

Psychological Well-being of Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren) Students: The Role of Family Functioning and Self-Compassion in Reducing Loneliness

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Doi: [10.31316/g-couns.v10i01.7647](https://doi.org/10.31316/g-couns.v10i01.7647)

Abstract

Changes in the living environment and parental separation can trigger various emotional problems in students, including loneliness. This study quantitatively assessed the connection of family functioning, self-compassion, and loneliness to students' perceptions of family and self among 76 students. Data was collected using psychological scales of loneliness (15 items, $\alpha=0.856$), family functioning (28 items, $\alpha=0.855$), and self-compassion (16 items, $\alpha=0.796$). SPSS 24.0 for Windows was utilized for multiple regression analyses to explore relationships among the variables. Multiple regression analyses revealed significant negative associations between family functioning ($\beta=-0.37, p<0.01$), self-compassion ($\beta=-0.521, p<0.01$), and loneliness. Family functioning and self-compassion together accounted for 47.1% of the variance in loneliness ($R^2=0.471$). This ascertained the need for proper and family-oriented self-compassion, particularly regarding alleviating loneliness for students who have been distanced from their families. This highlighted the need to employ comprehensive techniques and approaches to enhance the emotional support provided by families and various stakeholders to students.

Keywords: psychological well-being, family functioning, self-compassion, loneliness, boarding school

Abstrak

Perubahan lingkungan tempat tinggal dan perpisahan orang tua dapat memicu berbagai masalah emosional pada santri, termasuk kesepian. Studi kuantitatif ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis hubungan antara fungsi keluarga, self-compassion dan kesepian pada 76 santri. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan skala psikologis kesepian (15 item, $\alpha=0,856$), fungsi keluarga (28 item, $\alpha=0,855$), dan self-compassion (16 item, $\alpha=0,796$). SPSS 24.0 for Windows digunakan untuk analisis regresi berganda guna mengeksplorasi hubungan di antara variabel. Analisis regresi berganda menunjukkan adanya hubungan negatif signifikan antara fungsi keluarga ($\beta=-0,37, p<0,01$), self-compassion ($\beta=-0,521, p<0,01$), dengan variabel kesepian. Fungsi keluarga dan self-compassion menyumbang sebanyak 47,1% dari varians kesepian ($R^2=0,471$). Temuan ini menegaskan perlunya self-compassion yang tepat dan berorientasi pada keluarga, khususnya dalam hal mengurangi kesepian bagi siswa yang tinggal jauh dari keluarga mereka. Hasil ini menegaskan perlunya menggunakan teknik dan pendekatan yang komprehensif untuk memperkuat dukungan emosional yang diberikan kepada santri oleh keluarga dan pihak terkait.

Keywords: kesejahteraan psikologis, keberfungsian keluarga, self-compassion, kesepian, boarding school

Article info

Received February 2025, accepted May 2025, published January 2026



INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is home to a vast network of Islamic boarding schools, known as *pesantren*, which educate millions of students annually (Rani et al., 2023). These schools play an important role in the education system of Indonesia (Azmi et al., 2024; Faisal Tamimi, 2024; Haryanto, 2022). According to data from the Islamic Boarding School Database on the Ministry of Religion's website, approximately 3 million students reside within the Pesantren. Furthermore, the number of students in Indonesia is mainly in the age group <17 years, which is 5,836 people (Kemenag, 2020). These institutions provide unique educational and living environments for adolescents, primarily aged 15-18, who transition from living with their families to residing independently at the boarding school. While fostering independence is a key objective, this transition requires significant adaptation and can present substantial challenges for students (Hurlock, 1991; Mbogo, 2018; Schaverien, 2024)

As is often the case with other educational institutions, students enrolled at a boarding school encounter some stressors, such as extended family separation, adjusting to living with peers in a highly regimented setting, and dealing with academic work (Ahmed et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2025; Reardon et al., 2023). These demanding circumstances can trigger various emotional problems (Syamsul et al., 2018; Udawiyah et al., 2020; Zuhriyah et al., 2023). Among these challenges, loneliness is a prevalent emotional issue (Dewi et al., 2024; Maghfur, 2018; Xing et al., 2021) Loneliness is defined as a distressing feeling arising from a discrepancy between desired and actual social relationships (Cacioppo et al., 2009; Fahrudin & Husmiati, 2014; Killeen, 1998; Motta, 2021) In the context of students, the feeling of loneliness experienced can disrupt students' social lives; for example, they will have difficulty studying optimally, causing feelings of anxiety, discomfort and alienation (Tang et al., 2020) This feeling of alienation makes students feel rejected by their surroundings, causing them to be less able to adapt to the Islamic boarding school environment (Rudrum et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2024). Furthermore, other studies have found that students who have difficulty adapting to Islamic boarding schools report that they often feel tired and bored, often experience homesickness syndrome, often fall asleep in class, have difficulty building new relationships with their friends, have less mastery of basic religious knowledge, and try to escape from the Islamic boarding school (Handono & Bashori, 2015; Khairunnisa et al., 2024).

Understanding factors that mitigate loneliness in this specific context is crucial. Two constructs potentially influential in adolescent well-being, particularly when separated from family, are family functioning and self-compassion. Family functioning is a concept that arises about the interaction among family members, including communication, family characteristics, ability to adapt, self-acceptance, social support, affection, time spent together, ability to express emotions, problem-solving, morality or religiosity, family climate, hatred and caring between family members (Greeff, 2000; Leeman et al., 2016; Ramaswami et al., 2022; Zhang, 2018). According to Schwab, Gray-Ice, and Prentice (2001), family function has a different meaning from family functioning; family function is the goal in the family, while family functioning is everything that directly or indirectly fulfils family functions. A supportive and functional family environment can provide a critical sense of security and connection, even when physically distant, potentially serving as a buffer against loneliness (Greeff, 2000; Wallace & Sterns, 2022).



To overcome loneliness when separated from family, students are asked to develop self-awareness or good self-compassion (Pratiwi et al., 2019). Furthermore, self-compassion, conceptualized as treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance, especially during times of difficulty or perceived failure, serves as an important internal resource (Akin, 2010; Keller & Huppert, 2021; K. Neff, 2003; Reyes, 2012). Theory and research suggest that self-compassion helps individuals navigate painful emotions like loneliness by reducing self-criticism and fostering a sense of shared human experience, thus preventing feelings of isolation (Elfaza & Rizal, 2020; Long & Neff, 2018; K. D. Neff, 2016; K. D. Neff et al., 2007; K. D. Neff & McGehee, 2010). Higher self-compassion is associated with higher well-being and lower distress in students (Fong & Loi, 2016; Long & Neff, 2018; Luo et al., 2019).

While previous studies have explored self-compassion and loneliness, research specifically examining the interplay of family functioning and self-compassion in relation to loneliness within the unique context of Indonesian Islamic boarding school students living away from home remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the relationship between family functioning, self-compassion, and loneliness among students residing in a boarding school. Based on the theoretical underpinnings and previous research, we hypothesize that family functioning and self-compassion are negatively associated with loneliness in Islamic boarding school students.

METHOD

Research Steps

This study begins by identifying the problems, which involves outlining the issues that require examination. After this step, the process proceeds to a review of literature, where available research and information relevant to the problems are explored to construct prior knowledge and identify gaps that necessitate new knowledge. The other important step is designing the study, which involves developing a detailed research plan, as well as the methodology, choosing the instruments for data collection, establishing criteria for sampling, and determining the scope of the study. Once the design is set, the next step is data collection, which involves the gathering of data using the outlined methods. The next step is data analysis, which consists of analyzing, cleaning, transforming, and arranging the data to prepare it for interpretation. This is followed by data processing, which involves carrying out analysis to determine the patterns, trends, and relationships within the data. The last step in this process is writing the report where the entire research undertaken, results obtained, and the conclusions drawn are recorded and presented.



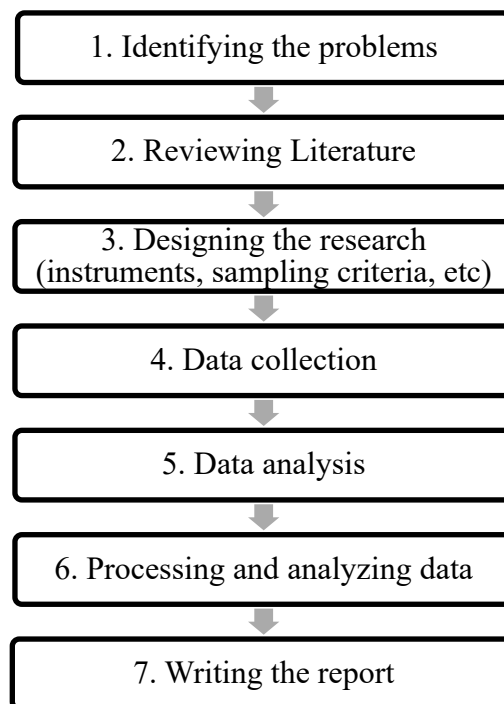


Figure 1. Research Steps

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research method to investigate the relationship between family functioning, self-compassion, and loneliness.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 76 adolescent students from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) living in residential areas of the school. Participants were recruited using a total sampling technique. The inclusion criteria for participants were: 1) Students aged 15-18 years, 2) Students who had lived in the boarding school for at least 1 year, and 3) Students who were willing to participate in the study.

Instruments

Data were collected using a questionnaire package comprising three psychological scales: 1) Loneliness Scale: This scale, referring to Russell's theory (1994), was used to measure loneliness. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.856, and each item had an internal validity score above 0.3. 2) Family Functioning Scale: This scale is a modification by Sulanjono (in Sukma, 2018) of the Family Assessment Device (FAD) scale. It assessed participants' perception of their family's functioning and demonstrated high internal consistency with a reliability score of 0.960, and each item had an internal validity score above 0.3. 3) Self-Compassion Scale: This scale measured participants' level of self-compassion. Its internal consistency in this study was excellent, with a reliability score of 0.976, and each item had an internal validity score above 0.3.



Procedure

Following ethical approval and obtaining permission from the boarding school administration, data collection was conducted. The questionnaires were distributed to the eligible students during designated class sessions. Before administering the questionnaires, participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and procedures, and written consent was obtained from each student willing to participate. Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis to examine the predictive relationships between family functioning, self-compassion, and loneliness. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 22 for Windows software.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study (Table 1) showed that the majority (75%) of students experienced loneliness in the moderate category, had family functioning in the moderate category (75%), and self-compassion in the moderate category (71%).

Table 1.
 Categorization of Variable's Score

Variable	Categories	Categorization Norm	Total (n)	Percentage (%)
Loneliness	High	$X > 47$	6	8
	Medium	35 – 47	57	75
	Low	$X < 35$	13	17
Family functioning	High	$X > 84$	9	12
	Medium	67 – 84	56	74
	Low	$X < 67$	11	14
<i>Self-compassion</i>	High	$X > 52$	10	13
	Medium	32 – 52	54	71
	Low	$X < 32$	12	16

The results of the study also showed that the variables of family functioning and self-compassion had an influence of 47,1% on the loneliness variable in students (Table 2).

Table 2
 Regression Test's Results

Model	R	<i>R Square</i>	<i>F Change</i>	<i>Sig. F Change</i>
1	0,686	0,471	32,458	0,000**

** $p < .01$

Meanwhile, the results of the correlation test showed a significant negative relationship between the family functioning variable and loneliness, as well as the self-compassion variable with loneliness in students (Table 3).



Table 3
 Correlation Test's Results

Variabel	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	Sig.	Keterangan
X ₁ — Y	- 0,537	0,000**	Negatif-Signifikan
X ₂ — Y	- 0,521	0,000**	Negatif-Signifikan

***p* < .01

This study sought to explore the correlation of family dynamics, self-compassion, and loneliness among adolescent students of an Indonesian Islamic boarding school. The results from the population sample under consideration through multiple regression analysis reveal critical insights into factors associated with loneliness in this specific population.

The results of the test of the relationship between family functioning and self-compassion with loneliness in Islamic boarding students, who obtained the results of the calculation of multiple regression analysis techniques, namely $R = 0.686$ and F value = 32.458 with a significant level of $p < 0.01$, and both independent variables provide an effective contribution (SE) to the dependent variable of 47.1%. This is in accordance with the theory of Perlman & Peplau (1998), where changes in social relationships with physical separation between parents and their children who attend Islamic boarding schools can affect loneliness. Family functioning could predict loneliness in students (Berryhill et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2022; Yun et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2024). In addition, the individual factor is where individuals who have self-compassion can overcome their loneliness (Akin, 2010; Liu et al., 2020; Sugianto et al., 2020). On the contrary, individuals who lack self-compassion will find it challenging to overcome the feelings of loneliness they experience (Deviana & Purwanto, 2018; Wandana & Nurwidawati, 2024).

The data show a significant inverse correlation between family functioning and loneliness, which supports our hypothesis. It indicates that adolescents who perceive their families as functioning more effectively, marked by enhanced communication, support, and problem-solving skills, tend to experience lower loneliness even when separated from the family physically. This is true from a wider psychological perspective, also from Social Support Theory, which claims that an individual's strong social network and support mitigate the effects of feelings of loneliness and isolation. According to our results, some previous research studies have also reported a negative correlation between family functioning and loneliness, like research completed by (Bayat et al., 2021; Berryhill et al., 2018; Pan et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2022; Yun et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2024). This highlights the critical role families play, providing emotional connection and a sense of security to adolescents, particularly those navigating the transition to greater independence in a boarding school setting, where managing their own lives poses complex challenges.

Supporting our hypothesis, the study noted a meaningful negative connection between self-compassion and loneliness. Participants with higher self-compassion indicated lower levels of loneliness. This does enhance self-compassion views as an internal resource for coping with difficult emotions. Self-compassionate people are better able to temper the harsh emotional consequences of loneliness or the challenges associated with adapting to a new place, fostering a sense of common humanity instead



of feeling isolated. This finding supports the self-compassion theory and was noted in prior empirical works with adolescents and young adults conducted by (Akin, 2010; Andel et al., 2021; Elfaza & Rizal, 2020; Lee et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Pratiwi et al., 2019). All these studies reported that self-compassion correlated negatively with loneliness.

A combination of both family functioning and self-compassion helped to prognosticate the loneliness of the subjects within the study, explaining a hefty portion of (47.1 %) of the factors related to loneliness amongst the studied boarding school students. The data suggest protective factors on the outside, like a family providing a supportive environment, while on the inside, coping resources like self-compassion thwarted the distressing impact of loneliness for adolescents withdrawn from homes. Although family separation is an integral aspect of the boarding school system, the quality of the relationship with family, coupled with the student's ability to self-soothe and accept, plays a vital role in their emotional health.

This evidence is fundamental for the psychosocial support of boarding school students. With reference to family functioning and self-compassion as protective factors, interventions for alleviating loneliness in this population should address both aspects. For families, this may involve guiding effective communication between parents and students to foster strong family ties regardless of geographical distance, while also encouraging supportive and understanding sentiments. For students, cultivating untouched childhood self-compassion through mindfulness practices, self-kindness, and recognition of others can help mitigate feelings of loneliness and homesickness. Such supportive roles can be optimally performed by counsellors, administrators of the pesantren, and students' parents, in fostering a context that understands the emotional realities of school life while providing the necessary resources to manage them, both internally and externally.

CONCLUSION

The study's results indicate that all hypotheses are accepted, namely the relationship between the variables of family functioning and self-compassion with loneliness in Islamic boarding school students. In addition, family functioning and self-compassion are also negatively related to loneliness, indicating that higher levels of these factors tend to correspond with lower levels of loneliness. The findings of this study also support several previous studies and have implications for several recommendations that can be given to further researchers and related parties, such as Islamic boarding schools and families. Families are expected to function optimally and coordinate with Islamic boarding schools regarding the growth and development of students. Meanwhile, Islamic boarding schools need to develop peer support programmes and self-compassion training to reduce loneliness. Further research could explore the role of moderators (e.g., teacher support) with longitudinal methods.

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