



Relationship of Self-Compassion and Dysmorphic Concern in the Role of Appearance Contingent Self-worth among University Students

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Abstract- The present study was an empirical attempt to examine the relationship of self-compassion and dysmorphic concern in the role of appearance contingent self-worth among university students. The sample of the current study was taken from the University of Sargodha ($N = 335$) while using multi-stage sampling. At first, four faculties from the University of Sargodha were selected through the lottery method. In the second stage departments from the four faculties were randomly selected through the lottery method. From selected departments, the fixed numbers of students (i.e., 25 students from each department) were approached based on convenience. Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSW; Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003), Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011), and Dysmorphic Concern Questionnaire (DCQ; Oosthuizen, 1998) were used to measure the relevant constructs. Theregression analysis revealed that appearance contingent self-worth ($\beta = -.02, p > .05$) and self-compassion ($\beta = .02, p > .05$) are not the predictors of dysmorphic concern. The results of the study also showed that appearance contingent self-worth is mediating the relationship between self-compassion and dysmorphic concern. In the end, limitations, suggestions, and practical implications have also been thoroughly discussed.

Keywords: Body comparison, appearance contingent self-worth, self-compassion, dysmorphic concern, university students

I. INTRODUCTION

Self-compassion is an ability to be kind to oneself besides knowing about one's shortcomings. It is also defined as the ability for someone to acknowledge that they are not uniquely experiencing the feelings that they have (Neff, 2003a, 2003b). Empirically it is correlated with hopelessness and nervousness (De-Souza, Policarpo, & Hutz, 2020; Wasylikiw, MacKinnon, & MacLellan, 2012). Other correlates include success aims, dealing with educational disappointments, and control beliefs about learning (Iskender, 2011; Luo, Meng, Li, Liu, Cao, & Ge, 2019). People having greater self-compassion are also noted to have greater degrees of self-development drive (Breines & Chen, 2012; Phillips, 2019).

Self-compassion and Dysmorphic Concern

Individuals who have self-compassion will be healthy and will have a low dysmorphic concern because it teaches individuals to accept their imperfections and slight defects in appearance. Research also showed that individuals who have self-compassion are mentally better than people without it. It is also linked with excellence, and dread of disappointment (Neff 2003a; Ceccarelli, Giuliano, Glazebrook, & Stracha, 2019).

Previous studies also revealed that self-compassion acts as a technique that educates people on how to acknowledge themselves despite their flaws; it has a tendency of reducing the misery related to body dissatisfaction. Self-compassion may reduce body shame i.e., the feeling that if body values of the culture and society are not fulfilled then one is not a good person (Liss, & Erchull, 2015; Beadle, 2020). Some other studies also showed the same results that it is related to the low dysmorphic concern. A research was conducted which found that it is also correlated with a low level of body disappointments, embarrassment, and nervousness related to the body (Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Beadle, 2020;). Similarly, the results of another research also indicated that less body distress, body obsession, and tension regarding weight are predicted by higher levels of self-compassion (Wasylikiw et

al., 2012; Sedighimornani, Rimes, & Verplanken, 2019). Previous studies identified that it helps reduce the dysmorphic concern. It is probably going to decrease body dissatisfaction such that the people possessing self-compassion are polite, and calm instead of being critical. With help of common humanity that is part of self-compassion people view their looks from a comprehensive viewpoint which alleviates body disappointment and related sentiments of embarrassment.

Previous researches have shown that those individuals who judge themselves negatively utilize depressing self-talk (DeVore, 2013). Additionally, a few examinations have recommended that women have a lesser degree of confidence (Gentile et al., 2009). Confidence and self-compassion are theoretically different from each other and illustrate different types of links with selfishness, social comparison, and contingent self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Self-compassion is related to affirmative personality states, for example, hopefulness, life contentment, and thankfulness, it might also increase a feeling of admiration and regard for one's body (Breen, Kashdan, Lenser, & Fincham, 2010).

The mediating role of Appearance Contingent Self-worth

It was found in research that self-compassion produces optimistic feelings about the self. It is also related to stable sentiments of self-esteem. People having self-compassion do not compare their appearance with others that is why their self-worth is high and is not dependent on appearance (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Though a study proposed that both self-compassion and contingent self-worth might be possible sources of individual flexibility that affect the embarrassment-depressive signs relation. A person having high self-compassion would have low appearance contingent self-worth because one's apparent self-compassion is portrayed by a feeling of acknowledgment, self-consideration despite the disappointment, recognition of the current situation, and admiration of human flaws (Neff & Vonk, 2009). In this way, it might be a successful method of developing a worth of oneself (Neff, 2003a).

Even though the idea of contingent self-worth adds to a feeling of superiority and individual achievement, such insight may only give momentary assurance of one's value. People can only have high appearance contingent self-worth if they are not disappointed while comparing their appearance and body image with others (Ryan & Brown, 2003). Furthermore, a decrease in sense of worth that happens as a consequence of failure in perspectives of contingent self-worth such as social comparison would be higher than advantages obtained from successes in the same perspectives (Crocker & Knight, 2005). Therefore, one's elevated sense of contingent self-worth is beneficial when individual values are attained but limited in their benefits when those standards are not met. But if an individual has compassionate behavior towards himself then his self-worth would be supposed free of appearance (i.e. low appearance contingent self-worth). Furthermore, self-compassion has permanent consequences than contingent self-worth (Neff & Vonk, 2009).

People who have appearance contingent self-worth will have distress related to the body and a higher dysmorphic concern. Previous studies also investigated that distress is experienced by people when they use their self-worth in becoming similar to an impractical and unachievable set standard (e.g., digitally adapted pictures of models shown on television). Previous researches showed a relationship between appearance contingent self-worth and elevated apprehension about body or figure (Adams, Tyler, Calogero, & Lee, 2017; Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009).

Some other studies have also established a relationship between appearance contingent self-worth and body disappointment. Previous researches have also shown that it is also linked with eating disturbance (Overstreet & Quinn, 2012).

Individuals who have low self-compassion will do more body comparisons and they will have high appearance contingent self-worth, consequently, they will have a high dysmorphic concern and body dissatisfaction. Festinger (1954) cited in Castle & Phillips (2002) believed that self-esteem is lowered by social comparisons, particularly when there is the realization that the ideal will never be met. People who are involved in social comparisons have less confidence. They will have appearance contingent self-worth and consequently, they will also have a dysmorphic concern. The relationship has also been well-established by previous findings that body comparison and appearance contingent self-worth are associated with elevated body dissatisfaction (Modica, 2019; Homan, & Tylka, 2015; Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005).

Appearance contingent self-worth also serves as a mediator between self-compassion and dysmorphic concern. Early researches also demonstrated its mediating role. For instance, research was conducted which found that concentrating on one's looks leads to body shame in women but not men. The mediating role of body surveillance and appearance-contingent self-worth was also examined (Moya-Garofano, & Moya, 2019).

Body dissatisfaction is a main cause of distress in people. A feature that not only alleviates body dissatisfaction but also helps to create a positive feeling about the self is self-compassion. The research demonstrated causes of body image by considering correlation in sense of worth, self-compassion, and appearance contingent self-worth. Self-compassion and appearance contingent self-worth partly mediated the association between sense of worth and body image avoidance acts (Stapleton, Crighton, Carter, & Pidgeon, 2017).

The major objective of the study was to explore the relationship of self-compassion and dysmorphic concern in the role of appearance contingent self-worth in a randomly selected sample of university students. In this research, the following hypotheses had been formulated:

1. Appearance contingent self-worth will predict dysmorphic concern positively in university students.
2. Self-compassion will predict dysmorphic concern negatively in university students.
3. Appearance contingent self-worth will mediate the relationship between self-compassion and dysmorphic concern

II. METHOD

Research Design

The current study was a quantitative study with a correlational study design for measuring the relationship of self-compassion and dysmorphic concern in the role of appearance contingent self-worth.

Sample. The sample of the current study comprised students from the University of Sargodha ($N = 335$) including girls ($n = 210$) and boys ($n = 125$). Multi-stage sampling was used in this study. Firstly four faculties were selected randomly by using the lottery method then from each faculty three departments were selected by using the lottery method. Finally, 25 students from each selected department were approached by using convenient sampling. The age of sample ranged from 18 to 29 years ($M = 23.55$, $SD = 2.34$).

Instruments

Appearance sub-scale from Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale. The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale is a scale measuring seven domains of self-worth. Appearance subscale was utilized in this study which consists of 5 items anchored on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. The alpha reliability of the scale was found to be .84 (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003).

Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form. Self-compassion was measured through 12-item Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (Raes, Pommier, Neff, & Van Gucht, 2011). Its items are rated on a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always). The scale is psychometrically sound with an alpha, as reported by Raes (2011) as .91.

Dysmorphic Concern Questionnaire. The DCQ was assessed dysmorphic concern among the students. It comprises of 7 items with four possible responses including 0 (not at all), 1 (same as most people), 2 (more than most people), and 3 (much more than most people). Scores range from 0 to 3. Oosthuizen (1998) showed an alpha reliability of 0.87 on the scale.

Procedure

Multi-stage sampling was used to approach the sample. Four faculties were selected randomly from the faculties at the University of Sargodha. From each faculty, three departments were selected through the lottery method. Finally, after ensuring permission from the heads of the concerned departments, the students were approached from selected departments by using convenient sampling. The students completed the informed consent form, demographic information questionnaire, and four other questionnaires used in the proposed study.

III. RESULTS

To meet the objectives of the study, various statistical analyses were conducted including reliability analysis, correlation, and regression.

Table 1

Pearson Correlation among Study Variables (N = 335)

Variables	1	2	3	M	SD	α
1	-	.38***	.24***	17.98	7.57	.84
2		-	.39***	20.66	5.29	.53
3			-	37.16	6.68	.66

Note. 1 = body comparison; 2 = appearance contingent self-worth; 3 = self-compassion.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 1 shows Pearson correlation and psychometric properties of study variables. The findings indicate that dysmorphic concern has significant positive correlation with body comparison ($r = .42, p < .001$), self-worth contingencies ($r = .15, p < .01$) and self compassion ($r = .12, p < .05$). The reliability coefficient of body comparison, appearance contingent self-worth and self-compassion scale is .84, .53, and .66 respectively which indicates satisfactory internal consistency.

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analysis for Predicting Dysmorphic Concern from Body Comparison, Appearance Contingent Self-worth and Self Compassion (N= 335)

Variables	Dysmorphic Concern		F
	β	ΔR^2	
Self-worth contingencies	-.02		
Self-compassion	.02	.165	23.01***

*** $p < .001$.

Regression analysis is computed with body comparison, self-worth contingencies and self compassion as predictor variables and dysmorphic concern as outcome variable. The ΔR^2 value of .165 indicates that 16.5% variance in the dependent variable can be accounted for, by the predictors with $F(3, 331) = 23.01, p < .001$. The findings indicate that body comparison ($\beta = .42, p < .001$) has significant positive effect on dysmorphic concern whereas self-worth contingencies ($\beta = -.02, p > .05$) and self compassion ($\beta = .02, p > .05$) are non-significant predictors of dysmorphic concern.

Table 3*Standardized Path Coefficients for Direct and Indirect Effects of Self-compassion (N = 335)*

Paths	Outcome Variable	Predictor Variable	β	95%CI	
				LL	UL
a	DC	SC	-.11	-.22	.004
b	ACSW	SC	-.19**	-.30	-.07
c	DC	ACSW	.19**	.07	.30
d	DC	SC through ACSW	-.04	-.07	-.007

Note. DC = Dysmorphic concern; ACSW = Appearance contingent self-worth; SC = Self-compassion.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3 shows the mediating effect of self-compassion on dysmorphic concern through appearance contingent self-worth. R^2 value of 0.033 indicates that self-compassion explained 3.3 % variance in appearance contingent self-worth with $F(1,333) = 10.08, p < .01$. The R^2 value of 0.054 indicates that self-compassion and appearance contingent self-worth explained 5.4% variance in dysmorphic concern with $F(2,332) = 8.38, p < .001$. The indirect effect and direction of upper and lower limit confirmed the mediating effect of appearance contingent self-worth between self-compassion and dysmorphic concern.

IV. DISCUSSION

The existing study was conducted to explore the relationship of self-compassion and dysmorphic concern in the role of appearance contingent self-worth among University students. It was also hypothesized that appearance contingent self-worth would predict dysmorphic concern positively in university students. But the result of the current study fails to accept this hypothesis. The study was conducted in a city where people are not very fashionable and modern. According to the norms and values of society outer beauty is not preferred. Inner beauty which is the purity of the soul is appreciated in a city like Sargodha. People focus on inner beauty because they think that outer beauty fades out and is temporary but inner beauty lasts as long as a person is alive. People who are concerned about external beauty (physical appearance) and their self-worth is related to their appearance are considered materialistic and this act is not appreciated in Sargodha city.

The concept of beauty is not universal. It varies from culture to culture. What is seen as beautiful and attractive in one culture is seen as unhealthy and undesirable in another (Montero-Marin, et al., 2018). For the people of Sargodha true beauty starts from inside. Moreover, if there exists any type of self-worth regarding appearance, the nature of this attraction in appearance might differ from the western point of view. In Western society, the attraction and looking good involves the shape of the whole body while in a culture like ours, as the common observation suggests, appearance is more relevant to facial features rather than the whole body which might be another reason that the present study found that appearance contingent self-worth is not a predictor of dysmorphic concern.

It was hypothesized that self-compassion would predict dysmorphic concern negatively in university students but the results of the present study revealed that self-compassion is not a predictor of dysmorphic concern and these findings are in line with previous empirical evidence (Allen, Roberts, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Farrell, 2020). The sample of the present study comprised of students of university which is situated in such a city where people are relatively conservative and do not focus on skin beauty. They think that God is responsible for physical attractiveness; some people are born more beautiful than others. So, people here do not try to enhance or modify their physical appearance and beauty. They think that it is useless to spend time modifying the appearance and body shape (Ahmadpanah, et al., 2019). Perhaps, people here do not use self-compassion for perceived flaws in their appearance and body shape because they think that these flaws are by birth and they are due to genetics. Contrary to western culture, here people only utilize the ability of self-compassion for the things which are in the control of a person.

They believe that beauty is a gift of God and there is no role of a person in physical attractiveness and beauty (Akin, & Akin, 2017). Therefore, they do not use self-compassionate behavior for the concerns about the appearance and body shape. So, it may be a reason that this study showed non-significant prediction between self-compassion and dysmorphic concern.

Finally, it was hypothesized that appearance contingent self-worth would mediate the relationship between self-compassion and dysmorphic concern which was accepted. As self-compassion is the feeling of acceptance towards oneself a person expressing judgmental views about own appearance-related flaws would have appearance-dependent self-worth. Previous research showed that people with low self-compassion and who invest their self-worth in appearing like unrealistic criteria would have high appearance contingent self-worth (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2015; Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, & Larimer, 2009; Neff & Vonk, 2009).

People worried about their looks have low self-esteem because such individuals' self-worth is related to their physical representation and also show dysmorphic concerns. According to Quittkat, Hartmann, Düsing, Buhlmann, and Vocks (2019), individuals who are more concerned about their appearance, body shape, and body weight would have low self-esteem. In psychology, the term self-esteem is the overall self-worth or personal value of a person. So, there is a link between dysmorphic concern and appearance contingent self-worth.

People who have self-compassion will be healthy and will have low dysmorphic because it teaches individuals to accept their imperfections and slight defects in appearance. Research also showed that people possessing self-compassion enjoy good mental health (Neff 2003a; Wagner, 2020). It was concluded that self-compassion is linked with less body dissatisfaction (dysmorphic concern), and body shame (Mosewich, Kowalski, Sabiston, Sedgwick, & Tracy, 2011; Wagner, 2020). As there is a direct link between self-compassion and dysmorphic concern and mediator is enhancing the above-mentioned link.

V. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The current research has some limitations that should be overcome in the upcoming studies. Data was collected from a small sample (students of the University of Sargodha) in the present study. Due to the small sample size generalizability of results is low. Therefore it is suggested that a large sample should be taken in the later researches. This study explored things quantitatively. So, in future researches, things should be searched qualitatively and quantitatively to obtain deep insight. Data collection through a single source is also one of the limitations so it is suggested to utilize both self-report and observer-report measures.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

Besides certain weaknesses and limitations, the implications of this study also exist. Future researchers interested in studying the relationship of body comparison, appearance contingent self-worth self-compassion and dysmorphic concern can get help from this study. Clinicians and practitioners can get help from the findings (body comparison is the predictor of dysmorphic concern) of the study to control body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) at the initial stages. Besides this, they can also make interventions to reduce the dysmorphic concern in people. The findings of the study are also helpful for the counselors in increasing their awareness about dysmorphic concerns in the general population.

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