Mediating Effect of Self-Compassion on Masculinity and Psychological Distress among Young Adults

Mukesh K*, Deepak Arun Arumugam G and Dr. Sujamani M S

Department of Psychology, Presidency College, Chennai, India

Email of corresponding author: mukeshkarpagaraja@gmail.com

Abstract: The purpose of the study was to find whether self-compassion mediates the relationship between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults. Convenient sampling method was used to collect data from 140 male young adults from Presidency college, Chennai. The following standardized tools were used; Masculine Behavior Scale (MBS) by Snell, W. E., Jr. (1989), Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (SCS-SF) by Raes et al., (2011) Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) by Kessler and Mroczek (1992). Mediation analysis was performed to find the mediating effect of self-compassion in the relationship between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults. The results revealed that there was a significant mediating effect of self-compassion in the relationship between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults.

Keywords: Self-Compassion; Masculinity; Psychological Distress; Mediation Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Masculinity is a multifaceted concept encompassing various attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with men, distinct from male biological sex (Stanley and Thangaraj, 2022). The cultural definition of masculinity comprises actions, words, and customs that are typically associated with men and are therefore viewed as non-feminine within particular cultural and organizational contexts. Therefore, there are two aspects to masculinity: the positive, which is that it gives men a way to identify, and the negative, which is that it means that men are not the "Other" (which is feminine). Genetic coding or biological predispositions alone do not simply produce masculinity and male behaviors (Clatterbaugh, 1990; Whitehead & Barrett, 2001).

The exact nature of the crisis in masculinity—that is, how it presents itself and is actually experienced—is ill-defined and elusive. Men and masculinities are constantly and loudly in crisis. The notion that masculinity, in one form or another, is experiencing a severe crisis has gained widespread acceptance as a "truth." But is it really the case that something is taken for granted on the basis of the adage "no smoke without fire" when it is mentioned repeatedly? In addition, there are three reasons why there might be a crisis: either it is brand-new and exclusive to our era, it has existed in the past in one or more similar forms, or it is a component of masculinity itself (Beynon, 2002).

Self-compassion, defined as a positive and accepting attitude towards oneself, is a crucial concept in various fields such as mental health care, organizational behaviour, and caregiving. Studies have shown that self-compassion levels can impact intrinsic motivation, performance, and well-being (Kristýna et al., 2023). Self-compassion has been studied for centuries in Eastern philosophy, and Buddhism in particular. It was not until Neff (2003a, b) published two articles in the psychological literature that the construct of self-compassion was defined and a self-report inventory was provided to measure individual differences in the tendency to be self-compassionate. Fundamentally, practicing self-compassion entails treating oneself with the same consideration, kindness, and compassion that one shows to loved ones who are going through a difficult time.

Psychological distress is a collection of uncomfortable mental and physical symptoms that most people associate with their typical mood swings. Psychological distress, however, can sometimes be a sign of the onset of major depressive disorder, anxiety disorder, somatization disorder, schizophrenia, or any number of other clinical conditions. It is believed to be what is evaluated by numerous purported self-report depression and anxiety tests (APA Dictionary of Psychology, n.d.). Understanding of psychological distress has been controversial for many years. The major dispute among students of psychological distress has been over the meaning of the concept, and about what actually is meant by the assertion that a person is psychologically distressed (Torkington, 1991).

Understanding the intricate dynamics between masculinity, self-compassion, and psychological distress among male young adults holds significant importance in contemporary psychology. Masculinity, often associated with traditional gender norms and societal expectations, plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' psychological well-being. However, the rigid adherence to masculine norms can also contribute to psychological distress, as individuals may face challenges in expressing vulnerability or seeking help due to societal stigma.

A research paper examined the relationship between masculinity and self-compassion among male adults. It emphasized that societal expectations of masculinity often compel men to prioritize resilience and toughness over the open expression of their emotions, which can adversely affect their self-compassion. That study revealed that most male respondents exhibited lower levels of traditional masculinity, moderate self-compassion, and a low propensity for seeking mental health help. This suggested that masculinity significantly influenced how men perceived and treated themselves with kindness, thereby impacting their levels of self-compassion (Paquibot et al., 2023).

In 2022, Creesy and Sarelle aimed to teach self-compassion as a tool to mitigate the effects of toxic masculinity on male youth, focusing on individuals aged 16-26. Participants were introduced to the concept of toxic masculinity, its societal expectations, and its perpetuation through socialization cycles. Additionally, they were educated on Kristin Neff's theory of self-compassion. The workshop encouraged male youth to reflect on instances of toxic masculinity they had encountered, whether as perpetrators or victims, using elements of self-compassion. Key findings indicated that all participants acknowledged the potential to apply self-compassion when facing pressures of masculinity. Furthermore, 88.3% of participants reported learning effective ways to implement self-compassion, with self-kindness and mindfulness being the most beneficial elements. The workshop's objectives included educating male youth about toxic masculinity expectations, promoting self-compassion as a means to reflect on experiences of toxic masculinity, and addressing underlying issues such as isolation and the need for dominance through the practice of self-compassion.

Self-compassion, emerges as a crucial psychological construct that influences how individuals relate to themselves in times of difficulty or distress. It encompasses elements of self-kindness, mindfulness, and common humanity, offering a compassionate approach to self-evaluation and coping with adversities. Exploring the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between masculinity and psychological distress can provide valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms through which gender identity influences mental health outcomes.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of masculinity and self-compassion in understanding psychological well-being, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding their interplay among male young adults, particularly within the context of Indian society. Existing research predominantly focuses on Western populations, and limited attention has been directed towards examining these constructs in non-Western cultural contexts.

Furthermore, while some studies have explored the association between masculinity and psychological distress, and others have investigated the protective role of self-compassion against mental health challenges, there is a scarcity of research that systematically examines the mediating effect of self-compassion in the relationship between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

The study aimed to identify the mediating effect of self-compassion between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults.

Objectives

To assess the mediating effect of self-compassion in relationship between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults.

Hypothesis

H01: Self-compassion would not mediate the relationship between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults.

Sample

Descriptive research design was employed in this study. The research was ex-post facto in nature. A convenient sampling method was used to collect data from 140 male young adults from Presidency college, Chennai.

Instruments

The following scales were used for the study:

1. Masculine Behavior Scale (MBS):

This scale was developed by Snell, W. E., Jr. in 1989. It is a self-report measure of gender-related behavioral tendencies. The instrument consists of 20 items that are scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from −2 (disagree) to +2 (agree). Cronbach alphas for each of the subscales on the MBS ranged from .69 to .89. The reliability results indicated that the items assigned to the four behavioral scales on the MBS were all internally coherent and consistent across time and criteria validity was confirmed with a relevant scale (Snell, 1989).

2. Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (SCS-SF):

This scale was developed by Raes, F., Pommier, E., Neff, K. D., & Van Gucht, D in 2011. It is a short form of self-compassion scale developed by Raes et al. (2011) from the SCS containing 12 of the original 26 SCS items. Cronbach's alpha ≥ .86 in all samples and a near-perfect correlation with the long form SCS r ≥ .97 all samples. The SCS-SF is a reliable alternative to the long form SCS, especially when looking at overall self-compassion scores. Because each subscale only contains two items, however, reliability of the subscales is lower (r's ranging from .54 - .75).

3. Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10):

This scale was developed by Kessler & Mroczek in 1992. The K10 scale involves 10 questions about emotional states each with a five-level response scale. The measure can be used as a brief screen to identify levels of distress. The ending kappa and weighted kappa scores ranged from 0.42 to 0.74, indicating that the K10 is a moderately reliable instrument. The total internal consistency of the psychological distress scale was α=0.844. Concurrent validity between this instrument and the self-reporting questionnaire was ρ=0.722 (p<0.001).

Analysis of data (statistical techniques)

Statistical analysis was done using SPSS version 26 to test the hypothesis. Mediation analysis was done with the help of the SPSS extension PROCESS v4.2 by Andrew F. Hayes. Mediation analysis was performed to find the mediating effect of self-compassion in relationship between masculinity and psychological distress.

RESULTS

The collected data were scored and entered; the analysis was carried out using SPSS 26.00. The analyses presented below include demographic details, correlation and mediation analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Variables

Measure	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Masculinity	140	6.75	19.80	-0.540	-0.583
Self-compassion	140	9.55	1.319	0.032	0.003
Psychological Distress	140	26.06	8.897	-0.095	-1.126

From Table 1, it is evident that the mean and standard deviation of all the variables, along with the skewness and kurtosis values, suggest a normal distribution of scores. The skewness and kurtosis values are within ± 1 range. But for the psychological distress variable, the value of skewness slightly exceeds -1 (-1.126), suggesting a mild degree of negative skewness. Considering the size of the sample, which is a moderate one, a slight deviation from normality is tolerable. The above descriptive statistics imply that all the variables are normally distributed.

Table 2: Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample (N=140)

Attributes	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Age	19	42	30
	20	44	31.4
	21	25	17.8
	22	21	15
	23	4	2.8
	24	4	2.8
Birth Order	First born	74	52.8
	Second born	54	38.5
	Third born	10	7.1
	Fourth born	1	0.7
	Fifth born	1	0.7
Residents	Rural	63	45
	Urban	77	55
Economic Status	Low	30	21.4
	Moderate	109	77.8
	High	1	0.7

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation Coefficient between Variables Masculinity, Self-Compassion and Psychological Distress

Variables	Masculinity	Self-compassion	Psychological distress
Masculinity	1	0.715[**]	-0.533[**]
Self-compassion		1	-0.606[**]
Psychological distress			1

**Significant at 0.01 level

Table 4: Mediation Analysis of the Variables used in the Study

Relationship	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Confidence level		Conclusion
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
Masculinity -> Self-compassion -> Psychological distress	-0.239[**] (0.000)	-0.091[**] (0.000)	-0.147[**]	-0.218	-0.083	Partial mediation

**Significant at 0.01 level

From the table we can infer that self-compassion acted as a mediator between masculinity and psychological distress. The results revealed a significant indirect effect of impact masculinity on psychological distress. Therefore, the hypothesis H01 has been rejected.
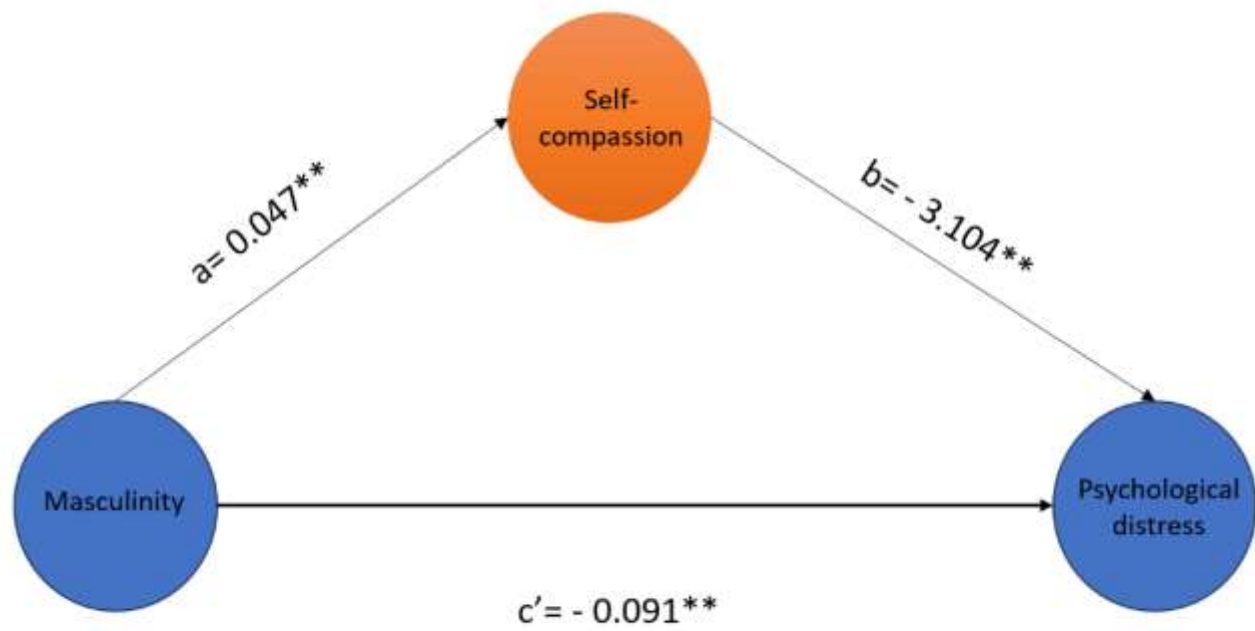
Figure 1 : Mediating effect of self-compassion on masculinity and psychological distress.

DISCUSSION

The results showed that there is a significant mediating effect of self-compassion between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults. Exploring the complex interplay between the factors offers insight into how self-compassion acts as an important mediator in the link between masculinity and psychological distress. By studying this nuanced interplay, we hope to get deeper insights into young men's psychological well-being and identify possible avenues for intervention and assistance.

Masculinity, as characterized by societal norms emphasizing qualities like competitiveness, emotional stoicism, and self-reliance, has a major impact on young men's attitudes, behaviors, and also contributes to men underreporting their mental health difficulties (Mahalik et al., 2016; Levant & Wimer, 2014). While adhering to traditional masculine standards might provide psychological resilience in some situations (Addis et al., 2006), it can also limit emotional expression and self-compassion (Gilbert, 2005). However, recent research

indicates that the association between masculinity and psychological distress is multifaceted, with masculinity possibly acting as both a protective and risk factor depending on individual experiences and coping mechanisms (Yap et al., 2021).

Contrary to misconceptions, our findings are consistent with earlier studies indicating a favorable relationship between self-compassion and masculinity (Wong et al., 2017; Addis et al., 2016). Self-compassion, defined as warmth, understanding, and kindness towards oneself, is identified as an important aspect of supporting psychological well-being and resilience (Neff, 2003). The capacity to recognize and validate one's feelings promotes emotional control while decreasing negative self-talk and rumination, hence reducing psychological distress (Hankin et al., 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000).

Our research highlights the mediating role of self-compassion in the link between masculinity and psychological distress in young men. By fostering self-compassion, individuals can challenge and renegotiate societal norms of masculinity, thereby facilitating a more adaptive response to stressors and emotional challenges. Self-compassion can help young men develop resilience and emotional well-being, allowing them to navigate the intricacies of masculine identity with greater ease (Neff & Germer, 2013).

Furthermore, self-compassion serves as a buffer against the negative effects of conforming to conventional masculine norms, reducing the influence of masculinity on psychological suffering. Interventions focused at increasing self-compassion have been proven to enhance numerous elements of mental health, such as positive affect and life satisfaction, as well as reduce negative affect, such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Shapira & Mongrain, 2010).

Our findings emphasize the need to include self-compassion intervention in mental health frameworks designed for young men. Therapeutic techniques that promote self-compassion may be a viable option for increasing emotional well-being and resilience, especially among those negotiating cultural expectations of masculinity. Furthermore, future research might look at the long-term impact of self-compassion therapies on mental health outcomes in varied groups of young men, providing useful insights into successful ways to increase psychological well-being in this demographic.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the importance of considering self-compassion as a crucial factor in understanding the relationship between masculinity and psychological distress among male young adults. The significant mediating effect of self-compassion highlights its potential role in buffering the negative impact of traditional masculine norms on mental health outcomes. These results suggest that promoting self-compassion may serve as a valuable intervention strategy for reducing psychological distress and enhancing well-being among male individuals navigating societal expectations of masculinity. To further support the cultivation of self-compassion among male young adults, it is essential to implement targeted interventions and initiatives within educational settings. Workshops or seminars can be organized to educate students about the concept of self-compassion and its significance for mental well-being. These sessions can provide evidence-based information on the benefits of self-compassion and offer practical strategies for incorporating it into daily life. Additionally, mindfulness-based practices, such as meditation, mindful breathing exercises, and body scans, can be introduced to help students cultivate present-moment awareness and self-acceptance. Regular practice of these techniques can strengthen self-compassion skills over time. Peer support networks or discussion groups can be established to provide a platform for male young adults to share their experiences, challenges, and successes related to self-compassion and masculinity. These networks should foster a supportive and non-judgmental environment where individuals feel validated and understood. Encouraging students to express their emotions openly and authentically can also promote self-compassion. Opportunities for creative expression through art, writing, or music can be provided to facilitate emotional processing and self-compassionate reflection. Positive role modelling can play a significant role in this process, with individuals who embody self-compassion and healthy expressions of masculinity serving as inspirations for others. Mentorship programs can be established to connect students with older peers or faculty members who prioritize self-care and compassion in their own lives. By fostering a campus culture that values self-compassion and emotional well-being, educational institutions can contribute to promoting mental health and resilience among male young adults. Further research and targeted interventions aimed at fostering self-compassion in young men may contribute to the development of more holistic approaches to promoting mental health and resilience in this population.

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