The development and validation of the Unified Scale of Compassion for Other People: Implications for socially responsible consumer behavior

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Abstract

Compassion is defined as recognizing others' suffering and feeling motivated to alleviate it. Unlike empathy, compassion is action-oriented and extends beyond dyadic interactions to broader social and environmental concerns. This research introduces the Unified Scale of Compassion for Other People (USC-P), a multidimensional measure encompassing six components: Sensitivity to Suffering, Empathic Concern, Shared Experiences, Distress Tolerance, Compassionate Intentions, and Non-Judgmental Perspective. Across a series of studies, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported a stable six-factor structure with high reliability. Predictive validity analyses showed that Empathic Concern and Compassionate Intentions were the strongest predictors of behavior, whereas more internally focused components played a lesser role. The USC-P offers a comprehensive, theoretically grounded tool for advancing research on compassion and its relevance for socially responsible consumption.

Keywords: Compassion, Socially Responsible Consumption, Scale Development

Track: Social Responsibility & Ethics

1. Background and Conceptual Framework

From charitable donations to calls for climate action, compassion functions as a moral compass that helps shape ethical and sustainable societies. Defined as awareness of another person's suffering accompanied by the motivation to alleviate it, compassion guides how we respond to the needs of others (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2024). Unlike empathy, which involves sharing another's emotions and is often passive (Lazarus, 1991), compassion is inherently action-oriented and typically arises in response to suffering, extending beyond dyadic interactions to broader humanity (Strauss et al., 2016).

Compassion has been conceptualized from multiple perspectives. While some view it as an emotional response, only a minority of emotion researchers classify compassion as an emotion (Ekman, 2016). This debate has shifted attention toward motivational accounts, particularly Gilbert's (2009) argument that compassion stems from evolved caregiving motives. He proposes that compassion reflects a blend of motives, emotions, cognitions, and behaviors rather than a single psychological category. Our research adopts this view, allowing us to capture both emotional resonance and motivation to act. Several models outline the core components of compassion. Gilbert's (2009) evolutionary framework distinguishes between engaging with suffering and acting to alleviate it. Strauss et al. (2016) identify five elements: recognizing suffering, understanding its universality, connection, tolerating distress, and the motivation to act. The present research draws on Strauss et al.'s (2016) five-component model and incorporates Gilbert's (2009) emphasis on a non-judgmental perspective.

Compassion also plays an important role in consumer behavior. By heightening concern for others' well-being, it may encourage socially responsible consumption (SRC), defined as consumer responses to market practices that harm ecosystems, human dignity, or animal welfare (Barnett et al., 2005). Compassion has been linked to ethical food choices (Pohlmann, 2022) and increased charitable giving through heightened empathic concern (Kim & Kim, 2024). Despite its importance, compassion research remains fragmented, particularly regarding measurement. Existing scales vary widely in how they capture emotional, cognitive, behavioral, motivational, or distress-related components. The Compassionate Engagement and Action Scales (Gilbert et al., 2017) and the Compassion Motivation and Action Scales (Steindl et al., 2021) primarily assess engagement and action but rely on convenience samples or short-term behavior, limiting generalizability. The Sussex-Oxford Compassion for Others Scale (Gu et al., 2020) addresses cognitive, affective, and behavioral components but was validated mainly with healthcare staff and students. The Compassion Scale (Pommier et al.,

2020) emphasizes mindfulness and emotional response but lacks the motivation-to-alleviate-suffering dimension, a key distinction from empathy. Finally, the Compassion Questionnaire Towards Others (Khoury et al., 2023) integrates affective, cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal skills but omits distress tolerance, an important component for maintaining compassion. These limitations underscore the need for a more comprehensive and integrative measure. The Unified Scale of Compassion for Other People (USC-P) addresses these limitations by integrating core elements across existing approaches to provide a unified and comprehensive assessment of compassion.

2. Scale Development Process Part I: Preliminary Studies

Building on existing scale limitations and the relevance of compassion, we first developed an initial pool of 78 items, mainly adapted from the scales mentioned previously, and added 24 new items, yielding 102 items for USC-P development. Four consumer behavior and marketing experts reviewed the pool to ensure content validity (Boateng et al., 2018), leading to revisions: all items were reworded to begin with "I," double-barreled items were split, terminology was standardized, and 24 items were removed for redundancy or misalignment, resulting in 78 items. Face validity was assessed via cognitive pretesting with 13 participants (54% female; M_{age} = 32.62, SD_{age} = 10.64; 31% native English speakers) using the Think-Aloud method (Lenzner et al., 2024), leading to 13 reworded items and 11 deletions. The refined 67-item pool was then administered in a larger pretest to evaluate preliminary psychometric properties.

In the pretest, 199 participants (71% women; M_{age} = 28.59, SD_{age} = 8.74) were recruited via convenience sampling. An Exploratory Factor Analysis with principal axis factoring and Oblimin rotation, guided by parallel analysis, yielded a seven-factor solution explaining 61% variance. The KMO was .93 and Bartlett's test was significant, χ^2 (2211) = 11,235.84, $p < .001$, supporting factor analysis. After removing 34 items for low loadings, poor correlations, or wording issues, 33 items remained, loading onto Sensitivity to Suffering, Empathic Concern, Shared Experiences, Distress Tolerance, Compassionate Intentions, Non-Judgmental Perspective, and Compassionate Behaviors (α = .83–.95). Sensitivity to Suffering reflects the ability to detect signs of suffering in others. Empathic Concern involves emotional and cognitive responses of warmth, care, and concern. Shared Experiences reflects awareness of suffering as a universal human experience. Distress Tolerance is the capacity to manage one's own emotional reactions. Compassionate Intentions reflect motivation to alleviate

suffering. Non-Judgmental Perspective is the ability to witness suffering without criticism, responding with openness and understanding. Compassionate Actions are observable efforts to do so. These results provided a psychometrically sound item pool for subsequent larger-scale studies to validate the USC-P's factor structure and reliability.

3. Scale Development Process Part II: Study 1 (Exploratory)

Participants (N = 352) were recruited through Prolific using U.S.-representative sampling. The sample included 51% women and 48% men, with ages ranging from 18 to 78 (M = 45.22, SD = 15.65). Educational attainment in the sample was in line with U.S. averages: 38% held a bachelor's and 19% a master's degree. Most participants identified as middle socioeconomic class. Consistent with U.S. demographics, the majority of the sample identified as White (64%).

An Exploratory Factor Analysis using principal axis factoring with Oblimin rotation was conducted. Factors were retained based on parallel analysis. The analysis yielded a six-factor solution accounting for 71% of the total variance. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .95, indicating excellent suitability for factor analysis. Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, χ^2 (528) = 10,605.59, $p < .001$, confirming the correlations among variables were large for factor analysis. After examination of the factor loadings, we decided to delete 9 items (see Table 1). Notably, Compassionate Intentions and Compassionate Behaviors converged onto a single factor, so they were merged and labeled Compassionate Intentions. The final 24 items loaded onto six factors: Sensitivity to Suffering, Empathic Concern, Shared Experiences, Distress Tolerance, Compassionate Intentions, and Non-Judgmental Perspective (α = .86–.92).

Table 1

Factor Loadings – Study 1 (Exploratory Factor Analysis)

Item	Factor						Decision
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
I try to help other people when they are struggling.	**0.90**	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.06	0.01	
I try to be there for people who are experiencing a lot of pain.	**0.86**	-0.04	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.03	Delete [1]
I try to comfort other people when they are suffering.	**0.85**	0.04	0.03	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	Delete [1]
I try to be caring towards other people when they are suffering.	**0.82**	0.11	0.05	-0.08	0.10	-0.07	Delete [1]
I try to do what is best for other people when they are in need.	**0.81**	0.04	-0.09	0.10	0.06	0.02	Delete [1]
I take actions to support other people in need.	**0.80**	0.00	0.00	0.11	-0.11	0.05	
I take care of other people when they are in need.	**0.80**	0.01	0.08	0.02	-0.04	0.04	Delete [1]
I do whatever I can to make other people feel better when they are feeling bad.	**0.80**	0.13	0.06	-0.07	-0.04	-0.04	
I take steps to ease other people´s suffering.	**0.67**	-0.07	0.05	0.27	-0.06	0.06	Delete [1, 5]
I come up with helpful ways for other people to cope with their distress.	**0.60**	-0.07	0.18	0.13	-0.10	0.13	
I refrain from making negative evaluations of other people based on their struggles.	0.00	**0.88**	0.02	-0.02	-0.05	-0.03	
I don´t judge other people harshly when they have a tough time.	-0.04	**0.86**	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.01	

Item	Factor						Decision
I am non-judgmental of other people's distress.	0.09	**0.83**	0.00	-0.01	0.03	0.06	Delete [4]
I am not overly critical of other people's flaws.	-0.08	**0.73**	-0.10	0.17	0.01	0.09	
I connect with the suffering of other people without judging them.	0.16	**0.63**	0.17	0.05	0.02	0.00	
I am quick to notice early signs of distress in other people.	-0.01	-0.02	**0.87**	0.05	-0.04	0.02	
I notice when other people are upset, even if they don't say anything.	0.09	0.05	**0.84**	-0.11	0.01	-0.05	
I recognize signs of suffering in other people.	0.00	0.05	**0.83**	0.03	0.00	0.03	
I notice distress in other people.	-0.01	-0.03	**0.82**	0.12	0.06	0.05	
I am emotionally affected by the hardships other people have to go through.	0.00	0.07	0.13	**0.77**	0.04	-0.04	
I am touched by the struggles of other people.	0.12	0.14	0.08	**0.67**	0.08	-0.06	
I concern myself with other people´s problems.	0.27	0.00	-0.01	**0.60**	-0.07	0.07	
I am sensitive to other people´s distress.	0.21	0.17	0.16	**0.49**	0.04	-0.05	
I feel concern for other people´s well-being when bad things are happening to them.	0.33	0.09	0.12	**0.48**	0.09	-0.03	Delete [4]
I know that everyone feels pain from time to time.	0.00	0.03	0.04	-0.03	**0.85**	-0.06	
I understand that everyone experiences suffering at some point in their lives.	0.08	-0.06	-0.08	0.05	**0.78**	0.11	
I understand that feeling upset at times is part of human nature.	0.09	0.03	-0.02	-0.09	**0.73**	0.03	
I know that everyone experiences struggles in life.	-0.09	0.09	0.01	0.12	**0.70**	0.01	
I feel that suffering is a part of the common human experience.	-0.09	-0.13	0.09	0.05	**0.65**	0.04	Delete [2]
I feel confident that I can cope with the distress that other people are experiencing.	0.01	-0.01	0.06	0.00	-0.02	**0.86**	
I can handle other people´s distress without feeling devastated.	-0.11	0.03	0.00	0.01	0.00	**0.84**	
I am able to cope with my feelings in response to other people´s suffering.	0.01	0.03	0.03	-0.07	0.11	**0.77**	
I can be there for other people when they are upset without feeling overwhelmed by their distress.	0.18	0.05	-0.07	-0.03	-0.02	**0.74**	

Note. Extraction: Principal Axis Factoring, Rotation: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization; Factor loadings ≥ .40 are **in bold**; Reasons for deletion: [1] High correlation (r > .70) with most items in the same factor, [2] Low correlation (r < .50) with most items in the same factor, [3] Factor loading (< .40), [4] Cross-loading, [5] Similar wording; Deleted scale items are in gray; Factors: 1 - Compassionate Intentions, 2 - Non-Judgmental Perspective, 3 - Sensitivity to Suffering, 4 - Empathic Concern, 5 - Shared Experiences, 6 - Distress Tolerance.

To establish convergent validity, we measured compassion using another scale that was not used for scale unification purposes: the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (α = .91; Hwang et al., 2008). While the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale demonstrated moderate-to-strong correlations (r = .52-.74, $p < .01$) with Empathic Concern, Sensitivity to Suffering, Compassionate Intentions, and Non-Judgmental Perspective dimensions of the USC-P, it showed relatively weak associations with Distress Tolerance and Shared Experiences (r = .18-.21, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that, compared to the Santa Clara scale, the USC-P provides a more comprehensive assessment of compassion, capturing additional dimensions.

To establish discriminant validity, we measured mindfulness through the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale (Feldman et al., 2007). Mindfulness is defined as the awareness that arises by being in the present moment in a non-judgmental way (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Conceptually, these two constructs are different. Mindfulness emphasizes awareness and presence, whereas compassion centers on emotional response and action (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2024). Cognitive and affective mindfulness showed weak-to-moderate correlations with six dimensions (r = .14-.42, $p < .01$), supporting the discriminant validity of

USC-P. Overall, this refined six-factor structure provided the basis for Study 2, which aimed to confirm the factor structure and examine the reliability and validity of the USC-P.

4. Scale Development Process Part III: Study 2 (Confirmatory)

Participants (N = 277) were recruited through Prolific Academic using U.S.-representative sampling. The sample included 50% women and 49% men, with ages ranging from 19 to 78 years (M = 45.78, SD = 16.35). Educational attainment in the sample was in line with U.S. averages: 33% held a bachelor's and 13% a master's degree. Most participants identified as middle socioeconomic class. Consistent with U.S. demographics, the majority of the sample identified as White.

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with maximum likelihood estimation to confirm the factor structure of the USC-P. The model included six latent factors: Sensitivity to Suffering, Empathic Concern, Shared Experiences, Distress Tolerance, Compassionate Intentions, and Non-Judgmental Perspective. The six-factor model demonstrated acceptable to good fit: χ^2 (237) = 474.00, $p < .001$; robust CFI = 0.93; robust TLI = 0.92; robust RMSEA = 0.07, 90% CI [0.06, 0.08]; SRMR = 0.06. These indices indicate that the proposed factor structure adequately fits the data (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). All standardized factor loadings were significant ($p < .01$) and ranged from 0.69 to 0.91, supporting good indicator reliability. Significant positive correlations emerged among the six compassion factors, indicating that they are related yet distinct. For example, Sensitivity to Suffering and Empathic Concern showed a strong association (r = .75, $p < .01$). In contrast, Distress Tolerance and Shared Experiences were only weakly correlated (r = .14, $p < .05$), reflecting that some factors capture unique aspects of compassion.

To further evaluate the psychometric properties of the USC-P factors, predictive validity was assessed by examining correlations with behavioral and self-reported outcomes: hypothetical donation intentions, frugal purchasing (Pepper et al., 2009), socially conscious purchasing (Pepper et al., 2009), recurring pro-environmental behaviors (Brick et al., 2017), and prosocial behavioral intentions (Baumsteiger & Siegel, 2019). The compassion factors were positively associated with most outcomes (see Table 2). Overall, these findings indicate that all compassion factors, particularly Compassionate Intentions and Empathic Concern, are meaningful predictors of altruistic tendencies and environmentally relevant behaviors, while Shared Experiences and Distress Tolerance exhibit more limited predictive relevance. This

pattern shows that some dimensions of compassion may be more behaviorally impactful than others due to the multifaceted nature of compassion (see Table 3 for the regression results).

Table 2

Predictive Validity of the USC-P (Correlation Analysis)

	Outcome Variables				
Compassion Factor	Donation Intentions	Frugal Purchasing	Socially Conscious Purchasing	Recurring Pro-Environmental Behaviors	Prosocial Intentions
Sensitivity to Suffering	.22**	-.09	.26**	.18**	.44**
Empathic Concern	.28**	-.04	.35**	.27**	.50**
Shared Experiences	.12	.07	.06	.09	.34**
Distress Tolerance	.00	.07	.18**	.25**	.25**
Compassionate Intentions	.23**	-.07	.35**	.32**	.59**
Non-Judgmental Perspective	.31**	.01	.17**	.14*	.46**

Note. ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 3

Predictive Validity of the USC-P (Regression Analysis)

	Outcome Variables				
Compassion Factor (Predictor)	**Donation Intentions**	**Frugal Purchasing**	**Socially Conscious Purchasing**	**Recurring Pro-Environmental Behaviors**	**Prosocial Intentions**
Sensitivity to Suffering	-.02	-.12	-.03	-.11	-.03
Empathic Concern	.16	.15	.30**	.19[!]	-.02
Shared Experiences	-.03	.09	-.08	-.01	.12*
Distress Tolerance	-.11	.16*	.08	.16*	-.02
Compassionate Intentions	-.01	-.26*	.21[!]	.27*	.52**
Non-Judgmental Perspective	.26**	.07	-.14[!]	-.14[!]	.10
Model Fit	$R^2 = .12$, $F(6, 270) = 5.89$, $p < .01$	$R^2 = .04$, $F(6, 270) = 1.95$, $p = .07$	$R^2 = .16$, $F(6, 270) = 8.38$, $p < .01$	$R^2 = .13$, $F(6, 270) = 6.98$, $p < .01$	$R^2 = .05$, $F(6, 325) = 2.67$, $p < .01$

Note. Reported coefficients are standardized (β); * p < .05, ** p <.01, [!] Marginally significant results.

Discriminant validity was further examined via correlations with four Empathy subscales (Ingoglia et al., 2016) and the Altruism scale (Rushton et al., 1981). Although empathic concern and perspective-taking factors of the empathy scale showed moderate-to-strong associations with several USC-P factors (r = .21-.76, $p < .01$), other empathy dimensions (fantasy, personal distress) demonstrated only small or nonsignificant correlations. Likewise, altruism showed generally small-to-moderate associations (r = .12-.46, $p < .05$), indicating that prosocial tendencies only partially overlap with compassion as measured by the USC-P. Overall, these patterns support good discriminant validity.

The nomological network of the USC-P factors was examined by assessing their associations with broad personality traits (Ingoglia et al., 2016) and value orientations (De

Groot & Steg, 2008). All compassion dimensions showed the strongest positive correlations with agreeableness (r = .14-.59, $p < .05$). Smaller but mostly positive and significant associations with open-mindedness, conscientiousness, and, for some factors, extraversion, suggest that these traits also support compassionate tendencies (r = .14-.35, $p < .05$). In contrast, negative emotionality was mostly unrelated or negatively associated with some factors (Distress Tolerance and Non-Judgmental Perspective; r = -.37 and -.17 respectively, $p < .01$). In terms of values, the compassion factors correlated moderately with altruistic and biospheric values (r = .17-.53, $p < .01$), reinforcing their alignment with caring and prosocial orientations. Egoistic values showed only weak or negative associations.

5. Discussion, Implications, and Future Research

This research developed and validated the USC-P, a multidimensional scale capturing both emotional and motivational foundations of compassion. Consistent with theoretical models viewing compassion as a blend of motives, emotions, cognitions, and behaviors (Gilbert, 2009; Strauss et al., 2016), the six-factor structure demonstrated strong reliability, convergent, and discriminant validity. Compared with existing measures, the USC-P provides a more integrated assessment by including often-overlooked components such as Shared Experiences and Distress Tolerance, which reflect internal regulatory and cognitive capacities complementing externally oriented aspects like Empathic Concern and Compassionate Intentions. The USC-P predicted a range of prosocial behaviors. Empathic Concern and Compassionate Intentions showed the strongest associations with most behavioral outcomes, emphasizing the role of motivational and affective engagement. Shared Experiences and Distress Tolerance showed weaker behavioral correlations, suggesting these internal capacities support but do not always directly drive observable actions.

These findings have theoretical and practical implications. Compassion is not uniform, but its components vary in motivating action. Interventions should prioritize enhancing motivational elements such as Compassionate Intentions alongside Empathic Concern. Recognizing Shared Experiences and Distress Tolerance as distinct but less predictive components can refine interventions by distinguishing internal awareness from action-oriented motivation. The USC-P is also adaptable for animal and nature contexts, potentially improving the prediction of environmentally relevant behaviors. Limitations include reliance on self-report and lower predictive strength of internal components.

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