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Investigating the Relationship Between Psychological Flexibility and Subjective Well-Being with the Mediating Role of Self-Compassion in Students

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The present study was conducted to investigate the relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being with the mediating role of self-compassion among university students.

Method: This study employed a descriptive-correlational design. The statistical population included all students of Razi University during the 2023–2024 academic year. In this study, 350 male and female students were selected through convenience sampling based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The instruments used in this research included the standardized Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989), the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003), and the Psychological Flexibility Scale (Bond et al., 2011). Pearson correlation analysis and structural equation modeling were used for data analysis. Data were analyzed using SPSS-26 and AMOS-24 software.

Findings: The results indicated that the conceptual model of the study demonstrated acceptable fit indices within the framework of structural equation modeling. The findings showed that the exogenous and mediating variables jointly predicted 0.53 of the variance in the endogenous variable (R = 0.53). The indirect effect of psychological flexibility on subjective well-being through self-compassion was found to be -0.178, which was statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Conclusion: The findings of the study suggest that the interaction between the processes of experiential acceptance and self-kindness indicates that subjective well-being is optimized when students are able to process stressful experiences without avoidance or self-criticism while simultaneously adopting a supportive attitude toward themselves. Accordingly, the development of educational programs and university-based interventions aimed at enhancing psychological flexibility and self-compassion may provide an effective pathway for promoting mental health, reducing emotional vulnerability, and improving students' academic adjustment.

Keywords: *Psychological flexibility, subjective well-being, self-compassion, students*

1. Introduction

University students constitute one of the most important and vulnerable populations in contemporary societies due to their simultaneous exposure to developmental, educational, occupational, and interpersonal challenges. Entering university is accompanied by substantial psychological and social changes that may significantly influence students' mental health, emotional adjustment, and overall quality of life. Academic pressure, uncertainty regarding future career

opportunities, financial concerns, social adaptation, and interpersonal stressors represent major sources of psychological strain during the student years (Pascoe et al., 2020). In recent years, growing attention has been directed toward the concept of subjective well-being as a central indicator of positive mental health and adaptive functioning among university students. Subjective well-being refers to individuals' cognitive and emotional evaluations of their lives and includes emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being dimensions (Jovanović, 2026). Research evidence indicates that higher levels of subjective well-being are associated with greater academic achievement, emotional stability, resilience, social adjustment, and life satisfaction, whereas lower levels are linked to psychological distress, anxiety, depression, academic burnout, and maladaptive coping behaviors (Britwum, 2025; Pan et al., 2025). Consequently, identifying the psychological mechanisms and protective factors that contribute to students' well-being has become a major focus in contemporary psychological research and educational mental health policy (Schrijvers et al., 2026; Zeng et al., 2025).

Subjective well-being has increasingly been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct influenced by both environmental and intrapersonal determinants. According to self-determination theory, psychological well-being emerges when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their environments (Ryan & Deci, 2016). Empirical studies have shown that satisfaction of basic psychological needs contributes substantially to well-being and adaptive functioning across various populations (Shangguan et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2020). Among students, perceptions of social connectedness, educational support, and psychological safety have been found to predict more favorable mental health outcomes and higher levels of subjective well-being (Rahmasari et al., 2026; Sinclair et al., 2025). Likewise, educational institutions that implement supportive mental health policies and inclusive psychosocial interventions tend to foster healthier academic climates and improved student adjustment (Schrijvers et al., 2026). Studies conducted among university populations have demonstrated that psychological well-being is closely associated with coping strategies, emotional regulation capacities, and adaptive cognitive processes (Lopes & Nihei, 2021; Morales-Rodríguez et al., 2020). Furthermore, health-promoting behaviors such as regular physical activity and healthy sleep patterns have also been associated with increased well-being and reduced psychological distress among students (Herbert et al., 2020; Kaar et al., 2017). Despite the growing body of evidence regarding the determinants of well-being, substantial variability remains in students' psychological adjustment, suggesting the presence of mediating and moderating psychological processes that require further empirical investigation.

One of the most influential constructs in recent contextual and positive psychological approaches is psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility refers to the ability to remain consciously in contact with present experiences, including unpleasant emotions and thoughts, while engaging in behaviors that are aligned with personal values and long-term goals. This construct is considered a central process in acceptance and commitment therapy and has been strongly associated with emotional resilience, adaptive coping, and mental health outcomes (Davis et al., 2020; Pinna & Edwards, 2020). Individuals with high psychological flexibility are more capable of accepting difficult emotional experiences without avoidance, cognitive fusion, or maladaptive reactions. In contrast, psychological inflexibility is characterized by experiential avoidance, rigid cognitive patterns, emotional suppression, and difficulty adapting to stressful circumstances (Figueiredo et al., 2024; Jo et al., 2024). Research findings have consistently demonstrated that psychological flexibility predicts lower levels of anxiety, depression, stress, burnout, and psychological distress across diverse populations (Chong et al., 2023; Guo et al., 2022). Moreover, psychological flexibility has been identified as a protective factor in trauma recovery, emotional adjustment, and psychosocial functioning (Faulkner et al., 2021; Maral & Satici, 2025). Recent investigations have also highlighted the mediating role of psychological flexibility in the relationship between mindfulness, stress, and emotional well-being (Seclén Uchuya et al., 2026). These findings suggest that psychological flexibility may function as a key psychological mechanism that facilitates adaptive emotional processing and promotes subjective well-being in stressful educational contexts.

Within university settings, students with greater psychological flexibility appear better equipped to cope with academic pressure, interpersonal difficulties, and future uncertainty. Such students are more likely to adopt adaptive coping strategies, maintain emotional balance, and preserve psychological functioning during stressful periods (Guo et al., 2022). Conversely, students with lower flexibility may exhibit increased emotional vulnerability, cognitive rigidity,

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and maladaptive coping responses, leading to diminished well-being and increased psychological symptoms (Jo et al., 2024). Evidence further indicates that psychological flexibility contributes not only to the reduction of psychopathological symptoms but also to the enhancement of positive psychological outcomes, including resilience, life satisfaction, and social functioning (Davis et al., 2020; Maral & Satici, 2025). In occupational contexts, cognitive and psychological flexibility have similarly been associated with higher occupational well-being and improved interpersonal functioning (F. S. Mirhashemi et al., 2024; Z. Rahimi Gorji & S. Salehi, 2024). Although these findings provide substantial support for the importance of flexibility-related processes, the precise mechanisms through which psychological flexibility contributes to subjective well-being among university students remain insufficiently understood. One potentially important explanatory variable in this relationship is self-compassion.

Self-compassion is another central construct in contemporary positive psychology that has attracted considerable empirical attention over the past two decades. Self-compassion refers to treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance during moments of failure, suffering, or inadequacy rather than engaging in harsh self-criticism or self-judgment (Neff, 2011). According to Neff's theoretical model, self-compassion comprises three major bipolar dimensions: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification (Neff, 2011). Individuals with high self-compassion tend to respond to difficulties with emotional balance, acceptance, and supportive self-awareness, which facilitates psychological resilience and adaptive coping. Meta-analytic evidence has shown that self-compassion is negatively associated with depression, anxiety, shame, and stress while positively related to emotional well-being, life satisfaction, and psychological adjustment (Marsh et al., 2018). In student populations, self-compassion has been identified as an important protective factor against academic stress, emotional exhaustion, and self-critical thinking patterns (Marshall & Brockman, 2016). Furthermore, self-compassion appears to enhance individuals' capacity to regulate emotions effectively and recover from adverse experiences more adaptively.

The role of self-compassion in promoting mental health and well-being has been supported in both clinical and non-clinical populations. Studies have demonstrated that self-compassion is associated with increased positive affect, psychological resilience, interpersonal functioning, and emotional stability (Marshall & Brockman, 2016). Technological interventions and digital mental health tools have even been designed to cultivate self-compassion as a means of improving psychological well-being and emotional regulation (Lee et al., 2019). Self-compassion may be especially important for university students because academic environments frequently expose individuals to evaluative stress, social comparison, fear of failure, and uncertainty regarding future outcomes. Students who respond to these stressors with self-kindness and mindful awareness may experience lower emotional distress and greater subjective well-being than those who rely on self-criticism and experiential avoidance (Marsh et al., 2018). Moreover, self-compassion may interact dynamically with psychological flexibility because both constructs involve openness to emotional experiences, nonjudgmental awareness, and adaptive self-regulation processes. Previous studies have indicated significant associations between psychological flexibility and self-compassion, suggesting that flexible individuals may be more capable of responding compassionately to personal difficulties (Marshall & Brockman, 2016). Similarly, self-compassion may strengthen the beneficial effects of psychological flexibility on emotional adjustment and psychological well-being by reducing maladaptive emotional reactions and fostering supportive self-attitudes.

Contemporary research increasingly emphasizes the importance of integrated psychological models that explain how positive psychological constructs interact to influence well-being. For instance, studies have shown that cognitive flexibility mediates the relationship between psychological well-being and interpersonal functioning (Zahra Rahimi Gorji & Somayeh Salehi, 2024). Other investigations have reported that cognitive and psychological flexibility mediate the association between psychological needs satisfaction and occupational well-being (Fatemeh Sadat Mirhashemi et al., 2024). Additionally, psychological flexibility has been associated with lower emotional distress and greater adaptive functioning across various cultural and developmental contexts (Figueiredo et al., 2024; Seclén Uchuya et al., 2026). Simultaneously, self-compassion has emerged as a robust predictor of emotional well-being and resilience in both adolescents and adults (Marsh et al., 2018). Research conducted among students has further indicated that supportive psychosocial conditions, resilience, and coherent self-regulation strategies contribute substantially to well-being and academic functioning (Britwum, 2025; Rahmasari et al., 2026). Studies examining social well-being

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and quality of life have also highlighted the importance of adaptive psychological processes in promoting positive educational outcomes and reducing emotional vulnerability (O'Shea et al., 2023; Shdaifat et al., 2025). Nevertheless, despite the growing evidence supporting the independent roles of psychological flexibility and self-compassion, limited research has simultaneously examined these variables within an integrated structural framework among university students, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts.

The necessity of the present study becomes more evident when considering the increasing prevalence of psychological distress and emotional difficulties among university students worldwide. Mental health challenges among students have become a major public health concern, with growing rates of anxiety, depression, burnout, loneliness, and psychosocial maladjustment reported across educational settings (Satinsky et al., 2019; Zeng et al., 2025). The rapid social, educational, and technological changes affecting students' lives have intensified emotional pressures and increased the need for effective psychological interventions and preventive programs. Given that subjective well-being plays a crucial role in students' academic performance, emotional adjustment, interpersonal relationships, and long-term psychological health, identifying the psychological factors that enhance well-being is of substantial theoretical and practical importance. Psychological flexibility may enable students to cope more adaptively with stressors, while self-compassion may protect them from the harmful effects of self-criticism and emotional dysregulation. Therefore, understanding the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being may provide valuable insights for designing educational, counseling, and psychological interventions aimed at promoting students' mental health and adaptive functioning.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being with the mediating role of self-compassion among university students.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present study employed a descriptive correlational design using a structural equation modeling (SEM) approach. The statistical population consisted of all students of Razi University during the 2023–2024 academic year. Based on the recommendation of Gadagnoli et al. (1988), who suggested that in studies based on modeling and path analysis the sample size should be at least 300 participants, a total of 350 male and female students were selected as the research sample. Participants were recruited using the convenience sampling method. Inclusion criteria included students' informed consent to participate in the study and completion of at least one academic semester. Exclusion criteria included a self-reported history of specific physical or psychological disorders as well as incomplete questionnaire responses. These criteria were considered to enhance data accuracy, ensure the relative homogeneity of the sample, and improve the validity of the research findings. The following instruments were used in the present study. Structural equation modeling was employed to examine the direct and indirect relationships among the variables.

2.2. Measures

The Psychological Well-Being Scale was developed by Carol Ryff in 1989 and revised in 2002. The short form of the instrument consists of 18 items and measures six major dimensions of psychological well-being: environmental mastery (Items 1, 4, and 6), autonomy (Items 9, 12, and 18), positive relations with others (Items 3, 11, and 13), personal growth (Items 7, 15, and 17), purpose in life (Items 5, 14, and 16), and self-acceptance (Items 2, 8, and 10). Responses are rated on a six-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (6). Therefore, the total score ranges from 18 to 108, with higher scores indicating greater psychological well-being. In this version, 10 items are scored directly and 8 items (3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 13, 16, and 17) are reverse scored. In the original version, the correlation between the short and long forms ranged from .70 to .89, and Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the six dimensions were reported as .51, .76, .75, .52, .73, and .72, respectively, with an overall alpha coefficient of .71. In the Iranian standardized version, acceptable reliability coefficients have also been reported. Specifically, Khanjani et al. (2014) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .78 for the internal consistency of the short form. In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .72, indicating acceptable measurement stability and validity of the instrument in the Iranian sample.

The Psychological Flexibility Scale was developed by Bond et al. in 2011 and is considered one of the most widely used instruments for assessing psychological inflexibility

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and experiential avoidance. The scale consists of 7 items assessing three major components related to inflexibility: unwillingness to experience unwanted thoughts and emotions, inability to remain mindful and present-focused, and difficulty moving toward personal values. Items are rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (7). Therefore, scores range from 7 to 49, with higher scores indicating lower psychological flexibility and higher experiential avoidance. Bond et al. (2011) reported a test–retest reliability coefficient of .81 and an internal consistency coefficient of .84 for the scale. The Persian version of the instrument was developed using standard forward–backward translation procedures and has demonstrated acceptable content and construct validity in Iranian studies. In the present study, the reliability of the questionnaire based on Cronbach's alpha was .848, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and appropriate reliability for assessing psychological flexibility in the student sample.

The Self-Compassion Questionnaire was developed by Kristin Neff in 2003 with 26 items. The 12-item short form of the Self-Compassion Scale was later developed by Raes, Pommier, Neff, and Van Gucht (2011). This version includes six bipolar dimensions: self-kindness versus self-judgment, common humanity versus isolation, and mindfulness versus over-identification. Respondents answer the items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "almost never" (1) to "almost always" (5). Raes et al. (2011) reported an internal consistency coefficient of .86 for the scale. Factor analysis of the items, similar to the long form, revealed the six aforementioned factors and one higher-order self-compassion factor. In the study conducted by Sabzeh Arai Langroudi (2013), in addition to examining the factor structure of the scale in an Iranian sample, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .68 was reported. In the study by Ghorbani, Watson, Zhu, and Norballa (2012), the internal consistency coefficient was reported as .84. In the present study, the reliability of this questionnaire based on Cronbach's alpha was .785.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 26 and AMOS Version 24 at a significance level of .05.

3. Findings and Results

Examination of the demographic characteristics of the research sample showed that among the 350 participants, the highest frequency belonged to the 19–25 age group with 270 individuals (77.1%). This was followed by 50 individuals (14.3%) aged 26–30 years, 24 individuals (6.9%) aged 31–35 years, 5 individuals (1.4%) aged 36–40 years, and 1 individual (0.3%) aged 41–45 years. Regarding educational level, 266 participants (76.0%) held a bachelor's degree, 61 participants (17.4%) held a master's degree, and 23 participants (6.6%) held a doctoral degree. In terms of gender, 234 participants (66.8%) were female and 116 participants (33.2%) were male. These findings indicate that the majority of the sample consisted of undergraduate students aged 19–25 years, with a predominance of female participants. Table 1 presents the descriptive indices of the study variables.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
Psychological Well-Being	75.53	10.49	-0.570	-0.340
Emotional Well-Being	27.71	4.43	-0.647	-0.088
Social Well-Being	64.63	10.24	-0.435	-0.162
Total Subjective Well-Being Score	167.86	21.23	-0.505	-0.093
Psychological Flexibility	23.60	8.04	-0.166	-0.916
Self-Compassion	37.58	7.32	0.712	-0.859

The descriptive indices of the research variables indicate that the mean psychological well-being score was 75.53 with a standard deviation of 10.49, emotional well-being had a mean of 27.71 with a standard deviation of 4.43, and social well-being had a mean of 64.63 with a standard deviation of 10.24. In addition, the mean total subjective well-being score was 167.86 with a standard deviation of 21.23, indicating a relatively favorable level of subjective well-being among participants. Regarding self-compassion, the mean score was 37.58 with a standard deviation of 7.32. Furthermore, the mean psychological flexibility score was 23.60 with a standard deviation of 8.04. Examination of skewness and kurtosis indices for all variables showed that their values were within the acceptable range (approximately ±1),

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indicating that the distributions of the study variables were relatively normal. Prior to testing the proposed model and to ensure the adequacy of the data for structural equation modeling analysis, the underlying statistical assumptions were thoroughly examined. First, the normality of data distribution was evaluated and confirmed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test ($p > .05$), and simultaneous inspection of boxplots verified the absence of influential outliers. Next, the assumption of linear relationships among variables was confirmed through visual examination of scatterplots. In addition, tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) indices were calculated to assess multicollinearity among predictor variables. Tolerance values above .10 and VIF values below 10 indicated the absence of problematic multicollinearity. Finally, the assumption of error independence (absence of residual autocorrelation) was assessed using the Durbin–Watson test, and the obtained statistic fell within the standard range (1.5–2.5), confirming the independence of observations. Therefore, the prerequisites for conducting the main analysis were satisfactorily met.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix of the Research Variables

Variables	Subjective Well-Being	Self-Compassion	Psychological Flexibility
Subjective Well-Being	1	–	–
Self-Compassion	.222 p = .001	1	–
Psychological Flexibility	.190 p = .001	.353 p = .001	1

The results presented in Table 2 indicated that statistically significant relationships existed among all study variables at the .05 significance level. The findings demonstrated that the relationship between subjective well-being and self-compassion was inverse and statistically significant, whereas the remaining relationships among the variables were direct and statistically significant at the .05 level.

Figure 1 illustrates the structural equation model, indicating that the exogenous and mediating variables jointly predicted 53% of the variance in the endogenous variable ($R = .53$). Table 3 presents the model fit indices.

Table 3

Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Acceptance Criterion	Observed Value	Fit Status
χ^2/df	Good < 3.0 Acceptable < 5.0	1.53	Good Fit
Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI)	> .90	.986	Good Fit
Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI)	> .80	.847	Good Fit
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	> .90	.943	Good Fit
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	> .90	.981	Good Fit
Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	> .90	.983	Good Fit
Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI)	> .90	.959	Good Fit
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	< .08	.085	Excellent Fit

As shown above, the proposed model demonstrated an excellent fit. As can be observed, the most important fit index, RMSEA, was obtained as .085, indicating excellent model fit. Other fit indices, including NFI, CFI, IFI, TLI, and AGFI, were obtained as .943, .981, .983, .959, and .847, respectively, all of which indicate that the proposed model had an acceptable level of fit.

Table 4

Direct Effects Among the Research Variables

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Path Coefficient	Test Statistic	Significance

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Psychological Flexibility	Self-Compassion	-0.75	-9.18	.001
Psychological Flexibility	Subjective Well-Being	-0.53	-5.25	.001
Self-Compassion	Subjective Well-Being	0.24	2.42	.015

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that the path coefficient between psychological flexibility and self-compassion among students was β = -0.75 with a test statistic of -9.18, which was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The path coefficient between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being was β = -0.53 with a test statistic of -5.25, which was also statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Furthermore, the path coefficient between self-compassion and subjective well-being was β = 0.24 with a test statistic of 2.42, which was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level.

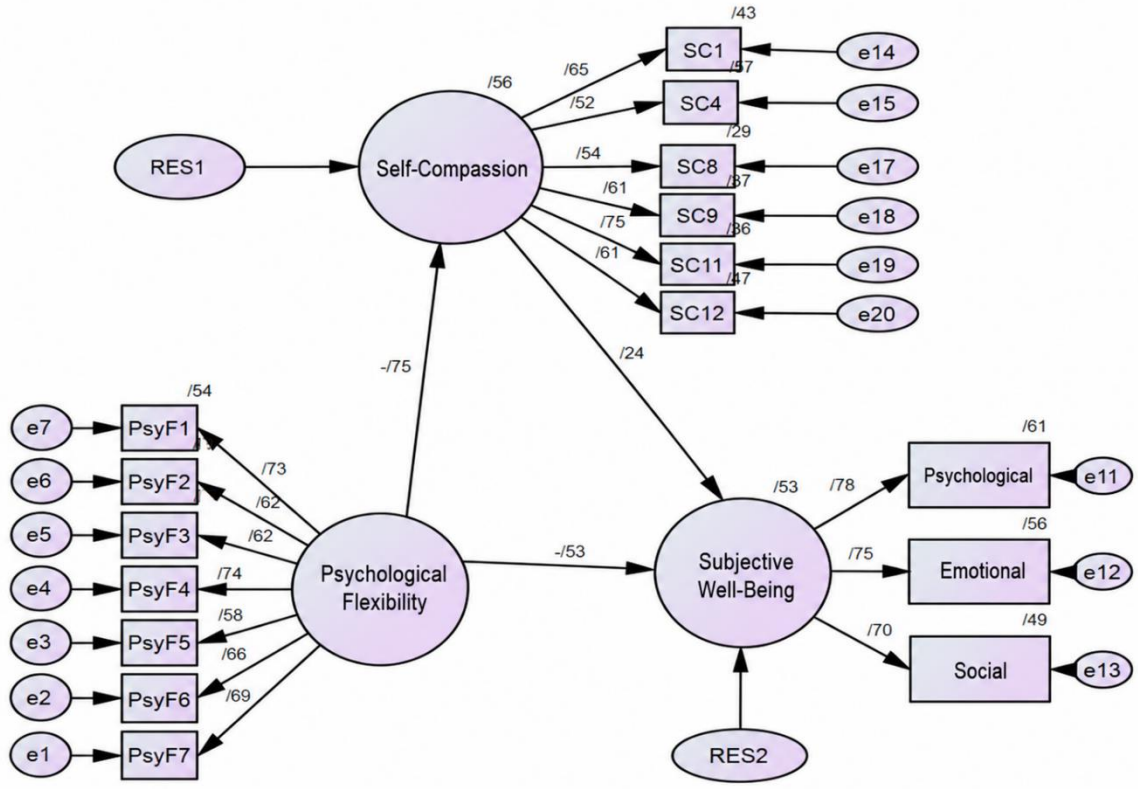
Table 5

Results of the Indirect Paths in the Research Model

Indirect Paths	Path Coefficients	p	Hypothesis
Psychological Flexibility → Self-Compassion → Subjective Well-Being	-0.178	.001	Confirmed

Figure 1

Structural Model of the Research



Based on the results presented in Table 5, the indirect effect of psychological flexibility on subjective well-being through self-compassion was obtained as -0.178, which was statistically significant.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being

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with the mediating role of self-compassion among university students. The findings demonstrated that the proposed structural model had acceptable fit indices and that psychological flexibility and self-compassion significantly predicted subjective well-being. Furthermore, the results indicated that self-compassion mediated the relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being. In general, the findings suggest that students who possess greater psychological flexibility and higher levels of self-compassion experience more favorable levels of subjective well-being and psychological adjustment. These findings are theoretically meaningful because they support contextual and positive psychological approaches emphasizing adaptive emotional regulation, acceptance-based coping, and compassionate self-awareness as central mechanisms underlying mental health and well-being.

One of the major findings of the study was the significant relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being. The results demonstrated that psychological flexibility significantly predicted subjective well-being among students. This finding is consistent with previous studies indicating that individuals with greater psychological flexibility exhibit lower emotional distress, better coping capacities, and higher levels of psychological adjustment (Chong et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2020; Jo et al., 2024). Psychological flexibility enables individuals to remain psychologically present during difficult experiences without excessive avoidance, suppression, or cognitive fusion. Such individuals are better able to accept unpleasant emotions and stressful situations while continuing to engage in behaviors aligned with their personal values and goals. Consequently, they experience lower psychological conflict and greater emotional balance, which contributes directly to higher subjective well-being. Previous research has shown that psychological flexibility is associated with reduced depression, anxiety, stress, and burnout across both clinical and non-clinical populations (Figueiredo et al., 2024; Guo et al., 2022). The findings of the present study also align with evidence suggesting that flexibility-related processes facilitate resilience and adaptive functioning in stressful contexts (Faulkner et al., 2021; Maral & Satici, 2025). University students are frequently exposed to academic pressures, uncertainty about future careers, interpersonal conflicts, and emotional instability. Students with greater psychological flexibility may therefore be more capable of tolerating these stressors without becoming psychologically overwhelmed.

The relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being can also be interpreted within the framework of self-determination theory and contextual behavioral science. According to self-determination theory, individuals experience higher well-being when they function autonomously and behave in accordance with their internal values and psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2016). Psychological flexibility contributes to this process because it reduces rigid cognitive and emotional patterns that interfere with autonomous functioning and adaptive self-regulation. Flexible individuals are more likely to engage in meaningful and value-consistent behaviors despite experiencing discomfort or uncertainty. Research has similarly indicated that satisfaction of basic psychological needs contributes substantially to subjective well-being and emotional adjustment (Shangguan et al., 2025; Tang et al., 2020). The findings of the present study support the idea that psychological flexibility may act as an important mechanism through which individuals maintain adaptive functioning and psychological health in demanding educational environments. In line with this interpretation, previous studies have reported that psychological flexibility predicts improved recovery, emotional functioning, and resilience across different populations (Pinna & Edwards, 2020; Seclén Uchuya et al., 2026).

Another important finding of the study was the significant relationship between psychological flexibility and self-compassion. The results demonstrated that students with lower psychological inflexibility reported higher levels of self-compassion. This finding is theoretically understandable because both constructs involve adaptive responses to internal experiences. Individuals with high psychological flexibility are less likely to judge themselves harshly or avoid unpleasant emotions; instead, they approach their experiences with openness, acceptance, and mindful awareness. These characteristics overlap considerably with the core dimensions of self-compassion described by Neff, including self-kindness, mindfulness, and recognition of common humanity (Neff, 2011). Previous studies have similarly reported strong associations between psychological flexibility and self-compassion (Marshall & Brockman, 2016). Individuals who possess greater flexibility are often more capable of responding compassionately to failure, stress, and emotional suffering because they are less trapped by self-critical thoughts and experiential avoidance patterns.

The observed relationship between psychological flexibility and self-compassion may also reflect shared

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emotional regulation mechanisms. Psychological flexibility promotes nonjudgmental awareness and acceptance of internal experiences, whereas self-compassion reduces maladaptive emotional reactions such as shame, self-criticism, and over-identification with distress. Both processes facilitate adaptive emotional processing and reduce emotional reactivity during stressful experiences. Previous evidence has shown that self-compassion is negatively associated with psychological distress and positively associated with emotional resilience and mental health (Marsh et al., 2018). Likewise, contextual behavioral approaches emphasize that flexible acceptance of emotional experiences can reduce psychological suffering and improve emotional functioning (Davis et al., 2020). Therefore, it is plausible that psychological flexibility creates psychological conditions that allow students to treat themselves more compassionately during moments of stress and failure.

The findings also revealed that self-compassion significantly predicted subjective well-being among students. This result is consistent with previous literature indicating that self-compassion is positively associated with emotional well-being, life satisfaction, resilience, and psychological health (Marshall & Brockman, 2016; Neff, 2011). Self-compassionate individuals are more likely to respond to personal difficulties with emotional balance and supportive self-attitudes rather than harsh self-judgment or emotional suppression. Such responses reduce emotional exhaustion and facilitate adaptive coping strategies, which ultimately enhance subjective well-being. Students often encounter experiences involving academic evaluation, social comparison, fear of failure, and uncertainty about future success. Students who lack self-compassion may interpret these experiences as indicators of personal inadequacy and engage in self-critical thinking, leading to heightened emotional distress and reduced well-being. In contrast, students with higher self-compassion may perceive such experiences more realistically and respond with understanding and emotional acceptance.

The positive role of self-compassion in well-being has been consistently supported in empirical studies. Meta-analytic evidence has demonstrated that self-compassion is inversely related to depression, anxiety, and stress while positively related to happiness and psychological adjustment (Marsh et al., 2018). Research has also shown that self-compassion promotes emotional regulation and interpersonal functioning by reducing maladaptive cognitive-emotional patterns (Marshall & Brockman, 2016). Furthermore, emerging technological and psychological interventions designed to enhance self-compassion have shown promising effects on emotional well-being and mental health outcomes (Lee et al., 2019). The findings of the present study therefore reinforce the importance of self-compassion as a protective psychological resource in university populations.

One of the most important findings of the study was the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between psychological flexibility and subjective well-being. This finding suggests that psychological flexibility contributes to subjective well-being partly through increasing students' self-compassion. In other words, psychologically flexible students may experience higher well-being because they are more capable of treating themselves with kindness, emotional acceptance, and mindful awareness during stressful experiences. This finding extends previous research by integrating contextual behavioral and positive psychological perspectives within a unified explanatory framework. Previous studies have independently demonstrated the beneficial effects of psychological flexibility and self-compassion on emotional well-being (Maral & Satici, 2025; Marshall & Brockman, 2016), but fewer studies have examined their combined relationships in student populations.

The mediating effect observed in the present study may be explained through several psychological mechanisms. First, psychological flexibility reduces experiential avoidance and emotional suppression, thereby allowing individuals to acknowledge difficult emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them. This open emotional stance may create conditions that facilitate self-kindness and mindful emotional processing. Second, self-compassion may transform the way students interpret stressful experiences by reducing shame, self-criticism, and feelings of isolation. Consequently, flexible and self-compassionate students may be more resilient in facing academic and interpersonal difficulties, leading to higher levels of subjective well-being. These interpretations are supported by studies showing that flexibility-related processes contribute to resilience, emotional adjustment, and adaptive functioning (Chong et al., 2023; Faulkner et al., 2021). Similarly, research has indicated that self-compassion buffers the negative effects of stress and promotes psychological health (Marsh et al., 2018; Neff, 2011).

The findings of the present study also have important implications for mental health promotion in educational settings. Universities increasingly face challenges related to students' psychological distress, academic burnout,

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loneliness, and emotional maladjustment (Pascoe et al., 2020; Satinsky et al., 2019). Educational institutions therefore require evidence-based interventions that enhance adaptive psychological functioning rather than merely reducing psychopathology. The present findings suggest that interventions aimed at increasing psychological flexibility and self-compassion may substantially improve students' subjective well-being and emotional adjustment. Acceptance-based interventions, mindfulness training, compassion-focused programs, and self-compassion exercises may help students regulate emotions more effectively and respond adaptively to stress. Previous studies have demonstrated that supportive educational environments and mental health policies positively influence students' well-being and psychosocial adjustment (Schrijvers et al., 2026; Sinclair et al., 2025). Similarly, promoting psychological resources such as flexibility, resilience, and self-compassion may strengthen students' coping capacities and overall mental health.

In addition, the findings support broader theoretical perspectives emphasizing the multidimensional nature of well-being. Subjective well-being is not solely determined by external circumstances but also depends heavily on individuals' internal psychological processes and emotional regulation capacities. Studies examining psychosocial and educational determinants of well-being have similarly highlighted the importance of adaptive psychological functioning, social support, and emotional resilience (Britwum, 2025; Rahmasari et al., 2026). The present study contributes to this literature by demonstrating that psychological flexibility and self-compassion function together to explain variations in students' subjective well-being. The findings also align with previous research emphasizing the role of cognitive flexibility and adaptive self-regulation in psychological and occupational well-being (F. S. Mirhashemi et al., 2024; Z. Rahimi Gorji & S. Salehi, 2024). Overall, the results suggest that interventions focusing simultaneously on acceptance-based coping and compassionate self-awareness may be especially effective for enhancing students' mental health and emotional well-being.

One limitation of the present study was the use of a cross-sectional correlational design, which restricts causal interpretation of the relationships among the variables. Additionally, the study relied exclusively on self-report questionnaires, which may have been influenced by response biases such as social desirability and subjective interpretation of items. The sample was also limited to students from a single university, which may reduce the generalizability of the findings to other student populations and cultural contexts. Furthermore, potential variables such as socioeconomic status, personality characteristics, family relationships, and academic achievement were not controlled and may have influenced the observed relationships.

Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal and experimental designs to clarify the causal relationships among psychological flexibility, self-compassion, and subjective well-being. Comparative studies involving students from different universities, academic disciplines, and cultural settings may also provide a broader understanding of these relationships. In addition, future investigations could examine the moderating or mediating roles of variables such as resilience, emotional regulation, mindfulness, social support, and academic stress. The effectiveness of intervention programs designed to increase psychological flexibility and self-compassion should also be evaluated using controlled experimental methodologies.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that universities and counseling centers should prioritize psychological interventions aimed at strengthening adaptive emotional and cognitive capacities among students. Workshops focusing on mindfulness, acceptance-based coping strategies, emotional regulation, and self-compassion training may help students manage academic stress more effectively and improve their subjective well-being. Educational policymakers may also benefit from incorporating mental health promotion programs into university curricula and student support systems. Creating supportive educational environments that encourage emotional acceptance, interpersonal connectedness, and compassionate self-awareness may ultimately contribute to healthier, more resilient, and psychologically balanced student populations.

Authors' Contributions

All authors significantly contributed to this study.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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