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A Gender Study on Self-Comparison, Self-Compassion and Self-Improvement Motivation among Young Adults

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Abstract

Over the years, researchers have studied the effects of various motives that influence the behavior of an individual. The study aimed to investigate the correlation between the variables self-compassion, self-comparison and self-improvement motivation and their effect on young adults. A randomised sample of 60 young adults, 30 females and 30 males were administered three questionnaires measuring self-compassion, self-comparison, and error-oriented motivation. Correlation matrix showed a significant negative relationship ($r = -0.269$, $p < 0.05$) between self-compassion and self-comparison. Similarly, a significant negative relationship ($r = -0.507$, $p < 0.001$) was found between self-improvement motivation and self-compassion. There was evidence of a significant positive relationship ($r = 0.440$, $p < 0.001$) between self-improvement motivation and self-comparison. However, no significant differences were seen in the results between males and females. The present study revealed the various relationships between the variables and addressed the grounds regarding the non-significant gender difference. Recommendations and implications of the findings were also addressed.

Keywords: Self-comparison, social-comparison, self-compassion, self-improvement, error-oriented motivation, young adults

Introduction

The young adults in India between the ages of 18 and 25 make up one of the country's most valuable resources. They are in a vulnerable stage of life where many intrinsic and extrinsic variables might have an impact on their psychological and physical health and safety (Sunitha & Gururaj, 2014). Early adulthood and adolescence are a time when people take on commitments and frequently rebel against them. Young adults become independent and learn

to live with their decisions (Jurewicz, 2015). Important choices in life are a hallmark of emerging maturity. Important choices must be made in the areas regarding parental expectations, financial stability, autonomy, financial responsibility, education, romantic connections, community and religious values, and society norms are listed in priority order. These choices in life are influenced by internal, external, contextual, and interpersonal factors (Mitra & Arnett, 2019).

Self-compassion in the Indian context plays a role in personality development of young adults. A positive relationship exists between conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and self-compassion while neuroticism and self-compassion are negatively correlated (Thurackal et al., 2016). While evidence indicates a substantial link between self-compassion and mental health and wellbeing, gender stereotypes may prevent both men and women from developing self-compassion. Males have been seen to score higher on self-compassion scales as compared to women and this disparity is more significant when the sample consists of ethnic minorities (Yarnell et al., 2015).

Self-compassion has also been seen as a prominent factor that diminishes the negative outcomes of social comparisons (Choi et al., 2014; Thompson & Bardon, 2022). Social comparisons can be either upward or downward in character. When people evaluate themselves with someone, they believe to be superior, this is known as upward comparison (Wheeler, 1966). Making comparisons with people who are viewed as inferior is known as a downward comparison (Wills, 1981).

Additionally, self-improvement motivation in young adults is also seen to relate to self-compassion and self-comparison. Multiple studies have been conducted showing that after making a mistake, individuals who treat themselves with self-compassion are more motivated to improve themselves and they display self-improvement behaviors. Apart from that, admitting to personal failure may encourage people to improve themselves (Breines & Chen, 2012).

Over the years, there is an increased public awareness and understanding into self-compassion, self-comparison, and self-improvement motivation. In both adults and adolescents, self-compassion has consistently been associated with improved mental health, decreased psychopathology, and greater positive wellbeing (Bluth & Neff, 2018). Similarly, self-comparison is an important indicator of satisfaction and acts as a motivator for part-taking in healthy behaviors (Shakya et al., 2015). Research has shown that self-improvement

motivation acts as a mediator between an individual's desire to develop the self by learning new skills and psychological empowerment (Matsuo, 2019).

This study aims to investigate the relationship between self-compassion, self-comparison, and self-improvement motivation. Many studies are available that examine the relationship between two of the above-mentioned variables, however this study tries to identify and address the research gap by understanding how the three variables interact with each other and influence young adults.

Self-Comparison

“Social comparison is the idea that people learn about their own attitudes, beliefs and abilities by comparing themselves to the other people around them” (Aronson et al., 2010). Self-directed attention, according to several theories, generates a comparison amongst one's current behavior or state and anything significant and pertinent as a standard (Schier & Carver, 1983). Evaluation of ability depends on the presence of a proxy performer and the comparator's asking of the question, "Can I do X?" The informational value of a proxy is influenced by several factors, including the proxy's relative position on qualities compared to the comparator and whether the proxy gave the preliminary task their best effort.

An individual's self-evaluation of himself is formed by comparisons with their past or possible future selves and this aspect is influenced by his current comparison focus (Hanko et al., 2009). Two essential information sources for assessing one's traits and skills are social and temporal comparisons. An individual's self-evaluations of task performance and ability are influenced by both social comparison information (where the individuals' performance fell within the overall distribution) and temporal comparison information (whether self-performance improved or declined over time) (Zell & Alicke, 2009). Results have indicated that temporal comparison occurs more frequently and plays a more important role in young and middle-aged adults (Brown & Middendorf, 2010).

Suls et al. (2002) defined social comparison as, “social comparison consists of comparing oneself with others in order to evaluate or to enhance some aspects of the self”. During this age of social media, the level of self and social comparison among individuals has increased exponentially. Benign envy towards others is shown to trigger feelings of self-improvement whereas malicious envy triggers gossiping. Furthermore, having a strong social

identity tends to lead to a significant positive relationship between social comparison and benign envy (Latif et al., 2021).

Social comparison can be upward or downward in nature. Upward comparison was defined by Wheeler (1966) as “occurring when people compare themselves to someone, they perceive to be superior”. On the other hand, Wills (1981) defined downward comparison as “making a comparison with someone perceived to be inferior”. Immediately following an intimidating event, downward comparison is typically utilized to protect one's self-esteem. It could be viewed as a quick self-defense tactic. On the other hand, upward comparison is frequently employed to determine whether one's condition may be improved and acts as a long-term self-improvement plan (Michinov & Bavent, 2001). Additionally, comparisons that are either upward or downward can cause the comparator to feel less sympathetic towards the comparison targets and less willing to help them (Yip & Kelly, 2013).

Studies have shown that couples who constantly remind each other of aspects about their relationship that make it superior to those around them, part take in downward social comparison. Downward comparison has the tendency to increase satisfaction among married couples. Additionally, it is seen to produce several positive relationship traits that reduce fighting and increase contentment and fulfilment. However, this is applicable only in those who are high in social comparison orientation (Buunk et al., 2001).

Although it is commonly accepted that upward social comparison deflates egos, people frequently contrast their own skills and qualities with those of others. Furthermore, it is suggested that upward comparison can occasionally be self-enriching rather than always leading to more negative self-evaluations. As a result, people might make upward comparisons to improve their perception of themselves. Thus, upward comparison does not contradict the goal for a positive self-perception; rather, it often actually advances it by enabling self-improvement (Collins, 1996).

Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is defined as “a cognitive, affective, and behavioral process consisting of the following five elements that refer to both self and other-compassion: (a) Recognizing suffering; (b) Understanding the universality of suffering in human experience; (c) Feeling empathy for the person suffering and connecting with the distress (emotional resonance); (d) Tolerating uncomfortable feelings aroused in response to the suffering person (e.g. distress,

anger, fear) so remaining open to and accepting of the person suffering; and (e) Motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering” (Strauss et al., 2016).

“Self-compassion entails being kind and understanding toward oneself in instances of pain or failure rather than being harshly self-critical; perceiving one's experiences as part of the larger human experience rather than seeing them as isolating; and holding painful thoughts and feelings in mindful awareness rather than over-identifying with them” (Neff, 2003). Notwithstanding personality-related differences, self-compassion has indicated a considerable variation in positive psychological well-being. It is also found to have a strong negative correlation with neuroticism and negative affect (Neff et al., 2007). Self-compassion is also related to high levels of positive responses to daily life problems and helps individuals cope with adversity and life difficulties (Muris et al., 2019).

The extent to which self-compassionate people cope through problem-solving or distraction does not seem to differ from that of less self-compassionate people, however they seem to depend further on positive restructuring and less on avoidance and escape (Allen & Leary, 2010). A significant negative relationship exists between tackling issues in a pessimistic manner, low levels of self-confidence and an unwillingness to take responsibility with self-compassion, openness to experiences, extraversion, responsibility, and agreeableness. A positive relationship exists between productive problem solving with self-compassion, openness to experience, extraversion, and agreeableness (Arslan, 2016).

In terms of gender differences, self-identified men and women tend to have higher levels of self-esteem. However, individuals who score highly on both femininity and masculinity scales demonstrate the strongest levels of self-compassion (Yarnell et al., 2019). Additionally, in comparison to younger females or all-age males, older women exhibit the lowest levels of self-compassion. Self-compassion among older teenagers is seen to be more effective at reducing anxiety in males than in females. Furthermore, young adults with low and average levels of self-compassion tend to experience more depressed symptoms compared to individuals with high levels of self-compassion (Bluth et al., 2016)

Aggression and susceptible narcissism are seen to have a negative correlation with self-compassion. However, these variables tend to have a positive correlation with self-esteem. Thus, self-compassion in individuals is a sign of a generally secure, positive sense of self and indicates higher consistent feelings of self-worth as compared to self-esteem (Barry et al., 2015; Neff & Vonk, 2008). Moreover, social comparison, social self-consciousness, self-rumination, and rage, are seen to exhibit larger negative associations with self-compassion. The findings

imply that when assessing what makes a healthy self-stance, self-compassion serves as a viable substitute for global self-esteem.

According to studies, assessing self-compassion, primarily using the Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003b), yields reliable, repeatable results, linking higher levels of self-compassion to less mental health symptoms (Macbeth & Gumley, 2012). However, the large number of negative items do not play a beneficial role in the assessment of self-compassion. Researchers have shown skepticism regarding the validity of the scale as half the items, which are negative and reversely scored, assess isolation, judgement, and over-identification instead of the key components of self-compassion which are self-kindness, mindfulness and common humanity. The negative items tend to inflate the relation of self-compassion with psychopathology and fail in reflecting the protective character of self-compassion (Muris, 2016).

Self-Improvement Motivation

“Self-improvement motivation refers to the psychological process of an individual’s efforts to make the self-perception more positive to gain a sense of progress and growth” (Sun & Li, 2012). Conscious desire exhibits the self-improvement motive. It can also be seen in preferences for upward feedback comparisons, upward feedback trajectories, and feedback that may be self-threatening now but will probably be helpful in the future (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Vijeh (2014) defined self-improvement motivation as, “motivation for self-improvement is a motivational process that involves the self. It gains considerable significance when learners need to overcome obstacles while in the meantime, sustaining the motivation”.

Positive feelings are highly regarded and actively sought after. Positive feelings, apart from being pleasant, also may have long-term advantages in significant areas, such as work-life balance, physical wellness, and interpersonal relationships. According to recent research, people may be motivated to participate in positive behaviors that contribute to self-improvement when they are experiencing pleasant feelings, most notably thankfulness. Being grateful leads to self-improvement motivation and individuals try to better themselves through increasing connectivity, elevation, humility, and some negative feelings like indebtedness (Armenta et al., 2017).

Numerous social media studies have shown that exposure to idealized body imagery has a negative impact on body satisfaction. Paradoxically, though, such imagery draws large audiences to the media. Only a few research have shown that thin-ideal exposure increases

women's body satisfaction. The contradictory results and the paradoxical appeal to thin-ideal messages are explained by the kind of social comparison women make which may be self-evaluation vs. self-improvement. Individuals with a higher propensity to compare their body with others tend to improve their body satisfaction through self-improvement social comparisons that lead to weight loss practices (Westerwick, 2014).

A social media user who has gained trust in a particular business is known as a social media influencer. Because of their reach and credibility, these content creators may share knowledge with a broad audience and influence others. Social media influencers are a source that their followers use to satisfy their inner needs, such as the yearning to escape or to take part in self-improvement. Followers who are motivated by their need for self-improvement and enjoyment as well as a desire to escape, tend to ascribe glamour, fun, and closeness to the social media influencers. These attributions have an impact on how the social media influencers are viewed generally in the minds of their followers (Malik et al., 2023).

On many academic achievement metrics, girls and women currently score better than boys and men. These developments might be caused by gender-based motivational differences. Results of various studies show that there are gendered tendencies that are "to prove" vs "to try and to improve," with males tending to focus on showcasing and defending their strengths and females on putting in a lot of effort and resolving weaknesses. Research understands how these motives grow within social and academic learning environments and interact with gendered socialization, value, and behavior patterns in other situations (Butler, 2014).

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of the study is to examine the gender differences in the relationship between self-comparison, self-compassion, and self-improvement motivation.

Hypothesis

- There will be a significant relationship between self-comparison and self-compassion.
- There will be a significant relationship between self-comparison and self-improvement

- There will be a significant relationship between self-comparison, self-compassion and self-improvement motivation in both males and females

Sample

The questionnaires were administered to a sample consisting of 60 participants, out of which 30 were males and 30 were females between the ages of 18 to 25. All participants were in Bangalore.

Measures

- **Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (INCOM):** developed by Gibbons and Buunk (1999), is an eleven-item scale that measures self-comparison orientation. The items are rated on a five-point scale ranging from ‘I strongly disagree’ to ‘I agree strongly’.
- **Neff’s Self-Compassion Scale:** is a short-form version developed by Neff (2003). It consists of twelve items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Almost never’ to ‘Almost always’ and measures individual differences in self-compassion.
- **Error-Oriented Motivation Scale:** developed by Edmondson (1996), consists of twenty-one items that are rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Not at all like me’ to ‘Very much like me’. The scale is used to assess error-oriented motivations.

Procedure

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms. Informed consent of the participant was taken, and they were thanked for their cooperation. Standardized Psychological Tests were administered.

Analysis of Data

Results

Table 1*N, Mean and Standard Deviation*

	Gender	Self Comparison	Self Compassion	Self Motivation
N	Female	30	30	30
	Male	30	30	30
Mean	Female	36.9	32.9	71.8
	Male	37.5	34.2	72.6
Standard deviation	Female	6.26	9.35	11.2
	Male	7.28	8.58	16.3

Table 2*Correlation between self-comparison, self-compassion, and self-improvement*

	Self- Comparison		Self-Compassion		Self Motivation
Comparison	—				
Compassion	-0.269	*	—		
Motivation	0.440	***	-0.507	***	—

*Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001*

Table 3

T statistics showing gender differences

		Statistic	df	p
Comparison	Student's t	-0.362	58.0	0.719
Compassion	Student's t	-0.575	58.0	0.567
Motivation	Student's t	-0.221	58.0	0.826

Note. $H_0: \mu_{\text{Female}} \neq \mu_{\text{Male}}$

Discussion of Results

The aim of the present study was to understand the relationship between the variables self-compassion, self-comparison and self-improvement motivation. Firstly, the degree to which each variable influences the other is explained. Second, any gender differences in self-compassion, self-comparison and self-improvement motivation between males and females is discussed.

As shown in table 2, the correlation between the three variables is analyzed. A significant positive relationship ($r= 0.440$, $p<0.001$) is seen between self-comparison and self-improvement motivation. If an individual is high in self-comparison tendencies, then their self-improvement motivation will also be high. When individuals partake in self-comparison, they tend to accept a deficiency in themselves for the sake of improving themselves in the future

(Sedikides, 2009). Four motives have been identified that guide self-comparison or evaluation which are self-assessment, self-enhancement, self-verification, and self-improvement (Taylor et al., 2012).

A significant negative correlation ($r = -0.507$, $p < 0.001$) is seen between self-compassion and self-improvement motivation. When an individual increases their levels of self-compassion, their self-motivation reduces. This result is contrary to previous research which states that self-compassion promotes self-improvement (Chwyl et al., 2020). This challenges previous research which shows evidence of a positive relationship between the two variables. These present results can have occurred due to certain reasons. Individuals who treat themselves with a lot of understanding and care might not be willing to see deficiencies in them that warrant any improvement. Additionally, if self-improvement motivation is high, people can tend to treat themselves harshly if they do not live up to their own expectations.

A significant negative correlation ($r = -0.269$, $p < 0.01$) between self-compassion and self-comparison has been indicated. Individuals who are high in self-compassion do not compare themselves negatively or positively with others. Individuals who have high levels of self-compassion show kindness, warmth and gentleness toward themselves. Especially in terms of body related threats and dissatisfaction, individuals high in self-compassion do not associate their body image to their self-worth nor do they participate in comparison (Homan & Tylka, 2015). This is essential in maintaining well-being and a positive mental state.

The results of the independent T-test showed that there is no significant difference in the levels of self-compassion, self-comparison and self-improvement motivation among young males and females. In the case of self-compassion, some studies have provided evidence that contradicts the present study (Amemiya & Sakairi, 2020; Murn & Steele, 2018; Bluth et al., 2017; Yarnell et al., 2019; Yarnell et al., 2014) whereas only a small portion of research corroborates the results of this study (Sun et al., 2016). The limited number of participants and the confined area of their residence could be one of the factors that led to this study's contradictory results.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to investigate the correlation between the variables self-compassion, self-comparison and self-improvement motivation and their combined effect on young adults. The results of a correlation matrix showed that self-compassion and self-comparison had a significant negative relationship. The same outcomes were found in the relationship between self-improvement motivation and self-compassion. A significant positive relationship was seen

between self-improvement motivation and self-comparison. However, there were no significant differences in the results of males and females regarding the three variables.

Future research in this area must concentrate on whether self-improvement motivation influences upward or downward self-comparison and how this affects the individual. Furthermore, increasing the sample size and the area of residence of the population can provide more insights.

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