

Self Compassion as a Predictor of Social Comparison, Body Image and Social Appearance Anxiety

Ritik Singh¹, Dr. Amit²

¹Student, Bsc Psychology, Sushant university

ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the role of self-compassion as a predictor of social comparison, body image, and social appearance anxiety among young adults aged 18–25 years. Guided by Neff's (2003) framework of self-compassion and Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, the study sought to understand how self-compassion influences appearance-related psychological outcomes. A sample of 100 participants from Delhi NCR was selected using purposive sampling. Standardized measures, including the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2010), Social Comparison Scale (Allan & Gilbert, 1995), Body Image Scale (Cash, 2000), and Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (Hart et al., 2008), were administered. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed that self-compassion was positively correlated with body image ($r = .58, p < .001$) and negatively correlated with social appearance anxiety ($r = -.55, p < .001$). However, self-compassion also showed a positive relationship with social comparison ($r = .68, p < .001$), contrary to the hypothesized direction. The findings suggest that self-compassion contributes to positive body image and reduced appearance-related anxiety, though its association with social comparison may be contextually influenced. The study underscores the potential of self-compassion as a protective factor for emotional well-being and body satisfaction among young adults exposed to appearance pressures.

Keywords: Self compassion, Young adults, Purposive sampling, Body image

Introduction

Self-compassion—an attitude of kindness, common humanity, and mindful acceptance toward one's own suffering—has been increasingly recognized as a protective psychological resource for young adults negotiating appearance standards and social evaluation (Neff, 2003). It reflects an adaptive way of relating to oneself during times of perceived inadequacy or failure, fostering emotional balance and resilience.

Young adults (approximately 18–25 years old) are uniquely susceptible to distress related to bodily appearance because this developmental period is associated with identity formation, heightened peer comparison, and increased exposure to idealized body images through social media (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others, and upward comparisons in bodily appearance are strong predictors of body dissatisfaction and social appearance anxiety (Myers & Crowther, 2009).

Recent empirical research suggests that self-compassion may disrupt this harmful cycle of negative self-evaluation by reducing maladaptive upward appearance comparisons, improving emotion regulation, and enhancing body appreciation (Homan & Tylka, 2015; Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark, 2013). Experimental

and intervention studies further demonstrate that brief self-compassion practices—such as writing compassionate letters to oneself or reading self-compassion prompts—can effectively decrease body-related anxiety and increase body satisfaction (Seekis et al., 2020; *The Fittspiration and Self-Compassion Stimuli*, 2021).

Meta-analytic syntheses have reported moderate to large inverse associations between self-compassion and body-image concerns, as well as positive associations between self-compassion and body appreciation (Turk, Waller, & Bryant, 2020). Mechanistically, self-compassion appears to reduce self-judgment and shame while enhancing a sense of common humanity, thereby diminishing the emotional weight and salience of social appearance comparisons (Neff & Germer, 2017; Guo et al., 2023).

Despite mounting evidence, several research gaps remain. Many studies have relied on convenience samples of university students, have varied in measurement approaches and intervention duration, and have often lacked long-term follow-up, limiting the generalizability of findings to diverse populations. Consequently, questions persist about the predictive role of trait self-compassion in influencing social comparison behaviors and social appearance anxiety among emerging adults.

The present study therefore positions self-compassion as a predictor of social comparison tendencies, body image outcomes, and social appearance anxiety among individuals aged 18–25 years. By clarifying the strength and direction of these relationships, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of how self-compassion functions as a protective factor and to inform prevention and intervention strategies that target internal self-relating processes rather than solely external appearance pressures.

Review of Literature

Neff (2003) developed and validated the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) across multiple samples (students and community respondents; scale validity reported across studies), using factor analysis and correlational statistics to show that higher self-compassion is associated with lower depression and greater life satisfaction; the SCS is the foundational measure used in later self-compassion → body image work.

Andrew, Tiggemann, & Clark (2013) in an Australian sample of ≈266 female undergraduates, the authors used online surveys and multiple regression to test whether social comparison mediates the self-compassion → body image link; results indicated self-compassion related positively to body appreciation and negatively to body dissatisfaction, with social comparison partially mediating the effect.

Homan & Tylka (2015) using a U.S. sample of 263 adult women, the study employed correlational and moderation analyses to show that self-compassion buffered the negative effects of body comparison and appearance-contingent self-worth on body appreciation (i.e., at high self-compassion the negative links were attenuated).

Seekis et al. (2020) in a quasi-experimental intervention (young women, subset $n \approx 35$ with body concerns within a larger sample), participants completed a brief mindful self-compassion workshop and were followed at 1-month; repeated-measures MANOVA showed reductions in body dissatisfaction and social appearance anxiety relative to waitlist.

Turk, Waller, & Bryant (2020) This meta-analytic review synthesized 21 studies (total $N \approx 5,966$) and used random-effects meta-analysis to find a medium–large negative correlation between self-compassion and body image concerns ($r \approx -.45$) and a positive correlation with body appreciation ($r \approx .52$), noting heterogeneity across age and method.

Fardouly & Vartanian (2015) in an experimental and correlational program with young women, the authors used ANOVA and regression to show that exposure to appearance-focused social media increases

upward comparison and body dissatisfaction; they discuss self-compassion as a potential moderator to buffer these effects.

Fitspiration vs Self-Compassion Stimuli Study (2021) in two U.S. samples (Study 1 $N \approx 180$ undergraduates; Study 2 $N \approx 296$ community adults), experimental ANOVAs showed that viewing self-compassion quotes improved immediate body satisfaction and lowered upward comparison relative to fitspiration images, indicating brief self-compassion cues can counteract social comparison effects.

Guo et al. (2023) using cross-sectional survey data in a Chinese sample of young adults, the authors applied mediation analysis and found self-compassion reduces appearance anxiety partly via reduced rumination and fear of negative evaluation; statistics included bootstrapped indirect effects.

Tylka & Homan (2015 replication) A replication/extension in a mixed-gender sample ($N \approx 300$) used hierarchical regression and confirmed that self-compassion weakens the relationship between appearance-based social comparison and body dissatisfaction, and predicts greater body appreciation.

Martín-Herrera et al. (2018) a Spanish cross-sectional study ($N \approx 412$ university students) used SEM to show self-compassion predicts lower body shame and social appearance anxiety, with mediation via decreased upward comparisons; results support cross-culture applicability.

Pila et al. (2022) in a sport-focused sample of young athletes ($N \approx 220$), showed that self-compassion was related to lower body-related shame and anxiety, and higher body appreciation especially under conditions of performance pressure, using mixed ANOVA and regression;

Smeets et al. (2017) in an RCT with young adult women ($N \approx 80$), found a reduced self-criticism and body-dissatisfaction following a self-compassion training for six weeks, and reported repeated-measures ANOVA and effect sizes to analyze;

Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford (2015) in a randomized trial ($N \approx 86$ women), a brief self-compassion writing exercise reduced negative body image and lowered social appearance concerns at immediate post test (t-tests, moderate effect sizes).

Nicol et al. (2019) in a longitudinal study of college students ($N \approx 320$) used cross-lagged panel modeling and found that higher baseline self-compassion predicted reduced social comparison and lower social appearance anxiety six months later.

Boone et al. (2017) Boone et al. (2017) examined self-compassion, body image, BMI and self-esteem in a sample of young adult French participants ($N \approx 210$). Correlational analyses and regression analyses found that self-compassion predicted body satisfaction when controlling for self-esteem and BMI, providing evidence of incremental validity.

Webb & Zimmer-Gembeck (2014) in adolescents and emerging adults (combined $N \approx 450$), moderation analyses indicated that self-compassion buffered the negative associations of social comparison with social anxiety and appearance concerns.

Need Of The Study

The societal pressures of idealized images and social comparisons, largely propagated via social media, for young adults today, are at an unprecedented level which has resulted in increased body dissatisfaction and anxiety about appearance (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Specifically, self-compassion has been associated with limiting these effects because self-compassion promotes acceptance of oneself and reduces self-criticism and is associated with helping individuals feel better about their bodies (Homan & Tylka, 2015; Turk et al., 2020). However, self-compassion has not been explored as a predictor of social comparison, body image, and social appearance anxiety among 18-25 year olds and has not been explored

among any Indian populations paid attention to these emerging adults. This paper will explore self-compassion contributions to the literature while providing more information on other areas of psychological protection to help increase body positivity and emotional well-being among young adults.

Research Methodology

AIM- To examine the role of self-compassion as a predictor of social comparison, body image, and social appearance anxiety among individuals aged 18–25 years.

Research Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between self-compassion and social comparison.
2. To explore the association between self-compassion and body image.
3. To study the relationship between self-compassion and social appearance anxiety.
4. To determine whether self-compassion significantly predicts social comparison, body image, and social appearance anxiety among young adults.

Hypotheses

H₁: There would be a significant negative relationship between self-compassion and social comparison.

H₂: There would be a significant positive relationship between self-compassion and body image.

H₃: There would be a significant negative relationship between self-compassion and social appearance anxiety.

Research Design

The present study adopted a quantitative correlational research design to explore how self-compassion predicts levels of social comparison, body image, and social appearance anxiety among young adults. The study is cross-sectional in nature and utilizes a survey-based approach using standardized psychological scales.

Sample Size

A total of **100 participants** aged **18–25 years** were included in the study. The **purposive sampling technique** was employed to select participants who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate voluntarily.

Inclusion Criteria

- Individuals aged between 18 and 25 years.
- Residents of Delhi NCR
- Participants willing to provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals below 18 or above 25 years.
- Not residing in Delhi NCR.
- Those unwilling to complete the full questionnaire or provide consent.

Tools Used

- **Self-Compassion Scale** (SCS; Neff, 2010)
- **Body Image Scale** (Cash, 2000)
- **Social Appearance Anxiety Scale** (SAAS; Hart et al., 2008)
- **Social Comparison Scale** (Allan and Gilbert, 1995)

Procedure

Participants were approached both online and offline. They were briefed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. After obtaining informed consent, standardized questionnaires were distributed. Completed responses were collected and prepared for statistical analysis.

Statistical Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic data, and Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between self compassion, social comparison, body image and social appearance anxiety.

Result

Variables	Mean	SD	Self compassion	Social comparision	Body image	Social appearance anxiety
Self compassion	38.3	7.39	1	.678**	.579**	-.545**
Social comparision	65.9	19.8		1	.614**	-.503**
Body image	34.3	10.3			1	-.712**
Social Appearance anxiety	36.4	15.6				1

Table 1. Shows the mean, sd and value of all variables.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among study variables are presented in Table 1. The mean score for the Self-Compassion Scale (M = 38.30, SD = 7.39) indicated a moderate level of self-compassion among participants. Social Comparison scores (M = 65.90, SD = 19.80) reflected a moderate tendency to compare oneself with others. The mean Body Image score (M = 34.30, SD = 10.30) suggested generally positive perceptions of one’s body, while the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (M = 36.40, SD = 15.60) indicated a moderate level of appearance-related anxiety.

Pearson’s correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relationships between variables. As shown in Table 1, Self-Compassion was positively correlated with Social Comparison, $r(98) = .68, p < .001$, and Body Image, $r(98) = .58, p < .001$, indicating that individuals with higher self-compassion also reported higher social comparison and more positive body image. Conversely, Self-Compassion was negatively correlated with Social Appearance Anxiety, $r(98) = -.55, p < .001$, suggesting that higher self-compassion was associated with lower levels of appearance-related anxiety.

In addition, Social Comparison was positively correlated with Body Image, $r(98) = .61, p < .001$, and both variables were negatively correlated with Social Appearance Anxiety, $r(98) = -.50$ and $-.71$, respectively, $p < .001$. All relationships were statistically significant, indicating a consistent pattern among self-compassion, appearance evaluation, and social anxiety.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the relationships between self-compassion, social comparison, body image, and social appearance anxiety. The findings revealed several significant associations consistent with theoretical expectations.

First, self-compassion showed a significant positive association with body image, suggesting that individuals who treat themselves with kindness and understanding tend to perceive their bodies more positively. This aligns with previous research indicating that self-compassion fosters body appreciation, acceptance, and resilience against negative body evaluation (Neff, 2003; Wasyliw et al., 2012).

Second, a significant negative correlation between self-compassion and social appearance anxiety indicates that individuals with higher levels of self-compassion experience less fear or anxiety regarding their physical appearance. This finding supports earlier studies suggesting that self-compassion reduces body-related shame and fear of negative judgment (Mosewich et al., 2011).

Unexpectedly, self-compassion was found to be positively correlated with social comparison, contrary to the hypothesized negative relationship. One possible explanation is that participants who are self-compassionate may still engage in social comparison as a means of self-improvement rather than self-criticism. Alternatively, cultural or contextual factors may influence the way social comparison is perceived, making it less detrimental in this sample.

Overall, the findings highlight that self-compassion plays an important role in promoting positive body image and reducing appearance-related anxiety, although its relationship with social comparison may be more complex than originally expected.

Conclusion

The study provides evidence that self-compassion is an important psychological resource linked to healthier perceptions of one's body and reduced appearance-related anxiety. Individuals with higher self-compassion tend to experience lower social appearance anxiety and a more positive body image. Although the unexpected positive correlation between self-compassion and social comparison warrants further investigation, the overall pattern suggests that enhancing self-compassion could serve as a protective factor against negative body evaluations and social appearance concerns.

In summary, fostering self-compassion may be a beneficial strategy for improving body satisfaction and emotional well-being, particularly in social contexts that emphasize appearance and comparison.

Limitations

Despite the valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional correlational design prevents causal interpretations; it cannot be concluded that self-compassion directly influences body image or appearance anxiety. Second, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias and social desirability effects. Third, the sample size ($N = 100$), while adequate for correlational analysis, limits the generalizability of the results to larger or more diverse populations.

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