Being Compassionate in Early Adulthood
The Correlation Between Self-Compassion and Physical Appearance Comparison

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ABSTRACT

In early adulthood, college students have dynamics in developmental aspects that help them not to make a physical appearance as their focus. However, many students prioritize their appearance and feel dissatisfied, more sensitive about their physical appearance, and associated with negative feelings about their bodies. Self-compassion that makes people feel compassionate and not criticize themselves can help students toward the tendencies of physical appearance comparison. This research examined the relationship between self-compassion and physical appearance comparison in students in the early adulthood phase. It was conducted using the correlational method. The sample in this research is 343 students of Hasanuddin University Makassar (74% Female and 26 % Male), from the years 2017, 2018, and 2019, who are ≥20 years old and were taken based on the cluster sampling. Data were collected by using measurement tools: Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised (PACS-R) and Self-Compassion Scale (SCS). Bivariate Pearson Correlation Analysis showed a significance level of .000 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that self-compassion was significantly correlated with physical appearance comparison. Then, -0.264 as correlation coefficients which means if the higher self-compassion, the lower the physical appearance comparison. This finding could provide information for the readers, especially students in the early adulthood phase, about the importance of self-compassion to enhance their physical appearance's positive meaning.

Keywords: self-compassion, physical appearance comparison, early adulthood

1. INTRODUCTION

Adulthood is marked with responsibility and acts according to their wills [1]. It begins with early adulthood at the age of 20-40 years old, and they make decisions that have a lifelong impact on an individual's health, happiness, and success. They explore the career they want to achieve, their identity, and the lifestyle they want to adopt. Early adulthood is a period of adjustment to new life patterns and social expectations by experimenting and exploring [2].

The ideal standard of physical appearance is a common thing to be found by early adult individuals when they are exploring. Early adult individuals are considered able to accept the shortcomings of their body with the dynamics of early adulthood development that can make individuals receive and increase self-competence [2]. It is caused by developments that occur in the cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical aspects. Labouvie-Vief & Diehl, cited in Santrock [2], explained that early adult individuals involve reflective thinking to solve problems in various aspects of life so that they should be able to accept the contradictions or imperfections they had. Caspt, cited in Santrock [2], stated they are also more stable emotionally than adolescents. They realize that stable emotions are needed in carrying out the responsibilities assigned to individuals and understand that stable emotions help in individual thinking processes. Physical changes in early adulthood are also unavoidable. Hurlock [3] explained that if an individual grows into an adult, they learn to accept physical changes and know how to take advantage of them. Although the appearance may not be as expected, the individuals can recognize their shortcomings and realize that they can't erase the shortcomings but they can try to improve. Frederick,

cited in Cash [4], also stated that early adult individuals do not think about physical changes in the body but make the best use of their body functions, which is different when they are teenagers.

However, out of 100 female students at the University of Indonesia, 51 have a negative body image and even carry out inappropriate dietary behavior [5]. Some early adult individuals also change their appearance to appear more attractive to others. Astuty, Astuti and Prasida [6] who researched STIKES Karya Husada Semarang also showed that out of 141 female students, 89 (63.12%) female students had gone on a weight loss diet because their physical appearance did not look attractive to others. Early adult individuals feel the need to achieve an ideal body, such as becoming thinner or more muscular [7-8].

The ideal standard of appearance makes individuals compare their appearance with other individuals. Female students often compare their appearance with their peers who have a more attractive body in their opinions [9]. Early adult individuals also compare their appearance when viewing profile pictures on Facebook because they feel that the individual looks happier [10].

Festinger, cited in Rumsay and Harcourt [11], explained behavior to compare physical appearance with other people who are still relevant in terms of age and gender in real life and social media to conduct self-evaluation is called physical appearance comparison. Physical appearance comparison is an idea developed from the social comparison theory by Festinger [12].

Wood, cited in Rumsay and Harcourt [11], who developed Festinger's theory of social comparison, stated that appearance comparisons could be divided into two types, namely downward and upward comparison. Downward comparison is a comparison between individuals with others who are worse off and is carried out for self-enhancement to feel better. Upward comparison is a comparison with other individuals who are considered better so that individuals are inspired to improve their quality. Individuals who perform upward comparisons do not feel inferior and will assume that they are the same as others so that later they can succeed on the dimensions being assessed.

However, many studies have found that upward physical appearance comparison does not make individuals inspired by people who are better than themselves. On the other hand, upward physical appearance comparison makes early adult individuals

more aware of their body's shortcomings so that they are associated with negative attitudes and feelings towards their body [13]. Therefore, this upward physical appearance comparison has a positive relationship with body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, body surveillance, eating disorders [14-17] and negatively with body image as well as body appreciation [18-19]. Shahyad, Pakdaman, and Shokri [20] explained that when an early adult individual compares his body with others, the individual felt pressured to get an attractive body and guilty because it did not fit the ideal body.

Individuals who do physical appearance comparisons continuously can make them more aware of their shortcomings, let alone comparing their physical appearance with individuals who they think have the better appearance (upward) so that they feel dissatisfied with their bodies. Therefore, Individuals need to love and accept their physical appearance [21]. The ability to love oneself, understand oneself without criticizing oneself for failure or incompetence in the face of painful experiences is called self-compassion [22].

Self-compassion itself is related to early adult individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. Individuals who have reached the integrity stage will be more accepting of the conditions that occur to them to have higher self-compassion [21]. Self-compassion is significantly associated with age so that as the individual ages, one's self-compassion will increase [23].

However, some early adult individuals have low self-compassion. Neff and McGehee [24] found that the level of self-compassion of early adult and adolescent individuals did not have a significant difference. Whereas it is stated that individuals' lowest level of self-compassion is during adolescence [21]. Albertson, Neff, and Dill-Shackleford [25] also found that early adult women have low self-compassion and high body image concerns. Research conducted by Adika [26] on psychology students at Sanata Dharma University also shows that students' self-compassion is at a low level. So, even though self-compassion is important and needed when adults compare themselves, some of them have a low self-compassion.

Neff [27] explained that self-compassion could mediate the tendency of individuals to compare themselves with other individuals in assessing themselves. Dimensions of self-compassion, namely self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness, can help eliminate negative emotions and increase a sense of connectedness with others. Self-kindness, which means treating oneself well and stopping

judging oneself when there are failures or imperfections, can help individuals not criticize their physical appearance when compared with others. Individuals with common humanity mean understanding that failure or imperfection has been felt by others so that they do not feel isolated and understand that these experiences are part of life. Whereas with mindfulness, individuals observe events that occur by not exaggerating or reducing their emotions so that emotional balance is achieved when comparing appearances. They can process every emotion and not sink too much from negative experiences. With self-compassion, individuals increasingly understand their humanity which helps reduce the fear of social rejection.

Homan and Tylka [19] explained that self-compassion made individuals respond well when they compared their bodies with others so that individuals with high self-compassion have low physical appearance comparisons. Rodgers, Franko, Donovan, Cousineau, Yates, McGowan and Lowy [28] found that the higher an individual's self-compassion, the lower the level of appearance comparison was, especially in emerging adult women. Amalia [15] also found that self-compassion with physical appearance comparison negatively affects adolescents. The dimensions of self-compassion are expected to help individuals when making physical appearance comparisons. Qidwati [29] also researched adolescent girls in Surabaya and got the results of a relationship between self-compassion and physical appearance comparison by showing the dimensions of common humanity and high mindfulness that can help lower the level of individual physical appearance comparison.

Nerini, Matera, Di Gesto, Policardo, and Stefanile [30] explained that when individuals felt excluded or isolated from others, they were more likely to perform behaviors comparing their physical appearance with other individuals to prove their status and to not feel isolated again. Meanwhile, when they identify emotions excessively, it is associated with the possibility of internalizing the ideal standard of appearance that can increase body dissatisfaction. Individuals who are self-compassionate less likely to make upward physical appearance comparisons. It is possible that when comparing behavior is triggered (ex. at a gym), self-compassion can be a mechanism that helps individuals to engage in positive self-talk, cognitive restructuring, acceptance-focused coping, or balancing negative emotions so that they are not suppressed or exaggerated [31].

Therefore, the relationship between self-compassion and physical appearance comparison can be further investigated, especially for students. Authors are interested in taking data from college students because Bowman, cited in Santrock [2], stated that one of the critical events during the transition from adolescence to adulthood is being a college student. Individuals feel the need to change themselves in response to peer diversity [32].

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The participants were 343 students from 2017, 2018, and 2019 at Hasanuddin University. There were 255 (74%) females and 88 (26%) males, aged 20-23 years and came from different departments. A hundred and sixty-three participants (48%) identified as Buginese, 75 participants (22%) were Makassar, 22 participants (6%) were Javanese, 15 participants (4%) were Chinese, and the rest of 68 participants (20%) as other ethnic groups.

2.2. Measures

Demographics. Participants provided their age, gender, and ethnicity.

Physical Appearance Comparison. Participants completed an 11-item Physical Appearance Comparison Scale (PACS-R; Thompson, 2014) adapted into Indonesian by Qidwati (2018). This scale was developed to measure one's tendency to compare their physical appearance, weight, body shape, body size, and body fat to the others. Participants were asked to indicate how often they make each kind of comparison using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Always").

Self-Compassion. Participants completed a 25-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS; Neff, 2003a) that has been adapted by Idris (2018) into Indonesian. This scale was developed to indicate how often individuals respond to difficult situations with self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness, and over-identification. Response options ranged from 1 ("Never") to 5 ("Always").

2.3. Procedures

The university's student affairs have approved all the procedures. A brief description of the study, including required criteria and compensation, was posted through social media to all departments in the university. The study was described to all participants as an exploration of physical appearance. Interested

participants were directed to the survey link on the posted online banner. The scale was completed in *google form* to facilitate the participants for answering online because the study was held in the middle of a pandemic. The form had informed consent, demographics questionnaire, the scale for physical appearance comparison and self-compassion, and two open questions about participants' physical appearance opinions.

2.4. Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was done using IBM SPSS 25 to describe participants' profiles and responses according to items from SCS and PACS-R. Correlation between self-compassion and physical appearance was conducted using Pearson Correlation, correlating each item score with total score item's variables. Data should be normal by seeing Kolmogorov-Smirnov significant value and linear by seeing significant value from regression analyses on IBM SPSS 25.

3. RESULT

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are shown in **Table 1**. Most of the participants have a moderate that tends to be a high level of self-compassion, with 148 participants (43%) having moderate level and 65 participants (19%) having a high level of self-compassion. Twenty-one (6.1%) and 117 participants (34.1%) in the highest and high category for common humanity dimension, thus making common humanity is the most common dimension in the very high and high categories. Most of the participants also have a moderate that tends to be a low level of physical appearance comparison. A hundred and twenty-seven participants (37%) have moderate levels and 124 participants (36%) have a low physical appearance comparison.

The open questions were answered with a variety of answers. The first question asked about how the participants describe physical appearance. They answered physical appearance as a book cover, mirror, golden, and flower. The second question asked about is physical appearance important. Two hundred and eighty-two participants (82%) answered yes, and 61 participants (8%) answered no. Most of the participants who answered yes, explained that physical appearance is important because it is the first thing other people see and judge or physical appearance can describe one's personality. But participants who answered no, explained that there are other things more important than physical appearance.

Table 2 show the correlation for the study variables. As hypothesized, self-compassion was negatively correlated with physical appearance comparison. Bivariate Pearson Correlation Analysis shows significance level is .000 ($p < 0.05$), which indicates that self-compassion is significantly correlated with physical appearance comparison. Then, -0.264 as correlation coefficients which means if the higher self-compassion, the lower physical appearance comparison but it is weak.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	Min	Max	M	SD
SC	1.69	4.85	3.43	0.47
PAC	11	55	24.24	8.95

Note. PAC=Physical Appearance Comparison; SC=Self-Compassion; N=343 (male=255; female=88); Mean= the average value of total score; SD= standard deviation;

Table 2. Correlation Analysis

	PAC	SC
PAC	1	(R) -0.264
		(p) .000
SC	(R) -0.264	1
	(p) .000	
N	343	343

Note. PAC=Physical Appearance Comparison; SC=Self-Compassion

4. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the correlation between self-compassion and physical appearance comparison among a sample of early adults in Hasanuddin University. Overall, the study revealed that self-compassion was negatively related to physical appearance comparison. It meant the higher the self-compassion, the lower the individual's physical appearance comparison and vice versa.

Individuals who made physical appearance comparison felt more aware of their shortcomings and dissatisfied with their physical but self-compassion helped to neutralize the feelings. Self-compassion keeps people from being trapped in negative feelings when comparing themselves. People become able not

to over-identify their emotions to stay calm and recognize the broader human context of the individual's experience [22].

Consistent with the previous research by Homan and Tylka [19], with higher self-compassion, people do not criticize themselves when they fail to achieve ideal standards [21]. Self-compassion can help them to realize that there isn't a standard ideal for physical appearance. Self-compassion makes them know that each individual's diversity of physical appearances exists. People recognize the concept of physical appearance is broad, such as various body shapes and sizes [21].

The dimensions of self-compassion were associated with lower physical appearance comparison [28]. Previous studies by Qidwati [29] showed that common humanity and mindfulness could help lower the level of individual physical appearance comparison. As well as what was obtained from this research, most of the participants were in the high category of common humanity, which means they understand humans have flaws and accept that no individual is perfect [21].

Common humanity helps individuals realize that everyone has their own mistakes and feels bad about them. Everyone has their shortcomings, which makes them human [33]. People feel frustrated and helpless when they can't control something to be desired. Still, with common humanity, they understand that every human being also feels the same way so that they do not feel alone about the suffering they feel [21].

However, based on the analysis results, the strength of the relationship between self-compassion and physical appearance comparison was considered weak. It meant self-compassion has little effect on college students in performing physical appearance comparison behavior. This is different from Qidwati's research [29] which found a strong relationship between the two variables. The difference lies in the participants. The previous author took a study about female adolescents between 15-18 years old. Adolescents still experience physical changes and emotional instability due to biological growth, so they are vulnerable to physical appearance matter [2].

As for the other things that can relate to or influence people to perform physical appearance comparisons other self-compassion, such as personalities like perfectionism or appearance self-schema. People who have cultural values obsessed with physical appearance can make the individual have a high appearance self-schema [13]. Arnocky and

Locke [34] also get the results that female individuals who have a prominent level of jealousy will often perform physical appearance comparison behavior because they perceive other individuals as threats to get a partner.

Festinger [12] stated that people make physical appearance comparisons for self-evaluation, following the results of the open questions in this study. Participants with a high level of physical appearance comparison explained physical appearance is still crucial for the first impression to others, boosting confidence or avoiding bullying. Individuals compare physical appearances that are considered important to assess themselves comparing with others or don't want to be bullied again. But the participants with a low level of physical appearance comparison felt even physical appearance is important, it is unnecessary to compare each other.

Participants with a high level of self-compassion explained that physical appearance is important to express comfort and satisfaction with oneself. Self-compassion helps people to embrace their flaws and try to be better without sinking into negative feelings for too long [21].

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion in this study, it can be concluded that there is a relationship between self-compassion and physical appearance comparison for students at Hasanuddin University in Makassar. This relationship is negative, which means that the higher the student's self-compassion, the lower the student's physical appearance comparison and vice versa.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have conceived the idea and designed the analysis. The first author is responsible for the research methodology and the conceptual framework of the research. The second and third authors contributed to collected data, contributed analysis tools, performed the analysis, and elaborated discussion results. All authors discussed the result and contributed to the final manuscript.

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