Self-Compassion in an Academic Setting: A Big Data-Driven Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Psychological pressure can hinder students from performing optimally in academic settings. In response, self-compassion (SC) emerges as a crucial skill to help students manage stress and maintain mental health. While previous research has predominantly examined SC in clinical contexts, this study offers a novel perspective by investigating its application within an academic setting. The aim is to develop a theoretical model that explains the role of SC in addressing psychological academic challenges. A systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA model, supported by big data and visualized through VOS viewer. Using the Publish or Perish application, 505 articles were identified from Scopus- and Sinta-indexed journals (Elsevier, PubMed, Crossref, Google Scholar) published between 2019 and 2023. Nineteen articles were selected for in-depth analysis. The results reveal two academic categories: positive and negative. Self-compassion enhances variables in positive settings and moderates the effects of negative academic stressors. This research contributes to the design of psychological intervention strategies for students.

Keywords: psychological academic challenges, big data, self-compassion, students

Abstrak

Tekanan psikologis dapat menghambat siswa untuk berkinerja optimal dalam pengaturan akademik. Sebagai tanggapan, welas asih diri (SC) muncul sebagai keterampilan penting untuk membantu siswa mengelola stres dan menjaga kesehatan mental. Sementara penelitian sebelumnya sebagian besar telah meneliti SC dalam konteks klinis, penelitian ini menawarkan perspektif baru dengan menyelidiki penerapannya dalam pengaturan akademik. Tujuannya adalah untuk mengembangkan model teoritis yang menjelaskan peran SC dalam mengatasi tantangan akademik psikologis. Tinjauan literatur sistematis dilakukan dengan menggunakan model PRISMA, didukung oleh big data dan divisualisasikan melalui VOSviewer. Dengan menggunakan aplikasi Publish or Perish, 505 artikel diidentifikasi dari jurnal terindeks Scopus dan Scota (Elsevier, PubMed, Crossref, Google Scholar) yang diterbitkan antara 2019-2023. 19 artikel dipilih untuk analisis mendalam. Hasilnya mengungkapkan dua kategori akademik: positif dan negatif. Welas asih diri meningkatkan variabel dalam pengaturan positif dan memoderasi efek stres akademik negatif. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada desain strategi intervensi psikologis bagi siswa.

Kata kunci: tantangan akademik psikologis, data besar, belas kasihan, siswa

INTRODUCTION

High-quality education is a universal aspiration for all nations (Sebu, 2023). However, data from a World Health Organization (WHO) survey (2017) reveal that between 10% of school-aged children and 20% of adolescents worldwide experience mental health issues. In Indonesia, a survey by the Ministry of Health indicates that the prevalence of mental health challenges among 15-year-olds increased from 6% in 2013 to 9.8% in 2018. The I-NAMHS survey (2022) further reported that approximately 34.9% (or 15.5 million) adolescents experience mental health challenges. Research by Marthoenis and Schouler-Ocak (2023), utilizing national data from the Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) conducted by WHO in Indonesia in 2015, found that 7.3% of Indonesian adolescents experience psychological distress. Alongside these psychological issues, students also face fundamental academic challenges such as underachievement, grade repetition, and absenteeism (Wuryanto & Abduh, 2022).

This situation illustrates the complex circumstances faced by students, who are expected to function optimally in academic settings while managing the psychological pressures arising from various challenges. Within this context, self-compassion emerges as a crucial psychological resource. A literature review by Apsari & Budi Utomo (2024) on self-compassion in clinical settings found that self-compassion helps individuals cope more effectively with pressure and stress, thereby maintaining mental health stability. Self-compassion itself is a key variable in positive psychology and is closely associated with managing psychological stress (Neff et al., 2007). Despite its potential benefits, the application of self-compassion remains predominantly confined to clinical contexts and has received limited attention in academic settings. Neff (2003) proposed that self-compassion refers to how individuals relate to themselves when experiencing failure, inadequacy, or personal suffering. It consists of three interrelated components: (1) self-kindness versus self-judgment, (2) common humanity versus isolation, and (3) mindfulness versus overidentification (Neff et al., 2019).

Research by Setiani and Titi (2023) has shown that self-compassion is a capacity that is not limited by gender. Individuals with high self-compassion, when faced with pain or failure, tend to adopt a positive attitude toward themselves, demonstrate self-kindness, and forgive themselves (Allen & Leary, 2010). Self-compassion enables individuals to view negative experiences as part of a broader human experience, rather than isolating themselves. It also fosters balanced awareness, avoiding excessive identification with one's faults or failures. Neff (2003) explains that several factors, including parenting style, cultural norms, and personal experiences shape self-compassion. Parenting that encourages the development of empathy will influence a child's ability to be self-compassionate. Cultural norms also play a role; cultures that promote individualism may hinder the cultivation of self-compassion (Montero-Marin et al., 2018). Personal experiences, including failures, difficulties, and successes, can likewise determine one's capacity for self-kindness and influence levels of self-compassion.

Numerous studies on self-compassion have linked it to various forms of psychological distress. Most research on self-compassion has focused on clinical psychology contexts, such as mental health (Yela, 2020), depressive symptoms (Brophy et al., 2020), anxiety (Liu, 2022), eating disorders (Geller et al., 2020), and general stress

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(Bui et al., 2021). Self-compassion has also been shown to reduce symptoms of depression (Schnepper et al., 2020), anxiety (McEwan et al., 2018), body dissatisfaction (Mahon & Hevey, 2023), and other everyday stressors (Bistricky et al., 2023). Thus, self-compassion has been demonstrated to moderate the negative impact of clinical psychological challenges.

These findings offer hope that self-compassion also addresses psychological academic challenges faced by students. Nevertheless, there is a notable lack of literature reviews and studies exploring the dynamics of self-compassion in academic settings. On the other hand, this ability is considered highly important for students to cope with academic pressures, aiming to achieve high-quality, optimal education. The present study aims to summarize, analyze, and synthesize the literature on self-compassion in relation to students' academic situation, and to develop a theoretical model of self-compassion for coping with psychological academic challenges.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) method based on big data. According to Snyder (2019), SLR is a research methodology that provides a comprehensive overview of a particular field of study. The purpose of an SLR is to collect, evaluate, and synthesize all relevant and available evidence related to the research questions. The literature selection procedure followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses) model, which was chosen for its transparent, consistent, and systematic approach to literature search, selection, quality assessment, and data analysis, thus ensuring reliable and replicable results (Moher et al., 2009).

Data collection was conducted using big data approaches with the Publish or Perish application. The advantage of this approach lies in its efficiency in gathering, managing, and filtering a large volume of scientific articles, as well as facilitating the identification of relevant and up-to-date literature within a short time frame (Harzing, 2007). The search was conducted using the keywords "self-compassion" and "academic," focusing on studies published in the last five years (2019–2023) and limited to English-language literature. Selected sources included reputable databases: Elsevier (Scopus), PubMed, Crossref, and Google Scholar (see Table 1). These four databases are known for their broad coverage, credibility, and accessibility (Harzing, 2007). The search process identified a total of 505 articles, which were then subjected to visualization analysis using the big data-based Vos Viewer application.

Subsequently, a two-stage screening process was undertaken (see Figure 1). The eligibility screening involved removing 68 duplicates and books, followed by the elimination of 406 articles that were not indexed in Scopus or Sinta, as well as journals not relevant to the keywords. An additional five articles were excluded for being inaccessible or in languages other than English. The initial screening resulted in 26 journal articles meeting the inclusion criteria.

The second screening stage utilized the web-based big data application Elicit. The strength of this approach lies in its automation and faster screening process compared to conventional methods. The big data approach allows for efficient and detailed processing of large numbers of journal articles from diverse sources. This process is based on

research objectives, variables, study populations, sampling techniques, research types and designs, measurement instruments, analyses, findings, and limitations. Seven articles were excluded because their populations did not include "students" or "university students." The second screening yielded 19 articles, which were then analyzed in depth to achieve the research objectives.

Table 1.
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of The Articles

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Sourced from reputable databases	-
Published between 2019 and 2023	-
Peer-reviewed research journal articles	Books and book chapters
Indexed in Scopus and Sinta	Not indexed in Scopus or Sinta
Contain the keywords "self-compassion" and "academic"	Do not contain the keywords "self-compassion" and "academic"
Full text accessible	Full text not open access
Written in English	Written in Arabic, Spanish, or Chinese
Research conducted on student populations	Research conducted on teacher and professor populations
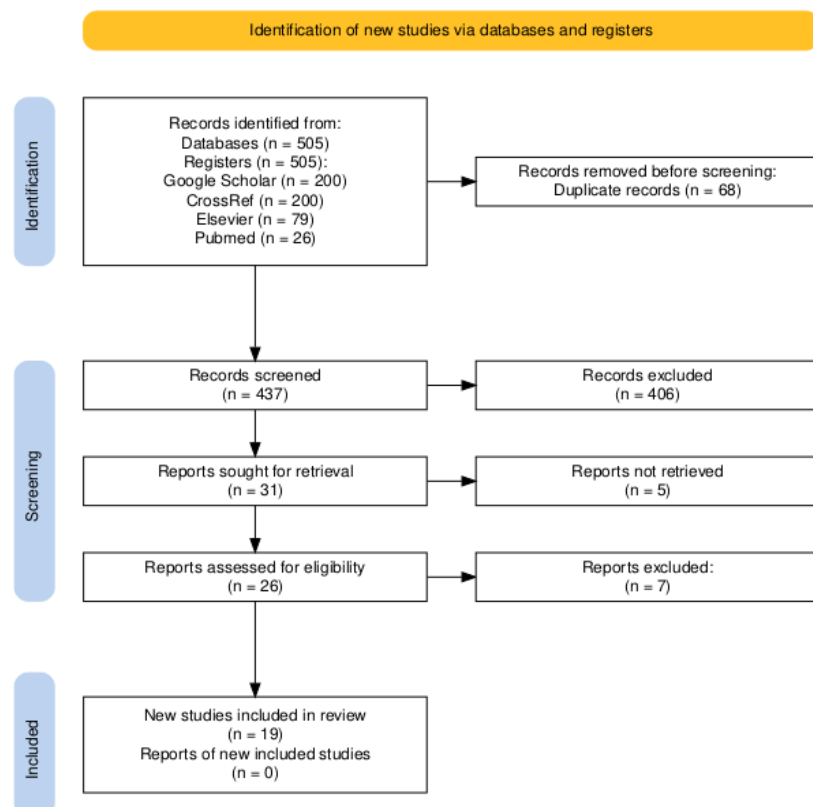
Figure 1. Articles Collection and Selection Process (Haddaway et al., 2022)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study provides an overview of self-compassion research over the past five years (2019–2023) in relation to coping with psychological academic challenges. The research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What do students encounter the psychological academic challenges? (2) How are these challenges situated within their specific setting?

From the initial pool of 505 articles, a network visualization analysis was conducted using the big data-based Vos Viewer application (see Figure 2). According to the Vos Viewer manual (Eck & Waltman, 2018), there are three key elements to consider when visualizing networks: (1) Each item (variable) is represented by a label or circle, with its size corresponding to the number of studies involving that variable. The more frequently a variable appears in the literature, the larger the circle. (2) The color of each variable is assigned by default according to its cluster. A cluster comprises a group of variables that are closely related. (3) The distance between circles indicates the strength of the relationship: the closer two circles are, the stronger their association.

As shown in Figure 2, three main clusters were identified: (1) the clinical cluster (red), (2) the academic cluster (blue), and (3) the social cluster (purple). The clinical cluster is the closest to self-compassion and features a complex network, suggesting that most self-compassion research has been conducted in clinical settings. The academic cluster, though more distant, contains a greater number of variables represented by smaller circles, indicating that psychological academic challenges among students are highly diverse, yet self-compassion research in these settings remains limited.
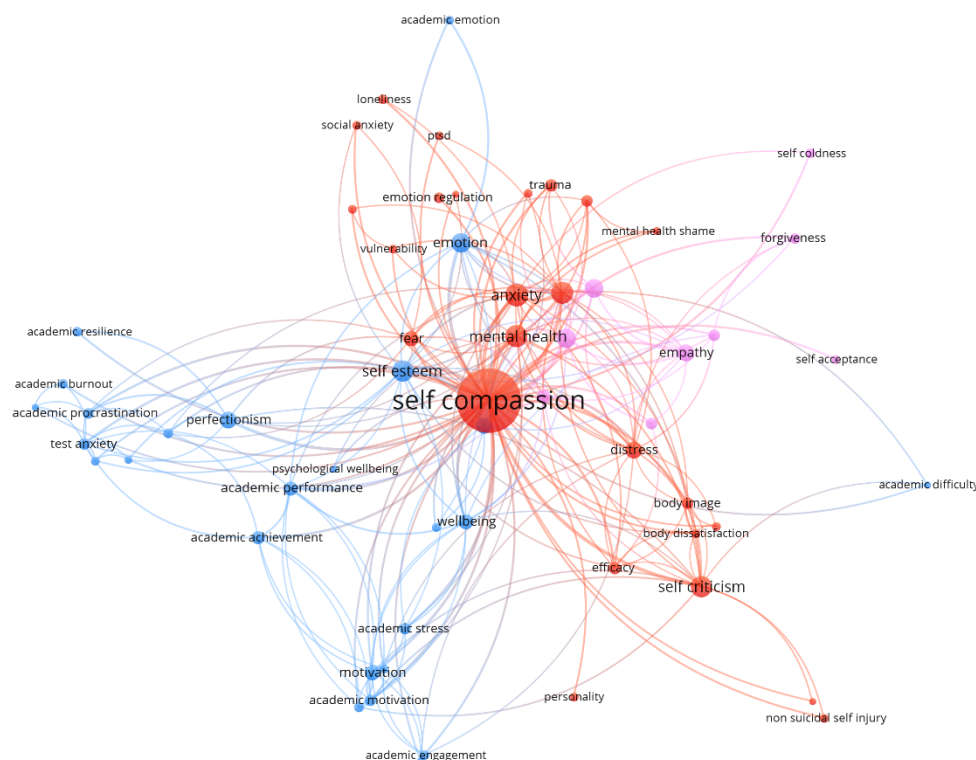

Figure 2. Vos Viewer Network Visualization: Research on Self-Compassion

Based on this visualization, the researcher identified variables within two categories: positive and negative academic settings (see Table 2). Variables in positive academic settings represent aspects of positive psychology that support optimal learning processes. In contrast, variables in negative academic settings have the potential to impede learning and cause psychological distress among students.

Table 2.
Characteristics of Variables Related to Self-Compassion in Academic Settings
(Based on 505 Articles)

Positive Academic Setting	Psychological well-being, academic performance, academic achievement, motivation, academic motivation, academic engagement, academic resilience, dan academic emotion
Negative Academic Setting	Academic burnout, academic procrastination, test anxiety, perfectionism, academic stress, and academic difficulty.

A total of 19 self-compassion studies in academic settings passed the second screening and were included for in-depth analysis. The following research questions were addressed: (1) What psychological academic challenges do students experience in positive and negative settings? (2) What is the theoretical model of self-compassion's effect on students in coping with psychological academic challenges within both positive and negative settings? The characteristics of these studies are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3.
Characteristics of Self-Compassion Research in Academic Settings

Research Population	The study populations included junior high school students, senior high school students, and university students from Indonesia, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Canada, Iran, Jordan, Finland, South Korea, and Hong Kong.
Sampling Technique	12 studies employed convenience sampling, 2 used cluster random sampling, 1 used stratified random sampling, and 4 studies did not specify the sampling technique.
Research Design	All 19 articles were quantitative studies with a cross-sectional design.
Research Instrument	Nine studies utilized the 26-item Self-Compassion Scale, six used the 12-item Self-Compassion Scale Short Form, three used adapted versions of the Self-Compassion Scale in local languages, and one study did not specify the instrument used.
Analysis	14 studies used correlational analysis, 3 used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), 1 used comparative analysis, and 1 employed an experimental analysis. All studies reported statistical properties.

The results of the systematic literature review from 19 articles are presented in Table 4.

Table 4.
Literature Review Results

No.	Authors and Years	Title	Research Results
1.	Setiani & Titi (2023)	Self-Compassion Based on Gender and Student Academic Achievement	There was no significant effect of gender on the level of self-compassion among university students. Similarly, no significant relationship was found between students' self-compassion and their academic achievement.
2.	Rahmatia et al. (2022)	The Relationship between Resilience and Academic Procrastination seen from Students' Self-Compassion	A direct negative relationship was observed between resilience and academic procrastination. Self-compassion was positively associated with resilience and negatively associated with academic procrastination. However, no direct relationship was found between resilience and academic procrastination mediated by self-compassion.
3.	Ningrum et al. (2021)	The Effect of Self-Compassion and Islamic Spiritual Orientation on Academic Anxiety	There was a significant negative effect of self-compassion and Islamic spiritual orientation on students' academic anxiety. Self-compassion can reduce academic anxiety through positive changes in self-perception.
4.	Kotera, Lieu, et al. (2022)	Mental Wellbeing of Indonesian Students: Mean Comparison With UK Students and Relationships with Self-Compassion and Academic Engagement	Self-compassion and academic engagement together accounted for 36% of the variance in mental well-being. Self-compassion was identified as the strongest and most significant predictor of mental well-being. Indonesian university students demonstrated higher levels of self-compassion compared to their British counterparts.
5.	Kotera, Maybury, et al. (2022)	Mental Well-Being of Czech University Students: Academic Motivation, Self-	Mental well-being was positively associated with both intrinsic motivation and self-compassion. Self-compassion emerged as the

		Compassion, and Self-Criticism	strongest predictor of mental well-being, with intrinsic motivation mediating the pathway from self-compassion to mental well-being.
6.	Martin et al. (2019)	Examining The Importance of Academic-Specific Self-Compassion in The Academic Self-Control Model	Academic self-compassion was found to have a stronger association with academic resourcefulness compared to general self-compassion. Academic self-compassion served as a predictor for university adaptation, academic resourcefulness, and expected GPA.
7.	Egan et al. (2022)	Mindfulness, Self-Compassion, Resilience and Wellbeing in Higher Education: A Recipe to Increase Academic Performance	There was a positive relationship between self-compassion, mindfulness, consideration of future consequences, and resilience with academic performance. High levels of self-compassion predicted higher academic performance.
8.	Yustika & Widyasari (2021)	Students' Self-Compassion and Academic Resilience in Pandemic Era	A positive correlation was also found between self-compassion and academic resilience.
9.	Mansouri et al. (2022)	The Mediating Role of Fear of Failure, Self-Compassion and Intolerance of Uncertainty in the Relationship Between Academic Procrastination and Perfectionism	Self-compassion had a direct, significant negative effect on academic procrastination. Similarly, there was a direct, significant negative effect of perfectionism on self-compassion. Fear of failure, intolerance of uncertainty, and self-compassion all played significant roles in the relationship between academic procrastination and perfectionism.
10.	Tang (2019)	Resilience and Self-Compassion related with Achievement Emotions, Test Anxiety, Intolerance of Uncertainty, and Academic Achievement	Self-compassion was negatively associated with test anxiety and was a significant predictor of intolerance of uncertainty. Students with higher levels of cognitive test anxiety exhibited lower levels of self-compassion.
11.	Kotera, Aledeh, et al. (2022)	Academic Motivation of Indonesian University Students: Relationship	Motivation was negatively associated with both self-compassion and resilience. Both

		with Self-Compassion nd Resilience	self-compassion and resilience predicted all three types of motivation, and they also moderated the pathway from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.
12.	Poots & Cassidy (2020)	Academic Expectation, Self-Compassion, Psychological Capital, Social Support and Student Wellbeing	Self-compassion was identified as a significant predictor of student well-being. The study highlighted the mediating roles of self-compassion, psychological capital, and social support in the relationship between academic stress and student well-being.
13.	Fisher et al. (2023)	Academic Burnout Among Accounting Majors: The Roles of Self-Compassion, Test Anxiety, and Maladaptive Perfectionism	Eighty-five percent of accounting students reported moderate to high levels of academic burnout. Test anxiety and maladaptive perfectionism were also found to be high. Academic burnout was lower among students with high self-compassion. Higher self-compassion was also associated with lower levels of test anxiety and maladaptive perfectionism.
14.	Lahtinen et al. (2020)	Does Self-Compassion Protect Adolescents Who are Victimized or Suffer From Academic Difficulties from Depression?	Self-compassion was inversely related to self-coldness and academic difficulties. Self-compassion was found to moderate and weaken the relationship between academic difficulties and depression.
15.	Lee & Lee (2020)	The Role of Self-Compassion in The Academic Stress Model	The effect of academic burnout on depression varied according to levels of self-compassion, indicating that students with high self-compassion may experience fatigue from academic demands, but it does not necessarily lead to depression.
16.	Abdellatif (2022)	Modeling the Relationships Between Academic Boredom, Self-Compassion, and Quality of Academic	Self-compassion was found to partially mediate the relationship between academic boredom and quality of academic life.

		Life Among University Students	
17.	Supervía et al. (2022)	The Mediating Role of Happiness and Academic Self-Efficacy in The Relationship between Self-Compassion and Academic Well-Being In Student	A significant relationship was found between academic well-being and self-compassion, mediated by happiness and academic self-efficacy. Students with high self-compassion reported greater happiness and higher academic self-efficacy.
18.	Al-Awamleh (2020)	The Relationship between Self-Compassion and Academic Achievement for Sport Science Students	Most participants reported moderate levels of self-compassion. There was a significant gender difference in self-compassion, with female students reporting higher levels of self-compassion.
19.	Shirmohammadi et al. (2021)	The Association between Self-Compassion and Academic Well-Being with the Mediating Role of Perceived Academic Stress and Academic Optimism in Female Students	Self-compassion had a direct, positive, and significant relationship with academic optimism, a negative relationship with academic stress, and no significant association with academic well-being.

An in-depth analysis of 19 articles revealed psychological academic challenges experienced by students in both positive and negative academic settings (Table 5).

Table 5.
Literature Review Results

Positive Academic Setting	Academic achievement, academic engagement, academic performance, academic resilience, academic resourcefulness, dan academic well-being.
Negative Academic Setting	Academic expectation, academic procrastination, academic anxiety, academic boredom, academic burnout, academic difficulties, dan academic procrastination

Based on the in-depth analysis of 19 articles, the researcher developed a theoretical model of student self-compassion in psychological academic challenges within both positive and negative academic settings (see Figures 3 and 4).

**Psychological Academic Challenges Experienced by Students**

The results of the systematic literature review (SLR) identified several psychological academic challenges investigated among students ranging from junior high school (SMP) to senior high school (SMA) and university levels. The challenges

encountered were classified into two categories: positive academic settings and negative academic settings. Positive academic settings refer to aspects of positive psychology that can support the learning process. These include psychological well-being, academic performance, academic achievement, motivation, academic engagement, academic resilience, and academic emotion. Positive academic settings encompass students' perceptions of the quality of their academic life, their level of academic engagement, and the extent of their academic achievement.

In contrast, negative academic settings are associated with negative psychological variables that can hinder the learning process. These include academic burnout, procrastination, test anxiety, perfectionism, stress, and difficulty. The presence of negative academic issues indicates that students are experiencing psychological pressures and challenges in their academic environment. For example, students may experience anxiety related to academic demands and, at the same time, suffer from academic burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and a diminished sense of academic accomplishment. It is crucial for students to address these academic challenges promptly, and one way to do so is by developing self-compassion skills.

The theoretical propositions developed are based on the analysis of the 19 reviewed articles. Self-compassion plays a significant role in positive academic settings (see Figure 3). Students who possess strong academic motivation—both extrinsic and intrinsic—are more likely to develop high levels of self-compassion. This, in turn, fosters greater academic resilience, which subsequently contributes to enhanced student well-being. Improved well-being ultimately leads to better academic performance, including higher GPA and academic achievements. Moreover, intrinsic motivation and self-compassion can enhance academic self-control, self-efficacy, and academic engagement, which are further linked to improved academic outcomes and overall performance.
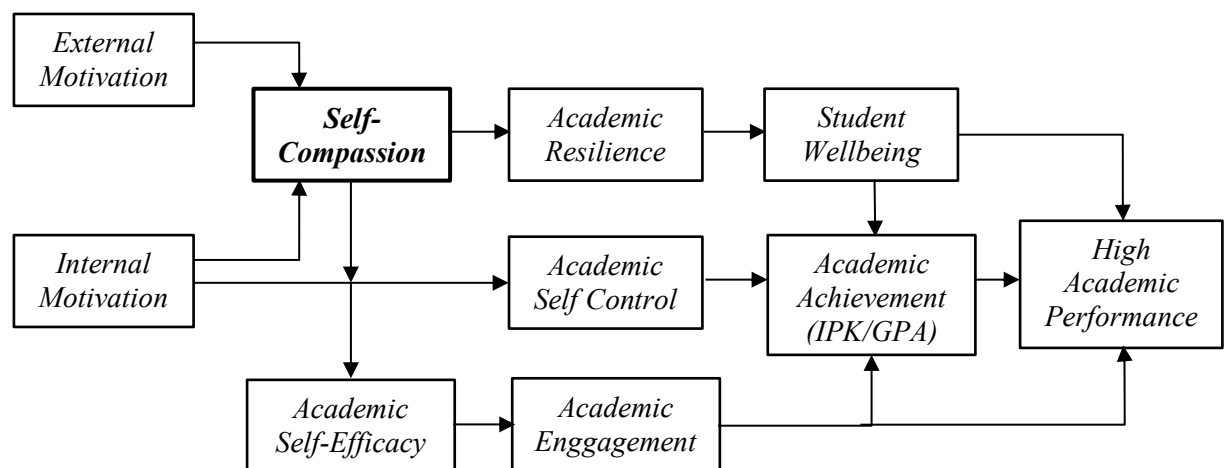
Figure 3. Theoretical Model of Self-Compassion in Positive Academic Settings

The crucial role of self-compassion in negative academic settings is illustrated in Figure 4. Students who experience academic difficulties—such as heightened levels of perfectionism that subsequently increase academic procrastination—can develop high

academic resilience if they possess strong self-compassion. This, in turn, leads to an improvement in their academic quality of life. Similarly, when students encounter academic challenges that result in anxiety or even depression, those with high levels of self-compassion tend to exhibit greater academic resilience, ultimately enhancing their overall academic quality of life.
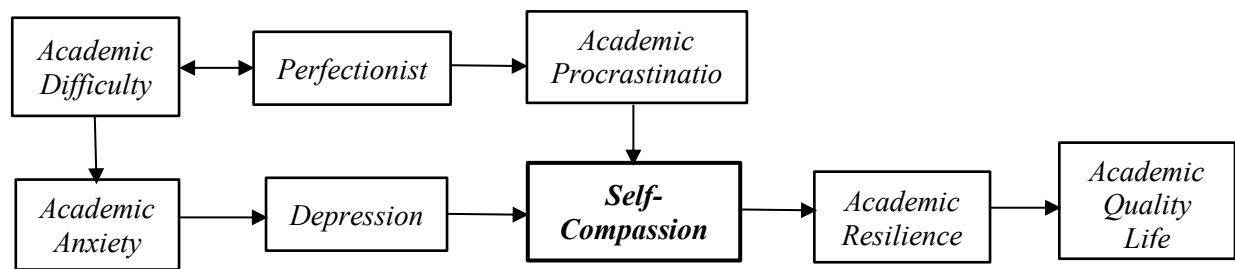
Figure 4. Theoretical Model of Self-Compassion in Negative Academic Settings

The Impact of Self-Compassion in Coping with Psychological Academic Challenges

The results of the systematic literature review (SLR) indicate that self-compassion has a positive relationship with positive academic settings. Abdellatif's (2022) model demonstrated that high levels of self-compassion, particularly through the positive dimension of self-warmth, can enhance students' academic quality of life. Self-compassion has a significant influence on students' mental well-being (Supervía et al., 2022) and is recognized as the strongest predictor of mental well-being (Kotera, Lieu, et al., 2022; Kotersa, Maybury, et al., 2022; Poots & Cassidy, 2020). However, research by Shirmohammadi et al. (2021) found that self-compassion was not related to well-being among high school students, suggesting that economic status and parental educational attainment also contribute to student well-being at this level. Nevertheless, students who possess high self-compassion, regardless of environmental factors, tend to have better and happier well-being (Yang, 2023).

Higher levels of self-compassion can predict better academic performance (Egan et al., 2022), although students' academic performance does not, in turn, influence their self-compassion (Al-Awamleh, 2020). This suggests that self-compassion plays a unidirectional role in improving students' academic performance. However, self-compassion does not have a direct effect on academic achievement (Setiani & Titi, 2023). Self-compassion is positively associated with academic resilience (Egan et al., 2022; Kotera, Aledeh, et al., 2022; Rahmatia et al., 2022; Tang, 2019; Yustika & Widyasari, 2021), indicating its potential in helping students develop resistance to academic stress.

In addition to its positive outcomes, emerging research also highlights factors that contribute to the development of self-compassion. A recent study found that self-control, motivation, and resilience collectively and significantly predict self-compassion among pre-service teacher students (PPG), accounting for 28.8% of its variance (Apsari et al., 2024). This finding underscores the importance of fostering these personal attributes to enhance self-compassion, especially where psychological resilience is crucial.

Furthermore, self-compassion is negatively associated with a negative academic setting; it is negatively correlated with academic procrastination (Rahmatia et al., 2022).

The moderating effect of self-compassion on academic procrastination can enhance academic performance (Egan et al., 2022) and reduce students' fear of failure (Mansouri et al., 2022). Self-compassion is also negatively associated with, and can predict, academic anxiety (Fisher et al., 2023; Tang, 2019), primarily by promoting more positive self-perceptions (Ningrum et al., 2021).

Moreover, self-compassion can moderate the impact of academic boredom (Abdellatif, 2022), academic burnout (Fisher et al., 2023), and academic distress (Lahtinen et al., 2020). As a result, students with high levels of self-compassion who experience academic difficulties are less likely to suffer from worsening challenges or develop depression. This relationship demonstrates that lower levels of negative academic issues accompany high self-compassion.

CONCLUSION

Self-compassion has a significant association with various aspects of students' lives. In an academic setting, self-compassion can be categorized into two situations: positive and negative. In positive academic settings, self-compassion serves as a significant predictor and has a beneficial effect on relevant variables. Conversely, in negative academic settings, self-compassion demonstrates a negative association and plays an essential role in mitigating the adverse impacts of negative variables. Ultimately, self-compassion enhances academic performance in positive settings and allows students to maintain a good academic quality of life even in adverse circumstances. This study affirms that self-compassion is a crucial capacity that should be cultivated and continually developed by every student to achieve educational success. The findings are expected to serve as a guideline for counselors, academic advisors, and schools in designing character-building and student well-being programs based on self-compassion. Future research is recommended to develop and test the effectiveness of self-compassion interventions implemented in school settings.

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