

# ***Effect of Self-Compassion on Moderating Body Dissatisfaction***

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**Abstract:** Unreal or photo-shopped body image proposed by the media has been claimed to enhance body dissatisfaction. The main goal of this paper is to discuss whether self-compassion can improve the substantial body image dissatisfaction of western females. This paper provides a theoretical analysis based on previous research. It summarizes the previous research results showing that self-compassion can influence people's attitudes and acceptance of stereotypes and analyzes how this influence, led by self-compassion, can help to improve body satisfaction and cope with eating disorders. The result is that self-compassion can moderate females' body dissatisfaction by intensifying females' body evaluation, enhancing their immunity to gender stereotypes, and coping with the disorders that reflect body dissatisfaction.

**Keywords:** Self-compassion, Gender stereotype, body dissatisfaction, Female

## **1. Introduction**

The media plays a vital role in shaping people's perception of beauty; it can be a bad thing. To be more specific, the photoshopped and unreal images of the body that is used by the media of western society, such as TV or magazines, significantly enhance people's stereotyped notion of "body"; the mismatch between people's body image and gender stereotype enhanced by the media declines their body satisfaction [1]. More importantly, compared to males, females tend to report more body dissatisfaction [2]. As a result, in these digital times when media-enhanced stereotypes are unavoidable, media-induced body image dissatisfaction has become an issue that impairs females' quality of life. Fortunately, self-compassion might provide a way to solve this problem. Self-compassion is the concept that people show their compassion for the suffering themselves to cope with the frustration and see themselves in view of inclusion [3]. This paper applies the results of previous research on the relationship between self-compassion, body appreciation, acceptance of stereotypes, and eating disorders to analyze whether being compassionated toward oneself would overcome this issue. Considering that it is easier for the female to receive the unreal body image proposed by media in these digital times, discovering a technique of moderating the media-aroused body dissatisfaction is essential for females to maintain or improve their life quality.

## 2. Self-compassion Enhance Body Appreciation

Firstly, the technique of self-compassion can increase females' appreciation of their bodies. The reason is that self-compassion can make people evaluate their bodies with a kind and nurturing attitude because self-compassion emphasizes kindness to oneself and tolerance of one's mistakes [3]. A kind and nurturing attitude can increase their kindness and patience with their body. On the one hand, the enhanced kindness upon their body can make them more friendly to their body. On the other hand, the stronger patience with their body prevents them from complaining about the 'imperfection' on their body if there is a mismatch between body image and media-enhanced gender stereotypes. The awareness that being friendly and patient with their body stimulated by self-compassion makes them more likely to appreciate their body. As for the evidence, 263 female adults were guided to rate their tendency to be patient and kind to their body image and their level of body appreciation to measure their level of self-compassion and body satisfaction simultaneously [4]. This research indicated that participants with a stronger tendency to be kind and patient with their body traits are more likely to appreciate their bodies [4]. Besides providing a positive attitude that encourages body appreciation, self-compassion can increase body appreciation by allowing females to be aware that the gender stereotypes enhanced by the media are not the only acceptable body form because self-compassion can make people to interpret themselves with consideration of the whole humanity [3]. The broader perspective provided by self-compassion allows females to recognize that most female bodies do not perfectly match the gender stereotype promoted by the media. However, it does not mean they must be depressed about their "imperfect body." In other words, the consideration of the whole human condition makes females realize that even though most females do not have movie actors and model bodies, they can still live with happiness. As a result, considering the entire humanity can help them understand their current body image, which does not match the gender stereotype and cannot prevent them from living happily, motivating them to appreciate their body image. Barron's study involves prospectively exposing 118 late adolescent and early adult females to motivational images and self-compassion quotes on Instagram. The fitspiration picture only shows individuals with low levels of adiposity. The self-compassion pictures, however, show females in various body forms, whether high or low adiposity. There are also self-compassion quotes in these pictures, such as "do not push yourselves so hard." The researchers measured the change in participants' body satisfaction after exposure to the content and found that only the participants who read the self-compassion quotes exhibited higher scores on the scale of measuring body appreciation compared to the group viewing fitspiration pictures, indicating that the awareness that many females whose body does not match the gender stereotype can still be happy does increase female's tendency of body appreciation [5]. More importantly, body appreciation plays an important role in improving body dissatisfaction because females with a stronger tendency to appreciate their bodies can find more positive aspects than females who cannot. The awareness that their body is positive in some way can help them to develop better body satisfaction. According to Tiggemann & McCourt, female who reports stronger tendencies of appreciating their body can also give a more detailed description of their positive perspective on their body, indicating their more profound understanding of their body's positive aspects, which is significantly beneficial to their body satisfaction [6]. From this perspective, self-compassion can moderate the female's body dissatisfaction because it can increase the female's tendency of body appreciation, enhancing their body satisfaction.

## 3. Self-Compassion Moderates the Effect of Gender Stereotypes

Secondly, self-compassion can make females less likely to be influenced by gender stereotypes in the media. The key reason the gender stereotype can hurt females' body satisfaction is that it leads females to compare themselves with the unreal body image in the media. Females were unavoidably exposed

to media information in these digital times. As a relatively accessible criterion of body shape, the gender stereotype in the media constructs females' criteria for evaluating their bodies. As a result of media influence, females would compare their body image to the unreal and photoshopped body image in the media. This media-induced body comparison would lead to their dissatisfaction with their body because a female's real body image is not likely to match with the unreal body image in the media and this mismatch between the ideal criterion and real body image impairs their body satisfaction. Fortunately, self-compassion can decrease their tendency to compare themselves with gender stereotypes. According to Neff's introduction to self-compassion, mindfulness, one of the important aspects of operating self-compassion, allows people to focus on reflecting their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings without suppression and judgment [3]. In other words, self-compassion allows females to concentrate more on their thoughts and feelings during the process of reflecting on themselves instead of over-considering external information, such as the gender stereotypes in the media. The self-compassion's emphasis on personal thoughts and feelings prevents females from internalizing gender stereotypes as the criterion of body. Therefore, self-compassion can moderate gender stereotypes' impairment of body satisfaction by moderating their tendency to engage in media-induced body comparison. As for the evidence, Homan & Tylka investigate the inverse relationship between gender stereotypes and body satisfaction, and they found that self-compassion plays a mediating role in this relationship [4]. Their result indicates that females with a high level of self-compassion exhibit a lower tendency to engage in body comparison even though they were exposed to the gender stereotype in the media. In this way, the stereotype's impairment on their body satisfaction is moderated [4].

#### **4. Self-Compassion is Helpful to Prevent Eating Disorder**

Thirdly, self-compassion can be applied to prevent the eating disorder; the reason why this effect is important to improve a female's body dissatisfaction is that the eating disorder which is the reflection of body dissatisfaction. Eating disorders refer to the inability to maintain eating habits, including the symptoms of binge eating or purging behavior [7]. Females who are dissatisfied with their bodies are at a higher risk of developing eating disorders. The reason is that body dissatisfaction would stimulate a strong eagerness to pursue the thinness or the unreal ideal body image in the media. The pursuit of thinness causes them to avoid eating or even vomit the food they just ate to decrease the intake of calories. The research organized by Berengüi indicates that the individual with a higher level of body dissatisfaction is more likely to suffer from eating disorders [8]. Therefore, stronger body dissatisfaction can be reflected as the symptoms of abandoning eating and the inability to keep the eating habit. Self-compassion can also be applied to moderate the symptoms of eating disorders because females with high level of self-compassion contain a stronger ability to accept their body form. According to the current study of eating disorders pathology, a higher body mass index, which is the indicator of an individual's weight, usually predicts eating disorders [9]. From this perspective, it can be seen that the occurrence of eating disorders is related to high weight. Considering that most gender stereotypes promoted by the media regard thinness as the ideal body form, high-weight female is more likely to suffer from eating disorders because their eagerness to decrease the intake of calories is stronger. However, self-compassion emphasizes the tendency to show compassion to themselves during distress. Even though females might not be able to appreciate or resist the influence of gender stereotypes, self-compassion can also allow them to enhance their ability to receive their dissatisfied body image, declining their motivation to decrease their intake of calories. The declined motivation to prevent the intake of calories also decreases the likelihood of developing the eating disorders symptoms, such as abandoning eating or vomiting. The research measures the level of self-compassion, BMI, and the tendency to develop eating disorders among 153 female participants [9]. Their results indicate that a high level of self-compassion eliminates the positive relationship between

BMI and eating disorders. In other words, the females with a high level of self-compassion, the high BMI does not predict a higher risk of suffering from an eating disorder. However, for females with moderate or even low-level of self-compassion, the positive relationship between BMI and eating disorders still exists [9]. Besides the evidence that self-compassion prevents the development of eating disorders, Ferreira also found that eating disorders do report less tendency for self-compassion. According to researchers, their high level of body shame is aroused by the lower tendency of self-compassion, leading to the development of eating disorders [10]. This research indicates that the level of self-compassion is a significant variable that predicts the development of eating disorders, implying that high-level self-compassion is indispensable for females to avoid eating disorders. Overall, self-compassion can prevent females from suffering from eating disorders by enhancing their acceptance of their bodies. Given that eating disorders are a reflection of body dissatisfaction, self-compassion is critical in reducing female body dissatisfaction.

## 5. Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that there are risks in using self-compassion techniques to improve body dissatisfaction. Self-compassion can only be used as a mental excuse and may affect people's motivation to improve their physical health. To be more specific, people with obesity need to exercise to improve their health, and the kindness and self-inclusive attitude that comes with self-compassion may lead them to underestimate the health risks they face. The research focusing on females with obesity found that the re-increase follows a higher level of self-compassion in weight [11]. However, self-compassion can evoke intrinsic motivation for women to improve their physical condition. As mentioned in the second paragraph, self-compassion can increase women's tendency to appreciate their bodies. The body appreciation fostered by self-compassion can lead women to care more about their health status, because women who appreciate their bodies perceive them as valuable, leading them to have stronger motivation to keep them healthy. The enhanced motivation to stay healthy can be reflected in stronger motivation to exercise. This study recruited 323 female university students to attend a 16-week yoga course. The yoga instructor's teaching philosophy of guiding students away from judgment and allowing participants to respect their bodies ensured self-compassion. Statistical analysis showed that participants' levels of self-compassion increased during the yoga sessions and that the increased self-compassion also led them to report a better appreciation of their bodies. More importantly, the researchers also found that improved body appreciation did predict greater intrinsic motivation to further engage in exercise [12]. Thus, self-compassion can enhance women's motivation to maintain physical health because self-compassion allows them to realize that their bodies are valuable and worth valuing; self-compassion serves as much more than a psychological excuse.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper illustrates the effect of self-compassion on improving a female's body satisfaction and suggests that self-compassion can provide more than a mental excuse. On the one hand, self-compassion can enhance a female's level of body appreciation. In contrast, a higher level of body appreciation allows females to notice more positive aspects of their bodies, improving body satisfaction. On the other hand, self-compassion also enables females to concentrate more on their thoughts instead of the gender stereotypes in the media, moderating the harmful effects of gender stereotypes on their body satisfaction. More importantly, self-compassion can help females avoid the symptoms of eating disorders. The researches indicate that self-compassion can eliminate the positive relationship between BMI and eating disorders. In contrast, females with a lower level of self-compassion are at a higher risk of eating disorders. Based on all the discussed effects of self-compassion, the technique of self-compassion points out the path for a female to get rid of body

dissatisfaction in this time full of stereotyped body judgment. The critical limitation of this research is the lack of advice on how to systematically apply self-compassion. Further research on this topic might focus on designing specific interventions or guidance that enable females with low body satisfaction to apply self-compassion to themselves. Besides designing particular interventions, this paper might also imply further research to examine the external validity of self-compassion in moderating body dissatisfaction. The studies that can measure changes in subjects' body satisfaction after experiencing a self-compassion intervention might also help us understand more about applying self-compassion in reality.

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