The Role of Self-Compassion as a Moderator between Physical Appearance Comparison and Social Appearance Anxiety in Emerging Adult Women Peran Self-Compassion sebagai Moderator antara Physical Appearance Comparison dan Social Appearance Anxiety pada Perempuan Emerging Adults

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Physical appearance is important; people generally assess their appearance by comparing themselves. Comparing oneself to others can increase the tendency to experience anxiety, especially when one's appearance is perceived as less attractive than the comparison target or ideal societal standards. This study aimed to observe the role of self-compassion moderating the relationship between physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety in emerging adult women. The hypothesis is that self-compassion can moderate the relationship between physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety. There were 404 women aged 18-25 years old involved as the subjects of this research, and the selection of the research subjects was conducted using the purposive sampling technique. The instruments used in this research were the Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF), Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised (PACS-R), and Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS). Data was analysed using the Moderated Regression Analysis (MRA) through the JASP program. This research showed that selfcompassion can act as a moderator between physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety in emerging adult women. Self-compassion in emerging adult women can decrease the adverse effect of physical appearance comparison, so that anxiety related to appearance felt when interacting in a social environment can be minimised.

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#### 1. Introduction

Appearance plays a vital role for individuals, especially in social interactions. Individuals will try to present themselves attractively to make a positive impression on others, especially when looking for a partner or starting a romantic relationship. Physical appearance is important because it can reflect an individual's value or quality as a partner (Stephen & Luoto, 2021; Toma & Hancock, 2010). Individuals generally begin to build romantic relationships in the emerging adult phase. Emerging adult is a term Arnett (2014) coined for individuals aged 18-25. In this phase, individuals are interested in starting romantic relationships with the opposite sex before eventually getting married (Arnett, 2014).

When it is linked to Havighurst's developmental theory, emerging adults are in the early adult stage of development, which includes developmental tasks such as choosing a partner and learning to live with that partner (Hutteman et al., 2014). A similar theory was also proposed by Erikson, who stated that emerging adults have the developmental task of beginning to develop intimate relationships with others. If the developmental tasks at this stage fail, it can cause individuals to feel lonely, isolated, and afraid to form relationships in the future (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Therefore, individuals need to be able to perform their tasks well at this stage of development, and appearance can be one of the factors that can help them achieve this.

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E-ISSN: 2621-3893 A study by Quittkat et al., (2019) reported that women place more importance on their

appearance and spend more time achieving their ideal look than men. Women tend to pay more attention to their appearance due to ideal appearance criteria or beauty standards developed in the social environment. The beauty standards often used as a reference for women are having a slim body, looking young, and having fair and smooth skin (Balcetis et al., 2013; Pratiwi, 2018; Selimbegovic et al., 2021). In fact, women are more likely than men to experience changes related to their appearance, such as changes in body size due to pregnancy (Juliadilla, 2017), greater susceptibility to acne (Ramos-E-Silva et al., 2015), and greater susceptibility to anxiety due to acne than men (Szepietowska et al., 2024). According to research by Schmidt and Martin (2019), women are more often teased about their appearance than men. Ultimately, women who feel that they cannot look like the existing standards will become anxious about the negative judgments they may receive (Trekels & Eggermont, 2017).

The anxiety felt by individuals due to fear of receiving negative judgments from others is known as social appearance anxiety (Hart et al., 2008). If left unaddressed, social appearance anxiety can hinder individuals in performing social functions because they fear rejection (Williamson & Karazsia, 2018), experience depression (Alcaraz-Ibáñez et al., 2019), and have an improper diet that leads to eating disorders (Alcaraz-Ibáñez et al., 2019; Koskina et al., 2011; Turel et al., 2018).

Tiggemann and Slevec (2012) revealed that comparing oneself with others is one of the factors that can influence appearance-related anxiety. Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., (2017) also found that individuals who compare their appearance with a better reference point (upward comparison) tend to experience appearance-related anxiety and dissatisfaction with their appearance compared to individuals who do not make comparisons. Based on that research, it is known that making physical appearance comparisons can have an adverse effect, causing individuals to experience social appearance anxiety.

Fardouly et al., (2015) found that women who frequently compare their physical appearance experience negative moods after using social media, namely Facebook. Negative moods can be influenced by self-compassion. Neff and Germer (2017) explain that self-compassion can help individuals cultivate positive emotions when experiencing situations that do not meet their expectations. Therefore, the negative mood experienced after making comparisons may arise because individuals do not feel better than the object of comparison and lack self-compassion.

Research conducted by Choi, Lee, and Lee (2014) shows that groups with high selfcompassion experience fewer negative emotions than groups with low self-compassion. Furthermore, Choi also explains that self-compassion plays a strong role in protecting individuals from negative emotions and low self-esteem when they feel worse than the object of comparison. That is supported by research by Homan and Tylka (2015), which found that self-compassion can moderate the negative relationship between physical comparison and body appreciation, so that women with high selfcompassion can be better protected from negative feelings resulting from physical comparison and can appreciate their bodies. Based on previous research, it can be concluded that self-compassion is related to comparisons of physical appearances, where self-compassion can protect individuals from the harmful effects that arise after making comparisons.

Self-compassion protects individuals when they experience adverse events, allowing them to maintain positive feelings even when life does not go as expected (Leary et al., 2007). Thus, selfcompassion can help emerging adults accept their physical appearance and manage the negative emotions that arise after experiencing comparison situations. Individuals with low self-compassion will not be able to take their own shortcomings, resulting in high levels of social appearance anxiety. Conversely, individuals with high self-compassion will consider differences and imperfections in appearance after being in a comparative situation to be normal, resulting in lower levels of social appearance anxiety.

Research on physical appearance comparison, self-compassion, and social appearance anxiety is an interesting and important topic, based on the explanation. This study aims to determine the effect of physical appearance comparison on social appearance anxiety, moderated by self-compassion. In line with this objective, the research question to be answered is whether self-compassion moderates the relationship between these two variables. This study hypothesizes that self-compassion can

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moderate the relationship between physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety in emerging adult women.

#### 2. Methods

This study utilized quantitative research, using self-compassion, physical appearance comparison, and social appearance anxiety as variables. The sampling method employed nonprobability sampling with a purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criteria for this study were women aged 18-25 years. The exclusion criteria were respondents who were outside the 18-25 age range and those who failed the attention check when completing the questionnaire. Four hundred four women respondents aged 18-25 were involved in this study. The entire data analysis process was carried out with the assistance of JASP 0.95.3.0 version.

Three measurement instruments were used in this study. Before being administered to respondents, the scale was first adapted into Indonesian. The adaptation process involved forward and backward translation by an expert, followed by an assessment of the scale's equivalence and content validity by a psychology expert. The Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form is a shortened version of the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) created by Neff (2003). This scale contains 12 statements with five alternative answers. The Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form in this study had the total item correlation ranged from 0.468 to 0.666, with a Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of 0.864.

Schaefer and Thompson (2014) developed the Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised to measure individuals' tendency to compare their physical appearance with that of others. The Physical Appearance Comparison Scale-Revised contains 11 statement items and uses a Likert scale model. This study's Physical Appearance Comparison Scale had the total item correlation coefficient ranged from 0.720 to 0.888, with a Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of 0.964.

The Social Appearance Anxiety Scale is a measurement instrument derived from the symptoms or signs of social anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and body dysmorphic disorder (Hart et al., 2008). Hart et al. (2008) revealed that SAAS is a unidimensional measurement. The purpose of the scale is to assess a person's fear of being evaluated by others concerning their overall appearance, not limited to body shape alone (Hart et al., 2008). The scale comprises 16 statement items and uses a Likert scale model with five alternative answers. This study's Social Appearance Anxiety Scale had the total item correlation coefficient ranged from 0.472 to 0.829, with a Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of 0.954.

#### 3. Results

Based on the demographic data in Table 1, there is evident diversity in the characteristics of the research respondents. The characteristics of the respondents that can be identified in this study are relationship status, employment, and body mass index (BMI). BMI was determined by calculating the information provided on weight and height

Table 1. Respondents demographic data

Demographic	N	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Women	404	100
Men	0	0
Relationship status		
Single	246	60.89
Partnered/married	158	39.11
Employment		
Student	199	49.26
Employed	154	38.12
Unemployed	51	12.62
Body Mass Index (BMI)		
Underweight (BMI <18.5)	60	14.85
Normal (BMI 18.5 – 22.9)	218	53.96
Overweight (BMI 23 – 24.9)	66	16.33
Class 1 Obesity (BMI 25 – 29.9)	46	11.39

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Class 2 Obesity (BMI  $\geq$  30) 14 3.4

Table 2 shows that most respondents had high self-compassion (40.1%) and very low physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety (44.3% and 35.9%).

Table 2. The categories of research respondents for each variable

Variable	Category	N	Percentage (%)
Self-compassion	Very high	69	17.1
	High	162	40.1
	Medium	140	14.9
	Low	25	6.2
	Very low	8	2.0
Physical appearance comparison	Very high	26	6.4
	High	45	11.1
	Medium	60	14.9
	Low	94	23.3
	Very low	179	44.3
Social appearance anxiety	Very high	47	9.2
	High	55	13.6
	Medium	63	15.6
	Low	104	25.7
	Very low	145	35.9

Based on the analysis conducted to determine the correlation between variables and demographics, social appearance anxiety correlates with relationship status, self-compassion, and physical appearance comparison (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlation between variables and demographics

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	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Relati	ionship status	1.39	0.49	_				
2. BMI		2.34	0.98	0.027				
3. Self-c	compassion	41.88	7.64	0.123 *	-0.114*			
4. Physi	cal appearance comparison	n 15.17	11.29	0.008	0.199 ***	-0.598***	_	
5. Socia	l appearance anxiety	40.43	15.75	-0.151 **	0.061	-0.497 *** 0	.582 **	**

The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for the residuals of the threes variables, obtained a p value 0.232 (p > 0.05), confirming a normal distribution. The histogram also exhibits a bell-shaped pattern, confirming that the assumption of normality is met (Figure 1).

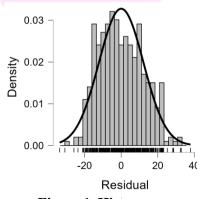


Figure 1. Histogram

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Linearity testing was performed using scatterplots between social appearance anxiety and physical appearance comparison (Figure 2), and between social appearance and self-compassion (Figure 3). The results showed that the data points did not form a specific straight-line pattern and were randomly distributed, indicating that the relationship between the variables is linear. Meanwhile, the multicollinearity test showed a tolerance value of 0.642 and a *VIF* of 1.557, indicating no signs of multicollinearity among the independent variables in the regression model (Table 4).

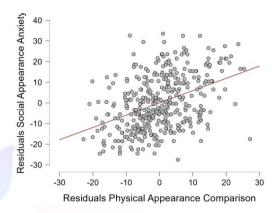


Figure 2. Scatterplot social appearance anxiety and physical appearance comparison

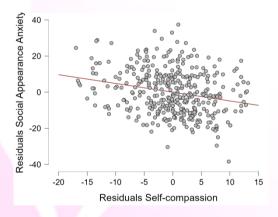


Figure 3. Scatterplot social appearance anxiety and self-compassion

Table 4. Multicollinearity assumption test

		-	
Variable	Tolerance	VIF	Description
Physical appearance comparison-	0.642	1.557	No indication of
Self-compassion			multicollinearity

The results of the hypothesis testing using moderated regression analysis (MRA) can be seen in Table 5. It is known that the interaction between physical appearance comparison and self-compassion shows several t = -2.386, p = 0.017. The significant interaction between the two variables (p < 0.05) indicates that self-compassion can act as a moderator variable (Liana, 2009; Linardon et al., 2020; Marizka et al., 2019). Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted that self-compassion can moderate the relationship between physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety in emerging adults. This moderating role indicates that self-compassion can weaken the relationship between physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety. If self-compassion is high, social appearance anxiety in individuals who compare physical appearance may decrease.

Table 5. The interaction between physical appearance comparison and self-compassion

Mod	lel	Unstandardized	SE	Standardized	t	p
Hı	(Intercept)	43.056	5.980		7.200	< 0.001
	Physical appearance comparison	1.143	0.230	0.820	4.967	< 0.001
	Self-compassion	-0.285	0.129	-0.139	-2.212	0.028
	Physical appearance comparison* Self-compassion	-0.014	0.006	-0.342	-2.386	0.017

Based on the analysis, the  $R^2$  change in the base model was 0.382, indicating that physical appearance comparison and self-compassion together explained 38.2% of the variance in social appearance anxiety. Then, when the interaction effect was added, the  $R^2$  change increased to 0.373, equivalent to an additional 0.9% of explained variance. This increase resulted in an effect size of 0.015, which is categorised as very small.

Furthermore, the interaction between physical appearance comparison and self-compassion on social appearance anxiety can be seen in Figure 4. Self-compassion scores are divided into three groups, namely low (14-39), moderate (39-45), and high (45-60). Figure 1(a) shows that when selfcompassion is low, the higher the physical appearance comparison, the higher the level of social appearance anxiety. In Figure 1(b), when self-compassion is moderate, the higher the physical appearance comparison and the social appearance anxiety, but the level of anxiety is not as high as when self-compassion is low. In contrast to high self-compassion (Figure 1(c)), the higher the physical appearance comparison, the lower the level of social appearance anxiety compared to the other two groups.

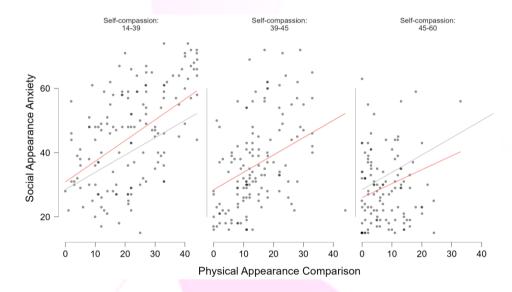


Figure 4. Statistical model plot between variables

As seen on Table 6, in the low self-compassion group, physical appearance comparison had a strong and significant effect on social appearance anxiety with a p value 0.001, contributing 30.6% of the effect. This effect was slightly reduced but remained significant in the moderate self-compassion group with p value 0.001 and contributing 21.9%. However, at high levels of self-compassion, the results were not significant, contributing a very minimal effect of 0.7%.

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**Table 6. Regression Analysis** 

Category	R <sup>2</sup> square	t	p
Low	0.306	7.996	< 0.01
Moderate	0.219	6.176	< 0.01
High	0.007	0.877	0.382

Researchers also analyzed whether there were differences in social appearance anxiety based on relationship status. Based on the analysis, there was a significant difference in social appearance anxiety between single women and women in relationships, with a p value < 0.001. Single women had higher levels of social appearance anxiety (M = 42.341, SD = 15.599) than women in relationships (M = 37.462, SD = 15.570) (Table 7).

Table 7. T-test for social appearance anxiety based on relationship status

Research Beletienship status		Descriptive statistic		Mann-Whitney U-test	
variable	Relationship status	M	SD	p	
Social	Single	42.341	15.599		
appearance	Partnered/married	37.462	15.570	< 0.001	
anxiety					

This study also analysed differences in social appearance anxiety based on BMI (Table 8). The results showed no significant difference in social appearance anxiety based on BMI, with a p value of 0.175 (p > 0.05).

Table 8. T-test for social appearance anxiety based on BMI

Dagaawah wawiahla	BMI categories	Descriptive s	tatistic	ANOVA
Research variable		M	SD	p
Social appearance	Class 2 obesity	49.857	17.931	
	Class 1 obesity	41.674	16.105	
	Underweight	40.550	17.819	0.175
anxiety	Normal	40.106	14.813	
	Overweight	38.545	15.783	

## 4. Discussion

Comparing oneself to others can be done by individuals anywhere and in various aspects of life. Individuals who desire to achieve their ideal appearance generally compare their physical appearance with others (Taniguchi & Hubbard, 2019). When there is a difference between one's appearance and the ideal appearance, and one feels dissatisfied with their appearance, it can cause individuals to criticize themselves (Pinto-Gouveia et al., 2014). Research conducted by Iancu et al. (2015) found that criticizing oneself for one's shortcomings is a predictor of anxiety. In line with this, previous studies have also found that comparisons can increase anxiety in individuals (Jiang & Ngien, 2020; Thøgersen-Ntoumani et al., 2017).

Self-compassion is known to protect individuals from anxiety, so the anxiety experienced by individuals after making comparisons may be caused by low self-compassion (Neff et al., 2007). Self-compassion will help individuals reduce adverse reactions such as blaming and criticizing themselves for their shortcomings (Neff & Germer, 2017). Compared to criticizing and worrying about other people's judgments, self-compassion helps individuals to accept and respond well to stressful situations (Homan & Tylka, 2015). Thus, self-compassion enables emerging adult women to accept and love themselves regardless of their physical condition, so they do not blame themselves for physical appearance-related shortcomings.

The presence of self-compassion will also help individuals pay less attention to the judgments others make about them and help them draw more balanced conclusions from an event (Gill et al., 2018). That is supported by Allen and Leary (2010), who state that individuals with high self-compassion will interpret stressful events they are experiencing as not as bad as those experienced by

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individuals with low self-compassion. Therefore, high self-compassion can help emerging adult women not to focus too much on other people's judgments regarding their physical appearance. Later, when they find differences with the ideal criteria after making comparisons, emerging adult women will consider differences in physical appearance between individuals to be normal, thereby minimizing their anxiety.

In addition, Choi et al., (2014) also reported that self-compassion can protect individuals from negative emotions experienced when individuals feel worse than the object of comparison. As is well known, self-compassion involves understanding that humans are imperfect, so when experiencing unpleasant events, individuals can give attention and affection to themselves to feel emotions (Neff & Germer, 2017). Being kind to oneself and accepting one's shortcomings will help individuals appreciate their physical appearance more, making it easier to deal with appearance-related concerns (Koc & Ermis, 2016).

Overall, the results of this study are consistent with previous studies that self-compassion can protect individuals from anxiety (Gill et al., 2018; Neff et al., 2007; Ștefan, 2019) and can be a protective factor against appearance-related problems (Rodgers et al., 2017). In this study, high selfcompassion can reduce social appearance anxiety in emerging adult women. Self-compassion is essential to have and continue to cultivate within individuals because high self-compassion is associated with lower levels of mental health symptoms (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012).

Another finding of this study is that single women have higher social appearance anxiety than women who are in a relationship. This result is in line with previous research conducted by Amil & Bozgeyikli (2015), which found that individuals who are in a relationship with the opposite sex have lower levels of social appearance anxiety than individuals who are not in a relationship with the opposite sex. The anxiety felt by single individuals may arise from feelings of rejection due to a lack of physical attractiveness (Doğan & Colak, 2016). Research conducted by Goldsmith and Byers (2016) reported that messages from partners impact women's perception of their bodies, where positive messages from partners, such as compliments, can increase self-confidence and selfacceptance. Therefore, the level of social appearance anxiety among emerging adult women who have partners may be lower than that of single women because they tend to receive positive opinions from their partners, which ultimately helps them to accept themselves and not feel rejected.

This study also analyzed whether there were differences in social appearance anxiety based on BMI. The results of the analysis showed that there were no significant differences in social appearance anxiety based on BMI. These results align with Alemdag, Alemdag, and Ozkara's (2016) research. It shows that social appearance anxiety is not only experienced by individuals in specific BMI categories, but can also be experienced by individuals of various shapes and sizes. Sevindi's (2020) research found that satisfied individuals with their height and weight will have lower social appearance anxiety than dissatisfied individuals. Therefore, social appearance anxiety in individuals cannot be determined solely based on weight and body size; it requires knowledge of how satisfied individuals are with their physical appearance. Social appearance anxiety can occur due to a gap between actual and ideal physical conditions when individuals focus too much on appearance (Hart et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2024). This gap between actual and ideal physical conditions can make individuals feel disappointed, dissatisfied, and negative about themselves, which then leads to anxiety.

This study has several limitations. The first limitation of this study is that it cannot determine whether respondents feel anxious because of their appearance or because they are anxious individuals who tend to feel anxious in various situations (trait anxiety). However, based on the descriptive data, most respondents had a very low level of social appearance anxiety, so it is possible that the respondents involved in this study were not anxious individuals. Second, the data for this study were collected online, so the researchers could not observe the questionnaire completion process. The researcher took anticipatory measures to overcome this weakness by explaining in the informed consent form that the questionnaire was completed voluntarily and that confidentiality would be maintained. The researcher also provides a reward to show appreciation for respondents who complete the questionnaire sincerely. In addition, there is an attention check on the scale to determine the concentration and sincerity of the subjects in completing the questionnaire. Third, the researcher

did not involve men and individuals of other developmental ages, so this study was limited to women

# 5. Conclusions

who were emerging adults.

Based on the analysis conducted, the hypothesis in this study is accepted. In emerging adult women, self-compassion can weaken the relationship between physical appearance comparison and social appearance anxiety. Furthermore, it can be explained that the presence of self-compassion in emerging adult women can reduce the influence of physical appearance comparison, thereby reducing the anxiety related to appearance felt when interacting in social environments. Conversely, in emerging adult women who lack self-compassion, the influence of physical appearance comparison will actually increase anxiety related to appearance when interacting in social environments.

# 6. CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

**Nur Aisyah Rahmani Nasution:** conceptualisation, research design, data analysis, discussion, article writing; **Tina Khostarina & Nikita Zahra:** data analysis, review, discussion, editing, translating, and reference check.

# 7. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that no financial or personal conflict could have appeared to influence the work reported in this research.

# 8. Declaration of Generative AI and Assistive Technologies in the Writing Process

The technology used in this article is JASP for data analysis and Grammarly to check and correct the writing.

# 9. Funding

The authors independently fund this research, including operational costs, data collection, and analysis.

# 10. Ethical Approval

All respondents who participated gave their consent after receiving information related to the study on the informed consent form, including information that participation in this study was voluntary. This research also followed the provisions in the HIMPSI code of ethics for psychology.

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