

## The mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty

Sharon S \* and Aarsha Ajayan

*Department of Psychology, Kristu Jayanti (Deemed to be University), Bangalore, India.*

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### Abstract

The present study examined the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between adult rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty. A cross-sectional research design was employed with a sample of 296 undergraduate and postgraduate students aged 18–25 years, recruited through convenience sampling. Participants completed standardized measures assessing rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and intolerance of uncertainty. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed that rejection sensitivity was negatively associated with self-compassion and positively associated with intolerance of uncertainty, while self-compassion was negatively associated with intolerance of uncertainty. Mediation analysis indicated that rejection sensitivity significantly predicted lower self-compassion, and self-compassion significantly predicted lower intolerance of uncertainty. Although rejection sensitivity was directly associated with intolerance of uncertainty, this relationship became non-significant when self-compassion was included in the model. The indirect effect was statistically significant, indicating indirect-only mediation. These findings suggest that self-compassion functions as a key psychological mechanism linking interpersonal sensitivity to distress related to uncertainty. The study contributes to the literature on emotional regulation processes and highlights the potential importance of self-compassion-based interventions in reducing maladaptive responses to perceived rejection and uncertain situations.

**Keywords:** Rejection sensitivity; Self-compassion; Intolerance of uncertainty; Mediation; Young adults

### 1. Introduction

Emotional well-being is influenced by life events and by how people think and feel about those events. Recent psychological research has focused on finding factors that can make people more vulnerable to emotional distress, as well as factors that can protect them from these vulnerabilities. Two key concepts that have been identified as important predictors of psychological distress are rejection sensitivity (RS) and intolerance of uncertainty (IU). While these ideas come from different theoretical backgrounds, both involve increased threat perception and unhelpful emotional responses. This study aims to explore how these concepts interact and whether self-compassion plays a role in this relationship.

#### 1.1. Rejection Sensitivity

Rejection sensitivity is the tendency to anxiously expect, quickly notice, and strongly react to rejection in social situations (Downey & Feldman, 1996). People with high rejection sensitivity are extremely alert to social cues. They are more likely to see unclear interactions as rejections. This tendency increases emotional distress and affects how they behave. It often leads to withdrawal, hostility, or defensive actions that can hurt relationships. Over time, these patterns can strengthen expectations of rejection and lead to ongoing social difficulties.

\* Corresponding author: Sharon S

## 1.2. Intolerance of Uncertainty

Intolerance of uncertainty, on the other hand, is the inability to handle unclear or unpredictable situations (Rosser, 2019). People with high intolerance of uncertainty see uncertainty as threatening and distressing. They often worry too much and overthink as they try to regain control. Intolerance of uncertainty is seen as a common vulnerability because it underlies many anxiety-related symptoms and adds to increased stress in different situations.

Although rejection sensitivity (RS) mainly involves interpersonal threats and intolerance of uncertainty (IU) focuses on reactions to unclear situations, both involve similar mental processes. These include increased threat appraisal, a tendency to interpret situations negatively, and emotional responses. In social situations, uncertainty and fear of rejection often go hand in hand. Ambiguous social signals can trigger both fears of rejection and discomfort with unpredictability. This overlap suggests that people with high levels of rejection sensitivity may also struggle more with uncertainty, especially in unclear relational contexts. However, being vulnerable doesn't always lead to negative outcomes.

## 1.3. Self-Compassion

There are several psychological constructs that influence how people deal with threats and uncertainty. Self-compassion is a key factor linked to emotional strength and effective coping. It involves treating oneself kindly, recognizing that everyone faces hardships, and being aware of distress without harsh judgment (Neff, 2023). Self-compassion helps reduce self-criticism and emotional overidentification. Research consistently shows that self-compassion is linked to lower anxiety and better regulation of emotions.

## 1.4. Aim and Objectives of the Study

### 1.4.1. Aim

The present study aims to assess the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty.

### 1.4.2. Objectives

- To examine the levels of self-compassion, rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty among adults.
- To examine the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty
- To assess the relationship between self-compassion and intolerance of uncertainty
- To determine whether self-compassion mediates the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty.

## 1.5. Hypotheses

- H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant relationship between adult rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty.
- H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant relationship between adult rejection sensitivity and self-compassion.
- H<sub>03</sub>: There is no significant relationship between self-compassion and intolerance of uncertainty.
- H<sub>04</sub>: Self-compassion does not significantly mediate the relationship between adult rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty.

## 1.6. Significance of the Study

From a theoretical perspective, this study connects Rejection Sensitivity and Intolerance of Uncertainty, highlighting how sensitivity to interpersonal threats can extend into broader cognitive difficulties. By identifying self-compassion as a mediating factor, it also integrates emotional regulation theory, offering a clearer explanation of how these processes are linked.

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## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational research design to examine the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty.

## 2.2. Participants

The sample consisted of 296 participants who were between the ages of 18-25 years involved emerging adults from the general population who voluntarily took part in the study.

## 2.3. Sampling Technique

A convenience sampling technique was used, participants were recruited based on availability and willingness to participate.

## 2.4. Measures

- **Adult Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (A-RSQ):** Rejection Sensitivity was assessed using the A-RSQ (Berenson et al., 2009), rated on a 6-point Likert scale ( $\alpha = .74$ )
- **Self-Compassion Scale – Short Form (SCS-SF):** Self compassion was assessed using the SCS-SF (Neff et al., 2011), rated on a 5-point Likert scale ( $\alpha = .86$ )
- **Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale – Short Form (IUS -12):** Intolerance of Uncertainty was assessed using the IUS-12, rated on a 5-point Likert scale ( $\alpha = .85$ )

## 2.5. Data Analysis

Data was analysed using Jamovi software (version 2.6.44), Descriptive statistics were assessed to assess distribution pattern of the variables.

Pearson correlation was used to examine the relationship between the variables and a mediation analysis was conducted to test whether self-compassion mediated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty. The level of significance was set at  $p < .05$ . Direct, indirect and total effects were estimated along with 95% confidence intervals.

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## 3. Results and Discussion

This present study intended to assess the mediating role of Self-Compassion in the relationship between Rejection Sensitivity and Intolerance of Uncertainty using Jamovi software (version 2.6.44). The results are presented through descriptive statistics, correlation and mediation.

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics and Normality tests for Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-Compassion	2.99	0.53	0.07	0.35
Intolerance Of Uncertainty	2.95	0.83	0.22	-0.50
Rejection Sensitivity	9.50	2.68	0.66	1.02

Note. N=296.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and distributional characteristics of the study variables.

Self-compassion scores showed a mean of  $M = 2.99$  and a standard deviation of  $SD = 0.53$ . The distribution demonstrated negligible skewness (0.07) and kurtosis (0.35), indicating that the data were approximately normally distributed.

Intolerance of uncertainty scores yielded a mean of  $M = 2.95$  and a standard deviation of  $SD = 0.83$ . The skewness (0.22) and kurtosis (-0.50) values suggested a fairly symmetric distribution with no substantial deviations from normality.

Rejection sensitivity scores had a mean of  $M = 9.50$  and a standard deviation of  $SD = 2.68$ . The distribution showed mild positive skewness (0.66) and kurtosis (1.02), indicating slight deviation from perfect normality; however, these values remained within acceptable limits to perform parametric analysis.

**Table 2** Correlations Among Self-Compassion, Intolerance of Uncertainty, and ARSQ

Variables	1	2	3
Self-compassion	—		
Intolerance of Uncertainty	-0.38***	—	
Rejection Sensitivity	-0.16**	0.15**	—

Note.  $N = 296$ . Pearson's  $r$  values are reported.  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2 shows the correlation matrix of Self Compassion, Intolerance of Uncertainty and Rejection Sensitivity, done by Pearson's product moment correlation.

A moderate negative correlation was found between Self-compassion and Intolerance of uncertainty,  $r = -.38$ . This indicates that individuals with higher levels of self-compassion tend to report lower intolerance of uncertainty. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between self-compassion and intolerance of uncertainty was rejected. This supports Neff's (2003) idea that self-compassion is a helpful emotional regulation strategy that reduces negative feelings and psychological vulnerability. It also matches Carleton's (2016) framework identifying intolerance of uncertainty as a key factor which contributes to anxiety and distress. This suggests that self-compassion may help reduce unhelpful responses to uncertainty.

A small but significant positive correlation was observed between adult rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty,  $r = .15$ . This suggests that individuals with higher rejection sensitivity tend to experience greater discomfort in uncertain situations. Thus, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between adult rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty is rejected. Downey and Feldman's (1996) rejection sensitivity theory supports this finding, suggesting that people with high rejection sensitivity are more emotionally reactive to ambiguous situations.

A small but significant negative correlation was also found between adult rejection sensitivity and self-compassion,  $r = -.16$ . This indicates that individuals who are more sensitive to rejection tend to report lower levels of self-compassion. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating there is no significant relationship between adult rejection sensitivity and self-compassion is rejected. Previous studies show that higher levels of self-compassion were linked to lower levels of rejection sensitivity, Borawski and Nowak (2022).

**Table 3** Regression Coefficients for the Mediation Model

Path	B	SE	z	p
Rejection Sensitivity → Self-Compassion (a)	-0.033	0.013	-2.57	0.010
Self-Compassion → Intolerance of Uncertainty (b)	-0.562	0.074	-7.58	< 0.001
Rejection Sensitivity → Intolerance of Uncertainty (c')	0.029	0.016	1.84	0.066

Table 3 shows the Regression pathways for all three variables.

The regression analyses conducted to examine the proposed mediation model demonstrated that rejection sensitivity was a significant negative predictor of self-compassion,  $B = -0.033$ ,  $SE = 0.013$ ,  $z = -2.57$ ,  $p = .010$ . This indicates that individuals with higher levels of rejection sensitivity tend to report lower levels of self-compassion.

Further, self-compassion was found to be a significant negative predictor of intolerance of uncertainty,  $B = -0.562$ ,  $SE = 0.074$ ,  $z = -7.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . This suggests that individuals who exhibit higher self-compassion are significantly less likely to experience distress in response to uncertain situations, highlighting the protective role of self-compassion in mitigating cognitive and emotional discomfort associated with uncertainty.

In contrast, the direct effect of rejection sensitivity on intolerance of uncertainty was not statistically significant when self-compassion was included in the model,  $B = 0.029$ ,  $SE = 0.016$ ,  $z = 1.84$ ,  $p = .066$ . Although the direction of the

relationship remained positive, the lack of statistical significance indicates that rejection sensitivity does not independently predict intolerance of uncertainty once the influence of self-compassion is accounted for.

**Table 4** Mediation Effects with Bootstrapped Confidence Intervals

Effect	B	SE	95% CI [LL, UL]	z	p
Indirect (a × b)	0.018	0.008	[0.003, 0.034]	2.39	0.017
Direct (c')	0.029	0.015	[-0.0004, 0.060]	1.84	0.066
Total (c)	0.047	0.018	[0.013, 0.081]	2.65	0.008

Table 4 shows the Indirect, Direct and Total effects of the variables.

A mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether self-compassion mediated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty. The indirect effect of rejection sensitivity on intolerance of uncertainty through self-compassion was significant,  $B = 0.018$ ,  $SE = 0.008$ , 95% CI [0.003, 0.034],  $z = 2.39$ ,  $p = .017$ , as the confidence interval did not include zero. This indicates that self-compassion significantly mediated the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty.

The direct effect of rejection sensitivity on intolerance of uncertainty, controlling for self-compassion, was not significant,  $B = 0.029$ ,  $SE = 0.015$ , 95% CI [-0.0004, 0.060],  $z = 1.84$ ,  $p = .066$ .

In contrast, the total effect of rejection sensitivity on intolerance of uncertainty was significant,  $B = 0.047$ ,  $SE = 0.018$ , 95% CI [0.013, 0.081],  $z = 2.65$ ,  $p = .008$ .

Taken together, these findings suggest an indirect only mediation, thus the null hypothesis stating that self-compassion does not significantly mediate the relationship between adult rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty is rejected.

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## 4. Summary and Conclusion

The study assessed the mediating role of self-compassion in the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and mediation analysis was done to test the hypotheses.

### 4.1. Summary

Correlation results showed that self-compassion was negatively associated with intolerance of uncertainty, while rejection sensitivity was positively associated with intolerance of uncertainty and negatively associated with self-compassion. These findings suggest that individuals higher in rejection sensitivity tend to experience greater distress in uncertain situations and lower self-compassion.

Mediation analysis further revealed that rejection sensitivity significantly predicted lower self-compassion, which in turn significantly predicted lower intolerance of uncertainty. Although the total effect of rejection sensitivity on intolerance of uncertainty was significant, the direct effect became non-significant after including self-compassion, while the indirect effect remained significant, indicating indirect-only mediation.

Overall, the findings highlight self-compassion as a key mechanism through which rejection sensitivity influences intolerance of uncertainty, suggesting its potential role in reducing distress associated with uncertainty.

### 4.2. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that self-compassion plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between rejection sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty. Individuals with higher rejection sensitivity tend to exhibit lower self-compassion, which in turn contributes to greater difficulty in tolerating uncertainty. The findings highlight self-compassion as an important psychological mechanism underlying this relationship and suggest its potential value in reducing distress associated with uncertainty. Enhancing self-compassion may therefore be beneficial in promoting emotional resilience and improving individuals' ability to cope with uncertain situations.

### 4.3. Implications

#### 4.3.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, the results strengthen perspectives that conceptualize self-compassion as a key emotional regulation mechanism that buffers vulnerability factors such as rejection sensitivity. By demonstrating that self-compassion mediates the relationship between interpersonal sensitivity and intolerance of uncertainty, the study integrates interpersonal and intrapersonal processes within a unified framework of psychological resilience.

#### 4.3.2. Practical Implications

Practically, these findings highlight the value of incorporating self-compassion focused strategies into mental health interventions and wellness programs. Techniques such as mindfulness practices, self-kindness exercises, and compassion-focused therapeutic approaches may help individuals reduce the emotional impact of rejection sensitivity and enhance their tolerance for uncertainty. These interventions may be particularly beneficial for young adults navigating socially evaluative and uncertain environments.

### 4.4. Limitations

The study was cross-sectional in design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships among rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and intolerance of uncertainty. Although significant associations were identified, longitudinal or experimental research is required to determine the directionality of these relationships.

### 4.5. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should employ longitudinal and experimental designs to better understand the temporal and causal relationships among rejection sensitivity, self-compassion, and intolerance of uncertainty. Further studies may explore additional mediators or moderators, such as emotion regulation, resilience, or social support, to deepen understanding of the mechanisms.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Acknowledgments*

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### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### *Statement of ethical approval*

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participation was entirely voluntary.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. All data were used solely for research purposes.

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