

Investigating the Mediating Role of Self-Compassion in the Relationship Between Narcissism and Academic Self-Efficacy of Final Year Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between narcissism and academic self-efficacy of final year students.

Methods: The methodological framework employed for this descriptive study was correlational in nature, specifically utilizing structural equation modeling. The statistical population pertinent to this inquiry encompasses all final year students enrolled at Bandar Abbas Islamic Azad University (both undergraduate and graduate levels) during the academic year 2024. In this study, sampling was executed via a stratified random sampling technique. The instruments utilized for data collection included Owen and Froman's academic self-efficacy scale (1988), Neff et al.'s self-compassion scale (2003), and Ames et al.'s narcissistic personality scale (2006). Structural equation modeling was employed to evaluate the research hypothesis. Moreover, the software utilized for this analysis was SPSS version 26 and Amos.

Results: The outcomes of the statistical analysis indicated that the structural model pertaining to the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between narcissism and academic self-efficacy among final year students demonstrated a satisfactory fit.

Conclusions: Consequently, it can be posited that students exhibiting a favorable degree of narcissism are likely to experience enhanced academic self-efficacy attributable to the presence of self-compassion.

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Introduction

The institution of higher education assumes a crucial function in the cultivation of human resources requisite for societal advancement and serves as a significant foundation for the promotion of scientific inquiry and educational objectives ([Bakrie et al., 2019](#)). Although the experience of attending university is enjoyable for numerous students, it concomitantly engenders an array of concerns and pressures ([Pourehsan et al., 2022](#)); elevated external expectations ([Flett et al., 2014](#)), constrained timelines for the completion of assignments ([Hamaideh, 2011](#)), competition among peers ([Beiter et al., 2015](#)), insufficient social support networks ([Sugiharno et al., 2022](#)), and occupational stress frequently impose both internal and external pressures on students ([Jiménez-Mijangos et al., 2023](#)), which can adversely influence their efficacy and, by extension, their psychological well-being; specifically, students in their final year exhibit a heightened susceptibility to psychosocial disruptions attributable to the recurrent exposure to the aforementioned stressors, which likely contributes to a diminished sense of self-efficacy in comparison to their less experienced counterparts.

Within the educational frameworks of various societies, academic self-efficacy and academic achievement are regarded as indicators of students' mental health, thereby underscoring the necessity for students to possess this psychological attribute ([Ajam, 2016](#)). Self-efficacy constitutes a pivotal determinant of human behavior in challenging circumstances. As a salient factor, self-efficacy significantly influences academic performance across diverse educational tiers ([Samavi, 2022](#)). This construct lays the groundwork for the enhancement of additional individual and social competencies. An individual's success in attaining a fulfilling personal and social existence, as well as effective performance, is contingent upon their comprehension and appraisal of their strengths, weaknesses, abilities, and aptitudes ([Motamedi et al., 2019](#)). Self-efficacy encompasses individuals' confidence in their motivational capacities and cognitive resources when confronted with adversities and challenges ([Mallahi, 2024](#)). Individuals exhibiting elevated levels of self-efficacy tend to rely more on their own endeavors and demonstrate increased perseverance when encountering obstacles ([Rafiola et al., 2020](#)). [Smith et al. \(2020\)](#) assert that individuals with heightened self-compassion also possess elevated self-efficacy; such individuals are unperturbed by the prospect of failure, exhibit greater self-assurance, and are equipped to confront life's challenges. Self-compassion further engenders a non-judgmental stance towards oneself,

particularly concerning one's shortcomings ([Moradi Kelardeh et al., 2019](#)) and serves as a cornerstone for mental health ([Vafaei et al., 2023](#)). This psychological characteristic exerts a beneficial influence on well-being and mental health ([Bohadana et al., 2019](#)) and is inversely correlated with adverse psychological outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and perceived stress ([Stutts et al., 2018](#)). [Neff \(2023\)](#) delineated self-compassion as a tripartite construct encompassing self-kindness versus self-judgment, recognition of human commonality versus isolation, and mindfulness versus overidentification. In the context of self-compassion, individuals are encouraged to confront rather than evade or repress their distressing emotions. Consequently, they are enabled to first acknowledge their experiences and extend compassion towards themselves ([Irons & Lad, 2017](#)). Self-compassion is positively correlated with life satisfaction ([Jennings & Tan, 2014](#)), and individuals exhibiting higher levels of self-compassion demonstrate enhanced capacity for conflict resolution and experience diminished emotional upheaval ([Yarnell & Neff, 2013](#)).

Given that self-compassion constitutes a distinct personality trait, it is subject to influence from various personality and environmental determinants. Among these determinants is narcissism, often referred to as such ([Saadat et al., 2017](#)). Narcissism represents a maladaptive personality characteristic ([Smith et al., 2020](#)). It can be conceptualized as a multifaceted and dynamic construct encompassing social, cognitive, and emotional self-regulatory mechanisms, which are typified by feelings of grandiosity, pride, self-absorption, an inherent sense of entitlement, and a propensity to exploit others ([Cheshure et al., 2020](#)). According to the American Psychological Association ([Anderson et al., 2017](#)), this psychological construct is additionally characterized as self-love and self-centeredness, defined as excessive in nature. It is marked by an inflated sense of superiority, authoritarian tendencies, and grandiose cognitive patterns ([Gruda et al., 2021](#)). Pathological narcissism is delineated by two distinct dimensions: grandiosity and vulnerability ([Malesza & Kaczmarek, 2018](#)). Both dimensions of narcissism exhibit certain similarities, such as self-centeredness and a sense of entitlement; however, they diverge in various aspects ([Krizan & Herlache, 2018](#)). Vulnerable narcissism correlates with elevated negative affect, diminished self-esteem, heightened sensitivity to criticism, and defensive mechanisms, whereas grandiose narcissism is characterized by an inflated self-concept, social assertiveness, extreme self-centeredness, and a pronounced inclination to seek external validation ([Zajenkowski & Fronczyk,](#)

2020). A research study conducted by [Saadat et al. \(2017\)](#) revealed no significant correlation between narcissism and academic self-efficacy. This aspect of the dark triad appears to predict a more favorable self-concept regarding self-efficacy; nevertheless, it does not ascertain an individual's actual performance level. This suggests that narcissistic individuals tend to report more favorable self-assessments due to their inflated self-perceptions, self-satisfaction, arrogance, and an exaggerated estimation of their capabilities, which they often ruminate upon. Consequently, the current investigation has sought to explore the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between narcissism and academic self-efficacy among final year students in Islamic Azad University of Bandar Abbas.

Material and Methods

The current investigation is categorized within the realm of applied research regarding its objectives, and it is characterized as a quantitative study in terms of data nature, as well as descriptive correlational research employing structural equation modeling for data collection purposes. The demographic scope of this research encompasses all final-year students enrolled at Bandar Abbas University (both undergraduate and graduate programs) during the academic year of 2024.

The sample size estimation was conducted utilizing the methodology proposed by [Lomax \(2004\)](#). In accordance with the overarching research framework and factoring in all observable variables, a total of 300 individuals were designated as participants in the sample. The sampling procedure was executed in a stratified random fashion, whereby 300 individuals were randomly selected from the cohort of final-year students at Bandar Abbas Islamic Azad University (undergraduate and graduate programs across various disciplines), with stratification based on gender as a distinguishing variable; the requisite questionnaires were subsequently disseminated among this group. Following the acquisition of pertinent data from the students, the questionnaires were transmitted to the participants through virtual platforms (Porsline).

For the purpose of data collection within the statistical sample, standardized questionnaires were employed. Subsequently, each questionnaire will be introduced, accompanied by a comprehensive articulation of their validity and reliability metrics.

The Student Academic Self-Efficacy Questionnaire: This scale conceived by Owen, and Froman, in 1988, serves to assess students' beliefs regarding their academic self-efficacy ([Ajam, 2024](#)). In the development of this instrument, Owen, and Froman solicited the insights of seven educational experts. This instrument comprises 33 individual statements, which are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from very low to very high, and is designed to evaluate students' confidence in various academic activities, such as note-taking, inquiring during lectures, maintaining attention in class, and utilizing computers. Given that statement 28 pertains to laboratory settings—which are not universally applicable across all disciplines—this item has been excluded from the Persian iteration of the questionnaire, thereby reducing the total number of statements to 32 ([Ajam, 2024](#)). To derive the overall score, the responses across all items are aggregated. Within this instrument, elevated scores signify higher self-efficacy, while lower scores indicate diminished self-efficacy in relation to the completion of academic assignments. Owen, and Froman established the reliability of this questionnaire via the test-retest method, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.9 over an 8-week interval ([Ajam, 2024](#)). In the context of the present investigation, the construct validity of this scale was substantiated through confirmatory factor analysis, with factor loadings exceeding 0.30, and the reliability of this instrument was corroborated by a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.73.

The Self-Compassion Questionnaire: This scale was conceived by [Neff \(2023\)](#) and comprises 26 items categorized into 6 dimensions: self-kindness, self-judgment, human commonality, isolation, mindfulness, and extreme identification, which are evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5. A higher score on this instrument signifies an elevated level of self-compassion, whereas a lower score denotes a diminished level of self-compassion. Furthermore, items 1, 4, 8, 9, 11, and 12 are assessed in a reverse scoring manner. In the investigation conducted by [Asayesh et al. \(2021\)](#), the alpha coefficient for the aggregate score of the scale was determined to be 0.76. Additionally, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the subscales of self-kindness, self-judgment, human commonalities, isolation, mindfulness, and extreme identification were reported as 0.81, 0.79, 0.84, 0.85, 0.80, and 0.83, correspondingly. The validity of the questionnaire has also been assessed positively. In the current investigation, the construct validity of this scale was corroborated through confirmatory factor analysis with factor

loadings exceeding 0.30, and the reliability of this instrument was substantiated by the Cronbach's alpha method with values ranging from 0.59 to 0.80.

The Narcissistic Personality Questionnaire: This questionnaire was formulated by [Ang and Raine \(2009\)](#). This instrument consists of 16 items. This tool lacks subscales and functions as a unidimensional measure designed to assess characteristics associated with narcissistic personality traits within a non-clinical demographic. This questionnaire was initially translated and validated by [Mohammadzadeh \(2009\)](#). The total score of this instrument spans from 16 to 80. A higher score reflects a greater degree of narcissism in the individual, while a lower score indicates the opposite. As a delineation point, a score of 48 or higher suggests the presence of narcissistic personality traits in the individual. There is no reverse scoring mechanism utilized in this questionnaire. [Ang and Raine \(2009\)](#) computed the convergent validity coefficient for this questionnaire by examining the correlation coefficient between the scores derived from this instrument and the scores obtained from the extroversion and openness to new experiences indices of the Big Five personality factor scale, with the coefficients calculated at 0.32 for extroversion and 0.41 for openness to new experiences. [Mohammadzadeh \(2009\)](#) reported the reliability of this questionnaire via a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.67 and established its validity through concurrent administration with the 40-item Narcissistic Personality Questionnaire, which yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.61. In the current investigation, the construct validity of the measurement scale was substantiated via confirmatory factor analysis, demonstrating factor loadings exceeding 0.30, while the reliability of this instrument was reaffirmed through the Cronbach's alpha methodology, which also resulted in a value of 0.79.

In this analysis, confirmatory factor analysis utilizing Amos software was employed to assess the validity of the scales, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient served as the basis for evaluating its reliability. Subsequently, the acquired data were delineated through the application of descriptive statistical methodologies, including mean and standard deviation, complemented by descriptive tables and graphical representations. To explore the research hypotheses, inferential statistical techniques were implemented. Within the inferential statistics framework, structural equation modeling was employed to scrutinize the hypotheses. In this investigation, the data analysis was facilitated using both SPSS and Amos software.

The following ethical considerations were meticulously adhered to throughout this research: Ensuring originality and refraining from replicating similar topics or engaging in deception, Upholding scientific integrity and credibility, Avoiding the utilization of unreliable sources, Standardizing the measurement instrument and clarifying the intended ambiguities, Incorporating expert opinions, Conducting preliminary testing of the instrument, Maintaining integrity in result analysis and Ensuring the confidentiality of information.

Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive indices of the demographic variables of the study.

Table 1. Descriptive indices of the demographic variables of the study

Variable	F	%
Age range	20-30 years	176
	31-40 years	78
	41-50 years	46
Academic level	Bachelor	195
	Master	105
Gender	Female	150
	Male	150
Marital status	Single	134
	Married	166

Table 2 reports the descriptive indices of the research variables.

Table 2. Descriptive indices of exogenous variables

Variable	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Narcissism	16	71	43.52	7.83	0.82	-0.68
Self-kindness	7	23	18.62	4.28	-0.89	0.81
Self-judgment	5	23	19.08	5.04	0.57	-0.34
Human connections	4	18	16.39	4.43	-0.43	0.30
Isolation	5	18	14.05	4.27	-0.79	0.56
Mindfulness	4	19	15.09	3.22	-1.16	1.53
Extreme identification	4	16	12.73	3.61	1.04	-0.72
Self-compassion	29	117	95.96	14.32	1.18	1.16
Academic self-efficacy	34	149	128.77	16.92	1.15	-0.43

To show the normality of the data (the conformity of the distribution of sample scores with the normal distribution), the Shapiro-Wilk statistical test was used. The result of this test showed that the type I error rate of the Shapiro-Wilk statistics is so high ($p > 0.05$) that the null hypothesis cannot

be rejected in this test. The null hypothesis of the present test is that there is no difference between the sample distribution graph and the normal distribution graph.

In this study, Mahalanobis intervals were used to identify outliers. The relevant analysis showed that no data among the Mahalanobis intervals is higher than the obtained chi-square value and, as a result, there is no outlier data among the subjects' responses.

Pearson correlation test (zero order) was used to show the pairwise correlation between the research variables. The correlation coefficients between the variables of self-efficacy and self-compassion were 0.703, between the variables of self-efficacy and narcissism were -0.521, and between the variables of self-compassion and narcissism were -0.635, all three values were at the significance level of 0.01. The regression weights (standard and non-standard) along with the significance level of the direct paths of the model are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. Regression weights of the direct paths of the model

Predictor	Criterion	B	β	S.E	T	P
Narcissism	Self-Compassion	-0.52	-0.47	0.05	-10.40	0.001
Self-pity	Academic Self-Efficacy	0.67	0.53	0.04	16.75	0.001
Narcissism	Academic Self-Efficacy	-0.47	-0.43	0.06	-7.83	0.001

Next, using bootstrap analysis, the regression weights along with the significance level of the indirect paths were calculated and displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of bootstrap analysis to determine the regression weights of indirect paths

Predictor	Mediator	Criterion	β	P
Narcissism	Self-Compassion	Academic Self-Efficacy	-0.25	0.001

In order to calculate the indirect path related to the hypothesis of this study, the bootstrap command in Amos software was used. Based on the results presented in the table 4, the indirect path from narcissism to academic self-efficacy (mediated by self-compassion) is estimated to be significant ($\beta=-0.25$ and $P<0.05$). This result indicates the indirect predictability of academic self-efficacy by the narcissism variable (through self-compassion). The value of the (C.R)T statistic is also within its optimal range ($T<1.96$). Figure 1 shows the final research model.

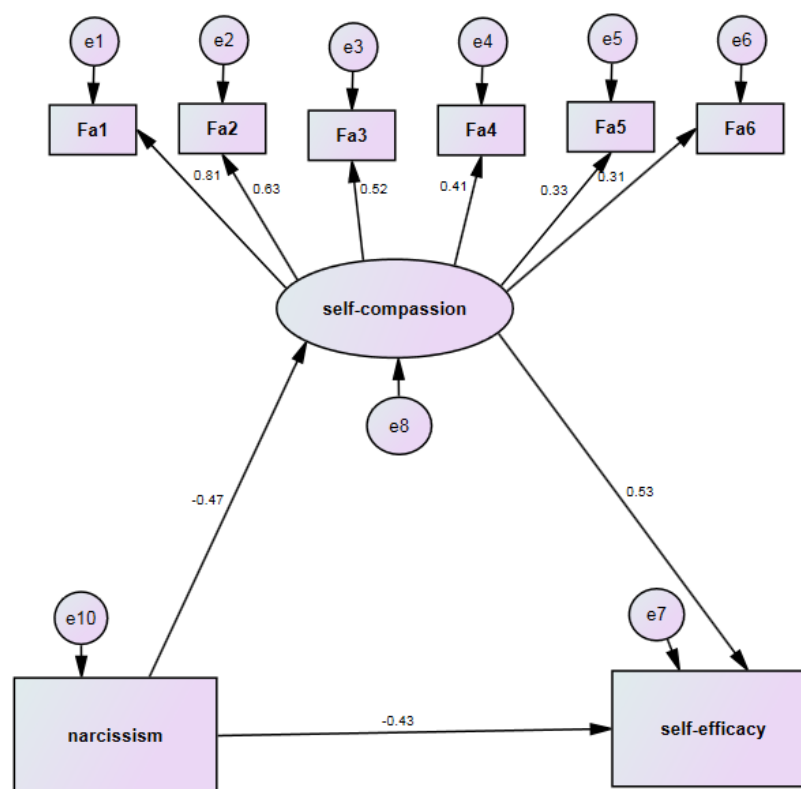


Figure 1. The final research model

In order to examine the fit of the final research model in the statistical population, the model fit indices were calculated in Amos software. Table 5 shows the model fit indices along with the optimal values of each index.

Table 5. Research Model Fit Indices

Indices	X ² /DF	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA	PCLOSE
Obtained values	1.76	0.95	0.94	0.96	0.92	0.053	0.19
Optimal values	< 3	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	> 0.90	< 0.08	> 0.00

According to the results in the table above, the result of dividing the chi-square by the degree of freedom was 1.76. The value of the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), which indicate the amount of variance and covariance explained by the model, was 0.95 and 0.94, respectively. The comparative fit index (CFI), which compares the target model with the independent model, was 0.92. The value of the Toker-Lewis index (TLI), as an

unnormalized fit index, was estimated to be 0.96. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the P value of close fit (PCLOSE) were also obtained as 0.053 and 0.19, respectively. All model fit indices were at an acceptable level, which indicates that, based on the desired levels of error and confidence, the model has a good fit in the statistical population of the study.

In order to calculate the total effects, the direct and indirect effects of the variables involved in a path should be added together to obtain a clearer view of the totality of the path. This is reported in Table 6.

Table 6. Standard values of direct, indirect and total effects of research variables

Predictor	Criterion	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Narcissism	Academic Self-Efficacy	-0.43	-0.25	-0.68

Based on the above table, the sum of the standard values (direct and indirect effect) of narcissism is equal to -0.68, which is estimated to be a desirable value. Considering the values related to direct effects, indirect effects, total effects, the final research model and the model fit indices, the research hypothesis was confirmed: Academic self-efficacy is predicted based on narcissism with the mediation of self-compassion in senior year students.

Discussion

The conviction in one's capabilities or self-efficacy across various domains facilitates an individual's adept management of their emotional responses ([Malik et al., 2024](#)). The significance of self-efficacy within the educational sector has garnered increased scholarly attention in recent years, with empirical evidence indicating that self-efficacy beliefs substantially influence multiple facets of academic achievement. Individuals exhibiting elevated levels of self-efficacy tend to attain superior academic grades, contemplate broader vocational pathways, possess enhanced employment prospects, establish ambitious personal objectives, and experience improved physical and psychological well-being ([Kerr et al., 2013](#)).

Self-compassion empowers individuals to cultivate greater courage and critically assess the detrimental cycle of negative self-perception and self-criticism, allowing them to set elevated expectations while simultaneously redefining realistic standards and more attainable goals through

a compassionate lens that eschews hardship and suffering. Furthermore, self-compassion serves as a constructive form of self-acceptance, reflecting the extent of acknowledgment and acceptance of unfavorable aspects of oneself and existence ([Asayesh et al., 2021](#)). This construct encompasses three principal components: firstly, when an individual acknowledges their inefficacy and experiences resultant suffering, they embrace and comprehend their being; secondly, it embodies an awareness of the shared human experience, recognizing that pain and failure are universal and inevitable phenomena; thirdly, self-compassion signifies a measured awareness of one's emotional state and the capacity to confront distressing thoughts and feelings without exaggeration or self-pity, while also recognizing one's limitations and shortcomings. Such kindness towards oneself fosters a sense of security, enhances social connectivity, and mitigates rumination, suppression of negative cognitions, anxiety, and emotional distress ([Smith et al., 2020](#)). Self-compassion is not predicated upon positive self-judgment or evaluation; rather, it constitutes a mode of engagement with oneself. In the realm of compassion, one experiences empathy for oneself due to the shared human condition, rather than on the basis of feeling exceptional or above average. Thus, self-compassion underscores connection rather than division, indicating that one need not cultivate a sense of superiority over others to enhance one's self-perception.

Considering that self-compassion is inherently a personality trait, it is subject to influence from various personality and environmental factors. A significant factor in this context is narcissism ([Saadat et al., 2017](#)). Narcissism is characterized as a maladaptive personality trait (([Smith et al., 2020](#)). It represents a complex and dynamic interplay of social, cognitive, and emotional self-regulatory mechanisms, characterized by sentiments of grandeur, arrogance, self-absorption, entitlement, and a propensity to exploit others ([Cheshure et al., 2020](#)). Pathological narcissism is delineated by two dimensions: grandiosity and vulnerability ([Malesza & Kaczmarek, 2018](#)). While both dimensions share certain characteristics, such as self-centeredness and a sense of entitlement, they also exhibit distinct differences ([Krizan & Herlache, 2018](#)). Vulnerable narcissism correlates with heightened negative mood, diminished self-esteem, heightened sensitivity to criticism, and defensive behaviors, whereas grandiose narcissism is characterized by inflated self-esteem, social assertiveness, intense egotism, and a yearning for admiration ([Zajenkowski & Fronczyk, 2020](#)). Both manifestations can pose threats to self-compassion and self-acceptance.

Narcissistic students postulate that their academic competencies surpass those of their peers, thereby exploiting their scholarly endeavors to safeguard their inflated self-image, and they exhibit pronounced aggression and ire when their expectations are not met. These individuals possess an inflated sense of self-worth and seize every occasion to elevate their own status while simultaneously belittling and demeaning others. Such students demonstrate a reluctance to acknowledge their errors and exhibit an inability to extend forgiveness to themselves as individuals. In a manner analogous to their rigidity and inflexibility towards others, these persons also display a lack of flexibility and mercy towards their own existential identity. Consequently, due to their entrenchment in perfectionistic standards, these students deprive themselves of the opportunity for redemption and dismiss their inherent capabilities upon encountering setbacks or failures in their academic pursuits. Hence, the research hypothesis positing that academic self-efficacy is influenced by narcissism through the mediating effect of self-compassion in senior students is deemed plausible and exhibits an acceptable level of fit.

One key limitation of this study is its reliance on self-report measures, which may introduce response biases such as social desirability or inaccurate self-perception. Additionally, the sample was restricted to final-year students at a single university (Bandar Abbas Islamic Azad University), limiting the generalizability of findings to other academic levels or institutions. The cross-sectional design also prevents causal inferences, meaning that while relationships between narcissism, self-compassion, and academic self-efficacy were identified, the directionality and long-term effects remain unclear. Furthermore, the study did not account for potential confounding variables, such as personality traits (e.g., conscientiousness) or external stressors (e.g., academic workload), which could influence the observed relationships.

Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to explore causal pathways and stability of these relationships over time. Expanding the sample to include diverse universities, academic levels, and cultural contexts would enhance generalizability. Mixed-methods approaches, incorporating qualitative interviews, could provide deeper insights into how narcissism and self-compassion interact to shape academic self-efficacy. Additionally, experimental or intervention-based studies could examine whether fostering self-compassion mitigates negative aspects of narcissism and improves academic outcomes. Exploring moderating variables, such as gender, socioeconomic status, or academic discipline, could also offer a more

nuanced understanding of these dynamics. Finally, utilizing behavioral measures alongside self-reports could reduce bias and strengthen validity.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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