

## Article

# Fear of Compassion and Social Anxiety among Students with Hearing Impairment: A Chain Mediation Model

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the influence of fear of compassion on social anxiety among students with hearing impairment, and to examine the chained mediating effect of self-identity and self-esteem in this complex psychological relationship. The primary objective is to provide a robust theoretical basis for targeted mental health interventions tailored specifically for this vulnerable demographic. A comprehensive cross-sectional survey was conducted involving a total of 118 students with hearing impairment recruited from five distinct special education schools. Data collection was systematically performed by adopting validated psychometric instruments, including the Fear of Compassion Scale, Self-Identity Scale, Self-Esteem Scale, and Interaction Anxiety Scale. Subsequent empirical analyses revealed that fear of compassion significantly and positively predicted the manifestation of social anxiety among these students. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that self-identity played a crucial independent mediating role in the pathway between fear of compassion and social anxiety. Consequently, the evidence suggests that reducing the baseline level of compassion fear serves as a critical entry point for effectively alleviating social anxiety among students with hearing disorders. Simultaneously, actively enhancing the self-identity and self-esteem levels of this specific group can successfully buffer and block the detrimental driving effect of compassion fear on their overall social anxiety, thereby promoting better psychological well-being and social integration.

**Keywords:** hearing impairment; fear of compassion; social anxiety; self-identity; self-esteem; special education

## 1. Introduction

Social anxiety refers to an individual's excessive tension, worry, or fear in social situations, which are irrational negative emotional responses. It is a prevalent psychological problem among adolescents, exerting severe negative impacts on their daily lives and mental health. Individuals with social anxiety traits experience intense fear and anxiety in social situations and tend to adopt avoidant behaviors, which greatly impairs the quality of life of those with high levels of social anxiety.

This is particularly true for groups with special needs. Their obvious or hidden physical deficiencies make them different from the general population. Students with hearing impairment face great difficulties in communicating with ordinary people, making them more vulnerable to social anxiety in interpersonal interactions than their peers without disabilities. Social anxiety can intensify individuals' rumination and bring adverse effects to their interpersonal relationships, daily life, academic study and other aspects. Nevertheless, existing research on social anxiety among students with hearing impairment remains scarce. Therefore, exploring the influencing factors and functional pathways of social anxiety in this group can provide a theoretical basis for social anxiety intervention. It helps students with hearing impairment improve their social functioning and enhance their social adaptability, and also enriches the research on social anxiety of ethnic minority hearing-impaired groups in the field of special education [1].

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Fear of compassion refers to an individual perceiving the receipt of compassion as a manifestation of weakness and negative self-image. Previous studies have found that there is a certain correlation between fear of compassion and social anxiety. Individuals with high social anxiety traits tend to show fearful responses to compassion from others and are more likely to experience tension and behavioral avoidance in empathic interaction situations. Research has indicated that individuals with social anxiety are characterized by fear of compassion. Low self-evaluation is one of the key factors contributing to the development of social anxiety [2]. In addition, fear of compassion hinders individuals' normal interpersonal communication, prompts self-protection tendencies, and further triggers anxiety in social situations.

Self-identity refers to adolescents' reorganization of internal motivation, personal competence, beliefs, life experiences and other factors through exploring alternative possibilities, thereby forming a consistent ideal self. Self-identity is equivalent to ego identity. It serves as the foundation for sound personality development and the establishment of good interpersonal relationships, and is also the basis for the formation of a healthy personality. When fear of compassion induces stressful situations, individuals with negative self-perception are more prone to experiencing negative emotions. Fear of compassion may reduce individuals' tendency to experience and engage in intimate behaviors, which is detrimental to the establishment of self-identity. Accordingly, fear of compassion may be negatively correlated with self-identity. Fear of negative evaluation plays a partial mediating role between self-identity and social avoidance. As the core component of the cognitive-behavioral model of social anxiety, fear of negative evaluation is positively correlated with social anxiety [3]. Therefore, self-identity may exert a certain influence on social anxiety.

Self-esteem is an integral part of self-consciousness and functions as a value evaluation mechanism. Personal self-esteem derives from the interaction between social evaluation and individual self-esteem needs. Social identity theory divides self-esteem into personal self-esteem, which is based on personal characteristics such as ability and talent, and relational self-esteem, which is rooted in relationships with significant others such as family members and friends [1, 4]. Self-esteem involves self-acceptance and self-evaluation. It is a relatively stable self-emotion and an important psychological resource for coping with negative life events. Relevant studies have shown that individuals' fear of compassion may reduce their level of self-esteem. Self-esteem is a crucial influencing factor of life satisfaction as well as negative emotions such as anxiety and depression. Self-esteem affects people's thinking, emotions and behaviors. It acts as an anxiety buffer: high self-esteem enables individuals to be less vulnerable to anxiety and less likely to engage in anxiety-related behaviors; conversely, low self-esteem makes individuals more susceptible to anxiety and more prone to anxiety-related behaviors. Social anxiety is significantly correlated with self-esteem level. The lower an individual's self-esteem, the more emotionally unstable and introverted they tend to be, and the higher their level of social anxiety.

Nevertheless, existing studies have indicated that traditional culture exerts certain influences on individuals' psychology, and cognitive differences exist among different ethnic groups [5, 6]. In terms of the stage and sequence of children's moral cognitive development among different ethnic groups in China, there are disparities in the developmental pace and the age of reaching each developmental stage in specific dimensions. Due to distinct environmental and traditional cultural differences across regions, adolescents from different backgrounds may possess unique psychological characteristics. Comparative studies have found significant differences in personality traits and personality types among students from various ethnic groups.

Adolescence is a critical period for the shaping of individual personality. Previous studies on social anxiety have mostly focused on the general population, while fewer scholars have explored social anxiety among students with special needs. Research on social anxiety in special groups is mainly concentrated on individuals with hearing impairment. Similarly, studies on fear of compassion have largely targeted ordinary

populations, neglecting students with special needs who are closely related to compassion perception. Few researchers have explored the internal mechanism and influencing pathways between fear of compassion and social anxiety [7]. In addition, there is still a lack of relevant studies on social anxiety among hearing-impaired students in diverse regional contexts. Therefore, it is crucial for future research to further explore the relationships among fear of compassion, self-identity, self-esteem, and social anxiety among students with special needs. This study aims to provide references and practical implications for alleviating and preventing social anxiety among hearing-impaired students, so as to improve their mental health level, enable them to face life with a positive attitude, integrate into society confidently, and return to the mainstream of social life.

Based on the above literature, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study: Fear of compassion can significantly predict the level of social anxiety among students with hearing impairment. Self-identity plays a significant role in the positive relationship between fear of compassion and social anxiety. Self-esteem plays a significant role in the positive relationship between fear of compassion and social anxiety. The influence of fear of compassion on social anxiety of students with special needs can function through the chained mediating effect of self-identity and self-esteem [8].

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

This study adopted a convenience sampling method. In July 2025, participants were selected from hearing-impaired children of Grade Three and above in five special education schools. A total of 118 questionnaires were distributed on a class basis, and 118 were returned. After excluding 27 incompletely filled questionnaires, 91 valid participants were finally obtained, including 45 females [9, 10]. The average age was  $14.47 \pm 2.80$  years. This questionnaire survey obtained the informed consent of the respondents and the approval of the responsible ethics committee.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Fear of Compassion Scale, FCS

This scale was developed to assess fear of compassion and consists of three subscales: the Fear of Receiving Compassion Scale, the Fear of Expressing Compassion to Others Scale, and the Fear of Self-Compassion Scale, containing a total of 38 items [11]. All items are rated using a 5-point Likert scoring method. In this study, the scale was utilized to measure the level of fear of compassion among students with hearing impairment, with higher scores indicating a higher degree of fear of compassion. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the scale in the present study was 0.91.

#### 2.2.2. Self-Identity Scale, SIS

This scale was developed based on Erikson's theory. It comprises four subscales: self-role identity, self-worth identity, change of self-identity, and self-motivation identity, with a total of 19 items scored using a 4-point rating scale [12]. In this study, the scale was used to measure the level of self-identity among students with hearing impairment; higher scores indicate a higher level of self-identity. Based on item analysis and the indicator of Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient if an item was deleted, three items (Item 3, Item 5, and Item 11) that contributed little to internal consistency were removed. A total of 16 items were retained to form the simplified version of the scale for this study. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the simplified scale was 0.64.

#### 2.2.3. Self-Esteem Scale, SES

This scale was developed to assess self-esteem and consists of two subscales: self-negation and self-affirmation, with a total of 10 test items, using a 4-point scoring method. In this study, it was applied to measure the self-esteem levels of students with hearing impairment [13]. Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the scale in this study was 0.63.

#### 2.2.4. Interaction Anxiety Scale, IAS

This scale consists of 15 test items and adopts a 5-point scoring method. In this study, it was used to measure the social anxiety level of students with hearing impairment. A higher score indicates a higher degree of social anxiety [14]. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the scale in this study was 0.72.

### 2.3. Statistical Processing

First, SPSS 26.0 was used for descriptive statistics and correlation analysis in this study. Second, Model 6 in the PROCESS macro was adopted to test the mediating effect, and the Bootstrap bias-corrected test was performed to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the analytical results. The significance level was set at  $\alpha = 0.05$  in this study.

## 3. Result

### 3.1. Common Method Bias Test

This study adopted Harman's single-factor test to examine the common method bias. The results showed that the explanatory variance of the first factor was 17.2%, which was lower than the critical standard of 40%. This indicates that no significant common method bias existed in this study.

Pearson correlation analysis results showed (see Table 1) that fear of compassion was significantly positively correlated with social anxiety, with a correlation coefficient of 0.626 ( $p < 0.01$ ); fear of compassion was significantly negatively correlated with self-identity, with a correlation coefficient of -0.696 ( $p < 0.01$ ). Meanwhile, self-identity was significantly negatively correlated with social anxiety, with a correlation coefficient of -0.551 ( $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Variables

	M±SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1Gender	-	1						
2Age	14.47±2.80	-0.003	1					
3Residence	-	-0.005	0.056	1				
4SES	26.52±4.10	-0.026	0.201	-0.195	1			
5SIS	43.46±6.46	0.034	-0.006	0.068	-0.031	1		
6IAS	46.14±9.20	-0.006	-0.018	-0.048	0.176	-.551**	1	
7FCS	71.69±23.86	-0.057	-0.001	-0.078	0.177	-.696**	.626**	1

Note. Ns = 91. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ . Residence, Urban, Rural. SES, Self-Esteem. SIS, Self-Identity. IAS, Social Anxiety. FCS, Fear of Compassion.

### 3.2. Chain Mediation Effect Test

After controlling for gender, age, and place of origin, the mediating effect test was conducted with fear of compassion as the independent variable, social anxiety as the dependent variable, and self-identity and self-esteem as the mediating variables. The results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Bootstrap Analysis of Mediating Effects

Path	Effect size	95%CI		Effect size (%)
		Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	
Total effect	0.636	0.473	0.799	100
Direct effect	0.472	0.240	0.704	74.21
Total indirect effect	0.163	0.039	0.291	25.63
FCS → SIS → IAS	0.157	0.035	0.279	24.69
FCS → SIS → SES → IAS	-0.008	-0.065	0.012	-1.26
FCS → SES → IAS	0.015	-0.022	0.104	2.36

Note. SES, Self-Esteem. SIS, Self-Identity. IAS, Social Anxiety. FCS, Fear of Compassion.

Fear of compassion significantly and positively predicted social anxiety among students with hearing impairment ( $\beta=0.47$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Fear of compassion had a significant

negative predictive effect on self-identity ( $\beta=-0.45$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The direct predictive effect of self-identity on social anxiety was not significant ( $\beta=-0.35$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

There were no significant predictive effects between fear of compassion and self-esteem ( $\beta=0.19$ ,  $p>0.05$ ), self-esteem and social anxiety ( $\beta=0.08$ ,  $p>0.05$ ), as well as between self-identity and self-esteem ( $\beta=0.24$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

The Bootstrap test results indicated (see Table 2) that self-identity exerted a mediating effect between fear of compassion and social anxiety, with a mediating effect value of 0.157 (95% CI = [0.035, 0.297]), accounting for 24.69% of the total effect of fear of compassion on social anxiety (total effect value = 0.636). Fear of compassion produced an indirect effect on social anxiety through self-identity.

#### 4. Discussion

This study examined the relationship between fear of compassion and social anxiety among students with hearing impairment, focusing on the mediating effects of self-identity and self-esteem. The findings indicated that fear of compassion significantly predicts social anxiety among these students and indirectly influences their social anxiety through self-identity. However, the mediating effect of self-esteem was not statistically significant, suggesting that the primary pathway through which fear of compassion impacts social anxiety is via self-identity [6, 15]. These results offer valuable insights into strategies for reducing social anxiety and fostering improved social integration for students with hearing impairment.

##### 4.1. *The Relationship between Empathy Fear and Social Anxiety*

This study found that fear of compassion positively predicted social anxiety among students with hearing impairment, which verified Hypothesis H1. This indicates that the more individuals fear receiving care, help, or kindness from others, the more likely they are to experience tension, avoidance, and a sense of being evaluated in interpersonal interactions. Previous studies have pointed out that fear of compassion is closely associated with negative psychological states such as anxiety, depression, and self-criticism. Individuals who have difficulty accepting compassion and support from others may interpret social situations as threatening or evaluative, thereby intensifying social anxiety [16]. The cognitive model of social anxiety also suggests that individuals' excessive attention to others' evaluations and negative interpretation of social situations are crucial mechanisms underlying the emergence and maintenance of social anxiety. For students with hearing impairment, due to the influences of communication patterns, social interaction experience, and identity sensitivity, they are more likely to perceive others' assistance as "pity" or "special treatment," which further leads to inferiority, shame, and social avoidance. Meanwhile, fear of receiving compassion from others can significantly predict social anxiety symptoms. Therefore, fear of compassion may be an important psychological factor that exacerbates social anxiety among students with hearing impairment.

##### 4.2. *The Mediating Role of Self-Identity*

This study found that self-identity plays a mediating role between fear of compassion and social anxiety among students with hearing impairment. That is, fear of compassion may further affect their level of social anxiety by influencing their self-identity, which supports the hypothesis. Adolescence itself is a critical period for the formation of self-identity, during which individuals need to answer developmental questions such as "Who am I?", "Where do I belong?", and "How do I view myself?" For students with hearing impairment, the development of self-identity is additionally influenced by factors such as hearing impairment identity, communication patterns, peer acceptance, ethnic culture, and school environment. Relevant studies have indicated that the identity construction of adolescents with hearing impairment is complex, and their self-concept, sense of belonging, social relationships, and understanding of the "hearing-impaired identity" all affect their psychological adaptation [17]. Therefore, when individuals have a high level of fear of compassion, external support may no longer be perceived as acceptance, but

rather interpreted as a reminder of their own "vulnerability" or "difference." This weakens their positive self-identity and further increases social anxiety.

Identity construction among adolescents with hearing impairment is closely related to self-concept, sense of belonging, social relationships, and the interpretation of hearing-impaired experiences, which is consistent with the mediating effect of self-identity found in the present study [5, 18].

#### *4.3. The Self-Esteem-Related Pathway Is Not Significant.*

This study found that the correlations between fear of compassion and self-esteem, between self-esteem and social anxiety, as well as the chained mediating path of fear of compassion affecting social anxiety through self-identity and self-esteem were all non-significant. The results indicated that self-esteem did not exert a significant effect in the relationship between fear of compassion and social anxiety. A possible explanation is that high self-esteem is often contingent on personal achievement, social competition, and others' evaluations, while individuals with low self-esteem tend to worry about negative appraisal from others, which in turn leads to social anxiety [19, 20]. Previous studies generally regard self-esteem as an overall evaluation of personal worth, and low self-esteem has been closely linked to psychological problems such as anxiety and depression. Nevertheless, the present results suggest that among students with hearing impairment, the development of social anxiety may not be mainly shaped by general self-evaluation of worth. Instead, it is more likely influenced by factors such as identity acceptance, group belonging, and the perception of hearing-impaired identity.

Specifically, self-esteem mainly reflects an individual's perception of self-worth, whereas self-identity emphasizes how individuals understand who they are, where they belong, and how they perceive their social identity. For students with hearing impairment, their social anxiety may stem more from communication pressure caused by hearing loss, sensitivity to others' evaluations, and identity adaptation issues arising from the interplay of ethnic identity, hearing-impaired identity, and student identity. Existing studies have found that deaf and hearing-impaired adolescents tend to encounter more difficulties in peer relationships, friendship quality, and social participation. Children and adolescents with hearing loss are also more vulnerable to peer rejection and bullying experiences [3]. Domestic research has similarly indicated that hearing-impaired adolescents exhibit higher levels of social anxiety than their normally hearing peers. Therefore, even if their overall self-esteem remains relatively stable, insufficient acceptance of their hearing-impaired identity or social roles may still lead to tension, withdrawal, and anxiety in interpersonal interactions. It follows that within the research model of this study, self-identity can better explain the influencing mechanism of fear of compassion on social anxiety than self-esteem.

#### *4.4. Limitations of This Study and Future Prospects*

By constructing a chained mediation model, this study explored the relationship between fear of compassion and social anxiety among students with hearing impairment, as well as the role of self-identity. Nevertheless, several limitations of the present study should be noted [11, 14]. First, this study adopted a self-report method to assess fear of compassion and social anxiety among students with hearing impairment. Self-reports may be influenced by respondents' subjective cognition, concerns about others' evaluations, comprehension of the Chinese language, and expressive ability, which may hinder an objective reflection of their true levels of fear of compassion and social anxiety. Future research could optimize the study design by combining interviews, peer ratings, and physiological indicator measurements to obtain more comprehensive and accurate data through multiple approaches. Second, the participants of this study were exclusively students with hearing impairment from a specific geographical area, and the sample size was relatively small. Future research could expand the sampling scope to include students with hearing impairment from diverse regions and backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the research conclusions. Finally, this study employed a cross-sectional design, which cannot clarify the causal relationships among variables. Longitudinal

follow-up or experimental designs may be adopted in future studies to further verify the influencing pathways identified in this research and more clearly reveal the mechanisms underlying the effect of fear of compassion on social anxiety.

## 5. Conclusion

This study developed a chained mediation model to investigate the relationship between fear of compassion and social anxiety among students with hearing impairment, as well as the role of self-identity. No significant mediating effect of self-esteem between fear of compassion and social anxiety was identified, nor was the chained mediating effect of self-identity and self-esteem confirmed. These findings suggest that educators aiming to address social anxiety in students with hearing impairment should prioritize reducing their fear of compassion and fostering a stronger sense of self-identity.

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