



Linguistics

The Current State of Comfort with Interpersonal Touch Among University Students

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A B S T R A C T

This study surveyed 1,379 undergraduate students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, to explore their level of comfort with interpersonal touch—a prominent social behavior among Gen Z youth. Data were collected online between November and December 2024 and analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Results showed that students' comfort with interpersonal touch was relatively low. No significant differences were found by academic year or part-time work status. However, significant differences emerged in relation to gender, sexual orientation, and academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

Comfort with interpersonal touch plays a significant role in social communication, contributing to stress reduction, psychological well-being, and the development of social bonds (Gallace & Spence, 2010). However, university students' comfort with touch varies considerably due to influences such as cultural background, gender, personal experiences, and living environment (Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017). Hall's study (1996) demonstrated gender-based differences, revealing that 64.3% of female students felt comfortable hugging same-gender friends, compared to only 42.1% of male students.

In Vietnam, Dung Ho and colleagues (2016) found that while 72% of male students felt neutral when touched by lecturers, only 55% of female students agreed. Additionally, 46% of students with a history of domestic violence or negative touch experiences reported lower comfort levels with physical contact. Another study involving 700 students in Hanoi found that students spent 6–8 hours per day on social media and only 20% engaged regularly in intimate interactions such as hugging or handshaking. The decline in comfort with touch may hinder the formation of social connections and negatively affect mental health (Coan et al., 2006; Debrot et al., 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, intimate emotional experiences were reported to be the type of touch that people craved most during extended periods of social distancing (Von Mohr et al., 2021). According to Von Mohr et al. (2021) this was associated with feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

Despite its importance, empirical studies on this topic remain limited, particularly in Vietnam. This study aims to examine the current level of comfort with interpersonal touch among university students, identify influencing factors, and propose recommendations to raise awareness about the role of physical touch in communication and mental well-being.

Comfort with Interpersonal Touch

The concept of Comfort with Interpersonal Touch (CIT) has garnered increasing academic interest,

particularly among members of Generation Z. According to Webb and Peck (2015), CIT is defined as the degree to which individuals feel comfortable with intentional physical contact initiated by or directed toward others. This construct comprises two main components: comfort with initiating touch and comfort with receiving touch. Previous studies have affirmed that CIT can be influenced by cultural norms, gender, social context, and interpersonal relationships.

Comfort with interpersonal touch can be described as a pleasant sensation when one's skin is in contact with another person through actions such as hugging, stroking, or patting. This sensation is associated with the activity of C-tactile (CT) afferent fibers and has been linked to increased social bonding, reduced stress, and enhanced psychological well-being (Schirmer et al., 2023). Furthermore, research by Sahi et al. (2021) indicates that comforting touch functions as a strong form of social support, enhancing perceived safety and decreasing neural responses associated with emotional pain. These soothing effects are not only immediate but also have long-term benefits in reducing emotional distress when recalling painful experiences.

In healthcare contexts, CIT is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing physiological (e.g., pain relief, relaxation), psychological (e.g., safety, reassurance), and social factors (e.g., culture, gender, personal experience). Comfort with touch has implications for the quality of medical care and also influences psychological states, stress levels, and the ability to form social connections. According to Pedrazza et al. (2015), nurses' comfort with touch can affect the frequency and quality of touch-based care interventions, such as pain-relief massages, emotional reassurance, and hygiene support. Their findings identified five key dimensions affecting nurses' CIT: (1) physical comfort, (2) emotional regulation, (3) task-oriented touch, (4) reassuring touch, and (5) personal care. Notably, massage experience can enhance comfort with touch in caregiving settings.

METHODS

Sample

A convenience sampling method was employed in this study. A total of 1,397 valid responses were collected. All participants were full-time undergraduate students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained throughout the process. Watson's (2001) sample calculation formula for calculating the minimum sample size needed to be representative is 385 - 390 people (out of a total of 13,000 students at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM, the official sample is 1,379, meeting the requirements, surpassing and possibly increasing the representativeness of the research results, avoiding mistakes when selecting a convenience sample).

Instruments

The primary instrument used was the Comfort with Interpersonal Touch Scale (CIT), developed by Webb and Peck (2015). The scale consists of 20 items measuring students' comfort with interpersonal touch across two dimensions: initiating and receiving touch. Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). The overall level of CIT was calculated by averaging the item scores, with higher means indicating greater comfort with physical touch.

We did not find any studies using CIT in Vietnam. Therefore, the scale was translated from English to Vietnamese according to the process referred to in Tran (2009): 1/ Find an expert in Psychological scale adaption; 2/ Forward and reverse translation; 3/ Interview students; 4/ Evaluation; 5/ Pilot testing. The test results on 80 samples showed that the scale achieved a total scale reliability of 0.939, the total item correlation coefficient varied from 0.385 to 0.842. The translation results showed that the scale was suitable for official survey.

The final CIT scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.919. Item-total correlations ranged from 0.360 to 0.771, meeting the acceptable threshold (>0.3). Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted, resulting in the exclusion of item DC16 due to a factor loading

below 0.5. The analysis yielded satisfactory results: KMO = 0.931 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating the data's suitability for factor analysis. Three distinct factors emerged, with factor loadings ranging from 0.554 to 0.806. The two components related to initiating touch were further categorized into *personal touch comfort* and *social touch comfort*, resulting in a final 19-item structure.

Research Procedures

The study employed a combination of research methods including literature review, questionnaire-based survey, and statistical data analysis using SPSS 26.0. Among these, the questionnaire served as the primary data collection tool.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics: Levels of Comfort with Interpersonal Touch

Participants' comfort with interpersonal touch was assessed using a seven-point equal-interval scale: Very Low (1.00–1.86), Low (1.87–2.72), Fairly Low (2.73–3.58), Moderate (3.59–4.44), Fairly High (4.45–5.30), High (5.31–6.16), and Very High (6.17–7.00). Results in Table 1 indicate that students' overall comfort level fell within the **fairly low** range ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.044$).

There was considerable variation across individual items. The **lowest mean score** was observed for item DC18: "*I feel comfortable when a stranger touches my hand during a conversation*" ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.45$). In contrast, the **highest mean scores** were recorded for item DC9: "*I feel comfortable hugging others*" ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.661$) and item DC15: "*I feel comfortable when a colleague touches my hand while explaining something*" ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.634$).

These findings suggest that both the direction of the touch (whether the student is the initiator or receiver) and the identity of the person involved (stranger vs. familiar person) significantly influence comfort levels. Overall, students were least comfortable when touched by strangers during conversations, and most comfortable when they were the initiators and the person being touched was someone familiar.

Table 1: Mean scores and standard deviations of students' comfort with interpersonal touch across individual items at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM

No.	Statements	M	SD
DC1	Hugging others feels natural to me. (Original: Ôm người khác là điều tự nhiên đối với tôi.)	3.93	1.682
DC2	I often put my arm around other people's shoulders. (Original: Tôi thường khoác tay lên vai người khác.)	3.76	1.692
DC3	I think I enjoy physical contact more than most of my friends. (Original: Tôi cho rằng tôi thích động chạm thân thể hơn đa số bạn bè của mình.)	3.35	1.778
DC4	I feel comfortable when I am the one initiating physical contact. (Original: Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái khi là người chủ động động chạm thân thể.)	3.89	1.765
DC5	I feel more comfortable with physical touch than most people. (Original: Tôi cảm thấy tôi thoải mái với việc động chạm thân thể hơn hầu hết mọi người.)	2.97	1.615
DC6	When greeting someone, I usually incorporate physical touch. (Original: Khi chào hỏi ai đó, tôi thường có sự động chạm thân thể.)	2.54	1.422
DC7	When talking to people, I often touch their arm. (Original: Khi nói chuyện với mọi người, tôi thường chạm vào cánh tay họ.)	3.26	1.652
DC8	I find it hard not to touch others when I talk to them. (Original: Tôi không thể không chạm vào người khác khi nói chuyện với họ.)	2.32	1.495
DC9	I feel comfortable hugging others. (Original: Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái khi ôm người khác.)	4.00	1.661

DC10	When shaking someone's hand, I often place my other hand on their arm. (Original: Khi bắt tay ai đó, tôi thường đặt tay còn lại lên cánh tay của họ.)	2.43	1.435
DC11	I don't feel bothered if someone touches my hand. (Original: Tôi không cảm thấy phiền nếu có ai đó chạm vào tay tôi.)	3.55	1.735
DC12	When talking to someone, I don't feel bothered if they touch my arm. (Original: Khi nói chuyện với ai đó, tôi không cảm thấy phiền khi họ chạm vào cánh tay tôi.)	3.77	1.722
DC13	I feel comfortable when others touch me. (Original: Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái khi người khác chạm vào tôi.)	3.11	1.652
DC14	In conversations, I don't feel bothered when others touch me. (Original: Trong các cuộc trò chuyện, tôi không cảm thấy phiền khi người khác chạm vào tôi.)	3.47	1.653
DC15	I feel comfortable if a colleague touches my hand while explaining something. (Original: Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái nếu cộng sự chạm vào tay tôi khi giải thích điều gì đó.)	4.00	1.634
DC16	I don't feel bothered when receiving physical touch from others. (Original: Tôi không cảm thấy phiền khi nhận được sự động chạm của người khác.)	3.38	1.524
DC17	I feel comfortable when a stranger touches my hand during a conversation. (Original: Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái khi một người lạ chạm vào tay tôi trong cuộc trò chuyện.)	2.07	1.451
DC18	I feel comfortable when someone touches my shoulder to get my attention. (Original: Tôi cảm thấy thoải mái khi ai đó chạm vào vai tôi để thu hút sự chú ý của tôi.)	3.55	1.738
DC19	I don't feel bothered when someone places their hand on my upper back to guide me somewhere. (Original: Tôi không cảm thấy phiền khi ai đó đặt tay lên phần lưng trên của tôi để chỉ dẫn tôi vào một nơi nào đó.)	3.16	1.852
Average score of entire scale		3.29	1.044

Statistical Differences in Comfort with Interpersonal Touch by Demographic Variables

First, statistical differences based on academic year and part-time employment status were examined. The results showed no significant differences for these two variables in relation to students' comfort with interpersonal touch (sig. > 0.05). This indicates that regardless of a student's year of study or whether they have a part-time job, there were no statistically significant differences in their level of comfort with touch.

However, as shown in Table 2, there were statistically significant differences between **male and female students** in their ratings of comfort with interpersonal touch across all dimensions (sig. < 0.05). Additionally, students with **different sexual orientations** also reported significantly different levels of comfort with touch across all factors (sig. < 0.05). Finally, students with **different academic performance levels** showed statistically significant differences in their comfort with interpersonal touch across all components.

The results clearly and comprehensively reflect the differences between demographic variables and the components of students' comfort with interpersonal touch. Specifically, across all components, male students consistently reported higher levels of comfort compared to female students. This suggests that cultural context and the identity of the person involved in the touch strongly influence comfort ratings among male and female students (Dung Ho et al., 2016).

Regarding sexual orientation, homosexual and bisexual students reported higher levels of comfort with physical touch than heterosexual students, aligning with previous research on the role of touch in LGBTQ+ communities (Sorokowska et al., 2021).

Table 2: Results of Statistical Differences in Demographic Variables Across Components of Comfort with Interpersonal Touch

Demographic Variables M		Comfort with Interpersonal Touch		Comfort with Initiating Touch (Personal Touch Comfort)		Comfort with Initiating Touch (Social Touch Comfort)		Comfort with Receiving Touch	
		SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Gender	Male	3.70	1.120	3.89	1.342	2.82	1.251	3.98	1.358
	Female	3.18	0.998	3.59	1.287	2.59	1.088	3.17	1.157
Significance level		M1>M2 (p=0.003)		M1>M2 (p=0.001)		M 1 > M 2 (p=0.000)		M 1 > M 2 (p=0.000)	
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	3.18	1.017	3.57	1.269	2.59	1.081	3.18	1.220
	Homosexual	3.67	1.138	3.84	1.363	2.78	1.239	3.94	1.338
	Bisexual	3.42	0.985	3.83	1.299	2.66	1.140	3.48	1.118
	Others	3.40	1.128	3.60	1.515	2.85	1.337	3.51	1.236
Significance level		M1<M2 (p=0.000) M1<M3 (p=0.002) M2>M3 (p=0.020)		M1<M2 (p=0.015) M1<M3 (p=0.007)		M 1 < M 2 (p=0.041)		M 1 < M 2 (p=0.000) M 1 < M 3 (p=0.001) M1<M4 (p=0.021) M2>M3 (p=0.000) M2>M4 (p=0.013)	
Academic performance	Average	3.51	1.382	3.91	1.592	3.11	1.355	3.43	1.633
	Fair	3.24	1.033	3.57	1.310	2.63	1.122	3.29	1.200
	Good	3.26	0.993	3.62	1.252	2.59	1.090	3.31	1.202
	Excellence	3.62	1.227	4.09	1.417	2.81	1.255	3.67	1.484
Significance level		M2<M4 (p=0.000) M3<M4 (p=0.000)		M2<M4 (p=0.000) M3<M4 (p=0.000)		M 1 > M 2 (p=0.022) M1>M3 (p=0.011) M 3 < M 4 (p=0.041)		M 2 < M 4 (p=0.002) M 3 < M 4 (p=0.003)	

In terms of academic performance, students with excellent academic standing reported greater comfort with interpersonal touch. This may be associated with higher levels of social confidence and emotional intelligence (Turkeltaub et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that university students' comfort with interpersonal touch is relatively low, reflecting the influence of factors such as gender, sexual orientation, and academic performance. Male students reported higher levels of comfort than female students across all dimensions, consistent with prior research on the impact of culture and gender on physical contact behavior. Additionally, homosexual and bisexual students tended to feel more comfortable with physical touch than heterosexual students, especially in social contexts, which aligns with existing studies on the role of touch in LGBTQ+

communities.

Furthermore, students with excellent academic performance showed higher levels of comfort compared to those with fair or good performance, which may be associated with greater social confidence and emotional intelligence. Notably, no significant differences were found between academic years or between students with or without part-time work experience. This suggests that comfort with physical touch may not be influenced by the number of years spent in university or work experience, but rather by personal and cultural factors.

These findings highlight that comfort with interpersonal touch remains limited among university students, potentially due to familial, cultural, or personal experiences. Based on the research results, we propose the following recommendations to enhance students' comfort with physical touch: (1) Strengthen education on the role of physical touch in social communication and psychological well-being; (2) Encourage activities that promote healthy social interaction; (3) Build supportive environments that help students develop comfort with personal touch.

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