Research Articles

Self-Compassion, Psychological Well-Being, and the Quality of Romantic Relationships: A Study With Malaysian Emerging Adults

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Abstract

Self-compassion plays a critical role in romantic relationships in that it improves relationship quality through trust, expressions of love, and commitment, leading to more satisfying relationships and well-being. Fewer studies have examined the role of self-compassion as a relationship enhancing variable, especially in the context of romantic relationships in non-Western countries such as Malaysia. The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between self-compassion, satisfaction in romantic relationships, and psychological well-being among young emerging adults in Malaysia. In addition, the mechanism of how self-compassion may contribute to well-being was examined by focusing on the mediating effects of trust, expression of love, and commitment. Participants were 400 Malaysians aged 18 to 25 who had been in a relationship for at least six months but were not married at the time of data collection. They completed an online survey consisting of the Self-Compassion Scale, the Trust in Close Relationships Scale, the Adapted Version of the Affection Communication Scale, the Commitment Scale, the Relationship Assessment Scale, and the Psychological Well-Being Scale. A significant positive relationship was found between self-compassion, satisfaction with romantic relationships, and psychological well-being. Participants reported high levels of trust and commitment but relatively low levels of love expression in romantic relationships. The relationship between self-compassion and romantic relationship satisfaction was confirmed by the mediating effects of trust, love expression, and commitment. This study provides a better understanding of how self-compassion contributes to romantic relationships and psychological well-being in a broader cultural context.

Keywords

romantic relationships, self-compassion, trust, love expression, commitment, relationship satisfaction

Self-compassion and self-acceptance are essential for holistic psychological well-being (Neff, 2003; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010; Sirois et al., 2015). It encourages people to give themselves love and care (Neff, 2003), and this self-acceptance in turn builds resilience (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007; Sirois et al., 2015). Self-compassion not only improves health and well-being (Ferguson et al., 2014; Homan, 2016), but also promotes the development of healthy relationships (Jacobson et al., 2018; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Ying & Hashim, 2016).

Self-compassion has beneficial contributions to interpersonal relationships (Lathren et al., 2021; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Ying & Hashim, 2016;). Ying and Hashim (2016) found self-compassion to be positively associated with social connectedness among university students in Malaysia. Participants who scored high on self-compassion also reported higher level of self-connectedness. Self-compassion has also been linked to positive parenting and better friendship functioning (Lathren et al., 2021). Parents with a high level of self-compassion demonstrated more supportive parenting style. Self-compassion is especially important in romantic relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Self-compassion encourages individuals to love themselves by accepting themselves unconditionally. This self-acceptance contributes to a positive self-image and self-esteem. Individuals with self-compassion are more likely to exhibit self-confidence (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Self-acceptance, self-esteem and self-confidence as the outcome of self-compassion are important traits that help individuals stabilize and maintain a romantic relationship. In this regard, the practice of self-compassion is key in developing healthy romantic relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013).

A social relationship can be defined as a connection between two or more individuals who are able to interact effectively with each other (Hamilton, 2007). In general, social relationships can be classified into relationships with close individuals and acquaintances. Close others include family members, spouses, and best friends, while acquaintances can refer to more casual friendships such as working colleagues. They represent individuals who are familiar but with less emotional connections. Most importantly, social relationships also include romantic relations which can be characterized by relational, intimate, and collective connectedness (Hawkley et al., 2005). This is the focus of this study.

The connection with a particular social relationship can either be a short or a long term in nature. Positive social relationships bring about pleasant experiences for individuals by fostering connections with others. Conversely, negative social relationship experiences can lead individuals to feel apprehensive about forming close bonds with others (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015). What is important is the subjective assessment of each relationship. Hendrick et al. (1998) proposed a general assessment scale for meas-

uring satisfaction across different types of relationships. While designed to be generic, relationship assessment scale (RAS) is a highly relevant scale to measure satisfaction within romantic relationships. It has shown to have high correlations with other measure of marital satisfaction across a wide variety of samples (Hendrick et al., 1998). This scale is used in this study.

Self-compassion can potentially enhance romantic relationships by building trust, encouraging more expressions of love, and promoting commitment (Bolt et al., 2019; Neff & Beretvas, 2013). People who have high levels of self-compassion are likely to be trusting (Crocker & Canevello, 2008), express more emotional affection (Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008), and tend to have more stable and longer relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). People who are in romantic relationships where there are high levels of trust, love expression, and commitment, are more likely to experience satisfaction, which leads to a higher level of well-being. In this regard, trust, love expression, and commitment may be mediating variables that explain the relationship between self-compassion and satisfaction with romantic relationships.

In a study of American college freshmen, participants with higher self-compassion tend to report a higher level of interpersonal trust with their partners (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Trust requires the willingness of an individual to position him/herself in a vulnerable situation (Ozer & Zheng, 2017). Self-kindness emphasizes on being kind to oneself. When an individual is unable to trust oneself, it is even harder for him/her to trust others. Thus, self-kindness is part of the key components of self-compassion that can facilitate trust in others.

Trust can be the basis of better conflict resolution and relationship management. Trust facilitates the process of communication, and allows people to open up to their partners. Feeling that a partner will stand by you through ups and downs is crucial in a relationship. Trust plays an important role in the way people communicate their vulnerability and seek assistance from their partners. Trust is considered to be an important element in building a healthy and successful close relationship (Rempel et al., 1985). This study is looking at how trust can play a role as a mediator between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction.

A high level of self-compassion encourages a person to express one's feelings and thoughts either by verbalization or actions without self-judging and self-criticizing (Neff, 2003). Therefore, individuals with self-compassion are predicted to be better at expressing themselves and their emotions, including love. Love expression, in turn, increases satisfaction with romantic relationships (Floyd, 2006; Gareis & Wilkins, 2011; Kline et al., 2008; Schutz, 1958; Seki et al., 2002; Wilkins & Gareis, 2006). These studies employed a wide variety of samples including those residing in the United States and Japan (e.g., Seki et al., 2002) and people of different age groups (e.g., Gareis & Wilkins, 2011). Good control of emotion and positive attitudes often associated with high self-compassion can also contribute to higher quality and satisfaction of interpersonal relationships (Hill,

2009). Floyd and Riforgiate (2008) proposed that couples who constantly express their love towards each other tend to be more satisfied with their relationships.

Neff and Beretvas (2013) also suggested that self-compassion is positively associated with the length of a romantic relationship. Firstly, self-compassion is highly related to emotional intelligence, a key variable in helping individuals to strengthen and maintain their relationships (Neff, 2004). Mindfulness in self-compassion encourages the view of negative emotions as a part of a dark cloud without overreacting to them, while common humanity involves tolerance and forgiveness. According to Sternberg (1986), the presence of passion and commitment makes a romantic relationship different from other close interpersonal relationships. Commitment could also help in improving the stability of romantic relationships (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). A stable relationship with high commitment is likely to be more satisfying.

Emerging adults comprise of individuals aged between 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2000). This phase represents a key development stage marks by self-focusing, identity exploring, and a period of instability and many possibilities. Emerging adulthood can be considered as a dynamic stage characterized by a lot of activities and changes. Within this period, establishing and building romantic relationships can be an important task that may have bearing on their adjustment and well-being. It is important to examine romantic relationships by focusing on emerging adults as a unique developmental stage.

While Shulman and Connolly (2013) found that emerging adults rather focus on their studies or career than starting and maintaining a stable romantic relationship, Schulenberg et al. (2004) observed that when an individual meets up with the goal of romantic exploration and intimacy, they are most likely to experience more holistic well-being. For example, people who have a stable and healthy romantic relationship are more likely to avoid substance use. In addition, emerging adults who experienced a high-quality romantic relationship reported higher level of well-being and romantic relationship satisfaction (Collibee & Furman, 2015).

There are substantial cultural differences between Western and Eastern societies with regards to romantic relationships. Western culture refers to a set of social norms and cultural expectations often associated with those practiced within the Western world. Asian culture is a part of the Eastern tradition marked by certain unique characteristics. Although there is diversity within each cultural tradition, and there are a lot of interactions between the two as the impact of globalization and cultural assimilations, both cultural traditions are still considered relatively distinguished. Malaysian culture is part of the Eastern cultural tradition. As such, we present a brief discussion on cultural differences related to interpersonal relationships to enrich our discussion.

With regards to expressing emotion, studies have showns cultural differences in that Europeans tend to be more open and active in expressing their love toward their romantic partner (Kline et al., 2008). Americans were more likely to use direct love verbalizations with their significant-close ones and were not shy to show more physical

interactions such as kissing, touching, and holding hands. This is opposite of East Asian participants who were less likely to express love even in their married life. The East Asian participants that were recruited in Kline et al. (2008) study were Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans and can be considered as part of the Eastern society. These participants shared similar cultures and were heavily influenced by Confucian teaching. Based on Confucian teaching, physical interaction can only be expressed in private and is exclusive to married couples (Murstein, 1974).

The other cultural differences between Western and Eastern traditions is related to gender roles. In Chinese traditional culture, women are expected to hold traditional values such as being polite, loyal, and viewed as subordinate to men. Based on Confucian principles, women who self-sacrifice themselves for the family were idolized (Zhou, 2020; Zuo, 2003). The sense of self for women in traditional Chinese culture is secondary and they are not expected to express true selves in relationships. While Chinese Canadian females reported a greater level of commitment in their romantic relationships, they also reported a lower level of self-disclosure and intimacy behavior (Marshall, 2008). Western individuals also tend to build romantic relationships based on freedom of choice while non-Westerners tend to be concerned with the needs of family or group (Anderson et al., 2014; Moghaddam et al., 1993). Many past researches have shown that non-Western samples are more conservative and hold on to more traditional values in interpersonal relationships compared with Western samples (Gallagher, 2003; Moghaddam et al., 1993; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004; Sassler & Schoen, 1999; Xu et al., 2005). Clearly, the cultural differences related to romantic relationships are significant and more studies should include samples from wider cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, in contrast to Western societies, Eastern societies exhibit a stronger inclination toward collectivist cultural norms. Malaysia, classified as an Eastern society, places a significant emphasis on group harmony and societal expectations. According to Yum (2004), Asians often display a hesitance in openly expressing affection and commitment to their partners. Conversely, American culture places a higher value on self-expression. Individuals in the United States tend to manifest their love through direct communication, emphasizing their emotions more openly. Malaysia is composed of a minimum of three prominent ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. The Malay population in Malaysia is primarily Muslim, and as a result, their conduct and norms are intricately intertwined with Islamic teachings. Pre-marital skin-to-skin contact is not permissible within this context. Consequently, their methods of expressing love may diverge from those of Western individuals.

Hence, it is prevalent to observe that numerous Asian families discourage their college-aged children from engaging in premarital dating. The use of social network-based dating was not customary in Malaysia until the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of cultural origins, the appreciation for emotional intimacy and affection within romantic relationships is widely shared among young adults in both Western

and Eastern societies (Boisvert et al., 2023; Hoesni et al., 2016). This deep emotional connection continues to serve as a central pillar for relationship contentment. Given the human need for social connection and affection, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent Movement Control Order that disrupted established norms, many young adults were compelled to employ technology as a means of fostering and preserving their relationships. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, notable distinctions existed in communication strategies between Western and Eastern societies. However, technology-mediated communication now plays a pivotal role in shaping interactions among both Western and Eastern young adults, aiding in the maintenance of relationships. Additionally, online dating is gradually becoming a more common trend within Eastern cultures, including Malaysia.

From the above discussion, it can be co concluded that Western societies emphasize on equality and self-expression in relationships whereas Eastern-based Asians consider religious and cultural values as important in regulating their relationships. However, people from across different cultural backgrounds similarly value emotional intimacy in their relationships. Pandemic has contributed to more technology usage for maintaining relationships in all pver the world.

Past studies show that social relationships can help in promoting psychological well-being (Dunn & O'Brien, 2009; Gulact, 2010; Panahi et al., 2016; Tan & Karabulutlu, 2005; Twiselton et al., 2020). Twiselton et al. (2020) investigated the association between the quality of romantic relationships and well-being and discovered that it depends on a psychological flexibility personal construct. Individuals with greater behavioral flexibility are happier and have better-quality relationships. This highlights how crucial some personality traits can be to one's happiness and the quality of one's relationships. In this study, self-compassion is put forth as one of the personality traits that can have an impact on well-being both directly and indirectly through interpersonal relationships. Besides that, the social relationship provides the support that an individual requires to overcome life challenges. With social support, the individual will be able to perform better in the mental and physical aspects of self-development. According to Diener and Seligman (2004), an individual with a strong social relationship is reportedly to be happier than those with a lack of social relationship. Individuals with positive emotions can be more flexible and creative in thinking. Myers and Diener (1995) also stated that positive emotion is one of the elements in improving well-being. They are no longer narrowed or limited by those negative thoughts and feelings. Fear could make an individual afraid to take up challenges or move forward.

Fredrickson (1998) stated that positive emotion can help in expanding and enhancing the cognitive ability of an individual. Only when the individual is positive in thinking, they could then be able to see things clearly and be more open-minded to accept the sense of self and world view. It is important to understand and accept the imperfection of others and oneself. This will contribute to developing a successful relationship with

others (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2010). Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) also suggested that positive emotion and happiness are considered the key to success. Voon et al. (2017) identified that the positive construct of self-compassion in psychological well-being not only exists in Western culture but also exists in the Malaysian context. However, their sample of study only focused on Malaysian counselors, who are professionals in psychology. The counselors might not be getting full self-compassion training but they are well-trained in many different therapies, which might be related to some components that help in promoting psychological well-being.

Looking more specifically into research on self-compassion in romantic relationships, we found a similar pattern where the studies were mainly based on Western societies (e.g. Jacobson et al., 2018; Janjani et al., 2017; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Santerre-Baillargeon et al., 2018; Zhang & Chen, 2017). While these studies have contributed to the body of knowledge in this area, they do not offer a comprehensive understanding. More research on self-compassion should employ using wider samples. Even though the construct of self-compassion is heavily influenced by Eastern philosophical thoughts, limited research has focused on these cultural backgrounds. Whilst there are a few studies on self-compassion in Malaysia, they focus more on university students and counselors (Chang et al., 2019; Teoh & Hashim, 2020; Voon, Lau, & Leong, 2017; Ying & Hashim, 2016). This study is part of the attempt to expand research on relationships by studying more diverse samples.

The Present Study

The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between self-compassion and romantic relationships among emerging adults in Malaysia. What set this study apart from previous studies was the focus on examining the role of self-compassion in a broader context. This study examined the role trust, love expression, and commitment as the mediator in the relationship between self-compassion and satisfaction of romantic relationships. This focus is important because it helps to identify the underlying mechanism of how romantic relationship helps individuals to experience psychological well-being. Earlier in this paper, we provided a review on cross-cultural differences which shows that the expression, and behavior of love are different in Western and Asian cultures. This provides a strong need to explore the topic in a wider cultural context. Limited research has focused on Asian samples. This study can contribute to more studies on Asian samples, thus ensuring understanding of this research area is more comprehensive and inclusive.

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Method

Participants

Participants were 400 Malaysian emerging adults aged between 18 to 25 years old and literate in English. They have been in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months at the time of the data collection but were not married. Married couples were excluded to capture a more homogenous experience of romantic relationships. With n = 400, a large proportion (59.5%) have been in a long-term relationship between 37 to 84 months. One-hundred seventy-four (174) (43.50%) out of the 400 participants were male while the rest 226 (56.50%) were female. Of the 400 total participants, 95 were ethnic Chinese (23.80%), 166 were ethnic Malay (41.50%), 115 were ethnic Indian (28.80%), and 24 were other ethnic minority groups (6%). Participants represented all major ethnic groups in Malaysia.

Procedure

Participants responded to an online survey. Virtual snowball sampling was utilized to recruit emerging adults in this study. Facebook page was created to post invitations and to allow easy communication between researchers and potential participants. Post was further boosted using the Facebook advertisements. A specific audience was targeted to match the inclusion criteria of the participants. These criteria include (a) Malaysian, (b) aged between 18 to 25 years old, (c) literate and able to English language, (d) having no reading/learning difficulties or any other similar conditions that can affect their ability to complete this study, (e) is in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months, but not married and (f) heterosexual. Data was collected between October 2020 to January 2021. The period marked by the relatively early stage of Covid-19 pandemic where there were a lot of uncertainties and strict movement control was implemented by the Malaysian government. The early stage of the pandemic also imposed global financial and psychological challenges to people all over the world, including Malaysia. This is the background situation at the point of data collection of this study. Ethical approval to conduct research has been obtained from the university's committee prior to data collection.

Measures

Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) was used to measure self-compassion. This scale comprises 26 Likert-type items with a five-point scale from almost never to almost always. The higher the score indicates the higher the level of self-compassion. Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) has good reliability and validity property and is appropriate for individuals aged 14 and above (Neff, 2003). The following are some examples of sentences from SCS:

1. I'm disapproving and judgmental about my own flaws and inadequacies.

2.   When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong.

Trust in Close Relationship Scale (TCRS) was used to measure the level of trust in a romantic relationship. This scale can be categorized into three subscales: predictability, dependability, and faith. This instrument uses a Likert-type scale, whereby the participant can answer the questionnaires based on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The higher the score, the higher the level of trust the participant has in his/her romantic relationship (Rempel et al., 1985). The scale has a good reliability index ranging from .83 to .88 (Schneider et al., 2011). The following are some examples of sentences from TCRS:

1.   My partner has proven to be trustworthy and I am willing to let him/her engage in activities which other partners find too threatening.
2.   Even when I don't know how my partner will react, I feel comfortable telling him/her anything about myself, even those things of which I am ashamed.

Adaptive Version of Affection Communication Index (ACI) was employed to assess the level of love expression in a romantic relationship. It is a reliable scale with high validity (Dibble et al., 2012; Floyd & Morman, 1998; Rittenour et al., 2007). This adapted version of the Affection Communication Index (ACI) contains 19 items Likert-type scale with items answered on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The original questionnaire sentences are more general and can be used for different types of interpersonal relationships (Floyd & Morman, 1998). For the purpose of this study, "My partner and I" was added to each item to accurately capture love expression in romantic relationships. The participants were requested to report on the frequency of love expression behavior. Previous studies indicate high validity and reliability of the scale (Dibble et al., 2012; Rittenour et al., 2007). The following are some examples of sentences from ACI:

1.   My partner and I hold each other's hands.
2.   My partner and I kiss on lips.

The Commitment Scale (TCS, Arriaga & Agnew, 2001) was used to measure commitment. TCS can be divided into three subscales, which are intended to persist, long-term orientation, and attachment or bondedness with 4 items each. It uses an eight-point scale in which a higher score indicates a higher level of commitment. TCS demonstrated good reliability (r = .94) (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Dutta, 2016). The following are some examples of sentences from TCS:

1.   I intend to stay in this relationship.
2.   I want to maintain our relationship.

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) was employed to measure satisfaction with romantic relationships. This scale was developed by Hendrick et al. (1998). RAS consisted of seven

items, with items 4 and 7 as reversed scores. It has a Likert scale, ranging from 1 as low satisfaction to 5 as high satisfaction. The higher the score, the more the participant is satisfied with their romantic relationship. The scale has good internal consistency with a reliability index of .88. (Jacobson et al., 2018). The following are some examples of sentences from RAS:

1. How well does your partner meet your needs?
2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?

Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBS) has 54 items, developed by Ryff (1989) and this was used to measure psychological well-being. The higher scores for each subscale indicated that the individual experienced a higher level of psychological well-being. The internal consistency coefficients for this scale were reported in between Cronbach's alpha (α = .86) to (α = .93) with high six-week test-retest reliability (Ryff, 1989). The following are some examples of sentences from PWBS:

1. I am not afraid to voice my opinions, even when they are in opposition of most people.
2. My decisions are not usually influenced by what everyone else is doing.

Results

This section presented the findings of the research based on the research objectives that were stated above. The first part of this section outlined all descriptions of variables in different dimensions, while the second part discussed the result of all hypotheses testing which were presented. Table 1 presented the mean of key variables. The mean of self-compassion was 3.03, romantic relationship was 3.60, and love expression in the relationship was 3.04, whereas commitment in the romantic relationship was 3.66. The mean score of satisfaction with the romantic relationships was 2.98 while the mean of psychological well-being was 3.34.

The internal consistency of Self Compassion Scale was Cronbach α = .88 for overall and ranged from α = .65 to .75 for subscales. The reliability of the other scales was also of acceptable values with Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) Cronbach α = .65, Psychological Well-Being Scales (PWBS) with 54 items shown to have high reliability, Cronbach α = .89. All the internal consistency for the subscales of PWBS were also reported high as they ranged from Cronbach α = .65 to .82. Although .65 is not considered as high reliability, it is still at acceptable level of reliability (Ursachi et al., 2015). The detailed results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*The Mean, Standard Deviation, Cronbach's Alphas for Instruments*

Instrument	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Self-Compassion	**1.27**	**4.92**	**3.03**	**.99**	**-.01**	**-.73**	**.88***
Self-Kindness	1.00	5.00	3.05	1.09	.09	-.88	.75
Self-Judgment	1.00	5.00	2.96	1.08	.08	-.86	.75
Common Humanity	1.00	5.00	3.08	1.12	.08	-.94	.72
Isolation	1.00	5.00	3.01	1.06	-.15	-.77	.65
Mindfulness	1.00	5.00	3.09	1.12	-.02	-.89	.72
Over-identification	1.00	5.00	3.02	1.13	-.16	-.94	.72
Relationship Assessment	**1.14**	**4.86**	**2.98**	**1.05**	**.04**	**-.92**	**.65**
Psychological Well-Being	**1.37**	**5.76**	**3.34**	**1.30**	**.30**	**-1.02**	**.89***
Autonomy	1.00	5.86	3.35	1.38	.16	-1.14	.70
Environmental Mastery	1.00	5.86	3.38	1.39	.17	-1.19	.70
Personal Growth	1.29	5.86	3.37	1.35	.20	-1.17	.65
Positive Relations	1.00	6.00	3.37	1.36	.24	-1.14	.67
Purpose in Life	1.14	5.86	3.38	1.37	.21	-1.14	.82
Self-Acceptance	1.14	6.00	3.32	1.37	.29	-1.06	.73

Note. Bold values indicate overall scale of the variables. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha. α > .70

*p < .05

From Table 1, the result of the Pearson correlation analysis showed that self-compassion and psychological well-being were positively and significantly correlated (*r* = .80), as hypothesized. Besides that, the results indicated that self-compassion has a significantly positive and strong association with the satisfaction of the romantic relationship (*r* = .82).

SMART Partial Least Square 3, mediation analysis, was performed to assess the mediating role of trust (T) on the linkage between self-compassion (SC) and romantic relationship satisfaction (RAS). As demonstrated in Figure 1, the results indicated that the total effect of self-compassion on the satisfaction of the romantic relationship was significant (β = .90, *t* = 59.34, *p* < .00). With the inclusion of the mediating variable, trust, the impact of self-compassion on the satisfaction of romantic relationship remains significant (β = .64, *t* = 9.26, *p* < .001). The indirect effect of self-compassion on the satisfaction of the romantic relationship through trust was found significant (β = .27, *t* = 4.63, *p* < .00). This showed that the relationship between self-compassion and satisfaction of the romantic relationship was mediated partially by the trust.

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Figure 1

Trust Mediator Analysis
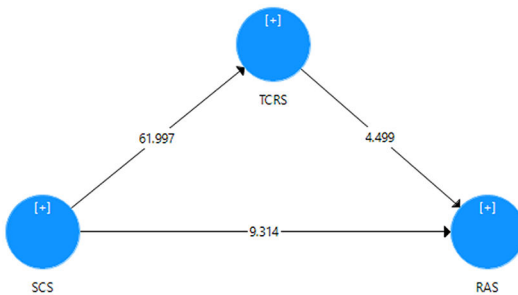
Note. SCS = Self-Compassion; TCRS = Trust; RAS = Romantic Relationship.

In order to examine the mediating role of love expression (LE) on the linkage between self-compassion (SC) and romantic relationship satisfaction (RAS), SMART Partial Least Square 3, a mediation analysis, was performed. As can be observed in Figure 2, the results revealed that the total effect of self-compassion on the satisfaction of the romantic relationship was significant (β = .90, t = 64.52, p < .00). With the presence of the mediating variable, love expression, the impact of self-compassion on the satisfaction of the romantic relationship became significant (β = .46, t = 6.04, p < .00). The indirect effect of self-compassion on the satisfaction of the romantic relationship through love expression was found significant (β = .44, t = 6.49, p < .00). This showed that the relationship between self-compassion and the satisfaction of the romantic relationship was mediated partially by love expression.

Figure 2

Love Expression Mediator Path Model
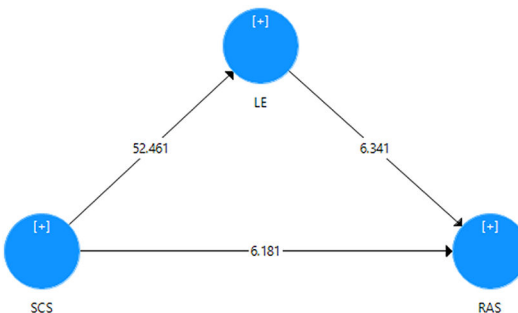
Note. SCS = Self-Compassion; LE = Love Expression; RAS = Romantic Relationship.

SMART Partial Least Square 3, a mediation analysis, was performed to assess the media-
ting role of commitment (C) on the linkage between self-compassion (SC) and romantic
relationship satisfaction (RAS). From Figure 3, the results stated that the total effect of
self-compassion on the satisfaction of the romantic relationship was significant (β = .90,
t = 62.27, p < .00). With the inclusion of the mediating variable, commitment, the impact
of self-compassion on the satisfaction of the romantic relationship remains significant
(β = .56, t = 10.16, p < .00). The indirect effect of self-compassion on satisfaction of
romantic relationship through commitment was found significant (β = .34, t = 7.23,
p < .00). This indicated that the relationship between self-compassion and the satisfaction
of the romantic relationship was partially mediated by commitment.

Figure 3

Commitment Mediator Analysis Path Model
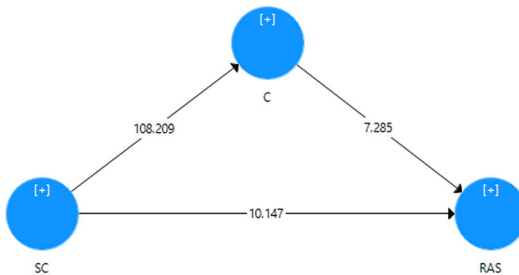
Note. SCS = Self-Compassion; C = Commitment; RAS = Romantic Relationship.

Table 2 provides a summary analysis of all mediator analysis.

Table 2

Mediation Analysis

	β			Indirect Effects of SC on RAS		
Hypothesis	**Total effect (SC->RAS)**	**Direct effect (SC->RAS)**	**Indirect effect (SC->RAS)**	**SD**	**t**	**95% CI**
Ha 4: SC->T->RAS	.90**	.64**	.27**	.06	4.63	[.17, .38]
Ha 5: SC->LE->RAS	.90**	.46**	.44**	.07	6.49	[.29, .55]
Ha 6: SC->C->RAS	.90**	.56**	.34**	.05	7.23	[.26, .44]

Note. Ha = Hypothesis; SC = Self- Compassion; T = Trust, RAS = Romantic Relationship; LE= Love Expression;
C = Commitment.
**p < .01.

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Discussion

The first research objective of this study was to examine the level of self-compassion, romantic relationship satisfaction, and psychological well-being among emerging adults in Malaysia. The result revealed a moderate level of self-compassion among participants. This is aligned with the results of past studies on self-compassion among emerging adults in Malaysia (e.g. Teoh & Hashim, 2020; Ying & Hashim, 2016) and helped to establish baseline findings to be compared with other age and/or cultural groups. The mean score of satisfaction with romantic relationships among the participants was also at a moderate level. Other studies on relationship satisfaction in Malaysia focused on married couples (e.g. Hoesni et al., 2016; Tam et al., 2011) instead of dating couples. Hoesni et al. (2016) found intimacy as the most significant part of marital love and this explained the reason married couples in Malaysia rate their romantic relationships as satisfactory. Similarly, a moderate level of satisfaction observed in this study may be the outcome of intimacy they experienced in their relationships.

In this study, participants also reported a moderate level of psychological well-being. This is somewhat inconsistent with past studies on well-being in Malaysia where most participants reported to be happy and to have a high level of psychological well-being (Helliwell et al., 2018; Teoh & Hashim, 2020). One possible explanation may be related to the time frame of data collection that was done during the pandemic Covid-19. The pandemic may have contributed to the lower level of well-being found in this study.

We found evidence that self-compassion has a positive correlation with psychological well-being among emerging adults between the ages of 19 to 25 years old in Malaysia. This is indeed consistent with many studies that suggest the relationship between self-compassion and well-being (Barnard & Curry, 2011; Ferguson et al., 2014; Homan, 2016; Magnus et al., 2010; Neff et al., 2005; Neff et al., 2007; Robitschek & Keyes, 2009). As discussed earlier, self-compassion that promotes self-kindness and self-acceptance is key to how people experience better well-being (Neff, 2003; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

The finding of this study also revealed that self-compassion was positively associated with satisfaction of romantic relationships. While limited research has specifically examined self-compassion and the satisfaction of the romantic relationship in the context of Malaysian romantic couples, the finding is consistent with the study conducted by Jacobson et al. (2018). Neff and Beretvas (2013) also found that individuals with high self-compassion tend to have a long and stable relationships with others. Findings from our study are consistent with these studies, providing further evidence of the role of self-compassion in contributing to the quality of relationships.

As discussed earlier, self-compassion has the ability to regulate emotions and produce positive emotions such as joy, pride, confidence, etc. (Adams & Leary, 2007; Close, 2013; Mosewich et al., 2013; Neff, 2003; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Neff et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). These positive emotions can help people to have more flexible and creative thinking, whereby they are no longer restricted to one thinking

perspective. By nurturing connected thoughts, self-compassion encourages people to be more understanding and to have less judgmental characteristics (Neff, 2003). From the literature review, individuals with high self-compassion tend to have more positive characteristics and have the ability to build a healthier romantic relationship (Neff, 2003; Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005; Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). This explains the direct relationship between self-compassion and relationship satisfaction.

More specifically, we found evidence for the significant role of trust as a mediator in the relationship between self-compassion and satisfaction in romantic relationships in this sample. This result is consistent with the finding from Crocker and Canevello's (2008) study, suggesting that individuals with higher self-compassion share higher interpersonal trust with their romantic partners. When the level of trust in a romantic relationship increases, the satisfaction of the romantic relationship also increases. Self-compassion helps the individual feel more emotionally connected with, and receptive to the flaws of their partner. Past studies suggest that trust toward one's romantic partner is based on the understanding of their behavior (Deutsch, 1960; Rempel et al., 1985; Scanzoni, 1979). Self-kindness as part of self-compassion encourages the individual to show compassion towards oneself by understanding one's self-value. This leads individuals to become more confident in themselves, thus building the basis for more stable characteristics. The confidence and stability encourage the individual to trust their romantic partner, thus increasing the satisfaction with that particular romantic relationship. Self-compassion increases understanding and improves communication, thus leading to an increase in the level of trust and satisfaction.

We also found evidence for the significant mediating effect of love expression in the relationship between self-compassion and romantic relationship satisfaction. The relationship between love expression and satisfaction in a romantic relationship is relatively well-established. According to past research, the frequency of love expression has a positive correlation with the satisfaction of a romantic relationship (Floyd, 2002; Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008). The more often the couple expressed their love, either verbally or non-verbally, the more satisfaction was reported (Floyd, 2002; Floyd & Morman, 1998; Floyd et al., 2005; Floyd & Pauley, 2011; Hesse & Floyd, 2008; Owen, 1987). Floyd and Morr (2003) also found that past love experiences can affect one's willingness in expressing his/her affection. The more positive love experiences, the higher the tendency to express affection and consequently, the higher the satisfaction with that relationship. On the other hand, the relationship between self-compassion and love expression is also evidenced in several research. For example, Dzwonkowska and Zak-Lykus (2015) suggested that individuals with a higher level of self-compassion are better at love expression. Self-compassion encourages acceptance and expression of one's true feelings, without judging or overreacting to them (Neff, 2003). The mindfulness component as a key element in self-compassion allows people to acknowledge their own emotions instead of suppressing them. This may explain the relationship between self-compassion

and the expression of love in our study. It can also explain why the expression of love can be the mediator between self-compassion and satisfaction in romantic relationships. Our findings are consistent with studies conducted earlier in different samples (Gareis & Wilkins, 2011; Kline et al., 2008; Seki et al., 2002; Wilkins & Gareis, 2006). While we discussed cultural differences in relationships, the difference may be clearer in how love is being expressed but not the function of love expression as the mediating variable.

Lastly, we also examined the mediating effect of commitment in the relationship between self-compassion and romantic relationship satisfaction among emerging adults in Malaysia. We found the relationships to be statistically significant. Earlier, we established that individuals with self-compassion are likely to have higher emotional intelligence which in turn may contribute to the strength and stability of the relationship (Neff, 2004). Mindfulness during self-compassion session encourages the individual to deal more healthily with their emotions whereas common humanity promotes tolerance and forgiveness, all of which suggested that self-compassion is positively associated with the strength and length of a romantic relationship (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). This explains the significant relationship we found between self-compassion and commitment. On the other hand, commitment contributes to the quality of the romantic relationship, making it more special compared to other relationships, like friendship. (Sternberg, 1986). Commitment could also help in improving the stability of romantic relationships (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001) and consequently, satisfaction. This explains the second part of the mechanism that illustrates the relationship between self-compassion, commitment, and satisfaction in romantic relationships.

Based on the Social Exchange Theory, commitment can be considered as the cost of building a relationship (Homans, 1961; Liu, 2012). Both Neff (2004), and Dzwonkowska and Zak-Lykus (2015) claimed that individuals with high self-compassion reported having a more positive attitude and higher emotional intelligence in handling life challenges. According to Frank (1988), commitment is not only referring to the promise of engaging oneself in a relationship but also facing all upcoming relationship challenges with the partner. Therefore, the individual with self-compassion is predicted to have that strength and emotional intelligence in maintaining a romantic relationship (Neff, 2004). This study provided a more complete understanding of the effect of self-compassion on the length of a romantic relationship. Although Neff and Beretvas (2013) did indicate that there was a positive relationship between self-compassion and the length of the relationship, the sample of their study only focused on college students. Meanwhile, this study included a sample with diverse backgrounds and education levels and we found a similar effect of self-compassion on prolonging the length of the romantic relationship.

This current study fills up the research gap by providing further evidence on how self-compassion contributes to the satisfaction of a romantic relationship. We found self-compassion to be associated with satisfaction in a relationship and the relationship is mediated by trust, love expression, and commitment. These three mediators illustrate

how self-compassion is able to improve the satisfaction of a romantic relationship. Most importantly, this study illustrates the more specific mechanism of how self-compassion can contribute to satisfaction of relationship quality and consequently well-being. This study highlights how personal characteristics like self-compassion can enhance relationship quality via the role of trust, love expression, and commitment. Future studies should explore more personal variables that are key in relationships and examine how they can contribute to specific aspects of relationships such as trust, expression of love, and commitment. The proposed model was supported in the study across Asian culture suggesting the universality of certain aspects of relationships. Since self-compassion plays a key role in romantic relationships, marital therapy should incorporate this in the interventions designed to help people with troubled marriages. Self-compassion skills can be taught so people can employ them in their everyday life thus improving the quality of their romantic relationships. Such an approach can also be extended to other types of relationships including family and friendships. One way to foster self-compassion is via self-compassion mediation training in therapy sessions. Self-compassion mediation training allows for self-kindness to flow. From the training, clients can learn to practice self-acceptance and self-love. These self-compassion meditation exercises usually can be done anywhere, anytime, and typically take 5 to 20 minutes (Neff, 2003). Equipped with better self-compassion skills and techniques, people are more likely to improve the quality of their relationships and subjective well-being.

This study has a few limitations. Due to translation restriction, only the English version of the scales were used as measurements. As such, this study only employed Malaysian young adults who were able to comprehend English. Since English is the second language in Malaysia, this group still represents a majority of young adults in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the group with limited understanding of English was excluded from the study. Future studies should address this issue by including both versions of the scales, thus improving the inclusivity of the study. Secondly, participants with reading/learning difficulties were not able to participate in this study. This is due to the procedure of using an online survey. Future studies should consider a variety of procedures to capture the participation of more diverse young people. This study only focused on heterosexual individuals. Similarly, future studies should aim to capture more diverse experiences of young people by including other sexual orientations, thus improving the inclusivity of psychological research.

In a nutshell, the findings of both the current and previous research showed that self-compassion plays a critical role in contributing to the satisfaction of the romantic relationship and psychological well-being. Our findings also indicated that self-compassion can promote the satisfaction of the romantic relationship by improving trust, expression of love, and commitment towards their partner in the romantic relationship. Similar to other past research, this study also found a positive correlation between self-compassion and psychological well-being. These findings highlight the role of self-compassion not

only as promoting well-being but also an agent to improve the quality of relationships. If self-compassion can improve romantic relationships, there is a great possibility that it can help enhance other relationships too including friendships, and relationships at the workplace. Further exploration of self-compassion potential positive contribution to other aspects of the relationship is necessary.

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