

## Self-compassion is associated with reduced self-presentation concerns and increased student communication behavior

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### ABSTRACT

Verbal communication can facilitate learning, academic performance, and a sense of belonging when students participate in classroom discussions, asks questions, seek help and speak with their instructors outside of class. Unfortunately, such adaptive communication behaviors are less likely to occur when students fear others' evaluations in group and dyadic settings. Using cross-sectional data from 691 undergraduates, this study investigated whether students' levels of self-compassion (the tendency to be mindful and kind to oneself and to recognize one's common humanity) would be associated with lower fear of evaluation and higher academic communication behavior. Students with higher self-compassion exhibited lower classroom participation avoidance and reported a higher tendency to ask questions, seek help, and speak with their instructors outside the classroom. Additionally, tests of a parallel mediation model revealed the degree to which students feared both negative and positive evaluation from others accounted for the relationship between self-compassion and most of these communication variables. The results suggest that self-compassion may be a source of resilience in students' affective experiences and behaviors related to verbal communication. Experimental research should explore the causal connection between self-compassion and these communication variables to understand if self-compassion practices lead to decreased student communication apprehension and fear of evaluation and increased communication behaviors.

### 1. Introduction

Verbal communication is becoming an increasingly expected and necessary behavior for college students. Many college instructors are moving away from lecture-only teaching formats and towards student-centered instructional practices, such as group discussions and student presentations, that require students to communicate in front of their classmates as a component of their grade (Rocca, 2010). Such instructional practices are supported by research showing that student communication frequency, in the form of classroom participation, asking questions, seeking help, and interacting with instructors, is associated with interest in and comprehension of material (Daly, Kreiser, & Roghaar, 1994; Martin & Myers, 2006), feelings of connection (Frymier, 2005), and school persistence (Ericson & Gardner, 1992; Van Ameringen, Mancini, & Farvolden, 2003). However, research also shows many students are anxious about or avoid communicating in academic contexts (Pedrosa-de-Jesus & Watts, 2012; Russell & Cahill-O'Callaghan, 2015; Weaver & Qi, 2005), limiting their ability to perform in participation-focused classrooms, seek clarification on academic concepts, and develop connections with their instructors. Given

the importance of student communication in facilitating student learning and performance outcomes, this study examines the individual differences that support and impede adaptive academic communication behaviors.

One individual difference that impedes student communication is the degree to which they are concerned with presenting a favorable impression to others, or their fear of evaluation. Fear of embarrassment or negative responses from teachers and peers can prevent students from asking questions and participating in class (Dillon, 1990; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Even students high in academic self-esteem may fear portraying an incompetent image to others, keeping them from seeking help (Kennedy, 1997). Consistent with these findings, self-presentation theory posits that when individuals want to make a favorable impression on others whose relationships they value, but lack faith in their ability to do so, they will experience social interaction anxiety (Leary, 2001; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). A consequence of social interaction anxiety is reduced communication behavior, a safety technique individuals utilize to avoid embarrassing themselves (Clark & Wells, 1995). In evaluative academic contexts, it is reasonable that students may wish to display an academically competent image to instructors

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and peers, but doubt their skills or abilities will enable them to achieve this goal. Such students are likely to avoid participating in class, asking questions, seeking help, and communicating with their instructors to circumvent feelings of shame.

However, when students are self-compassionate during the sometimes vulnerable and unpredictable situations that occur in learning contexts, they are less likely to be concerned with their self-image and others' evaluations (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005; Werner et al., 2012). Self-compassion refers to an unconditionally supportive self-stance, including relating to oneself with kindness, observing one's experience mindfully, and recognizing one's common humanity (Neff, 2016). In this study, it was hypothesized that students' trait self-compassion would be associated with their adaptive communication behavior through a reduced concern with others' evaluations, given they can rely on their own acceptance and consistent feelings of self-worth. As far as we are aware no prior research has examined the association between self-compassion and student communication, nor the processes through which they are related.

### 1.1. The benefits of academic communication

Classroom participation, question-asking, help-seeking, and out-of-class communication with instructors facilitate students' learning, performance, and sense of belonging. Such behaviors help students adapt to the demands of their academic environment, by participating when it is a component of their grade, clarifying their understanding of classroom material, and becoming socialized within an academic community.

Verbal communication in various academic contexts can deepen students' understanding of material and engage them more actively in the learning process.

As Pedrosa-de-Jesus and Watts (2012) write, a learner must be aware of the gap between their pre-existing knowledge and new information to ask a question. Asking questions and seeking help signifies active involvement in the attempt to acquire new forms of information, which should facilitate knowledge retention and engagement. Indeed, student-initiated questions are associated with heightened interest and involvement in learning material (Aguilar, Mortimer, & Scott, 2010; Newcastle, 1970), and increases in student motivation (Chickering, Gamson, & Barsi, 1987) and comprehension (Chin, Brown, & Bruce, 2002; Gall, 1970; King, 1994; Rosenshine, Meister, & Chapman, 1996). Seeking help can also facilitate student comprehension of course material and assignments, because students are less likely to experience frustration and confusion in learning environments. Adaptive help-seeking behavior may clarify students' understanding of material and is tied to student autonomy, self-regulated learning (Pintrich, 2004), motivation to improve (Roussel, Elliot, & Feltman, 2011), and strategic learning across cultures (Alexitch, 1997; Karabenick & Sharma, 1994; Schwab & Sukemuni, 1998).

A less frequently discussed communication activity, but one that is of interest in this study, is students' out of class communication with their instructors (OCC). OCC refers to interactions between faculty and students that take place in settings such as instructors' offices (Nadler & Nadler, 2000). In a meta-analysis, OCC frequency was related to increases in affective and cognitive measures of student learning, such as positive attitudes towards and comprehension of course material (Goldman, Goodboy, & Bolkan, 2016). Other indicators of learning that improve as student OCC rises include student motivation to study, academic achievement, and intention to remain in school (Dobrinsky & Frymier, 2004; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Lillis, 2011; Martin & Myers, 2006).

### 1.2. Self-presentation theory

These adaptive communication behaviors may be less likely to occur when individuals are overly concerned with presenting a favorable

image of themselves in academic settings. Self-presentation theory posits that individuals are motivated to present a particular image of themselves to others and that the type of self-image an individual desires to display depends on dispositional and situational elements (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987; Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Tseelon, 1992). In academic settings students may wish to portray themselves as intelligent, hardworking, competent, and likable to their instructors and peers for the purpose of achieving a desired grade, verifying a self-concept, and/or creating and maintaining social connections. Students' self-image concerns are discussed in several motivational theories, including achievement goal orientations (Pekrun, 2006) and students' conceptions of intelligence (Dweck, 2006). For instance, students with performance-oriented goals and an entity theory of intelligence carry out academic work for the purpose of proving themselves capable and smart to others. In contrast, for students who hold mastery goals and an incremental view of intelligence, self-presentation concerns are less salient and academic work is carried out for the purposes of learning and improving their current skillset (Pintrich, 2004).

Self-presentation goals can lead to fear of evaluation when individuals highly value making a favorable impression on others, perceive they lack the skill to do so (or have low self-efficacy regarding their social skills) and have a strong desire to belong to the social group they are among (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014). The fear of making an unfavorable impression on others, which could lead to a weakened social connection is more likely to arise in the presence of acquaintances, such as classmates or teachers, than in closer, long-term relationships (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014). If an individual does not value impressing others, or they are confident in their ability to convey a positive image of themselves, fear of evaluation will not be salient (Leary, 2001; Schlenker & Leary, 1982).

Individuals' self-presentation concerns likely evolved as an adaptive mechanism for individuals to monitor their social behavior and maintain their social connections (Gilbert, 2001). Indeed, in academic contexts, the desire to be seen as academically competent may positively influence motivation, appropriate classroom behavior, and work effort, as is the case when students hold performance approach goals (Pintrich, 2004). However, when self-presentation concerns are matched with low self-efficacy in social and/or academic skills, individuals may exhibit safety behaviors such as reduced communication and behavioral avoidance to reduce the likelihood of portraying themselves as incompetent to others' whose relationships they value (Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). In general, individuals who report they worry about others' evaluations report higher symptoms of social anxiety and lower frequencies of interactive social behavior (Cameron, 2009; Stoeckli, 2009; Vassilopoulos, 2005; Werner et al., 2012).

### 1.3. Fear of evaluation and academic communication

In academic settings, fear of making an unfavorable impression on those in evaluative positions (instructors) and others who witness their academic performance (peers) are associated with heightened communication anxiety and inhibited communication behavior, which can limit student learning and performance (Rocca, 2010; Weaver & Qi, 2005). The communication constructs studied here—classroom participation, question-asking, help-seeking, and out-of-class communication with instructors—are examples of the group and dyadic encounters that individuals avoid when they fear others' evaluation. As such, adaptive communication may be less likely to occur if students are concerned with potential evaluator's opinions about domains they value, such as their competence, intelligence, and likability (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014).

Two fears of evaluation constructs are relevant to individuals' self-presentation concerns in group and dyadic situations: fear of negative and fear of positive evaluation (Leary, 1983; Weeks, Heimberg, & Rodebaugh, 2008). Fear of negative evaluation refers to the extent to which individuals expect to be judged critically by others and pay

attention to signs of social threat in their environment, such as potentially negative feedback (Clark, 1999; Leary, 1983). Fear of positive evaluation describes the discomfort individuals experience when they are the center of attention or are praised for performing well (Rodebaugh, Weeks, Gordon, Langer, & Heimberg, 2012). Weeks et al. (2012) further explain this fear: “A socially anxious individual who volunteers an opinion in a group setting and receives positive feedback in response to it could fear that others...will become upset towards him/her for having ‘stolen the show’ (p. 46).” Fear of positive evaluation concerns the domains of portraying norm-abiding skills and social desirability.

#### 1.4. Self-compassion and fear of evaluation

Research suggests that self-presentation concerns are reduced when individuals have high levels of self-compassion (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Werner et al., 2012). This is most likely because the presence of self-compassion lessens the extent to which self-criticism undermines feelings of competency and also facilitates feelings of social connection which is not contingent on one's social performance (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Self-compassion occurs when a person responds compassionately to their own experience of distress with self-kindness, mindful awareness, and a feeling of connection to others—recognizing their common humanity (Neff, 2016). First, when making a mistake in front of others, the self-kindness dimension of self-compassion facilitates acceptance and soothing directed towards the self rather than self-judgment. Second, mindfulness entails observing one's thoughts and emotions with a perspective that is balanced and objective, in contrast to over-identifying with negative experiences, such as believing one's reputation is ruined when one makes a minor faux pas. Third, common humanity allows individuals to experience a deeper sense of connection when they consider others have faced difficulties, such as feeling embarrassed, rather than feeling isolated and alone in their moment of suffering (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Realizing one's experience is shared with others is also likely to reduce concerns with receiving positive attention or standing out from a group for performing well.

Self-compassion has demonstrated positive relationships with adaptive attitudes towards learning and responding to failure. Neff et al. (2005) found college students' self-compassion was positively linked to holding mastery goals—the motivation to learn and improve—and negatively associated with performance goals—the motivation to enhance one's self-image. These associations were mediated by the lesser fear of failure and greater perceived competence of self-compassionate students. Additionally, when individuals face setbacks or reflect on weaknesses self-compassion is associated with a greater desire to improve oneself (Zhang & Chen, 2016). In one study, college students who were prompted to be self-compassionate towards a personal weakness were more likely to report a desire to improve themselves and spent more time studying for a test after failing previously (Breines & Chen, 2012).

The adaptive academic behaviors that self-compassionate students exhibit may be explained by their reduced self-presentation concerns (Shimizu, Niiya, & Shigemasa, 2016). Self-compassion is associated with lower public self-consciousness, contingent self-worth, and a more stable sense of self-worth over time (Neff & Vonk, 2009), as well as reduced fear of both negative and positive evaluation (Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Werner et al., 2012). Neff, Kirkpatrick, and Rude (2007) found in a brief self-compassion intervention that as individuals' self-compassion scores increased, their feelings of social connection increased as well, a key variable driving self-presentation concerns. This finding is likely driven by the dimension of common humanity. As Neff et al. (2007) note, “Focusing on the interconnected aspects of experience may...lessen self-evaluative concerns because it tends to satisfy the need for belonging that often drive them (Leary, 1999; Nathanson, 1987)” (p. 141). Both fear of negative and positive evaluation occur when individuals fear being isolated from

a group for making an overly negative or positive impression. Students with higher self-compassion should understand that all human beings fail and succeed from time to time and also will be less likely to over-identify with their moment-to-moment experience, leading to reduced self-presentation concerns.

Experimental studies have found that self-compassion decreases feelings of social anxiety that are associated with inhibited social behavior. In a study by Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, and Hancock (2007), individuals high in self-compassion reacted to a potentially embarrassing task with fewer negative emotions and a more accurate appraisal of their performance than those low in the trait. In socially stressful situations like the Trier Social Stress Test (where participants are asked to give a speech to a panel of expressionless judges) self-compassion is inversely linked to physiological and cognitive measures of anxiety (Arch et al., 2014; Breines et al., 2014; Breines et al., 2015). In these settings, the reduced activation of sympathetic nervous system experienced by self-compassionate individuals suggests a less defensive response to social evaluation.

In sum, while fear of evaluation is underlined by a need to belong to the social group and be accepted by others, self-compassion provides a consistent sense of belonging and self-worth that does not depend on external evaluations. In addition, when evaluation goals are salient, the consistently kind orientation towards the self-entailed in self-compassion means feelings of competence will not be undermined by high degrees of self-criticism and the potential for failure will not seem so life threatening.

#### 1.5. Self-compassion and student communication

In the classroom, students may avoid communicating when they perceive themselves to be less skilled at verbal expression than other students (Neer, 1987). Frisby, Berger, Burchett, Herovic, and Strawser's (2014) review of the literature suggests students who are highly apprehensive about participating view the classroom as threatening. Communication presents the possibility of performing poorly in front of evaluators and peers, and therefore being judged or isolated (ibid.). Communication avoidance is associated with critical self-talk (Shi, Brinthaup, & McCree, 2015; Višlā, Cristea, Szentágotai Tătar, & David, 2013), low feelings of communication competency (Sallinen-Kuparinen, McCroskey, & Richmond, 1991), and sensitivity to signs of rejection (Kelly & Keaten, 2000; Kopecky, Sawyer, & Behnke, 2004).

In contrast, self-compassionate students engage in less critical self-talk, feel more competent, are less afraid of failure, and feel more socially connected than their less self-compassionate peers (Neff, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005; Neff et al., 2007; Smeets, Neff, Alberts, & Peters, 2014). In communication situations, self-compassionate students should relate to themselves kindly, rather than critically, not over-identify with the possibility of making minor communication mistakes, and will recognize their shared human experience with other students, rather than feeling isolated or threatened.

Participating and asking questions in the classroom can be a vulnerable experience for students, because it exposes their level of understanding in a public setting and in front of their peers (Cunconan, 2002; Doyle, 1986; Pedrosa-de-Jesus & Watts, 2012). Adaptive help-seeking behavior is also hindered by low-levels of self-esteem or students' fears of damaging their image as competent (Karabenick, 2003; Kennedy, 1997). OCC is similarly less likely to occur when students doubt their communication competency and experience anxiety in the classroom (Martin & Myers, 2006).

In contrast, students who are self-compassionate feel fewer negative emotions when recognizing their mistakes (Leary et al., 2007) and feel socially connected even while reflecting on their weaknesses (Neff et al., 2007). They are motivated to improve for intrinsic reasons – because they desire to learn and grow (Breines & Chen, 2012; Neff et al., 2005). These qualities of self-compassionate students are likely to reduce their fear of sounding unintelligent when asking a question in

class or appearing incompetent when asking for help (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Additionally, the desire to help and support oneself intrinsic to self-compassion may move students to ask questions or reach out for help from others to grow and improve.

### 1.6. Self-compassion, fear of evaluation, and academic communication

One reason self-compassionate students should display more adaptive communication behavior is because of their lessened fear of evaluation by others. Fear of negative and positive evaluation is well-known cognitive components of social anxiety and inhibited social behavior in the types of group and dyadic conversations that occur in and outside of the classroom (Vassilopoulos, 2005; Weeks et al., 2008). Self-compassion may reduce self-presentation concerns by decreasing the value individuals' place on controlling their self-image and by maintaining their feelings of competency and affiliation with others (Neff et al., 2005; Neff & Vonk, 2009; Smeets et al., 2014; Werner et al., 2012). This reduced fear of evaluation should help account for the negative association between self-compassion and classroom participation avoidance and the positive association between self-compassion and academic communication behavior.

### 1.7. Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1.** Self-compassion will be positively associated with academic communication behavior.

**Hypothesis 2.** Fear of negative evaluation will be negatively related to self-compassion and communication behavior.

**Hypothesis 3.** Fear of negative and fear of positive evaluation will mediate the relationship between self-compassion and communication behavior.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited from an undergraduate educational psychology subject pool at a large, southwestern university ( $N = 621$ ). Students ranged in age between 18 and 39 ( $M = 21.27$ ,  $SD = 2.65$ ). The ethnicity of the sample was 50% White, 20% Asian, 19% Latino, 7% African American, and 4% "other." Participants received course credit for their participation. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and was administered online.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Self-compassion

The 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SC; Neff, 2003b) assesses self-kindness (e.g., "I try to be understanding and patient towards those aspects of my personality I don't like"), self-judgment, common humanity (e.g., "I try to see my failings as part of the human condition"), isolation, mindfulness (e.g., "When something painful happens I try to take a balanced view of the situation"), and over-identification (e.g., "When I'm feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that's wrong."). Responses are given on a 5-point scale, negative items are reverse scored, and a mean of the six subscales is taken. Cronbach's alpha was 0.92 ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ , range = 1.12–4.8).

#### 2.2.2. Classroom participation avoidance

Classroom participation avoidance was measured with items from Neer's (1987) Classroom Apprehension about Participation Scale. While the scale measures both classroom participation behaviors and perception of communication competence, for this study, only items measuring classroom behaviors were used. Responses are given on a 5-

point likert scale. Item responses are summed for a total score. Higher scores indicate higher levels of classroom communication avoidance. Cronbach's alpha was 0.89 ( $M = 22.79$ ,  $SD = 5.94$ , range = 7–35). An initial confirmatory factor analysis using the Lavaan package in R studio showed below acceptable measures of fit on the 10-items used. As such, 3 items were dropped and the remaining items loaded well on one factor (CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.06).

#### 2.2.3. Question asking

The 12-item Student Propensity to Ask Questions (QA; Cunconan, 2002) scale assesses behavioral and affective components of asking questions in class. Responses are given on a scale of 1 to 5 and items are summed for a total score. Items include "I usually don't voluntarily ask questions in class" and "I have a fear of asking questions in class." Based on the results of confirmatory factor analysis 4 items with low factor loadings were dropped, leaving 8 remaining items that loaded well on one factor (CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.07). Cronbach's alpha was 0.93 ( $M = 20.53$ ,  $SD = 7.06$ , range = 8–40).

#### 2.2.4. Out-of-classroom communication

The 9-item Out-of-Classroom Communication Scale (OCC; Knapp & Martin, 2002) scale measures the frequency of speaking with instructors outside the classroom. Responses are given on a scale of 1 to 5 and items are summed for a total score. Based on the results of a confirmatory factor analysis, 5 items from the scale were dropped, and the 4 remaining items loaded well on 1 factor (CFI = 1.0, TLI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.07). An item example is, "I often talk to my instructor during his/her office hours." Cronbach's alpha was 0.85 ( $M = 10.33$ ,  $SD = 3.68$ , range = 4–20).

#### 2.2.5. Help-seeking

The 4-item Help-Seeking subscale of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (HS; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991) assesses students help-seeking from peers and instructors on a scale of 1 to 7. Item responses are summed for a total score. An example of an item is "When I can't understand the material in my courses, I ask another student for help." To improve scale reliability, one item was dropped. Cronbach's alpha was 0.69 for the remaining three items ( $M = 13.58$ ,  $SD = 3.86$ , range = 3–21). Confirmatory factor analysis revealed excellent fit (CFI = 1.0, TLI = 1.0, RMSEA = 0.00).

#### 2.2.6. Fear of negative evaluation

The 12-item Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation scale (FNE; Leary, 1983) assesses respondents' degree of worry about how others perceive them (e.g., "I often worry that I will say or do the wrong things"). Responses are given on a range from 1 to 5 and items are summed for a total score. Five items with low factor loadings were dropped from the scale, leaving seven items that loaded acceptably on one factor (CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.09). Cronbach's alpha was 0.90 ( $M = 20.89$ ,  $SD = 6.52$ , range = 7–35).

#### 2.2.7. Fear of positive evaluation

The 10-item Fear of Positive Evaluation (Weeks et al., 2008) scale assesses individuals' level of discomfort with being perceived positively. Responses are given on a 10-point Likert scale and responses are averaged for a total score. Items examples include: "I am uncomfortable exhibiting my talents to others, even if I think my talents will impress them" and "I feel uneasy when I receive praise from authority figures." One item was dropped to improve reliability. The final Cronbach's alpha was 0.82 ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ , range = 0.78–7.44). Confirmatory factor analysis revealed acceptable fit (CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.07).

### 2.3. Data analytic strategy

Each communication variable was tested separately for a significant

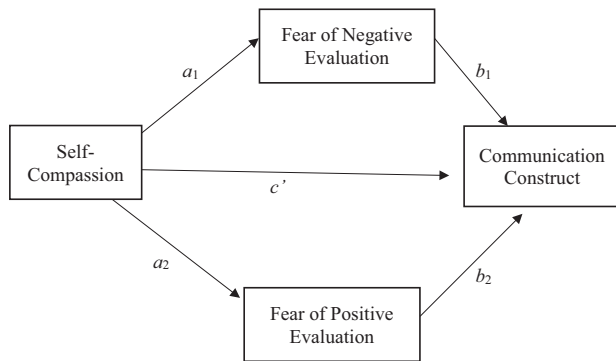


Fig. 1. Model of the hypothesized direct and indirect paths of self-compassion through fear of evaluation on communication.

association with self-compassion by calculating zero-order correlations. Because of the large sample size, we set our significance level at  $p < .01$  to avoid the chance of Type I error.

Hayes' (2013) PROCESS Macro for SPSS was utilized to test the indirect effects of self-compassion through fear of negative and positive evaluation on each of the four communication variables. Fig. 1 shows the hypothesized model. This parallel mediation model simultaneously tests the potential mediators and also controls for their shared variance. The macro employs biased-corrected bootstrapping tests with 10,000 re-samples to derive a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect. A confidence interval entirely above or entirely below 0 provides evidence for the indirect effect.

### 3. Results

Table 1 presents the results of the correlation analyses. As expected, self-compassion was negatively linked to classroom participation apprehension and positively linked to question-asking, help-seeking, and out-of-class communication. Cohen (1988) suggested that correlations of 0.10, 0.30, and 0.50 are small, medium, and large. Thus, most effect sizes were small to medium.

Table 2 presents the results of the parallel mediation analysis using Hayes' (2013) bias-corrected bootstrapping method. Self-compassion was indirectly associated with classroom participation avoidance through fear of negative and positive evaluation. The bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect of self-compassion through fear of negative evaluation ( $a_1b_1 = -0.96$ ) was  $-1.46$  to  $-0.48$ ; the confidence interval for the indirect effect of self-compassion through fear of positive evaluation ( $a_2b_2 = -0.58$ ) was  $-0.92$  to  $-0.33$ . Pairwise comparisons showed no significant differences

Table 1  
Intercorrelations ( $N = 621$ ).

	SC	CA	QA	HS	OCC	FNE	FPE
CA	-0.20**	1					
QA	0.18**	-0.84*** <sup>a</sup>	1				
HS	0.16**	-0.36**	0.37**	1			
OCC	0.13*	-0.40**	0.41**	0.40**	1		
FNE	-0.54**	0.30**	-0.31**	-0.13*	-0.14**	1	
FPE	-0.29**	0.31**	-0.26**	-0.21**	-0.09	0.42**	1

Note: SC = self-compassion, CA = classroom participation apprehension, QA = question-asking, HS = help-seeking, OCC = out of class communication w/instructor, FNE = fear of negative evaluation, FPE = fear of positive evaluation.

\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Because QA and CA were highly correlated a CFA was conducted to determine whether these were separate factors. A model of QA and CA as two separate factors revealed acceptable fit (CFI = 95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.08).

between the strength of the parallel mediators ( $CI = -0.38$ ,  $CI: -1.00$  to  $0.27$ ). Self-compassion did not directly predict classroom participation apprehension apart from its influence through fear of negative and positive evaluation ( $c' = -0.17$ ,  $p = .68$ ).

Tables 3, 4, and 5 portray the results of analyses with the other three communication outcomes. For question-asking (Table 3), the indirect effect of self-compassion through fear of negative evaluation was significant ( $a_1b_1 = 1.38$ ,  $CI: 0.80$  to  $2.01$ ) as was its effect through fear of positive evaluation ( $a_2b_2 = 0.50$ ,  $CI: 0.22$  to  $0.85$ ). The direct effect of self-compassion was not significant ( $c' = -0.04$ ,  $p = .94$ ) and fear of negative evaluation was a significantly stronger mediator than fear of positive evaluation ( $CI = 0.89$ ,  $CI: 0.16$  to  $1.66$ ). For help-seeking, only fear of positive evaluation showed evidence of being a mediator ( $a_2b_2 = 0.31$ ,  $CI: 0.15$  to  $0.53$ ). The direct effect of self-compassion was also significant ( $c' = 0.66$ ,  $CI: 0.12$  to  $1.20$ ). Finally, while self-compassion had a small positive relationship with out-of-class communication, there was no evidence that fear of negative and positive evaluation mediated this relationship, as the 95% confidence intervals for the indirect effects of self-compassion through these variables contained 0.

### 4. Discussion

This study is one of the first to demonstrate that self-compassion is linked to adaptive communication behaviors—participating and asking questions in class, seeking help from instructors or other students, and speaking with instructors outside of class. The analyses also revealed some of the processes through which self-compassion and student communication behaviors may be related. Self-presentation models predict that anxiety will occur when individuals place a high value on presenting a particular image to others (as competent or intelligent in the case of students; Leary, 2001) or fear standing out from their social group and this fear of evaluation from others may inhibit skillful communication (Weeks et al., 2008). Results of this study suggest that self-compassion helps to reduce the fear of evaluation experienced by students, which in turn allows for more adaptive communication behavior in the classroom.

Prior work on self-presentation concerns have centered on individuals' desire to present a favorable image to a real or imagined audience, which may often require hiding disliked aspects of the self (Tseelon, 1992). Findings here suggest that individuals are less concerned with others' evaluations when they treat themselves kindly, feel connected to others', and react to their experiences with balanced, mindful awareness rather than self-judgment, isolation, and over-identification. Individuals who have such a perspective may feel they have less to hide from others because they recognize that imperfections are a common human experience. As such, self-compassion may play a key role in determining how concerned individuals are with presenting a positive or negative image to others. Those with greater self-compassion may not be as vulnerable to concerns with the evaluations of others, providing a buffer against social anxiety and the associated inhibited social behaviors.

Indeed, findings indicated that the link between self-compassion and classroom participation or asking questions was mediated by the reduced fear of both positive and negative evaluation by others. These findings are in line with previous research that found students' communication behavior to be inhibited when they are overly concerned with peers' and instructors' potential negative evaluations (DePaulo, Epstein, & LeMay, 1990; Weaver & Qi, 2005). That fear of positive evaluation also limits communication behavior is a newer finding, but suggests that when students worry they will stand out from the group for receiving positive attention, they may be less willing to participate and ask questions in class. Self-compassion may be associated with a reduced fear of evaluation by promoting a sense of connection to others, kindness towards the self, and mindful awareness of one's moment-to-moment experience, rather than rumination on one's

**Table 2**

Regression coefficients, standard errors, and model summary for the indirect effects of self-compassion through fear of negative and positive evaluation on classroom participation apprehension.

Consequent												
		M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)			M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)			Y (CA)				
Antecedent		Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>		
X (SC)	<i>a</i> <sub>1</sub>	−5.24	0.34	< .001	<i>a</i> <sub>2</sub>	−0.62	0.09	< .001	<i>c</i> '	−0.17	0.41	.68
M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>1</sub>	0.18	0.04	< .001	
M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>2</sub>	0.93	0.17	< .001	
Constant	<i>i</i> <sub>M1</sub>	36.64	1.05	< .001	<i>i</i> <sub>M2</sub>	6.73	0.26	< .001	<i>i</i> <sub>Y</sub>	14.96	1.95	< .001
		R <sup>2</sup> = 0.29			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.08			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.14				
		F(1, 596) = 234.00, <i>p</i> < .001			F(1, 596) = 53.56, <i>p</i> < .001			F(3, 594) = 30.88, <i>p</i> < .001				

Note: SC = self-compassion, FNE = fear of negative evaluation, FPE = fear of positive evaluation, CA = classroom apprehension about participation.

**Table 3**

Regression coefficients, standard errors, and model summary for the indirect effects of self-compassion through fear of negative and positive evaluation on question asking.

Consequent												
		M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)			M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)			Y (question-asking)				
Antecedent		Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>		
X (SC)	<i>a</i> <sub>1</sub>	−5.24	0.34	< .001	<i>a</i> <sub>2</sub>	−0.62	0.09	< .001	<i>c</i> '	−0.04	0.49	.93
M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>1</sub>	−0.26	0.05	< .001	
M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>2</sub>	−0.79	0.21	< .001	
Constant	<i>i</i> <sub>M1</sub>	36.64	1.05	< .001	<i>i</i> <sub>M1</sub>	6.73	0.26	< .001	<i>i</i> <sub>Y</sub>	29.96	2.34	< .001
		R <sup>2</sup> = 0.28			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.08			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.12				
		F(1, 599) = 235.85, <i>p</i> < .001			F(1, 599) = 53.86, <i>p</i> < .001			F(3, 597) = 26.09, <i>p</i> < .001				

Note: SC = self-compassion, FNE = fear of negative evaluation, FPE = fear of positive evaluation.

**Table 4**

Regression coefficients, standard errors, and model summary for the indirect effects of self-compassion through fear of negative and positive evaluation on help-seeking.

Consequent												
		M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)			M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)			Y (help-seeking)				
Antecedent		Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>		
X (SC)	<i>a</i> <sub>1</sub>	−5.27	0.34	< .001	<i>a</i> <sub>2</sub>	−0.63	0.08	< .001	<i>c</i> '	0.66	0.28	.02
M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>1</sub>	0.00	0.03	.84	
M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>2</sub>	−0.50	0.12	< .001	
Constant	<i>i</i> <sub>M1</sub>	36.70	1.05	< .001	<i>i</i> <sub>M1</sub>	6.74	0.26	< .001	<i>i</i> <sub>Y</sub>	13.87	1.33	< .001
		R <sup>2</sup> = 0.28			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.08			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.06				
		F(1, 601) = 239.29, <i>p</i> < .001			F(1, 601) = 54.93, <i>p</i> < .001			F(1, 601) = 11.84, <i>p</i> < .001				

Note: SC = self-compassion, FNE = fear of negative evaluation, FPE = fear of positive evaluation.

**Table 5**

Regression coefficients, standard errors, and model summary for the indirect effects of self-compassion through fear of negative and positive evaluation on out-of-class communication.

Consequent												
		M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)			M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)			Y (OCC)				
Antecedent		Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>	Coeff.	S.E.	<i>p</i>		
X (SC)	<i>a</i> <sub>1</sub>	−5.14	0.34	< .001	<i>a</i> <sub>2</sub>	−0.63	0.09	< .001	<i>c</i> '	0.42	0.27	.12
M <sub>1</sub> (FNE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>1</sub>	−0.05	0.03	.10	
M <sub>2</sub> (FPE)	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	<i>b</i> <sub>2</sub>	−0.06	0.11	.59	
Constant	<i>i</i> <sub>M1</sub>	36.34	1.05	< .001	<i>i</i> <sub>M1</sub>	0.00	0.04	.88	<i>i</i> <sub>Y</sub>	10.36	0.04	.93
		R <sup>2</sup> = 0.28			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.08			R <sup>2</sup> = 0.02				
		F(1, 591) = 224.69, <i>p</i> < .001			F(1, 591) = 54.09, <i>p</i> < .001			F(3, 587) = 4.50, <i>p</i> < .01				

Note: SC = self-compassion, FNE = fear of negative evaluation, FPE = fear of positive evaluation, OCC = out-of-class communication.

performance in front of others. Because their sense of self-worth is not so contingent on social approval and is more stable, they are less fearful of being evaluated. This lessened fear of evaluation, in turn, results in more adaptive communication: students are more likely to participate in and ask questions in front of their class.

In more personal dyadic contexts, such as seeking help and speaking with one's instructor, however, we found that fear of evaluation did not play a particularly strong role. Fear of negative evaluation did not significantly predict help seeking, for instance, and it only had a small link to out-of-class communication. Fear of negative evaluation may be more relevant to public than private contexts. In group contexts, students may perceive they are being evaluated academically and/or socially more so than when they are speaking one-on-one with their instructors or others they may ask for help. However, future researchers should further explore this finding to better understand the various contexts that trigger fear of negative evaluation and to advance an understanding of when self-presentation concerns that could lead to inhibited social behavior are most likely to emerge in academic settings.

Self-compassion was associated indirectly with help seeking through fear of positive evaluation. Researchers theorize that fear of positive evaluation evolved to dampen social conflict during interaction, as fear of an increase in social status served to limit interaction with others seen to be more powerful (Gilbert, 2001; Weeks et al., 2008). Fear of positive evaluation may also be driven by an individuals' doubt that they will be able to maintain a high standard of performance (Weeks et al., 2008). Students may perceive that seeking help from an instructor or peer who may be more knowledgeable is an interaction with a more powerful social other, or they may doubt that they can maintain a positive self-image in such an encounter. Self-compassionate individuals are less self-conscious in general, however, (Neff & Vonk, 2009), and common humanity and self-kindness inherent to a self-compassionate stance may allow students to perceive their commonality with those they seek help from, rather than worrying about social rank. In turn, self-compassionate students are less inhibited by fear of positive evaluation and are therefore more willing to seek help.

The fact that self-compassion also had a direct association with help-seeking may be due to the concern for one's personal well-being associated with this supportive self-stance. For instance, Terry, Leary, and Mehta (2013) found that self-compassionate individuals were more motivated to seek medical attention for health problems than those who lacked self-compassion, and that motivated self-kindness and benevolent self-talk mediated the link between self-compassion and proactive health behaviors. This may also help explain why fear of evaluation did not mediate the link between self-compassion and out-of-class communication. The desire to help oneself may explain why self-compassionate students are willing to communicate outside of the classroom, whereas in public contexts fear of evaluation plays a more powerful role.

#### 4.1. Implications for teaching and learning

In the classroom, teaching practices may be informed by the findings of this study. For instance, instructors should note that students may not participate in classrooms or seek help not because they lack motivation or interest, but because they are unduly harsh on themselves or fear how they will be perceived by others. Working to build students' self-compassion and decrease their fear of negative evaluation in communicative contexts within and beyond the classroom may promote adaptive student communication behavior.

However, the use of cross-sectional data limits claims that can be made about causality. Future researchers should experimentally induce self-compassion in students to test the pathways modelled here and to determine whether increases in self-compassion do in fact exert a causal influence on reducing concerns with others' evaluations and increasing their communication behavior. Such experiments would better support

the argument for the pathways outlined here rather than alternative models of influence, such as a reduced fear of evaluation leading to higher self-compassion and more adaptive communication behavior. That all variables were measured at the same time is a significant limitation of this study.

Additionally, the contextual elements that influence communication behaviors within and outside of the classroom were not studied here. For instance, teacher personality is related to student question asking and out of classroom communication (Myers, Edwards, Wahl, & Martin, 2017) and the perception of classroom goals focused on relative-ability or personal improvement have been found to influence student help-seeking (Ryan et al., 1998). It is likely that these context variables interact with trait levels of self-compassion and fear of negative and positive evaluation to influence student communication. Future researchers should investigate these interactions to understand how classrooms and instructors can promote adaptive student communication behavior.

Given that self-compassion facilitates a clearer perception of the self while reducing defensive or difficult feelings when reflecting on one's weaknesses (Leary et al., 2007; Shimizu et al., 2016), dedicating time to helping students increase their levels of self-compassion may be a worthwhile endeavor for improving students' academic attitudes and behaviors. Instructors can promote self-compassion informally by articulating the common human experience of communication fear and modelling kindness in response to students' communication attempts. Many brief self-compassion practices are also available, which can easily be incorporated into the classroom curriculum to encourage gains in self-compassion. For instance, Johnson and O'Brien (2013) found a self-compassion writing activity carried out three times over 1 week significantly reduced participants' feelings of shame, symptoms of depression, and negative affect. In addition, more formal interventions exist to help individuals increase self-compassion, which may benefit students and instructors (Neff & Germer, 2013). Smeets et al. (2014) found that 3 weeks of self-compassion training for college students led to significantly greater increases in mindfulness, optimism, and self-efficacy, as well as significantly greater decreases in rumination in comparison to a time management control group.

## 5. Conclusion

This study makes several important contributions to understanding student communication and potential areas for treatment of communication fear and avoidance. To date, no other study has demonstrated a connection between self-compassion and the variety of communication constructs examined here. Communication research has primarily emphasized the relationship between communication apprehension, behavior and other self-concepts such as self-esteem, finding negative associations between self-esteem and communication apprehension and positive associations between self-esteem and communication behavior (Daly et al., 1994; McCroskey, Richmond, Daly, & Falcione, 1977). Unfortunately, the pursuit of self-esteem may emphasize self-presentation concerns and can lead to maladaptive academic behavior, such as self-handicapping (Petersen, 2014), defensiveness, and unrealistic self-appraisal (McGregor, Nash, & Inzlicht, 2009). Even students high in academic self-esteem may avoid seeking help for fear of portraying a less than competent image to others (Kennedy, 1997).

In contrast, self-compassion allows students to see themselves clearly, accept their mistakes and imperfections, and take action to correct mistakes (Breines & Chen, 2012; Leary et al., 2007; Neff et al., 2005). Self-compassion may help students feel safe enough to be vulnerable and make a comment in class or ask a question, because their feelings of self-worth are not dependent on others' evaluations. In sum, this work presents an exciting new area of study educators should consider in their quest to improve adaptive student academic communication.

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