



Self-compassion moderates body comparison and appearance self-worth's inverse relationships with body appreciation



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ABSTRACT

Although research on positive body image has increased, little research has explored which variables protect body appreciation during body-related threats. Self-compassion may be one such variable. Individuals high in self-compassion are mindful, kind, and nurturing toward themselves during situations that threaten their adequacy, while recognizing that being imperfect is part of “being human.” In this study, we investigated whether two body-related threats (i.e., body comparison and appearance contingent self-worth) were more weakly related to body appreciation when self-compassion was high among an online sample of 263 women ($M_{age} = 35.26, SD = 12.42$). Results indicated that self-compassion moderated the inverse relationships between body related threats and body appreciation. Specifically, when self-compassion was very high, body comparison and appearance contingent self-worth were unrelated to body appreciation. However, when self-compassion was low, these relationships were strong. Self-compassion, then, may help preserve women's body appreciation during body-related threats.

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Introduction

Within the past decade, scholars have acknowledged the value in understanding and promoting positive body image and thus have begun investigating this construct via qualitative and quantitative designs (Frisén & Holmqvist, 2010; Tylka, 2011; Wood-Barcalow, Tylka, & Augustus-Horvath, 2010). The most comprehensive and studied aspect of positive body image is body appreciation, which is defined as holding favorable opinions toward the body regardless of its appearance, accepting the body along with its deviations from societal beauty ideals, respecting the body by attending to its needs and engaging in healthy behaviors, and protecting the body by rejecting unrealistic media appearance ideals (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005). This construct does not simply represent the “healthy” end of a continuum with body dissatisfaction anchoring the “unhealthy” end, but instead, has been shown to be uniquely related to various indicators of well-being (Avalos et al., 2005). Although body image researchers have extensively explored causes and correlates of body dissatisfaction, body appreciation

has received less attention. However, because body appreciation entails more than the absence of dissatisfaction and has strong links to well-being, it is important to consider factors that help to achieve and sustain it. The present study explored the moderating role of self-compassion in the context of two potential challenges to body appreciation: social comparison and appearance contingent self-worth.

Self-compassion is defined as an attitude of kindness and understanding toward one's personal disappointments and struggles that includes three interconnected components: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Mindfulness refers to being open to and moved by personal distress while taking a nonjudgmental attitude toward perceived inadequacies and failures. Self-kindness entails treating oneself with understanding, patience, and forgiveness, even when confronted with perceived inadequacy or disappointment. People who are self-kind affirm that they deserve love and affection. Common humanity refers to the recognition that all people are imperfect, make mistakes, and experience failure. As a result of this recognition, self-compassionate people do not feel isolated by the experience of failure or struggle. Self-compassion is different conceptually from self-esteem; self-esteem distances people from confronting their personal inadequacies which preempts their experience of distress and prompts self-enhancing illusions (Neff, 2009; Neff & Vonk, 2009).

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Substantial evidence supports self-compassion as a beneficial characteristic (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). Self-compassionate people report lower rates of psychological distress, such as anxiety, depression, and stress (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). They also report higher rates of desirable characteristics, such as life satisfaction, social connectedness, perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation (Neff, 2003b; Neff et al., 2005). Self-compassion is also related to healthier body image, including lower body dissatisfaction, body shame, and body surveillance as well as higher body appreciation and body image flexibility (i.e., the ability to accept negative body-related thoughts and feelings while remaining committed to desired and valued behaviors; Daye, Webb, & Jafari, 2014; Kelly, Vimalakanthan, & Miller, 2014; Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Wasylikiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012). Researchers have begun to replicate these findings using experimental designs; for example, community women who received a 3-week online self-compassion meditation training program experienced greater body appreciation and lower body shame and body dissatisfaction, and maintained these improvements at a 3-month follow-up, relative to a control group (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2014).

Researchers are beginning to conceptualize self-compassion as a buffer, or moderator, of the relationships between distressing events and negative self-feelings (Leary et al., 2007). Moderators change the strength or direction of the relationship between two variables, asking “when or for whom” a given relationship exists (Karazsia, van Dulmen, Wong, & Crowther, 2013, p. 434). By definition, people high in self-compassion respond to situations that threaten their personal adequacy by treating themselves with kindness and nonjudgmental understanding (Neff, 2003a), and this process can help to regulate negative emotions (Leary et al., 2007). Indeed, experimental manipulations of self-compassion have been shown to increase positive affect and decrease negative feelings about the self, when compared to control groups without self-compassion inductions (Leary et al., 2007). For example, among college women who restrict their eating, those who were induced to think self-compassionately after eating a doughnut (i.e., they were told that all people eat unhealthy foods at times and asked to not be hard on themselves because “this little amount of food doesn’t matter anyway”) were able to reduce their disinhibited eating relative to a control group who did not receive the self-compassion induction (Adams & Leary, 2007, p. 1129).

Because self-compassion has been shown to regulate negative emotions, it is likely that it can buffer women against factors that produce feelings of shame toward their bodies, and initial evidence supports this idea. For example, given that society defines beauty as being thin for women, elevated BMI is often linked to weight stigma (interpersonal shame by others) and internalized self-shame among women (Tylka et al., 2014). A recent study showed that self-compassion weakened the positive relationship between BMI and eating pathology and inverse relationship between BMI and body image flexibility for women (Kelly et al., 2014). The authors concluded that treating oneself with understanding and kindness served as a protective factor for women, offsetting stigma and shame associated with having an elevated BMI in a culture that values thinness. Another recent study found that self-compassion weakened the links between women’s restrictive/critical caregiver eating messages (i.e., memories of their caregivers reprimanding them for eating too much and insinuating that they may be or become fat) and both body surveillance and body shame (Daye et al., 2014). These authors also concluded that self-compassion can protect women, in this case from early experiences of shame related to their bodies.

Another variable that has been shown to contribute to women’s feelings of inferiority is social comparison, which is the process of using information about others to derive conclusions about the self (Festinger, 1954). People engage in social comparison in domains that personally matter—and women are heavily socialized to view appearance as such a domain (Buote, Wilson, Strahan, Gazzola, & Papps, 2011). Indeed, evidence confirms that women commonly compare their bodies to their peers (Leahey, Crowther, & Mickelson, 2007; Trottier, Polivy, & Herman, 2007). It has been well-documented via correlational and experimental research that making frequent appearance comparisons is related to more negative feelings and derogatory statements about the body (Bamford & Halliwell, 2009; Corning & Gondoli, 2012; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002; Myers & Crowther, 2009). These findings are often explained in terms of “upward comparisons.” That is, when women compare themselves to someone who is thinner in cultures that value thinness, the recognition that they are heavier is likely to produce feelings of lowliness and negative self-appraisal (Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991). However, it is plausible that self-compassion could mitigate these well-documented effects. For example, if a woman recognizes that she is not as thin or toned as a peer or a health/fashion model, a compassionate attitude would help her to regulate feelings of inferiority and avoid self-criticism. A compassionate attitude might help her to assuage body-related distress that could emerge from the perceived discrepancy by recognizing that all bodies are different and nearly all bodies fall short of cultural ideals.

A second variable that has been associated with women’s distress is appearance contingent self-worth. Given pervasive cultural messages about the importance of physical beauty (particularly thinness), it is not surprising that many women internalize this message and come to believe that their worth as a person is, at least in part, rooted in their appearance (Buote et al., 2011). People seek to attain success and avoid failure in domains that matter most to them, and when self-worth is contingent upon an external criterion such as physical appearance, appearance takes on heightened importance (Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002). When women invest their self-worth in appearing like an unrealistic and unattainable criterion (e.g., digitally modified media images of women), then they may experience body-related distress. Consistent with this idea, appearance contingent self-worth has been linked with higher concerns about weight or shape (Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009) and higher body dissatisfaction, body surveillance, and eating disturbance (Bailey & Ricciardelli, 2010; Overstreet & Quinn, 2012). Yet, self-compassion may be able to weaken these associations. Self-compassion is not based on outperforming others or congruence with external standards. Instead, it is based on accepting oneself and recognizing that shortcomings or imperfections are part of being human. Thus, it is plausible that a self-compassionate attitude will promote self-kindness and understanding rather than self-judgment and criticism when women who value appearance fail to reach certain cultural standards of attractiveness.

To date, no study has explored whether self-compassion moderates the relationships between body comparison or appearance contingent self-worth and body appreciation. Therefore, we tested four hypotheses, grounded in the literature and rationale presented above. First, we hypothesized that body comparison and appearance contingent self-worth would show inverse associations with body appreciation. Although it has been well-established that body comparison and appearance contingent self-worth are related to higher body dissatisfaction, it is unknown whether they are related to body appreciation, a distinct construct from low body dissatisfaction (Avalos et al., 2005). Second, consistent with previous research (Wasylikiw et al., 2012), we predicted that self-compassion would show a significant positive relationship with body appreciation.

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