring lower on average.

Economic Status and Academic Performance

Self-compassion is largely understood as an internal coping resource rather than a direct function of external conditions (Marsh et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2021). Although low SES and academic struggles may indirectly challenge adolescents' self-perceptions, these variables may not directly predict their capacity for self-compassion.

Based on these insights, we propose:

H3: Self-compassion will not differ significantly based on family socioeconomic status or academic performance.

The Present Study

This study aims to (1) assess the general and subcomponent levels of self-compassion among Vietnamese middle school students, and (2) examine whether self-compassion varies significantly by gender, grade level, family SES, and academic performance. Through this work, we seek to provide empirical evidence relevant to the Vietnamese educational and psychological context, while also contributing to the broader international discourse on adolescent well-being and protective psychological resources.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

Participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) being a secondary school student enrolled in public schools in Ho Chi Minh City, (b) being literate and able to read and respond to structured questionnaires in Vietnamese, and (c) providing voluntary assent to participate in the study. Institutional approval was obtained from school administrators prior to data collection. Written informed consent was collected from the students' legal guardians, and verbal assent was also obtained from each participant. The consent forms included a clear explanation of the study's objectives, emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, and guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of all responses.

A total of 385 students participated in the study, selected using a convenience sampling method. The required sample size was determined using Cochran's formula (Cochran, 1977) with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting, with detailed verbal instructions provided to ensure proper comprehension. Participants completed the questionnaire within approximately 20 to 30 minutes. After data screening, all 385 responses were retained for final analysis. The sample consisted of 190 male (49.4%) and 195 female (50.6%) students, ranging from grades 6 to 9. Regarding academic achievement, which was determined based on the official academic classification from students' school records for the preceding semester, 145 students were classified as excellent, 156 as good, 73 as average, and 11 as below average. Family socioeconomic status (SES) was measured through a single self-report item where participants were asked to choose the category that best described their family's perceived financial situation, 8 students reported coming from affluent households, 138 from well-off families, 222 from middle-income families, and 17 from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Measures

Self-compassion was measured using the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (SCS-Y) developed by Neff et al. (2021), adapted for adolescent populations. The scale consists of 17 items assessing six core components: Self-Kindness, Self-Judgment, Common Humanity, Isolation, Mindfulness, and Over-Identification. Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Negative subscales (Self-Judgment, Isolation, Over-Identification) were reverse-scored prior to analysis. A composite score for total self-

compassion was calculated by averaging all items, following standard scoring guidelines. Based on prior research and Likert-scale conventions (Malhotra & Birks, 2007; Nguyễn et al., 2023), the total score was categorized into five levels: very low (1.0–1.8), low (1.81–2.6), moderate (2.61–3.4), high (3.41–4.2), and very high (4.21–5.0).

The internal consistency of the SCS-Y in this study was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha = .820 for the overall scale. Subscale reliabilities were also strong, ranging from $\alpha = .750$ (Self-Kindness) to $\alpha = .857$ (Common Humanity). Item-total correlations ranged from .607 to .827, and no items were removed.

Data Analysis

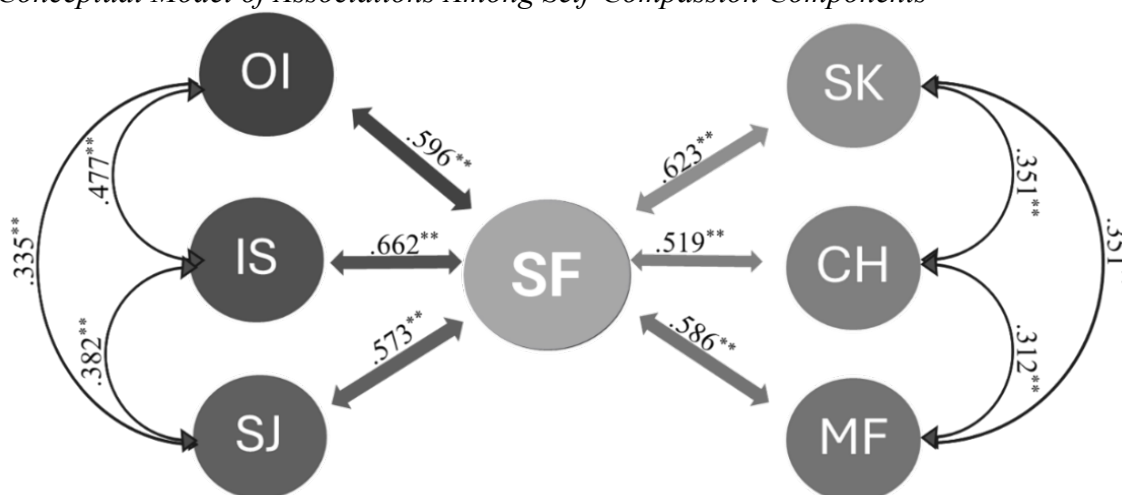
All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize demographic characteristics and distributions of self-compassion scores. Skewness and kurtosis were examined to assess normality assumptions. Internal consistency reliability of the SCS-Y was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha.

To examine within-subject differences across self-compassion subcomponents, a repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted. Given the violation of sphericity indicated by Mauchly's test ($W = .658$, $\chi^2(14) = 160.139$, $p < .001$), corrections were applied using both Greenhouse-Geisser ($\epsilon = .832$) and Huynh-Feldt ($\epsilon = .842$) estimates. Further analyses included multivariate tests (MANOVA) and within-subject contrasts, which revealed statistically significant linear, quadratic, and cubic trends ($p < .05$), while quartic trends were non-significant ($p = .882$). Between-subjects effects were also tested, yielding a significant main effect of self-compassion: $F(1, 384) = 8656.379$, $p < .001$, suggesting meaningful differences between individuals in total self-compassion scores.

Results

Figure 1

Conceptual Model of Associations Among Self-Compassion Components



Note. OI = Over-Identification, IS = Isolation, SJ = Self-Judgment, SK = Self-Kindness, CH = Common Humanity, MF = Mindfulness, SF = Self-Compassion

Figure 1 illustrates the intercorrelations among the components and their relationship with self-compassion.

To explore the relationships among the six components of self-compassion and their association with overall self-compassion, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted. Results indicated that all components were positively and significantly correlated with the total self-compassion score, suggesting a cohesive internal structure. Notably, Self-Judgment (SJ; $r = .573$), Over-Identification (OI; $r = .596$), and Isolation (IS; $r = .662$) showed moderate to strong correlations with self-compassion.

However, it is important to note that although these three components yielded positive correlations, they represent reverse-coded constructs. This means that lower levels of self-judgment, over-identification, and isolation (reflected by higher reverse-scored values) were associated with higher levels of self-compassion, consistent with Neff (2003a, 2003b) conceptual framework. These findings support the theoretical structure of the Self-Compassion Scale for Youth (SCS-Y), in which negative constructs are inversely related to the overall self-compassion construct.

Table 1

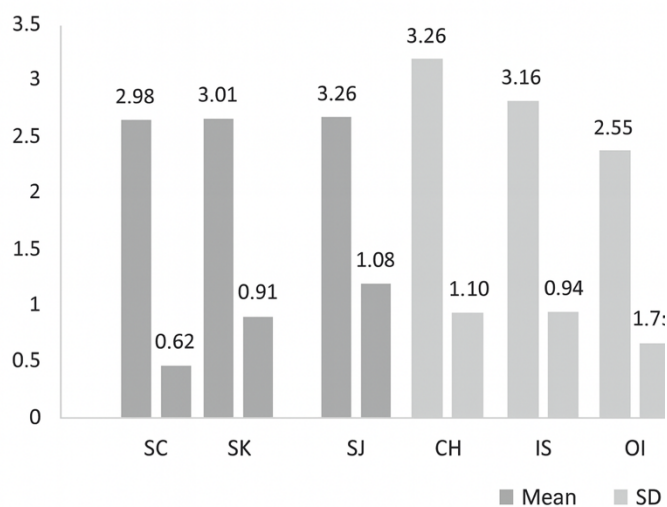
Descriptive Statistics and Frequency Distribution of Self-Compassion Components (N = 385)

Component	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High	M	SD
Overall Self-Compassion	9 (2.3%)	104 (27.0%)	180 (46.8%)	85 (22.1%)	7 (1.8%)	2.98	0.62
Self-Kindness (SK)	36 (9.4%)	72 (18.7%)	154 (40.0%)	76 (19.7%)	47 (12.2%)	3.01	0.91
Self-Judgment (SJ)	81 (21.0%)	84 (21.8%)	108 (28.1%)	68 (17.7%)	44 (11.4%)	2.78	1.08
Common Humanity (CH)	44 (11.4%)	57 (14.8%)	120 (31.2%)	75 (19.5%)	89 (23.1%)	3.26	1.08
Isolation (IS)	82 (21.3%)	77 (20.0%)	96 (24.9%)	81 (21.0%)	49 (12.7%)	2.88	1.10
Mindfulness (MF)	29 (7.5%)	74 (19.2%)	137 (35.6%)	83 (21.6%)	62 (16.1%)	3.16	0.94
Over-Identification (OI)	131 (34.0%)	103 (26.8%)	20 (5.2%)	89 (23.1%)	42 (10.9%)	2.55	1.17

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation

Descriptive statistics were computed for the overall self-compassion score and each of its six components. As shown in Table 1, the average Self-Compassion score among participants was $M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.62$, indicating a moderate level of self-compassion. In terms of distribution, 46.8% of students reported moderate levels, with 22.1% at high and 1.8% at very high levels. Conversely, 27.0% and 2.3% of students reported low and very low self-compassion, respectively.

Among the components, Common Humanity (CH; $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.08$) and Mindfulness (MF; $M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.94$) had the highest mean scores, suggesting that many students recognize shared human experiences and maintain a degree of balanced awareness in emotionally challenging situations. Conversely, Over-Identification (OI; $M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.17$) had the lowest mean, with 34.0% of students falling into the “very low” category, reflecting difficulties in maintaining emotional boundaries with negative experiences.

Figure 2*Means and Standard Deviations of Self-Compassion Components*

Note. OI = Over-Identification, IS = Isolation, SJ = Self-Judgment, SK = Self-Kindness, CH = Common Humanity, MF = Mindfulness

The differences observed among Self-Compassion subcomponents were statistically significant, as confirmed by a repeated measures ANOVA reported previously (see Method section). Components reflecting positive self-attitudes (SK, CH, MF) showed higher mean scores than components reflecting negative self-attitudes (SJ, IS, OI), confirming Hypothesis 1: Middle school students exhibit moderate levels of self-compassion overall, with higher scores on adaptive components compared to maladaptive ones.

These results are consistent with prior findings from adolescent populations (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017; Neff & McGehee, 2010), which emphasize that while adolescents may show strengths in empathy and mindfulness, they often struggle with self-criticism and emotional over-identification. The high variability in OI (SD = 1.17) particularly suggests the need for differentiated interventions targeting students at higher risk for internalizing problems.

Table 2*Gender Differences in Self-Compassion and Its Components (N = 385)*

Component	1 (n = 190)	2 (n = 195)	t	p
Overall Self-Compassion	3.07 (0.61)	2.88 (0.61)	3.081	.002**
Self-Kindness	3.08 (0.90)	3.04 (0.93)	0.462	.644
Self-Judgment	2.90 (1.08)	2.69 (1.06)	1.948	.052
Common Humanity	3.29 (1.14)	3.24 (1.02)	0.440	.660
Isolation	3.08 (1.11)	2.69 (1.06)	3.474	.001**
Mindfulness	3.25 (0.92)	3.08 (0.95)	1.781	.076
Over-Identification	2.72 (1.17)	2.39 (1.14)	2.850	.005**

Note. Values are presented as M (SD). **p < .0. Gender: Male = 1; Female = 2

Table 2 revealed a statistically significant difference in overall self-compassion by gender, $t(383) = 3.081$, $p = .002$, with male students reporting higher Self-Compassion scores (M = 3.07, SD = 0.61) than female students (M = 2.88, SD = 0.61). Significant gender differences

were also observed in Isolation and Over-Identification components. Specifically, male students reported higher levels of isolation ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.11$) compared to females ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.06$), $t = 3.474$, $p = .001$. Similarly, over-identification scores were significantly higher among males ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.17$) than females ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.14$), $t = 2.850$, $p = .005$.

These findings suggest that although male students demonstrated greater overall self-compassion, they may be more prone to internalizing emotional challenges, potentially reflecting gendered patterns in emotional regulation and expression (Gill et al., 2018).

Table 3
Self-Compassion Across Grade Levels (N = 385)

Component	Grade 6 (n = 113)	Grade 7 (n = 102)	Grade 8 (n = 81)	Grade 9 (n = 89)	F
Overall Self-Compassion	3.03 (0.64)	2.99 (0.62)	2.90 (0.53)	3.07 (0.66)	0.801
Self-Kindness	3.06 (0.96)	2.95 (0.91)	3.16 (0.79)	3.07 (0.97)	0.813
Self-Judgment	2.95 (1.16)	2.94 (1.06)	2.82 (0.93)	2.42 (1.04)	5.250
Common Humanity	3.36 (1.12)	3.16 (1.09)	3.24 (1.07)	3.29 (1.02)	0.679
Isolation	2.82 (1.14)	2.99 (1.10)	2.72 (0.98)	2.98 (1.15)	1.206
Mindfulness	3.23 (1.00)	3.10 (0.91)	3.20 (0.85)	3.10 (0.99)	0.493
Over-Identification	2.65 (1.16)	2.70 (1.24)	2.40 (1.04)	2.39 (1.19)	1.854

Note. ** $p < .01$

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences across grade levels (6 to 9). Results indicated no significant difference in overall Self-Compassion across grades, $F(3, 381) = 0.801$, $p = .494$, supporting the notion that self-compassion remains relatively stable during early adolescence (Neff, 2003b). However, a significant difference was found for the Self-Judgment component, $F(3, 381) = 5.250$, $p = .001$. Post hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) revealed that 9th-grade students reported significantly lower self-judgment scores than students in earlier grades, suggesting a developmental decrease in self-critical tendencies.

Table 4
Self-Compassion by Family Economic Status (N = 385)

Component	Wealthy (n = 8)	Well-off (n = 138)	Average (n = 222)	Poor (n = 17)	F
Overall Self-Compassion	3.38 (0.73)	2.97 (0.59)	2.97 (0.63)	2.89 (0.50)	1.280
Self-Kindness	3.04 (1.28)	3.06 (0.91)	3.06 (0.79)	2.96 (0.97)	0.067
Self-Judgment	2.95 (1.16)	2.94 (0.92)	2.82 (0.91)	2.42 (0.74)	1.246
Common Humanity	3.38 (1.15)	3.31 (1.05)	3.21 (1.10)	3.53 (1.05)	0.595
Isolation	3.42 (1.18)	2.84 (1.09)	2.91 (1.12)	2.55 (0.88)	1.266
Mindfulness	4.04 (0.55)	3.12 (0.94)	3.20 (0.96)	3.10 (0.94)	2.572
Over-Identification	3.06 (1.18)	2.61 (1.22)	2.59 (1.16)	2.59 (0.99)	0.809

A one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences in overall self-compassion across different family income levels, $F(3, 381) = 1.280$, $p = .281$. Although students from “wealthy” backgrounds reported slightly higher mean Self-Compassion scores ($M = 3.38$),

these differences were not statistically significant. This finding aligns with Neff (2003a), who emphasized that self-compassion is more strongly influenced by psychosocial than economic factors.

Table 5
Self-Compassion by Academic Performance (N = 385)

Component	Excellent (n = 145)	Good (n = 156)	Fair (n = 73)	Average (n = 11)	F
Overall Self-Compassion	3.01 (0.63)	2.93 (0.63)	3.00 (0.55)	2.98 (0.59)	0.488
Self-Kindness	3.03 (0.90)	3.00 (0.97)	3.12 (0.82)	3.70 (0.61)	2.134
Self-Judgment	2.69 (1.09)	2.83 (1.05)	2.97 (1.09)	2.45 (1.17)	1.548
Common Humanity	3.28 (1.05)	3.20 (1.14)	3.32 (1.04)	3.70 (0.84)	0.842
Isolation	3.00 (1.15)	2.89 (1.07)	2.72 (1.05)	2.30 (1.06)	2.060
Mindfulness	3.29 (0.96)	3.03 (0.93)	3.16 (0.89)	3.33 (1.06)	2.050
Over-Identification	2.64 (1.21)	2.48 (1.20)	2.60 (1.00)	2.10 (1.22)	1.134

No significant differences were found in overall Self-Compassion across different academic achievement levels, $F(3, 381) = 0.488$, $p = .691$. While students with “excellent” academic performance reported slightly higher levels of self-compassion ($M = 3.01$), this difference was not statistically meaningful.

In summary, the results support Hypothesis 2, confirming statistically significant differences in self-compassion based on gender and grade level (specifically on self-judgment). Conversely, Hypothesis 3 is supported in that no significant differences in self-compassion were found by family economic status or academic performance. These findings highlight the importance of age-related developmental factors and gendered emotional expression in shaping self-compassion, while downplaying the role of socioeconomic or academic achievement as key determinants.

Discussion

Specific Associations With Self-Compassion Components

This study investigated self-compassion among middle school students and explored how key demographic factors, such as gender, grade level, academic performance, and family socioeconomic status, are associated with various components of self-compassion. The findings revealed a moderately high level of self-compassion among adolescents, with a majority of students scoring in the moderate to high range. Among the subcomponents, students reported particularly strong tendencies toward common humanity and mindfulness, while over-identification and self-judgment emerged as areas of vulnerability.

In terms of gender, results showed that male students reported significantly higher levels of overall self-compassion than females. Specifically, boys reported higher levels of isolation and over-identification, both of which are reverse-coded constructs, indicating greater emotional entanglement and perceived social disconnection. This pattern may reflect gender-related emotional regulation styles in early adolescence, where boys may exhibit increased self-reliance and emotional suppression (Gill et al., 2018), but also experience heightened internal struggles in the absence of sufficient coping strategies (Neff & McGehee, 2010).

These findings suggest that gender norms around emotional expression could partly explain the observed differences in self-compassion dynamics.

Regarding developmental progression, grade level was not significantly associated with overall self-compassion, but differences were observed in the self-judgment component. Older students, particularly those in grade 9, reported lower levels of self-criticism compared to their younger peers. This finding is consistent with previous studies highlighting that as adolescents mature, they tend to develop improved emotional regulation and a more accepting self-perspective (Bluth & Blanton, 2015). The developmental transition from early to late adolescence may thus be accompanied by reduced self-judgment and increased cognitive flexibility, which facilitate healthier self-evaluations.

In contrast, neither socioeconomic status nor academic achievement were significantly associated with overall self-compassion or its components. Although students from higher-income households and with better academic performance showed slightly elevated self-compassion scores, these differences were not statistically significant. This pattern is in line with earlier findings suggesting that self-compassion is more strongly shaped by intrapersonal and relational factors than by material conditions (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003a). In particular, the emotional climate of the family and the presence of empathetic adult figures may be more critical than financial status in shaping adolescents' capacity for self-kindness and acceptance.

Comparative Overview Across Self-Compassion Dimensions

When analyzing patterns across the six self-compassion dimensions, common humanity and mindfulness consistently emerged as the most strongly endorsed components, suggesting that students generally recognize the universality of suffering and possess the capacity to remain emotionally balanced in difficult situations. This is consistent with Neff (2003b) model, which emphasizes that acknowledging shared human imperfection is central to developing a non-judgmental and compassionate stance toward oneself.

Conversely, over-identification and self-judgment were less developed in the sample, pointing to areas where adolescents may struggle with harsh self-criticism or rumination in the face of stress. The high standard deviation in these components, especially over-identification, suggests considerable individual variation, indicating that while some students may demonstrate effective emotional detachment, others may be more vulnerable to internalizing distress. These results support earlier research suggesting that emotional over-identification is a common challenge in adolescence and is often linked to increased risks for depression and anxiety (Bluth & Eisenlohr-Moul, 2017; Neff & McGehee, 2010).

Importantly, the moderate to strong positive correlations between all six subcomponents and the overall self-compassion score confirm the interconnectedness and internal coherence of the self-compassion construct. While certain components such as self-kindness and mindfulness directly reflect supportive inner dialogue, others (e.g., self-judgment and isolation) serve as protective indicators when present in lower degrees, as captured by reverse-coded scoring (Neff et al., 2021). Together, these findings support the validity of the SCS-Y in measuring self-compassion in early adolescents and demonstrate its sensitivity in identifying specific strengths and vulnerabilities.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Previous studies on self-compassion in adolescence have primarily focused on its relationship with mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, or emotional resilience (Bluth & Neff, 2018; Neff & McGehee, 2010). However, few investigations have examined how self-compassion manifests differently across sociodemographic subgroups in early adolescence, particularly in educational contexts within collectivist societies such as Vietnam. This study addresses this empirical gap by systematically analyzing how gender, grade level, academic performance, and family socioeconomic status influence both overall self-compassion and its six underlying components.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings lend support to Self-Compassion Theory of Neff (2003a), which conceptualizes self-compassion as a multidimensional construct, comprising both positive aspects (e.g., mindfulness, common humanity, self-kindness) and negative aspects (e.g., self-judgment, over-identification, isolation). The observed variability across subcomponents in this study, particularly the high scores in common humanity and mindfulness, and lower scores in over-identification, suggests that these dimensions are not uniformly expressed in adolescents, and may be differentially shaped by developmental, social, and cultural factors. The fact that self-judgment decreased significantly among older students further supports the developmental premise that adolescents gradually acquire cognitive and emotional resources that buffer against self-criticism (Bluth & Blanton, 2015).

Importantly, the gender-based findings extend existing theoretical frameworks by highlighting how gender norms and emotional expression may mediate the expression of self-compassion. While male students in this study reported higher overall self-compassion, they also exhibited elevated levels of isolation and over-identification, suggesting a potential disconnect between external expressions of resilience and internal emotional struggle. These findings support socialization theories which suggest that boys, especially in collectivist settings, are often encouraged to suppress emotional vulnerability (Gill et al., 2018), potentially leading to internalized forms of distress despite surface-level indicators of self-assurance.

Moreover, the lack of significant differences in self-compassion based on family economic status and academic performance contributes to a theoretical refinement: self-compassion may be less dependent on external socio-material conditions, and more closely tied to internal cognitive-affective processes and perceived emotional support systems. This supports prior assertions that psychosocial environments and personal meaning-making play a more central role than economic resources in fostering self-compassion (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Neff, 2003b).

From a practical standpoint, the findings hold significant implications for the design and implementation of school-based mental health interventions. First, the identification of vulnerable subcomponents, namely, over-identification, self-judgment, and isolation, suggests that interventions should not treat self-compassion as a monolithic construct, but rather focus on targeted component-level development. Programs such as Mindful Self-Compassion for Teens (MSC-T) or interventions using the ABCDE model of cognitive restructuring (Seligman, 2006) may be particularly effective in helping adolescents detach from negative thought patterns and respond to distress with greater balance.

Second, the results advocate for gender-responsive interventions. While male students may display higher self-compassion scores, their elevated levels of isolation suggest the need for psychosocial strategies that promote emotional literacy, peer support, and connection-building. Creating safe classroom environments that allow boys to express emotional difficulty without stigma may help mitigate the effects of emotional suppression.

Finally, the significant developmental trend in reduced self-judgment across grade levels provides evidence for age-appropriate emotional scaffolding. Interventions may benefit from early implementation, particularly in grades 6 and 7, when adolescents are still forming internal narratives about failure, self-worth, and personal adequacy. Integrating self-compassion training into the curriculum as part of social-emotional learning (SEL) may yield long-term benefits in resilience, academic engagement, and psychological well-being.

Conclusion

This study provides evidence that Vietnamese lower secondary school students report a moderate level of self-compassion, with stronger endorsement of common humanity and mindfulness than of the maladaptive components (over-identification, isolation, and self-judgment). Gender differences emerged in overall self-compassion and in isolation and over-identification, while grade-level differences were limited to self-judgment. No significant differences were found by family socioeconomic status or academic achievement. These findings support the use of the SCS-Y in Vietnamese urban school settings and underscore the value of gender-responsive, developmentally appropriate school-based interventions to strengthen self-compassion and emotional resilience.

Limitations

Despite offering novel insights into the structure and variability of self-compassion in middle school students, this study has several limitations that must be considered. First, the cross-sectional nature of the research design precludes any causal interpretation of the relationships between demographic variables and self-compassion. Longitudinal designs would be more suitable to examine how self-compassion evolves over time and interacts with academic, emotional, or social development. Second, all data were gathered through self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in introspection, particularly in younger students who may lack full meta-cognitive awareness. Although the SCS-Y has demonstrated psychometric reliability, future studies might incorporate multi-informant designs, including teacher or caregiver ratings, to enhance validity. Third, the sample was drawn exclusively from public middle schools in an urban Vietnamese context, which limits generalizability to students in rural or private education systems. Cultural and institutional variations in teaching styles, family dynamics, and peer relationships may differentially affect the development of self-compassion. Therefore, replication across diverse settings is necessary. Fourth, while the study examined multiple demographic variables, it did not account for interpersonal or familial variables, such as parental warmth, peer bullying, or attachment style, which could serve as mediating or moderating factors. Incorporating these variables would offer a more nuanced understanding of how environmental and relational contexts influence self-compassion. Lastly, while the study distinguished between positive and negative self-compassion components, it did not explore their direct associations with mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, or stress coping. Future research should investigate these links to determine which components are most protective, or most predictive, of adolescent psychological well-being.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini, AI-assisted writing tools, were used in proofreading and refining the language and formatting of the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors, improving clarity, and aligning the manuscript with the conference proceedings template. The authors further declare that no AI or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate the research content. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from the systematic conduct of the research.

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