

Self-compassion and problematic internet use: A study of university students

Lukman Hakim^{1*}, Lutfi Hidayati Fauziah¹, Selly Candra Ayu², Miftahul Izza Rofiqoh¹, Umbu Hendro¹

¹ Department of Psychology, Universitas Merdeka Malang, Malang, Indonesia

² Department of Psychology, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, Malang, Indonesia

Received February 21, 2026 | Accepted June 30, 2026 | Published June 30, 2026

Abstract: Internet use is an important component for the survival of today's humans, this is what makes humans have attachments and depend on the internet. The internet is one of the centers of attention for all ages, so it is important to have the ability to monitor internet usage behavior. Currently everyone can access internet use easily, therefore discussing the internet is also one of the negative impacts and the emergence of new problems in it. The term "problematic internet use" refers to maladaptive behavior that develops as a result of excessive or irregular internet use. Using correlational methodology, the purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use. In this study consisted of 140 students, who used the internet and had high-speed access. The findings of the study showed that problematic internet use and self-compassion had a significant relationship ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$; $r = -0.419$). The findings indicate that students with higher levels of self-compassion tend to report lower levels of problematic internet use. These findings suggest that self-compassion may serve as a protective psychological factor against problematic internet use. Therefore, interventions designed to enhance self-compassion may contribute to healthier internet-use behaviors and support students' psychological well-being.

Keywords: students; problematic internet use; self-compassion



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Introduction

Indonesia ranks fourth in the world for internet usage, with an average internet usage among approximately 230.4 million people as of October 2025, equivalent to 80.5% of Indonesia's total population. China ranks first, followed by India, and the United States in third place as the countries with the most internet users in the world in 2025, according to the Global Overview Report survey released by We Are Social 2026 (Harahap, 2026).

^{1*} Corresponding Author: Lukman Hakim, email: lukman.hakim@unmer.ac.id, Department of Psychology, Universitas Merdeka Malang, Terusan Dieng street . 62-64 Klojen, Pisang Candi, Sukun, Malang City, East Java, Indonesia

People today are quickly connected to the internet, including teenagers, who are among the most active internet users at this time (Yuananta et al., 2026). The internet provides various benefits and conveniences, such as communication, information, and entertainment, making the learning process more active and creative. Teenagers are connected to everything, and access to information is widely available and free. If all of this can be utilized properly and wisely, teenagers will reap many benefits, but if teenagers are unable to control their internet usage, it will have negative effects such as physical damage to the eyes due to prolonged exposure to gadget screens, headaches (dizziness), obesity, and disrupted sleep patterns, which ultimately worsen teenagers' emotional conditions, making them prone to anger or impulsive behavior, and disrupting their social development (Hariyani et al., 2024). Teenagers can also be exposed to negative websites, and children's safety and security can be threatened if parents share private data on social media. Teenagers can also become victims of cyberbullying and are vulnerable to exposure to pornography in the form of photos, images, illustrations, sounds, and writings containing pornographic content. One of the main impacts of excessive internet use is physical and psychological health problems (Fauziah, 2023). Potential dangers that may arise, especially for Generation Z, include loneliness, depression, and social problems such as difficulty communicating in social interactions, which can also cause personality and academic problems (Qiu, Gong, Yang, & Tan, 2025).

The internet has become an integral part of modern life, especially for teenagers who rely on it for academic, social, and entertainment purposes. Easy access to the internet allows them to obtain information quickly and communicate without limits. However, despite its benefits, excessive internet use can have negative effects, known as problematic internet use (Jorgenson et al., 2016). This phenomenon refers to maladaptive internet use that can interfere with the daily lives of users.

Teens with internet problems or disorders will argue that their online activities are a way to relieve stress, eliminate loneliness, and entertain themselves. On the contrary, teenagers who enjoy online activities feel dissatisfied with their interactions in offline life and feel that it is easier to achieve self-actualization online than in real life. The fear of missing out (FOMO) makes it difficult for them to disconnect from the internet, making it increasingly difficult to control its use (ADININGSIH, 2025).

Adolescence generally occurs between the ages of 12 and 21, with the division being that adolescence is filled with a desire for freedom and a more mature mindset due to cognitive development. However, in the context of internet use, many students experience anxiety due to excessive dependence (Yudi, Sandri, & Supraba, 2023). Students aged 17–21 are more likely to use the internet not only as a means of communication with others, online shopping, or simply browsing interesting items, watching interesting video content, or listening to music; their internet connection covers a wider range of activities. When they feel sad or lonely, the internet becomes an escape that makes them feel better. Unfortunately, this habit can lead to emotional dependence that is difficult to control. As a result, many students feel uncomfortable when offline and have difficulty building social interactions in the real world (Yudi, Sandri, & Supraba, 2023).

Excessive internet use is often not realized by individuals. This causes negative effects in human life and leads to dependence, which can slowly change an individual's life. Problematic internet use is a multidimensional syndrome characterized by maladaptive cognitive signs and the emergence of behaviors

that produce negative social, professional, or academic consequences (Nafisah et al., n.d.). Problematic internet use is a problem related to cognition and behavior that requires special treatment (Bleakley et al., 2016a). Problematic internet use has three dimensions, namely obsession, neglect, and control disorder. The dimension of obsession refers to mental involvement with the internet, characterized by daydreaming, fantasizing about the internet, and experiencing anxiety, worry, and depression caused by a lack of internet activity. The dimension of neglect is defined as ignoring areas of life that were previously considered important. Finally, control disorder refers to users who have difficulty controlling their internet use. This is demonstrated by increased internet use, longer time spent online than previously planned, and an inability to reduce the amount of time spent using the internet (Agriyani & Widyastuti, 2023).

Problematic internet use is a multifaceted syndrome that encompasses various maladaptive cognitive behaviors that can have a negative impact on a person's social, professional, and academic aspects. Problematic internet use is a problem related to cognitive and behavioral aspects, thus requiring special treatment stages (Saputra, Samboja, & Fauziah, 2023). Literally, the internet or interconnected-networking refers to a system of computers that are connected to each other in a network.

Although previous studies have consistently reported that problematic internet use is associated with various psychological problems, including anxiety, loneliness, and poor emotional regulation, limited studies have specifically examined the protective role of self-compassion among Indonesian university students. Most previous studies have focused on variables such as self-control, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem, while empirical evidence regarding self-compassion in the Indonesian context remains scarce. Considering that cultural background may influence both self-compassion and internet-use behavior, further investigation in Indonesian university students is warranted.

Excessive internet use often goes unnoticed by individuals. This can have negative effects on daily life, leading to dependence, and significantly affecting a person's lifestyle. Based on data obtained from The Royal Society for Public Health (Roopali, Meera, & Sameer, 2022), young people aged 16-25 tend to experience anxiety that becomes part of their lives due to uncontrolled internet use (Qiu, Gong, Yang, & Tan, 2025). Some psychologists state that the tendency to become addicted to social media or social networks can have an impact on the psychological condition of its users. This dependence on the internet is known as problematic internet use, which can cause emotional and social disorders.

Problematic internet use has symptoms such as excessive internet use, depression, and impulse control disorders, such as difficulty in restraining desires or urges and limitations in thinking more deeply. Teenagers who show symptoms of PIU also have difficulty coping with problems, have low psychological well-being, and lack social interaction (Anggara & Aulia, 2025). In addition, excessive internet use can make a person feel more enthusiastic, sleep less, eat less frequently, and move less, which can cause physical and mental health problems such as depression, OCD, family problems, and specific anxieties related to the misuse of certain functions in using the internet, such as using the internet for gambling or playing online games. Meanwhile, problematic internet use generally includes inappropriate behavior related to using the internet such as chatting, e-mail, and the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Path, and Instagram (Saputra, Samboja, & Fauziah, 2023).

Various effects caused by individuals with problematic internet use, if not addressed immediately, will endanger their physical and mental health. Individuals will be increasingly exposed to negative effects on themselves, so they need to strengthen themselves in order not to feel inferior, to always be productive, and to be able to accept themselves better. One of the things that needs to be improved is self-compassion. Individuals, especially adolescents, need to have good self-compassion in order to draw strength from within themselves so that they can be more productive. Self-compassion is the ability to accept and understand oneself, especially when facing failure or criticism. According to Neff (2016), individuals with high levels of self-compassion are better able to face life's challenges without dwelling on their mistakes. Conversely, adolescents with low levels of self-compassion tend to feel incapable and give up easily when faced with difficulties. This condition makes them more prone to using the internet as an escape to avoid the negative feelings they experience (Saputra, Samboja, & Fauziah, 2023).

Adolescents who find it difficult to accept their own shortcomings tend to use the internet to boost their self-confidence or simply distract themselves from the problems they face. Unfortunately, this habit can worsen internet dependence and increase the risk of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Research shows that individuals with low self-compassion are more prone to internet addiction than those with high self-compassion. Therefore, it is important for adolescents to increase their awareness of the importance of self-compassion in facing life's challenges so that they do not get caught up in excessive internet use (Fauziah & Rofiqo, 2023).

On the other hand, self-compassion is defined as an attitude of kindness and acceptance towards oneself. Self-compassion is related to a person's psychological condition, such as happiness, self-acceptance, life satisfaction, and a positive attitude towards oneself. With self-compassion, individuals are better able to understand and accept their strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to cope with life's pressures more effectively (Roopali, Meera, & Sameer, 2022). The present study extends previous research by examining the relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use among Indonesian university students. This study provides empirical evidence from a cultural context that has received relatively limited attention in the literature. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of preventive psychological interventions aimed at promoting healthier internet-use behavior among university students. Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use among Indonesian university students. Based on previous theoretical and empirical findings, it is hypothesized that self-compassion is negatively associated with problematic internet use, indicating that students with higher levels of self-compassion are less likely to exhibit problematic internet-use behaviors.

Method

This study uses a quantitative approach with a correlational method to understand the relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use among students. There were 140 students participating in this study, selected using accidental sampling, with criteria including students who actively use the internet and are willing to participate in the study. Demographic information, such as age and gender, was collected to provide a comprehensive overview of the research sample. The use of correlational methods in this study aims to analyze the direction of the relationship and the strength of

the correlation between problematic internet use, as explained by Caplan (2010), that maladaptive internet use can have a negative impact on a person's social and academic aspects.

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire distributed online via Google Form. This questionnaire consists of two main parts, namely the self-compassion scale and the problematic internet use scale. Self-compassion was measured using the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) by Neff, 2003, while problematic internet use was measured using the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) by Young, 1998. Before being used in the main study, the instruments were tested for validity and reliability to ensure that the data collected was highly accurate and consistent (Akin, 2010).

The data analysis techniques used in this study were adapted to quantitative research. Data were analyzed using statistical techniques such as Pearson's correlation test (product moment), with the help of SPSS software version 25. Meanwhile, if the study also involved qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes that emerged from participants' responses. In line with the opinion of Sinha et al. (2021), problematic internet use has a close relationship with individual psychological factors, so statistical analysis is needed to understand the relationship patterns between the variables studied.

In this study, the research will be conducted in several stages. First, participants will fill out a questionnaire to measure their level of self-compassion and problematic internet use. Next, statistical analyses such as validity and reliability tests, assumption tests, and correlation tests will be conducted. This process will be carried out with consideration for research ethics, including informed consent, participant data confidentiality, and ensuring that there are no harmful risks to participants during the research. Through this systematic research method, it is hoped that the research can provide further insight into the factors that influence problematic internet use among students, as well as how the level of self-compassion can be a protective factor in reducing the negative impacts of uncontrolled internet use.

Result

The validity and reliability analyses were conducted before testing the research hypothesis to ensure that the measurement instruments possessed adequate psychometric properties. This study employed two standardized instruments, namely the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) developed by Neff (2003), consisting of 26 items, and the Internet Addiction Test (IAT) developed by Young (1998), consisting of 20 items. The analyses were based on responses obtained from 140 university students who met the study inclusion criteria.

Item validity was examined using the corrected item-total correlation coefficient. All items of the Self-Compassion Scale (26 items) and the Internet Addiction Test (20 items) demonstrated acceptable validity according to the predetermined criteria. Therefore, all items were retained for subsequent analyses.

The reliability analysis indicated satisfactory internal consistency for both instruments. The Self-Compassion Scale yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.744, while the Internet Addiction Test produced a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.882. Since both coefficients exceeded the recommended

minimum threshold of 0.70, the instruments were considered reliable for measuring self-compassion and problematic internet use among university students.

Table 1
Scale Reliability Test

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Item
Self-compassion	.744	26
Problematic Internet Use	.882	20

The reliability test results for variable X (self-compassion) show that the instrument used has a good level of internal consistency. This is evidenced by a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.744. For variable Y (problematic internet use), the instrument used has a very good level of internal consistency. This is evidenced by a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.882, which is greater than the minimum reliability threshold of 0.60 ($0.744 > 0.60$). Thus, the two measurement instruments in this study can be considered reliable, meaning that the items in the scale have high consistency in measuring the variables in question. Good reliability ensures that the measurement results are trustworthy and can be used for further analysis in this study.

The testing of the effect of self-compassion on problematic internet use was conducted using simple linear regression analysis. Before conducting this analysis, a normality test was first performed to ensure that the data was normally distributed. The normality test was performed using the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, where the test results were determined based on the significance value (p -value). If the significance value obtained was less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), the data distribution was considered abnormal. Conversely, if the significance value is greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), then the data distribution can be declared normal. This normality test is important to ensure that the assumptions in simple linear regression analysis are met, so that the analysis results obtained can be interpreted more accurately and validly.

Normality Test shows that the significance value obtained is 0.094, which is greater than 0.05 ($0.094 > 0.05$). Thus, the null hypothesis (H_0) is accepted, which means that the data distribution on the variables of self-compassion (X) and problematic internet use (Y) is normally distributed. This normal distribution of data indicates that the assumption of normality in simple linear regression analysis has been met, so that the statistical analysis performed can provide valid results and can be interpreted more accurately.

In this study, a linearity test was performed to determine whether the independent variable (X) and the dependent variable (Y) had a linear relationship or not. This test was conducted by looking at the significance value (Sig.) in the Deviation from Linearity section of the linearity test analysis.

If the significance value obtained was greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), then the two variables were considered to have a linear relationship. Conversely, if the significance value is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), then the two variables do not have a linear relationship. This linearity test is important to ensure that the relationship between variables in the study can be analyzed using the linear regression method appropriately. The following are the results of the linearity test on the data of the two variables analyzed.

Linearity test Based on the results shown in the table above, the significance value for Deviation from Linearity is 0.300, which is greater than 0.05 ($0.300 > 0.05$). This indicates that the two variables, self-

compassion (X) and problematic internet use (Y), have a linear relationship. Thus, the relationship between the two variables can be analyzed using the linear regression method, as it meets the linearity assumption required in statistical analysis.

The correlation test in this study was conducted to determine the strength of the relationship between variable X (self-compassion) and variable Y (problematic internet use). The correlation coefficient value is used as a measure of the strength of the relationship between the two variables.

The interpretation of the correlation test results is based on the significance value (p-value). If the significance value obtained is greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), then the relationship between the two variables is considered weak or insignificant. Conversely, if the significance value is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), then the relationship can be said to be strong and significant. This correlation test is important for understanding whether self-compassion significantly influences problematic internet use among college students.

The correlation test in this study was conducted to determine the strength of the relationship between variable X (self-compassion) and variable Y (problematic internet use). The correlation coefficient value was used as a measure of the strength of the relationship between the two variables. The interpretation of the correlation test results was based on the significance value (p-value). If the significance value obtained was greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), then the relationship between the two variables was considered weak or insignificant. Conversely, if the significance value was less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$), then the relationship could be said to be strong and significant.

This correlation test is important to understand whether self-compassion has a significant effect on problematic internet use among students. The table above shows the results of the correlation test between the self-compassion variable (X) and the problematic internet use variable (Y). Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant moderate negative correlation between self-compassion and problematic internet use ($r = -.419$, $p < .001$). This finding indicates that students with higher levels of self-compassion tended to report lower levels of problematic internet use.

Discussion

The present study found a significant negative relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use among university students. These findings indicate that students with higher levels of self-compassion tend to report lower levels of problematic internet use. This result supports the hypothesis that self-compassion functions as a psychological protective factor that enables individuals to regulate emotions more adaptively and reduces their tendency to rely on excessive internet use as a coping strategy.

One possible explanation for this finding is that self-compassion facilitates adaptive emotional regulation. Individuals with high self-compassion tend to respond to stressful experiences with self-kindness rather than self-criticism. Consequently, they are less likely to escape into online activities when experiencing academic pressure, loneliness, or negative emotions. In contrast, students with lower levels of self-compassion may use the internet as an avoidant coping strategy to temporarily reduce emotional distress, thereby increasing the risk of problematic internet use.

The psychological impact of excessive internet use can be seen in changes in students' social behavior. They tend to ignore the presence of others and blame themselves for their failures. Lack of awareness of the importance of self-compassion can worsen this situation, creating a cycle of dependence on the digital world. The presence of the internet, which offers entertainment and quick access to various information, is a major factor that makes it increasingly difficult for students to control their use. As a result, uncontrolled internet use can have significant negative impacts, especially if there is no proper monitoring and self-regulation.

Based on these findings, the researchers suggest that future studies should further examine the relationship between students' social skills and social interests and problematic internet use, considering that low social interaction can be a major trigger for addictive behavior toward the internet. In addition, future research is also expected to design more effective intervention measures, especially for adolescents who have shown signs of problematic internet use, so that they can be helped to develop more adaptive coping mechanisms and improve their psychological well-being. The results of this study indicate that there is a significant relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use among students aged 17-21 years. These findings are in line with previous research conducted by Iskender & Akin (2011), which states that individuals with high levels of self-compassion tend to have better self-control in internet use, resulting in a lower risk of problematic internet use. The results of this study are also reinforced by research by Sinha et al. (2021), which found that individuals with higher levels of self-compassion have a lower tendency to use the internet excessively as a mechanism to escape stress or anxiety.

In this study, the analysis results show that the self-compassion variable has a negative correlation with problematic internet use, which means that the higher the self-compassion, the lower the tendency for a person to experience problematic internet use. This finding is consistent with the research by Neff et al. (2016), which states that self-compassion helps individuals manage emotional pressure in a more adaptive way, thereby reducing the need to use the internet excessively as a form of escape from negative feelings.

In addition, this study also found that uncontrolled internet use is often associated with anxiety and feelings of low self-esteem. This is in line with the findings of The Royal Society for Public Health (2019), which shows that excessive internet use among adolescents and young adults can lead to increased social anxiety and psychological distress. Thus, the results of this study reinforce the theory that problematic internet use can be rooted in individual psychological factors, such as low self-compassion and self-control.

However, there are several differences in the results of this study compared to previous studies. For example, research conducted by Hardie & Tee (2007) found that the main factors influencing problematic internet use were loneliness and lack of social support, while this study highlights the role of self-compassion in reducing the risk of problematic internet use. This difference shows that the psychological factors influencing problematic internet use can vary depending on the characteristics of the sample and the individual's social context.

Furthermore, the results of this study also contribute to the development of psychology by highlighting the importance of self-compassion-based interventions in reducing unhealthy internet use. This study supports the previous findings of Terzioylu et al. (2019), which stated that self-compassion training can help individuals improve their emotional well-being and reduce addictive behavior towards the internet. The findings are consistent with previous studies conducted by Iskender and Akin (2011), Sinha et al. (2021), and Qiu et al. (2025), all of which reported that self-compassion is negatively associated with problematic internet use or internet addiction. The consistency of these findings across different cultural settings suggests that self-compassion may represent a universal psychological resource that promotes healthier digital behavior.

The findings have practical implications for higher education institutions and mental health practitioners. Programs aimed at enhancing self-compassion, such as mindfulness-based interventions, self-compassion training, and psychoeducational workshops, may help students develop healthier coping strategies and reduce their tendency toward problematic internet use. Universities may also integrate digital well-being promotion into student counseling services to encourage balanced internet-use behavior.

Although the results of this study show a significant relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use, there are several limitations that need to be considered. One of them is the limitation in the sampling method, where this study only involved students within a certain age range, so the results cannot be generalized to a wider population. In addition, this study used a correlational design, so it cannot fully explain the causal relationship between the variables studied. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the causal relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use using experimental or longitudinal methods.

Overall, the results of this study provide new insights into how self-compassion plays a role in reducing problematic internet use among students. With the increasing use of the internet in the digital age, it is important for individuals to develop self-compassion skills in order to manage their stress and emotions in a more adaptive way, thereby reducing the risk of excessive internet use and its negative consequences. This study extends previous research by providing empirical evidence from Indonesian university students, a population that has received relatively limited attention in the literature on problematic internet use. The findings enrich the existing body of knowledge by demonstrating that self-compassion is also associated with healthier internet-use behavior within the Indonesian cultural context.

In addition, it is important to consider environmental and cultural factors in influencing the relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use. Cultures that emphasize competition and high achievement can make individuals more vulnerable to emotional pressure, which ultimately increases the risk of excessive internet use as an escape. Therefore, future research could expand the scope of the study by exploring how cultural factors play a role in this dynamic.

This research also opens up opportunities for more effective psychological interventions in addressing problematic internet use. Given that self-compassion plays a role in improving individuals' emotional well-being, self-compassion-based training programs can be developed to help students

manage stress and improve their digital balance. These programs can include techniques such as mindfulness meditation, self-reflection, and more adaptive emotion management strategies.

Finally, this study emphasizes the importance of the role of family and educational institutions in educating students about the impact of unhealthy internet use. By providing a deeper understanding of how self-compassion can help individuals control their digital behavior, it is hoped that students can use the internet more wisely and reduce the negative impacts that may arise from excessive use.

Conclusions

This study aims to understand the relationship between self-compassion and problematic internet use among students aged 17-21 years. Based on the analysis results, it was found that self-compassion has a significant influence on problematic internet use, where individuals with higher levels of self-compassion tend to have better self-control in their internet use. Conversely, students with low levels of self-compassion are more prone to internet addiction as a form of escape from the emotional and social pressures they face. These findings confirm that self-compassion acts as a protective factor in preventing problematic internet use.

In addition, this study reveals that students who experience academic and social pressure are more likely to use the internet excessively as a coping mechanism. The internet becomes the main means of seeking self-validation and entertainment, but without proper regulation, this can lead to dependence that negatively impacts their psychological well-being. These findings support previous studies that state that low self-compassion is associated with an increased tendency toward problematic internet use. However, this study also shows that cultural and environmental factors shape internet usage patterns among students, a point that has not been widely discussed in previous studies.

The main contribution of this study to the development of psychology is to highlight the role of self-compassion in reducing the negative effects of excessive internet use. Self-compassion-based interventions can be an effective strategy in improving students' emotional well-being and helping them develop better self-regulation in the digital age. Therefore, further research is recommended to explore in greater depth the relationships among self-compassion, social skills, and internet use, as well as to design interventions for academic and social contexts to prevent the negative impacts of problematic internet use.

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