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The Role of Self-Compassion in Mediating the Relationship between Self-esteem and Loneliness in the Vietnamese LGBT+ Community

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Abstract: The provision of mental health support for members of the LGBT+ community is an emerging concern in Vietnam, where discrimination and societal misunderstanding about diverse sexual orientations remain prevalent. This article explores the relationships between self-esteem, self-compassion, and loneliness among 263 LGBT+ individuals living in Vietnam. Results indicated that self-esteem was positively associated with self-compassion and negatively associated with loneliness. Furthermore, self-compassion significantly mediated the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness. These results suggest that self-compassion may serve as a protective psychological factor, helping to buffer the negative effects of low self-esteem on loneliness. The article highlights the need for mental health support that fosters self-compassion, particularly for marginalized groups. Importantly, the findings also point to broader implications for policy and healthcare: namely, promoting inclusive mental health services, integrating self-compassion practices into community-based programs, and advocating for anti-discrimination policies can play a critical role in supporting the psychological well-being of LGBT+ individuals in Vietnam.

Keywords: self-compassion, LGBT+, self-esteem, loneliness, mental health.

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1. Introduction

Individuals who identify as LGBT+ frequently face unique and persistent challenges throughout their lives, many of which stem from societal stigma and discrimination. A growing body of research consistently shows that LGBT+ individuals experience disproportionately high rates of mental health issues compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Bostwick et al. 2014). One prominent explanation for this disparity is minority stress theory, which suggests that marginalized groups experience chronic stress due to prejudice, social exclusion, and internalized stigma (Frost and Meyer 2023). The theory also argues that many LGBT+ individuals experience bullying, rejection, isolation, and

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psychological distress, often beginning at a young age and continuing into adulthood.

In the context of Vietnam, public awareness and social discourse around sexual diversity have begun to evolve in recent years (Le Trang Mai and Yu 2019). However, acceptance remains limited, and significant gaps persist in both research and policy that address the specific needs of the LGBT+ population. For example, studies have found that many gay professionals feel compelled to conceal their sexual identity in the workplace due to fear of discrimination (Luong The Huy and Pham Quynh Phuong 2015). Similarly, approximately 80% of LGBT+ individuals surveyed in another study reported having experienced bullying or workplace exclusion (Pham Thu Hoa and Dong Thi Yen 2015). These forms of social marginalization are not confined to adulthood. LGBT+ youth in Vietnam often report reluctance to disclose their sexual orientation in school environments due to anticipated stigma, peer rejection, or even discriminatory treatment by teachers (Horton 2014).

Given these ongoing challenges, both local and international research consistently indicates that LGBT+ individuals in Vietnam experience lower levels of well-being and are at greater risk for mental health concerns. These findings highlight the urgent need for psychological research and culturally sensitive interventions tailored to this population, particularly those that address internalized stigma, promote resilience, and foster supportive environments. However, support directed at individuals is only part of the answer. Because minority stress originates in a social environment that stigmatizes sexual and gender diversity, it is equally essential to reduce stigma, bullying, and discrimination at their source through inclusive education, protective legislation, workplace policies, and other measures against discrimination (Frost and Meyer 2023).

1.1. Self-esteem and Loneliness

Self-esteem and loneliness are two well-established constructs in psychological and behavioral research. Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation of their own worth or value, either globally or in specific domains (Rosenberg et al. 1995). In contrast, De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2006) described loneliness as a subjective emotional state characterized by a perceived gap between the social relationships one desires and those one actually experiences. They also classified loneliness into two main types: emotional loneliness, which results from the absence of close emotional attachments, and social loneliness, which stems from a lack of broader social networks.

Existing research has consistently shown that loneliness is strongly linked to various negative outcomes in mental and physical health. Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) showed that individuals who experience chronic loneliness are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, and even reduced life expectancy. Furthermore, they also argued that loneliness often leads to social withdrawal, reinforcing the cycle of isolation and emotional distress. Numerous studies have demonstrated a negative correlation between self-esteem and loneliness. Individuals with higher self-esteem tend to report lower levels of loneliness, likely because they feel more confident in social interactions, are more willing to seek help, and are generally more open to forming and maintaining relationships (Teneva and Lemay Jr 2020). In contrast, those with lower self-esteem often struggle with self-worth and may avoid social situations out of fear of rejection (Crocker 1999).

Within the LGBT+ population, research suggests that low self-esteem and high levels of loneliness are particularly prevalent (Gorczynski and Fasoli 2022). These patterns can often be traced back to early life experiences of feeling "different" from societal norms, compounded by bullying, exclusion, and the internalization of stigma and discrimination. Detrie and Lease (2007) noted that for many LGBT+ individuals, the struggle to understand their identity and to gain social acceptance contributes significantly to both diminished self-esteem and heightened feelings of loneliness. Given the established relationship between these two variables, this article explores their interaction in the Vietnamese LGBT+ context. Specifically, the research positions loneliness as the dependent variable and self-esteem as the independent variable, with the aim of examining how the two variables relate to one another and what factors might influence the dynamic between them.

1.2. Self-compassion and Mental Health

Self-compassion, as defined by Neff (2003), refers to the ability to treat oneself with kindness, understanding, and non-judgmental awareness during times of failure or suffering. It involves recognizing one's difficulties as part of the shared human experience rather than isolating events. Neff's model outlines three core components, each with opposing poles: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. These elements collectively foster a healthier emotional response to personal struggles and are considered key contributors to psychological resilience.

Although self-compassion is a relatively recent focus in psychological research, it has rapidly gained recognition for its strong association with mental well-being. Empirical studies have shown that higher levels of self-compassion are linked to lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (de Souza et al. 2020). Additionally, cultivating self-compassion has been found to enhance self-motivation, reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and promote emotional regulation (Miron et al. 2015). In the context of LGBT+ individuals, Carvalho and Guiomar (2022) indicated that research has demonstrated that self-compassion can serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of discrimination and internalized stigma. Practicing self-compassion is associated with greater self-acceptance, particularly regarding body image and sexual orientation. It can also support higher self-esteem and reduce the psychological distress that often arises from marginalization and identity-related stress.

In Vietnam, the concept of self-compassion has only recently begun to receive research attention. Existing studies have primarily focused on scale validation and have been conducted within Vietnamese school settings (Tran Minh Anh Quang et al. 2022). However, there remains a significant research gap concerning the Vietnamese LGBT+ population. To date, as far as we are aware, no studies have explored self-compassion within this group. Given the pressing mental health needs of LGBT+ individuals in Vietnam and the demonstrated importance of self-compassion in psychological well-being, our research aims to examine the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness. By exploring this dynamic, the research seeks to contribute valuable insights that may inform culturally relevant mental health interventions, as well as the legislative, educational, and workplace measures needed to reduce the

discrimination and stigmatization faced by the LGBT+ community.

1.3. Hypotheses

Based on the literature and theoretical framework discussed above, the following hypotheses were proposed:

1. Self-esteem is negatively associated with loneliness and positively associated with self-compassion.
2. Self-compassion is negatively associated with loneliness.
3. Self-compassion mediates the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness.

2. Methods

2.1. Procedure and Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, University of Social Sciences, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (approval No. 570/QĐ-XHNV-SĐH). Participants were recruited randomly through social media platforms, primarily Facebook, via a public post inviting eligible individuals to take part in the study. To be eligible, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) be Vietnamese citizens, (2) be over 18 years old, (3) have lived in Ho Chi Minh City for more than six months, and (4) self-identify as members of the LGBT+ community. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the survey was conducted anonymously. As a result, responses could not be withdrawn once submitted. Participants were informed that they could stop the survey at any point if they felt uncomfortable or emotionally distressed. Contact details for a psychological support hotline and an emergency email were provided in the study's instructions. Additionally, participants in need of further support were offered five free psychological counselling sessions from the Touching Soul Center in Ho Chi Minh City.

2.2. Instruments

University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale Version 3 (UCLA LS-3) (Russell 1996): The UCLA LS-3 is a 20-item scale designed to assess subjective feelings of loneliness. Participants respond using a 4-point Likert scale, with ratings ranging from 1 ("never") to 4 ("always"). The total score is used to categorize loneliness levels: scores between 1.0 and 1.7 indicate a low level of loneliness, scores between 1.71 and 2.45 represent an average level, and scores between 2.46 and 4.0 signify a high level. The scale was adapted for use in the Vietnamese context in previous research (Tran Thi Minh Duc and Cao Quoc Thai 2018), where it demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of 0.73. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.91, and 0.93 in the pilot study.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965): This scale consists of 10 items that measure positive and negative self-evaluations. Again, a 4-point Likert scale is used, with 0 indicating "strongly disagree" and 3 indicating "strongly agree." The average score ranges are as follows: 0 to 1.4 indicates low self-esteem, 1.5 to 2.5 indicates average self-esteem, and 2.6 to 3.0 indicates high self-esteem. The scale was previously adapted for Vietnam in a study by Tran Thi Minh Duc and Cao Quoc Thai (2018), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.72. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.82, and 0.80 in the pilot study.

Self-Compassion Scale (Neff 2003): The Self-Compassion Scale consists of 26 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 ("almost never") to 5 ("almost always"). The scale assesses six subscales: three of which reflect the negative aspects of self-compassion (self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification) and three reflect the positive aspects (self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness). Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-compassion. Scores between 1.0 and 2.1 indicate low self-compassion, 2.5 to 3.4 indicate average self-compassion, and 3.5 to 5.0 indicate high self-compassion. In a previous study in Vietnam (Tran Minh Diep and Tran Thu Huong 2017), the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.76. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.89, and 0.85 in the pilot study.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software version 22.0 (IBM Corp.) and the PROCESS macro for SPSS. A two-tailed p-value of 0.05 was considered statistically significant. As mediation tests involve a series of multiple linear regressions, the required sample size was calculated using G*Power software. For two predictors (self-esteem and self-compassion) with an α level of 0.05, a moderate effect size, and a power of 0.80, the estimated sample size was 55. With 263 participants, the current study exceeded the required sample size. Age, sexual orientation, and education level were included as covariates. A bootstrapping procedure with 5000 repetitions was used to calculate confidence intervals and significance levels for indirect effects.

The analysis began with a demographic description of the participants. Descriptive statistics and first-order Pearson correlations among self-esteem, self-compassion, and loneliness were computed. Statistical significance was determined with two-tailed p-values < 0.05. Finally, a mediation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that self-compassion mediates the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness. The PROCESS macro for SPSS was used to estimate the coefficient estimates and determine the significance of direct and indirect effects, with 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CI) based on 5000 bootstrap samples. The indirect effect was considered statistically significant if the confidence interval did not include zero (Preacher and Hayes 2008).

3. Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. A total of 263 individuals participated in the study. Approximately 49% of the participants identified as gay, and 58% held an undergraduate degree. Regarding relationship status, 44% of participants were single. Furthermore, 56.27% of participants had come out to others, excluding their family.

Table 1: *Participant demographic information*

Demographic	Frequency/Mean (N=263)	Percentage/SD
Age	26.67	5.3
Sexual Orientation		
Lesbian	32	12.2
Gay	129	49.05
Bisexual	47	17.9
Transgender	14	5.32
Others	41	15.6
Level of Education		
High school	75	28.52
Undergraduate	153	58.20
Graduate	35	13.30
Relationship Status		
Single	116	44.11
In a relationship	94	35.74
In an open relationship	14	5.32
In a short-term relationship	36	13.68
Coming-out status		
Out to everyone, including family	36	13.68
Out to most people, except family	148	56.27
Out to a few people	21	7.98
Not out at all	28	10.64

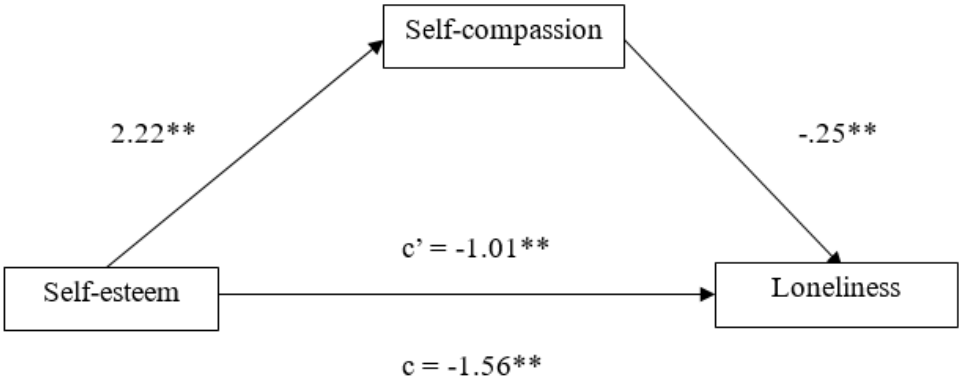
Table 2 displays the means, standard deviations, and Pearson bivariate correlations among the key variables. The results indicate that self-esteem was negatively correlated with loneliness and positively correlated with self-compassion. Additionally, self-compassion was negatively correlated with loneliness. Since all the correlations among the key variables were below .90, the assumption of multicollinearity was not violated, and the data met the necessary criteria for further analysis (Cohen et al. 2014).

Table 2: *Correlation between self-esteem, self-compassion, and loneliness*

Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.
28.75	4.41	-		
83.52	14.31	.70**	-	
48.42	10.73	-.62**	-.60**	-
*Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01.*				

Figure 1 illustrates the mediation model assessing the role of self-compassion in the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness. In Step 1 of the mediation model, the regression of self-esteem on loneliness was significant: β = -1.56, t = -12.87, p < .001. In Step 2, the regression of self-esteem on the mediator, self-compassion, was also significant: β = 2.22, t = 15.07, p < .001. Step 3 revealed that the regression of self-compassion on loneliness was significant: β = -0.25, t = -5.04, p < .001. Finally, the combined indirect effect of self-esteem on loneliness through self-compassion was also significant: β = -0.55, SE = 0.12, boot 95% CI [-0.80; -0.32].

Figure 1*: The Mediation role of self-compassion*



4. Discussion

This research examined the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness among Vietnamese LGBT+ individuals. The results confirmed all three hypotheses: (1) self-esteem was positively related to self-compassion and negatively related to loneliness, (2) self-compassion was negatively related to loneliness, and (3) self-compassion significantly mediated the relationship between self-esteem and loneliness. These findings highlight the importance of self-compassion as a psychological resource that may buffer the negative effects of low self-esteem and social disconnection in this marginalized population.

The observed negative association between self-esteem and loneliness aligns with previous research showing that individuals with higher self-esteem tend to experience stronger social connections and lower levels of perceived isolation (Orth and Robins 2014). For LGBT+ individuals, especially in a cultural context where sexual diversity is often stigmatized (Pham Quynh Phuong 2022), low self-esteem may stem from internalized discrimination and a lack of social acceptance. This contributes to feelings of loneliness and disconnection, which can, in turn, negatively affect mental health outcomes (Frost and Meyer 2023; Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015).

Importantly, this research contributes to the growing body of evidence emphasizing the protective function of self-compassion. Consistent with prior findings (Neff 2003;

Zessin et al. 2015), the results show that self-compassion is not only associated with lower levels of loneliness but also plays a mediating role between self-esteem and loneliness. This suggests that individuals with higher self-esteem may be more self-compassionate, and that this self-compassion, in turn, helps them manage feelings of loneliness more effectively. For LGBT+ individuals in Vietnam, where societal support may be lacking, internal psychological resources like self-compassion may be especially valuable.

The Vietnamese cultural context offers a unique lens through which to interpret these findings. Despite increasing awareness and some modest legal advancements, many LGBT+ individuals in Vietnam continue to face social rejection, discrimination, and pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations. In a collectivist society like Vietnam, where relationships and social harmony are prioritised over individual needs (Kito et al. 2017), fostering the concept of self-connection and self-compassion is especially important (Neff et al. 2008). In this context, self-compassion allows individuals to acknowledge their suffering without judgment, recognise their experiences as part of the shared human condition, and respond to themselves with kindness. This internal form of support becomes even more crucial when external support systems are either absent or insufficient.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that self-compassion training could be a valuable component of mental health interventions for LGBT+ individuals in Vietnam. Programs based on mindfulness and compassion-focused therapy could help participants build self-acceptance, reduce internalized stigma, and foster emotional resilience. Mental health practitioners working with LGBT+ clients may consider integrating self-compassion exercises into counseling and psychoeducation programs. Moreover, community-based initiatives that promote self-kindness, shared identity, and non-judgmental awareness could empower LGBT+ individuals to improve their psychological well-being. Nevertheless, such individually focused efforts should complement, rather than replace, structural change. Psychological interventions can help LGBT+ individuals cope with stigma, but they do not remove its sources. Reducing minority stress ultimately also requires inclusive school curricula and teacher training, legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and workplace policies that protect LGBT+ employees from exclusion and unfair treatment.

5. Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusion

The research has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal conclusions. Future longitudinal research is needed to examine the directionality of the relationships among self-esteem, self-compassion, and loneliness. Second, data were collected via self-report questionnaires, which may be subject to social desirability or response biases. Third, the sample consisted mainly of urban participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings to LGBT+ individuals in rural areas or other urban regions of Vietnam.

Future research should consider employing mixed-method approaches to explore the lived experiences of LGBT+ individuals and how self-compassion functions in their daily lives. Additionally, studies could compare self-compassion levels across different sexual orientations, gender identities, or cultural backgrounds to

better understand how this construct operates in diverse subgroups. Investigating how social and familial support interact with self-compassion to influence mental health outcomes could also offer deeper insight for intervention development.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of self-compassion in mitigating loneliness and enhancing self-esteem among Vietnamese LGBT+ individuals. In a context where external acceptance may be limited, fostering internal resilience through self-compassion may provide a vital pathway to improved mental health and emotional well-being. However, the responsibility for improving the mental health of LGBT+ individuals should not rest on these individuals alone. Strengthening personal resilience is valuable, but it is not sufficient while the social conditions that produce minority stress remain in place. Individually focused interventions must therefore be complemented by educational programs that promote understanding and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity, legislation that protects LGBT+ people from discrimination, and workplace policies that ensure equal treatment and inclusion. Together, these measures can reduce stigma and discrimination at their source, while self-compassion helps LGBT+ individuals navigate the challenges that remain.

Declaration of AI Use

The authors confirm that no AI tools were used in this study.

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