



## Body image in emerging adults: The protective role of self-compassion



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### ABSTRACT

Self-compassion is thought to protect from body image concerns. However, the mechanisms of this effect remain unclear. This study examined three positive dimensions of self-compassion as moderators of the mediated relationship between perceived overweight status, appearance comparison, and appearance esteem. A sample of 232 youth aged 13–18 years, mean = 18.36 ( $SD = 1.5$ ) years, reported on appearance esteem, appearance comparison, perceived weight status, and self-compassion dimensions including self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Among boys, mindfulness and common humanity moderated the perceived weight status to appearance comparison pathway of the mediation ( $ps = .01$ ), such that this relationship was weaker among boys with higher levels of these dimensions of self-compassion. These findings were not replicated among girls. None of the self-compassion dimensions moderated the appearance comparison to appearance esteem pathway. Self-compassion dimensions that decrease the focus on the self may protect against body image concerns among boys.

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### 1. Introduction

Western society has been described as highly appearance-focused and characterized by the adoption of unrealistic body ideals emphasizing slenderness and leanness (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999). Simultaneously, Western society is highly stigmatizing of overweight status (Rodgers, 2016). This standard of extreme thinness and stigmatization of overweight status has in turn been associated with body shape and weight concerns, particularly among youth who perceive themselves as overweight and failing to meet society's criteria for attractiveness (Hadland, Austin, Goodenow, & Calzo, 2014; Sonnevile et al., 2016; Strauss, 1999).

Appearance comparison, which is the tendency to engage in mostly unfavorable comparisons of one's physical appearance compared to others', has been identified as a critical mechanism in the maintenance of body image concerns (Thompson, Heinberg, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1991). Recently, self-compassion has been explored as a useful framework within which to ground interventions aiming to reduce body image concerns related to appearance pressures

to achieve unrealistic ideals and the stigma surrounding overweight status (Ferreira, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2013; Wasylikiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012). To date, however, the capacity of self-compassion to buffer the effects of perceived overweight on appearance comparison and subsequent body image concerns has undergone few formal examinations.

Sociocultural theory posits that appearance ideals are communicated to individuals through agents such as the media as well as family members and peers (Thompson et al., 1999). Central to these unrealistic appearance standards is the maintenance of a very low body weight (principally among females) and a very lean physique (among males). In addition to these ideals, Western society promotes the idea that body shape and weight are highly controllable through healthy eating and exercise practices, despite increasing evidence supporting the role of genetics in determining weight (Rodgers, 2016). Given this sociocultural context, the perception of being overweight, whether correct or not, may be perceived as a personal failure and would likely be associated with decreased body esteem. Indeed, perceived overweight status in adolescents has been shown to be associated with a number of indices of poor body image and lower self-esteem (e.g., Tiggemann, 2005).

Appearance esteem, specifically, is one facet of body image that captures the positive feelings of an individual related to their appearance (Mendelson, Mendelson, & White, 2001). In the last decade, the usefulness of considering the positive aspects of body

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image, as well as the factors that promote positive body image (in contrast to a model focused on risk and pathology) has been increasingly emphasized (Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005; Swami, Hadji-Michael, & Furnham, 2008). In addition, appearance esteem, as well as other indices of positive body image, has been found to be lower among higher weight male and female young adults (Streeter, Milhausen, & Buchholz, 2012; Swami et al., 2008). Thus, examining the factors that can help protect and foster positive body image in youth across weight status is an important direction for research.

One of the principal mechanisms highlighted by sociocultural theory that accounts for the effect of unrealistically thin appearance ideals, i.e. the thin-ideal, on body esteem is appearance comparison, which is the process of comparing one's appearance to that of others (van den Berg, Thompson, Obremski-Brandon, & Covert, 2002). Social identity theory, from which the theory of appearance comparison is derived, would posit that heavier individuals are thought to engage in more numerous appearance comparisons due to heavier weight, potentially constituting a threat to appearance esteem in a context that places a high value on thinness (Festinger, 1954). Unfortunately, the majority of social appearance comparisons are unfavorable which likely in turn leads to greater concerns regarding appearance (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2012).

Consistent with this, appearance comparison has been found to be associated with self-reported weight as well as lower body satisfaction among adolescents and adults (Rodgers, Paxton, & Mclean, 2014; Schaefer & Thompson, 2014). In addition, appearance comparison has been found to be associated with lower levels of weight esteem among adolescents (Tiggemann & Miller, 2010). Thus, appearance comparisons seem to be more frequent among individuals with lower levels of body satisfaction and who perceive themselves as having a higher weight status. In addition, and in support of the role of appearance comparison as a mechanism in the maintenance of low body satisfaction, appearance comparison has been found to mediate the relationship between weight status and body dissatisfaction (van den Berg et al., 2007). To date, the protective factors that might buffer from the negative effects of appearance comparison on body esteem are not well understood.

Self-compassion has been defined as being open to and non-avoidant of one's experiences, being caring towards and non-judgmental of oneself, particularly in times of distress, and recognizing that experiences of oneself as inadequate are intrinsic to the human experience (Neff, 2003). As defined by Neff (2003) self-compassion incorporates three core components: mindfulness, self-kindness, and common humanity. Self-compassion is thought to foster self-kindness, nurturance, and a compassionate view of one's self and body, as well as the capacity to respond to environmental threats or stressors (such as appearance pressures) in a non-reactive and non-judgmental way (Ferreira et al., 2013). It is also described as decreasing self-absorption and self-criticism (Neff, 2003). Thus, self-compassion provides a promising framework for disrupting the pathways described within sociocultural theory as leading to the development of low body esteem. Critically, acceptance-based frameworks such as self-compassion seek to disrupt the associations between private events such as thoughts and feelings, rather than attempting to modify the form or frequency of such events (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). These approaches aim to help individuals cultivate a different relationship to their thoughts, feeling and sensations, in a way that is accepting and non-judgmental. In the context of body image, and the pathways described above, this would imply that self-compassion would interrupt the mediated pathways, rather than for example decreasing the frequency of appearance comparison.

A small body of emerging research has started to explore the relationship between self-compassion and body image, finding support for the role of self-compassion as a protective factor (Braun,

Park, & Gorin, 2016). Two of the main pathways for this protective factor that have been considered include (1) that self-compassion may have a direct relationship with positive body image, in that it increases positive thoughts about and acceptance of one's appearance, and (2) that self-compassion may buffer against the effects of risk factors, such as appearance comparison, on body image. As the majority of the research to date has been cross-sectional, unsurprisingly, evidence to support both of these mechanisms has been found (Braun et al., 2016).

Specifically, with regard to the moderating hypothesis, it has been shown that self-compassion buffered the relationship between media pressure to be thin and internalization of the thin-ideal among a community sample of women, such that self-compassion protected against the effects of experiencing high levels of pressure to be thin on thin-ideal internalization (Tylka, Russell, & Neal, 2015). Similarly, among Canadian female undergraduates, self-compassion was shown to decrease the strength of the relationship between body weight and weight concerns, such that among young women with high body weight, those with higher levels of self-compassion reported fewer weight concerns (Kelly, Vimalakanthan, & Miller, 2014). In addition, self-compassion was found to buffer the relationship between family influences and body image among U.S. undergraduate women, such that it protected against the effects of critical messages from caregivers (Daye, Webb, & Jafari, 2014). Thus, there is some evidence for the buffering role of self-compassion in the pathways described within sociocultural models of body image concerns; however, all of these studies have been conducted among adult women, and studies including younger populations and males are absent from the literature.

Very few studies have examined the protective role of self-compassion as related to appearance comparison. One study among young women from the U.S. revealed that self-compassion moderated the relationship between body comparison and body appreciation, such that women with higher self-compassion were protected from the effects of appearance comparison on body appreciation (Homan & Tylka, 2015). The findings from this study supported the theory that women with higher levels of self-compassion might engage in appearance comparisons but be protected from the detrimental effects of these comparisons on their body image. The current study sought to replicate and extend these findings by testing this hypothesis in both male and female emerging adults, and examining the moderating effect of the positive dimensions of self-compassion on the relationship between appearance comparison and appearance esteem. The current study differs from this previous study in that it specifically seeks to examine the protective effect of self-compassion on *appearance esteem*, as opposed to body appreciation, which captures a broader dimension of positive body image, including an acceptance of perceived flaws and a lack of overvaluation of appearance as part of identity (Avalos et al., 2005).

In addition to the moderating relationship explored by Homan and Tylka (2015), however, it is also possible that self-compassion buffers from engaging in appearance comparison, for example by moderating the relationship between weight perceptions and engagement in appearance comparison. If this second pathway were correct, self-compassion would protect from engaging in appearance comparisons. In this way, youth who perceive themselves to be divergent from the thin-ideal, through a capacity for self-compassion, may not engage in appearance comparisons. The current study sought to extend previous findings by also examining this hypothesis.

In this way, the aim of the current study was to extend previous research on the protective role of self-compassion by examining these two moderation hypotheses among a sample of U.S. youth aged 13–19 years, primarily emerging adults. Specifically, given the role of appearance comparison as a mediator in the relation-

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