



# Self-Compassion as a Spiritual Shield: Young Adults in the Shadow of Social Appearance Anxiety

Zeki Karataş<sup>1</sup>

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University

Duygu Karataş<sup>1</sup>

Hacettepe University

<sup>1</sup> Assoc., Prof., Department of Social Work, Faculty of Health Sciences, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University, Rize, Türkiye. E-mail: zeki.karatas@erdogan.edu.tr

<sup>2</sup> MA Student. Department of Psychology, Faculty of Letters, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: duygukaratas25@hacettepe.edu.tr

**Corresponding author:**

Zeki Karataş

E-mail: zeki.karatas@erdogan.edu.tr

eISSN: 2458-9675

Received: 22.03.2024

Revision: 08.09.2025

Accepted: 09.09.2025

©Copyright 2025 by Author(s)

**Abstract**

This study examined the predictive role of self-compassion on social appearance anxiety among university students, a concern heightened by social media pressures. Employing a correlational research design, the study included 402 university students recruited through convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form and the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale. Analyses revealed a moderate, negative, and significant relationship between self-compassion and social appearance anxiety ( $r = -.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A simple linear regression analysis indicated that self-compassion explained 25% of the variance in social appearance anxiety ( $R^2 = .25$ ) and was a significant negative predictor ( $\beta = -.50$ ). Analyses also revealed that participants with higher body dissatisfaction and self-criticism reported significantly higher levels of social appearance anxiety. The findings strongly support that self-compassion serves as a key psychological resource and a 'spiritual shield' against social appearance anxiety for young adults. These results underscore the importance of implementing self-compassion-based interventions to support the mental health of young adults.

**Keywords:**

Self-compassion • social appearance anxiety • body satisfaction • university students • protective factor.

**Citation:** Karataş, Z. & Karataş, D. (2025). Self-compassion as a spiritual shield: Young adults in the shadow of social appearance anxiety. *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling*, 10(3), 349–366. <http://doi.org/10.37898/spiritualpc.1663291>

## Introduction

University students undergo a developmental period marked by intense academic, personal, and social challenges. The spiritual and psychological resources individuals possess play a critical role in coping with these challenges. One of the most important of these resources is self-compassion, which shapes an individual's attitude toward oneself (Fong & Loi, 2016; Tran et al., 2022). Self-compassion, which can be seen as an inward reflection of the concepts of compassion and mercy deeply rooted in Turkish culture, are particularly nurtured by religious and spiritual traditions. In Anatolian wisdom and Islamic belief, it is emphasized that the starting point of mercy toward all created beings is to avoid cruelty to one's own self—that is, to show self-compassion (Akin & Akin, 2017; Gunnell et al., 2017). From this perspective, self-compassion is not merely a psychological skill for students but also a spiritual coping mechanism (Abdollahi et al., 2023; Bülbül & Özbay, 2025). In the face of academic failures, social rejection, or feelings of personal inadequacy, approaching oneself with compassion—drawing strength from religious and spiritual beliefs—can be seen as a manifestation of divine mercy, serving as a spiritual shield against debilitating self-criticism (Bodok-Mulderij et al., 2023; Wilhoit, 2019).

Self-compassion, the foundation of this study, is the inward-directed form of the universal concept of compassion. Etymologically derived from the Latin *com-pati*, meaning “to suffer with,” this concept involves not only noticing the suffering of others but also the motivation to alleviate it (Neff, 2003). In Islamic tradition, mercy is seen as a manifestation of the divine names *Ar-Rahman* (The Compassionate) and *Ar-Rahim* (The Merciful), holding a sacred quality as both a divine grace and a fundamental human virtue (Maktar et al., 2025). This universal emotion is also a core virtue in Eastern philosophy, known as *karuṇā* in Buddhism, and has been established on a scientific basis in Western psychology, particularly through Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT) developed by Gilbert (2014). According to Gilbert, compassion is defined as “a sensitivity to suffering and a commitment to alleviate or prevent it” (Gilbert & Procter, 2006). When directed toward others, this multidimensional construct is called compassion; when directed toward oneself, it is conceptualized as self-compassion, the focus of this research.

Built upon this spiritual and universal foundation, self-compassion has gained a significant place in modern psychology and refers to an individual's ability to adopt a kind, understanding, and accepting attitude toward oneself in moments of difficulty, suffering, or perceived inadequacy, rather than being judgmental and critical (Neff et al., 2007; Neff, 2011b). According to Neff (2011a), self-compassion consists of three core components: treating oneself with kindness in difficult moments (self-kindness), understanding that negative experiences are part of the shared human experience (common humanity), and observing painful thoughts and feelings without suppression

or over-identification (mindfulness). These components enhance psychological resilience against negative self-evaluations and are associated with positive outcomes such as happiness and life satisfaction (Dan et al., 2023; MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff & Germer, 2018).

In today's world, individuals are constantly exposed to the evaluations of others, particularly through the influence of social media. At the forefront of these evaluations is physical appearance. The fear of being negatively evaluated by others based on one's appearance can trigger a condition known as "social appearance anxiety," which can profoundly affect an individual's psychosocial functioning (Hart et al., 2008; Kızılkaya & Özkaya, 2023). Processes underlying social appearance anxiety, such as social comparison (Festinger, 1954) and self-objectification (Fredrickson et al., 2011), lead individuals to constantly compare themselves to unrealistic aesthetic standards (upward social comparison) and to evaluate their bodies from an external perspective, as if they were an "object" (Szymanski & Henning, 2007). This can result in decreased self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and intense feelings of inadequacy (Betz et al., 2019; Jones, 2001).

Recent research has established that self-compassion is a significant construct both in promoting psychological well-being (Zessin et al., 2015) and in functioning as a protective factor against various mental health problems (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Studies focusing on adolescence have shown that higher self-compassion is positively associated with cognitive and affective abilities such as emotional intelligence (Castilho et al., 2017) and executive function proficiency (Shin et al., 2016), as well as general well-being indicators like life satisfaction (Bluth et al., 2016). Conversely, self-compassion has been consistently found to have a negative relationship with adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety and depressive symptoms (Han & Kim, 2023; Neff & McGehee, 2010), perceived stress (Stutts et al., 2018), and non-suicidal self-injury (Jiang et al., 2016). Although self-compassion may not always offer additional explanatory power when considered alongside related constructs like self-esteem (Muris et al., 2016), the existing evidence strongly supports its role as a vital internal resource that enhances adolescents' psychological resilience and buffers against distress.

At this juncture, self-compassion, as an internal and spiritual resource, can act as a powerful buffer against the detrimental effects of social appearance anxiety (Gao et al., 2023). The core components of self-compassion offer a direct antidote to the psychological mechanisms that fuel social appearance anxiety (Allen et al., 2020). For instance, self-kindness softens the harsh and relentless self-criticism that arises when an individual perceives a flaw or fails to meet societal beauty standards. Instead of self-punishment, the individual approaches themselves with understanding

and support. A sense of common humanity protects against feelings of isolation and shame by reminding the individual that appearance-related concerns are not a unique abnormality but a shared human experience. Finally, mindfulness prevents the individual from being swept away by anxious thoughts about their appearance, allowing them to observe these thoughts without judgment and maintain a healthy distance from them. Consequently, self-compassion helps individuals build a sense of inner acceptance and worth that is separate from their external appearance.

The literature indicates negative relationships between self-compassion and constructs such as body image (Wasylikiw et al., 2012), eating disorders (Ferreira et al., 2013), and social anxiety (Sadrzadeh et al., 2024; Werner et al., 2012). Similarly, the negative association between social appearance anxiety and self-compassion has been demonstrated in several studies (Allen et al., 2020). However, the purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth examination of this relationship within the context of Turkish university students and to determine the strength of self-compassion as a predictor of social appearance anxiety. In this regard, the research aims to quantify the extent to which young adults' self-compassion levels reduce their social appearance anxiety. Furthermore, it will investigate how this relationship differs based on variables such as gender, social media usage habits, and body satisfaction. The primary hypothesis of this study is that higher levels of self-compassion will significantly and negatively predict social appearance anxiety levels among university students. This study aims to highlight the importance of strengthening self-compassion skills as a "spiritual shield" against external pressures in intervention programs designed to protect the mental health of young adults.

### **The Present Study**

In light of the theoretical framework and the findings of previous research presented above, this study aims to examine the protective effect of self-compassion, an internal and spiritual resource, on social appearance anxiety, one of the most prevalent challenges of the modern era, among university students. While the literature establishes that self-compassion reduces negative self-evaluations and enhances psychological resilience (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012; Neff, 2023) and is negatively associated with social appearance anxiety (Banga, 2024; Shah & Quratul-ain, 2023), there is a scarcity of research that specifically models the predictive nature of this relationship—that is, the extent to which and in what direction self-compassion "predicts" social appearance anxiety—within the context of a Turkish sample of young adults. This study aims to fill this theoretical gap by empirically testing whether self-compassion is a significant predictor of social appearance anxiety.

In societies like Turkey, where digitalization is rapidly expanding and social media use is particularly high among young people, appearance-based social

pressures are intensely felt (Cetin & Ece, 2021; Önalın et al., 2021; Şahin, 2019). In this pressurized environment, understanding whether university students' capacity to cultivate a compassionate attitude toward themselves can serve as a "spiritual shield" against appearance-related anxieties is of critical importance (Mathad et al., 2019). The fundamental assumption of this research is that the components of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness) act as an antidote to the core mechanisms that fuel social appearance anxiety (harsh self-criticism, feelings of isolation, over-identification with anxious thoughts). Therefore, this study posits that an increase in self-compassion levels will lead to a significant decrease in social appearance anxiety levels.

The primary objective of this study, within a cross-sectional design, is to determine the extent to which self-compassion levels predict social appearance anxiety levels among university students. Additionally, it will be examined whether participants' self-compassion and social appearance anxiety levels differ significantly according to demographic variables such as gender, age, and perceived income level, and behavioral variables such as time spent on social media, body satisfaction, and the tendency for self-criticism regarding body image. The findings of this research are expected to provide a scientific basis for designing preventive intervention programs aimed at protecting and promoting the mental health of young adults in the digital age. In this context, the originality of the study lies in its modeling of self-compassion as a protective factor for social appearance anxiety and testing the strength of this relationship in a sample of young adults in Turkey. The main research questions to be addressed in line with the study's objectives are as follows:

1. What are the levels of self-compassion and social appearance anxiety among young adult participants?
2. Do the self-compassion and social appearance anxiety levels of young adult participants differ significantly according to gender?
3. Do the social appearance anxiety levels of young adult participants differ significantly according to variables such as age, income level, time spent on social media, perceived impact of social media on appearance, and body satisfaction?
4. Do the self-compassion levels of young adult participants significantly and negatively predict their social appearance anxiety levels?

## **Method**

This study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to investigate the relationships between different variables. This design aims to determine the direction and magnitude of the association between two or more variables. The primary focus

of this research was to examine the role of self-compassion in predicting social appearance anxiety among university students. Additionally, the study investigated whether students’ self-compassion and social appearance anxiety levels differed significantly based on various demographic and behavioral variables (e.g., gender, age, time spent on social media, body satisfaction).

Participants

This is a cross-sectional study, and data were collected using a convenience sampling method. The population of the study consisted of 18,755 students enrolled at a state university in Turkey during the 2023-2024 academic year. The sample was selected using a convenience sampling technique. The sample group comprised 402 students (minimum required  $n = 377$ ) from the aforementioned university who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. To reach the target sample size, an online participation invitation was sent to all students via email, and they were also encouraged to participate through in-class announcements.

**Table 1.**  
*Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants*

Variables	N	%
Gender		
Female	306	76.1
Male	96	23.9
Age group		
18-20	181	45.0
21-23	178	44.3
24+	43	10.7
Perceived economic status		
Low	33	8.2
Middle	279	69.4
High	90	22.4
Time spent on social media		
Less than 1 hour	27	6.7
1-3 hours	199	49.5
4-6 hours	145	36.1
More than 7 hours	31	7.7
Perceived impact of social media on appearance		
Yes	133	33.1
Partially	186	46.3
No	83	20.6
Body satisfaction		
Dissatisfied	52	12.9
Undecided	82	20.4
Satisfied	268	66.7
Self-criticism regarding body image		
Yes	139	34.6
Sometimes	200	49.8
No	63	15.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>100</b>

An examination of the participants' characteristics in Table 1 reveals that the mean age was 21.31 (SD = 3.44), with 76.1% being female and 23.9% male. Regarding perceived economic status, 8.2% of participants reported low, 69.4% middle, and 22.4% high income levels. A significant portion of the participants stated they used social media for 1-3 hours (49.5%) or 4-6 hours (36.1%) daily. A substantial majority (79.4%) indicated that social media "partially" or "completely" affects their perception of their appearance. Similarly, a large proportion of participants (84.4%) reported "sometimes" or "always" engaging in self-criticism about their body image, and 12.9% were dissatisfied with their bodies. These findings suggest that the sample group is exposed to pressures related to social appearance.

## Measures

### *Sociodemographic Information Form.*

This form, developed by the researchers, was used to collect information on participants' gender, age, perceived income level, time spent on social media, perceived impact of social media on appearance, body satisfaction, and self-criticism regarding body image.

### *Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form (SCS-SF)*

The Self-Compassion Scale-Short Form was developed by Raes, Pommier, Neff, and Van Gucht (2011). Its Turkish adaptation and validation study on adolescents was conducted by Yıldırım and Sarı (2018). The scale consists of 11 items on a single dimension, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1: almost never, 5: almost always). It includes 6 reverse-scored items (1, 4, 8, 9, 10, and 11). Higher total scores on the scale indicate higher levels of self-compassion. The original validation study reported an internal consistency coefficient of .75, concluding that it is a valid and reliable instrument for measuring self-compassion in Turkish adolescents. In the present study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the scale was .78.

### *Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS).*

The SAAS was developed by Hart et al. (2008) to measure individuals' social appearance anxiety and was adapted into Turkish by Doğan (2010). It is a 16-item self-report measure rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral statements related to appearance concerns. Higher scores on the SAAS indicate higher levels of social appearance anxiety. The Turkish adaptation study reported a Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency coefficient of .91 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of .80. In the present study, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was .94.

## Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the XXX University Xx Ethics Committee (Date: xx, No: xx). The research link was distributed through the

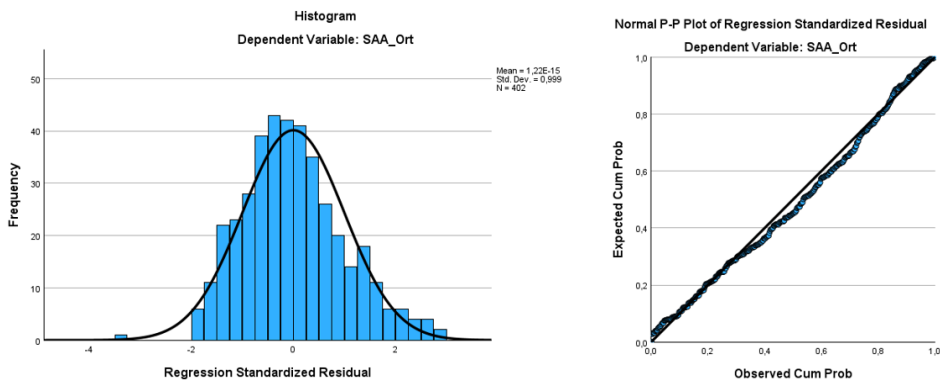
university’s student information system and the researchers’ social media accounts. Participants were presented with an information sheet about the study and were asked to check a box to provide informed consent. After giving consent, participants first completed the demographic information form, followed by the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale and the Self-Compassion Scale in an online survey format.

Data Analysis

To address the first research question (What are the levels of self-compassion and social appearance anxiety?), descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis) were calculated. For the second and third research questions (Do levels of self-compassion and social appearance anxiety differ based on demographic and behavioral variables?), Independent Samples t-Tests were used for two-category variables, and One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used for variables with more than two categories. However, when the assumptions for ANOVA were violated, the non-parametric alternative, the Kruskal-Wallis H Test, was applied. Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between variables. To test the main hypothesis of the study (Do self-compassion levels significantly predict social appearance anxiety levels?), a Simple Linear Regression Analysis was performed. Data were analyzed using the SPSS 29.0 software package.

The assumptions for regression analysis, such as normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variances, were examined (Pallant, 2020). The results of these tests indicated that the assumptions were met (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.  
Histogram and scatter plot for social appearance anxiety scale scores





## Results

In this study, initial analyses were conducted to determine whether students' social appearance anxiety differed significantly based on various demographic variables.

**Table 2.**  
*Descriptive statistics for the study variables*

Scales	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Self-Compassion	402	1.09	4.82	3.11	.63	.052	.082
Social Appearance Anxiety	402	1.00	4.88	2.10	.80	.746	-.169

As shown in Table 2, the mean score for self-compassion was 3.11 (SD = 0.63), and the mean score for social appearance anxiety was 2.10 (SD = 0.80). Since the skewness and kurtosis values for the scale scores were within the  $\pm 1.5$  range, the assumption of normality was met (Huck, 2012), and parametric tests were used for subsequent analyses.

**Table 3.**  
*Analysis of variables by gender*

Variable	Gender	n	Mean	SD	df	t	p
Self-Compassion	Female	306	3.09	0.62	400	-1.095	.937
	Male	96	3.17	0.65			
Social Appearance Anxiety	Female	306	2.07	0.77	400	-1.112	.386
	Male	96	2.17	0.85			

As indicated in Table 3, no statistically significant differences were found between genders in terms of self-compassion and social appearance anxiety levels.

**Table 4.**  
*Analysis of social appearance anxiety levels by various variables*

Variable	Groups	n	M.	SD	$\chi^2$	p	Significant Difference (Post-Hoc)
Age Group	18-20	181	2.29	.84	4.24	.120	-
	21-23	178	1.99	.72			
	24+	43	2.15	.82			
Economic status	Low	33	2.31	.97	6.49	.039*	No significant difference found
	Middle	279	2.12	.76			
	High	90	1.95	.80			
Time spent on social media	Less than 1 hour	27	2.08	.76	4.49	.213	-
	1-3 hours	199	2.03	.76			
	4-6 hours	145	2.20	.80			
	More than 7 hours	31	2.06	.98			
Perceived impact of social media on appearance	Yes	133	2.26	.85	17.97	<.001*	No < Partially; No < Yes
	Partially	186	2.11	.75			
	No	83	1.82	.73			
Body satisfaction	Satisfied	268	1.79	.58	109.87	<.001*	Satisfied < Undecided; Satisfied < Dissatisfied
	Undecided	82	2.53	.75			
	Dissatisfied	52	2.99	.84			
Self-criticism regarding body	Yes	139	2.37	.92	23.68	<.001*	Yes > Sometimes > No
	Sometimes	200	2.01	.67			
	No	63	1.79	.69			

$p < .05$

To examine whether participants' social appearance anxiety levels differed across various demographic and behavioral variables, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis H

test was used where ANOVA assumptions were not met. The results are summarized in Table 4. According to the findings, there were no statistically significant differences in social appearance anxiety scores by age group ( $\chi^2(2) = 4.24, p = .120$ ) or time spent on social media ( $\chi^2(3) = 4.49, p = .213$ ). In contrast, social appearance anxiety levels differed significantly between groups based on the perceived impact of social media on appearance ( $\chi^2(2) = 17.97, p < .001$ ), body satisfaction ( $\chi^2(2) = 109.87, p < .001$ ), and self-criticism regarding the body ( $\chi^2(2) = 23.68, p < .001$ ). Post-hoc analyses showed that participants who believed social media affected their appearance had significantly higher social appearance anxiety than those who did not. The anxiety level of those “Satisfied” with their bodies was significantly lower than that of both the “Undecided” and “Dissatisfied” groups. Similarly, as the frequency of self-criticism about the body increased, social appearance anxiety levels also rose significantly, with post-hoc tests revealing significant differences among all three groups (Yes, Sometimes, No). Furthermore, a statistically significant difference was found among groups based on perceived economic status ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.49, p = .039$ ). However, corrected post-hoc tests for multiple comparisons did not reveal a statistically significant difference between specific groups ( $p > .05$ ). These findings indicate that social appearance anxiety is strongly associated with body perception, internal evaluation processes (self-criticism), and sociocultural factors (perceived social media impact, economy), but not directly linked to factors like age or duration of social media use.

**Table 5.**  
*Correlation coefficients for the study variables*

Variables	M.	SD	1	2
1. Self-Compassion	3.11	0.63	—	
2. Social Appearance Anxiety	2.10	0.80	-.50**	—

*Note.*  $N = 402$ .  $M =$  Mean,  $SD =$  Standard Deviation. \*\* $p < .01$ .

As shown in Table 5, a statistically significant, moderate, and negative correlation was found between self-compassion and social appearance anxiety ( $r = -.50, p < .01$ ). This finding supports the main hypothesis of the study. Accordingly, as participants’ levels of self-compassion increase, their anxiety about being negatively evaluated by others based on their physical appearance decreases. Conversely, lower levels of self-compassion are associated with higher levels of social appearance anxiety. This relationship suggests that self-compassion has the potential to predict social appearance anxiety, setting the stage for regression analysis.

**Table 6.**  
*Simple linear regression analysis results for self-compassion predicting social appearance anxiety*

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p
(Constant)	4.21	0.18		23.00	<.001
Self-Compassion	-0.67	0.06	-.50	-11.70	<.001

*Note.* *Dependent Variable: Social Appearance Anxiety.*  $R = .50, R^2 = .25, Adjusted R^2 = .25, F(1, 400) = 136.00, p < .001$ .

According to the regression analysis results in Table 6, the overall model was statistically significant,  $F(1, 400) = 136.00$ ,  $p < .001$ . The independent variable, self-compassion, explained approximately 25% of the total variance in the dependent variable, social appearance anxiety ( $R^2 = .254$ ). Examination of the predictor coefficients revealed that self-compassion was a significant negative predictor of social appearance anxiety ( $\beta = -.50$ ,  $t = -11.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The unstandardized coefficient ( $B = -0.67$ ) indicates that for every one-unit increase in self-compassion scores, social appearance anxiety scores decrease by 0.67 units. This finding provides strong support for the study's main hypothesis. The results demonstrate that as university students' levels of self-compassion increase, their levels of social appearance anxiety significantly decrease.

### Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the protective role of self-compassion, as an internal and spiritual resource, against social appearance anxiety, one of the most common psychological challenges of the modern era, among university students. The primary hypothesis of the research was that higher levels of self-compassion would significantly and negatively predict levels of social appearance anxiety. The analysis results strongly supported this hypothesis. A moderate, negative relationship ( $r = -.50$ ) was found between self-compassion and social appearance anxiety, and the regression analysis revealed that self-compassion alone explained approximately 25% of the variance in social appearance anxiety. This finding is fully consistent with the literature, which indicates that self-compassion enhances psychological resilience (MacBeth & Gumley, 2012) and reduces negativity related to body image (Banga, 2024; Shah & Qurat-ul-ain, 2023; Wasylikiw et al., 2012). The theoretical mechanism underlying this relationship is that the three core components of self-compassion act as an antidote to the dynamics that fuel social appearance anxiety (Muris & Petrocchi, 2017; Özyeşil & Akbağ, 2013). An individual's kind and non-judgmental attitude toward oneself (self-kindness) softens the harsh self-criticism directed at perceived bodily flaws; understanding that one's anxieties are part of a shared human experience (common humanity) reduces feelings of isolation and shame; and the ability to observe anxious thoughts without over-identifying with them (mindfulness) mitigates their destructive impact (Bluth et al., 2022; Neff, 2023). Therefore, the most fundamental finding of this study is the empirical confirmation that self-compassion functions as a "spiritual shield" for young adults against appearance-based societal pressures.

The secondary findings of the study provide rich data for understanding the multidimensional nature of social appearance anxiety and the key dynamics that shape it. The most striking of these findings is the decisive role of the individual's cognitive and emotional relationship with their own body—namely, their body satisfaction and level of self-criticism—on their social appearance anxiety. The

results clearly demonstrated that participants who were dissatisfied with their bodies and possessed a critical inner voice regarding their appearance experienced significantly more intense social appearance anxiety compared to other groups. This aligns perfectly with literature findings that emphasize social appearance anxiety originates not from external threats but from an individual's internal evaluations of their own body (Linardon et al., 2022; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). In parallel with these internal evaluation processes, the perceived impact of an external factor, social media, also emerges as another key element shaping anxiety. Notably, it is the individual's subjective belief about the impact of social media on their appearance, rather than an objective measure like duration of use, that exhibits a stronger relationship with anxiety levels. This significant finding suggests that the underlying mechanism of anxiety, as outlined in Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, is the upward social comparisons made against idealized body images and the negative perceptions these comparisons create. When considered collectively, these findings indicate that social appearance anxiety is not a unidimensional phenomenon; rather, it is a complex experience that arises at the intersection of an individual's internal evaluation mechanisms (body perception, tendency for self-criticism) and sociocultural pressures from the external world (perceived social media impact) (Caner et al., 2022; Kızılkaya & Özkaya, 2023; Papapanou et al., 2023). These findings suggest that the severity of an individual's anxiety is determined primarily by how they cognitively and emotionally process these internal and external factors (Baltacı et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the finding that variables such as age and time spent on social media do not have a significant effect on social appearance anxiety is also noteworthy. This may indicate that social appearance anxiety is a widespread and general problem among the university youth population, rather than being specific to a particular age group or duration of use. The fact that the duration of social media use did not create a significant difference once again confirms that the source of the problem is not "how much" one is exposed, but "how" the content of that exposure is processed. The finding related to perceived economic status presents a more complex picture. While the overall Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ), the lack of significance in pairwise comparisons suggests that the effect of economic status on anxiety may be weak and indirect. Perhaps a higher economic status provides indirect protection by facilitating investments in the body (e.g., fitness, grooming), but this effect is not as pronounced as other psychological factors.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes the establishment of causal relationships between variables; although the

findings indicate a predictive relationship, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the direction and changes in this relationship over time. Second, the collection of data through self-report scales may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Third, the sample was drawn from a single university, which limits the generalizability of the results to all university students in Turkey.

Several important directions for future research emerge from this study. Primarily, conducting experimental and longitudinal studies to test the effectiveness of self-compassion-based intervention programs in reducing social appearance anxiety would provide valuable evidence for practical applications in this field. Pilot implementations of such programs could be carried out in university psychological counseling centers. Furthermore, studies that examine “how” social media is used in greater detail (e.g., active vs. passive use, types of accounts followed) could better illuminate the underlying mechanisms of the relationship between social media and anxiety.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that self-compassion is a strong and significant protective factor against social appearance anxiety for young adults. The cultivation of a kind, understanding, and accepting attitude toward oneself plays a pivotal role in mitigating the anxiety generated by appearance-focused societal pressures and internal self-criticism. This finding holds significant practical implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. In intervention programs aimed at supporting the mental health of young adults, it is of critical importance to prioritize practices that cultivate internal and spiritual resources, such as self-compassion, rather than focusing solely on skills for coping with external stressors. A young adult who can approach themselves with compassion has the potential to become a more resilient individual, capable of preserving their self-worth even in the shadow of the unrealistic ideals imposed by social media.

The theoretical contribution of this study is its empirical demonstration that the components of self-compassion (self-kindness, common humanity, mindfulness) function as a direct antidote to the core mechanisms that fuel social appearance anxiety (harsh self-criticism, isolation, and over-identification with anxious thoughts). In particular, our findings that body dissatisfaction and self-criticism increase anxiety underscore how crucial the self-kindness component is as a buffer against this destructive inner voice. In this regard, implementing structured “Mindful Self-Compassion” (MSC) programs for students through university psychological counseling and guidance centers can be offered as a concrete recommendation. Such programs can equip young adults with the skills to cultivate a more harmonious relationship with their bodies and protect themselves from the negative effects of social comparison.

Beyond practical recommendations, these findings offer a broader perspective on the mental health of young adults in the digital age. The finding that the perceived impact of social media on appearance is more decisive than the duration of use indicates that the issue is not with technology itself, but with the psychosocial processes mediated by it. Therefore, preventive mental health policies should not only focus on protecting young people from digital risks but should also aim to equip them with the internal psychological capital (e.g., self-compassion, psychological resilience) needed to withstand these risks. Integrating self-compassion training into educational curricula as part of social-emotional learning modules would contribute, in the long term, to fostering a generation that is more resilient to appearance-based pressures and derives its self-worth from internal sources.

**Acknowledgement.** The authors thank the participants for their support of this study.

**Ethical approval.** The study was performed in line with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration Guideline. Recep Tayyip Erdogan University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee Date: (29.05.2024) approved the research [Approval Number: 2024/227].

**Authors' contribution.** Conceptualization, D.K. and Z.K.; methodology Z.K. and D.K.; software, Z.K.; valida-tion, D.K.; formal analysis, Z.K.; investigation, D.K.; resources, Z.K.; data curation, Z.K.; writing—original draft preparation, Z.K. and D.K.; writing—review and editing, D.K.; visualization, Z.K.; project

administration, Z.K. and D.K.; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Peer-review.** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Funding.** This study was supported by the Scientific and Technical Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK-1919B012313877). We would like to thank TUBITAK for their support.

**Disclosure statement.** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Data Availability Statements.** The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## References

- Abdollahi, M., Soltani, A., Mzari Tavakoli, A., & Kamyabe, M. (2023). The proposed model of resilience based on self-compassion, empathy and spiritual well-being from the perspective of Islam: The mediating role of emotion-oriented coping strategy. *Quran and Medicine*, 8(3), 141–152.
- Akin, A., & Akin, U. (2017). Does self-compassion predict spiritual experiences of Turkish university students? *Journal of Religion and Health*, 56(1), 109–117. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-015-0138-y>
- Allen, L. M., Roberts, C., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., & Farrell, L. J. (2020). Exploring the relationship between self-compassion and body dysmorphic symptoms in adolescents. *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders*, 25, 100535. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jocrd.2020.100535>
- Baltaci, U. B., Yilmaz, M., & Tras, Z. (2021). The relationships between internet addiction, social appearance anxiety and coping with stress. *International Education Studies*, 14(5), 135–144.
- Banga, V. (2024). A study on body dysmorphia, appearance anxiety and self-compassion among young adults. *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Approaches in Psychology*, 2(12), 80:95-80:95.
- Betz, D. E., Sabik, N. J., & Ramsey, L. R. (2019). Ideal comparisons: Body ideals harm women's body image through social comparison. *Body Image*, 29, 100–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.03.004>
- Bluth, K., Lathren, C., & Park, J. (2022). Self-compassion as a protective factor for adolescents experiencing adversity. In M. Munroe & M. Ferrari (Eds), *Post-traumatic growth to psychological well-being: Coping wisely with adversity* (pp. 111–126). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-15290-0\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-15290-0_12)
- Bluth, K., Roberson, P. N. E., Gaylord, S. A., Faurot, K. R., Grewen, K. M., Arzon, S., & Girdler, S. S. (2016). Does self-compassion protect adolescents from stress? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(4), 1098–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-015-0307-3>
- Bodok-Mulderij, I., Schaap-Jonker, H., Klaassen-Dekker, A., Boselie, J., & Jacobs, N. (2023). The relation between religion/spirituality and mental health is mediated by self-compassion: Evidence from two longitudinal studies in the Dutch-speaking general population. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 15(3), 407–417. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000501>
- Bülbül, A. E., & Özbay, A. (2025). Spiritual well-being and fate in the patience self-compassion link among university students: A Turkish perspective. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 64(3), 1656–1675. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-024-02193-3>
- Caner, N., Efe, Y. S., & Başdaş, Ö. (2022). The contribution of social media addiction to adolescent LIFE: Social appearance anxiety. *Current Psychology*, 41(12), 8424–8433. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03280-y>
- Castilho, P., Carvalho, S. A., Marques, S., & Pinto-Gouveia, J. (2017). Self-compassion and emotional intelligence in adolescence: A multigroup mediational study of the impact of shame memories on depressive symptoms. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26(3), 759–768. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0613-4>
- Cetin, S., & Ece, C. (2021). Investigation of social appearance anxiety in university students. *Pakistan Journal of Medical and Health Sciences*, 15(5), 1694–1698. <https://doi.org/10.53350/pjmhs211551694>
- Dan, V. H., Ponnuchamy, L., Anand, N. K., Bhaskarapillai, B., & Sharma, M. K. (2023). Resilience and self-compassion among persons with depressive disorders: Prerequisite for a positive mental health approach. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, 12(8), 1621–1628. [https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpe.jfmpe\\_2270\\_22](https://doi.org/10.4103/jfmpe.jfmpe_2270_22)

- Doğan, T. (2010). Adaptation of the social appearance anxiety scale (saas) to Turkish: A validity and reliability study. *Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Education*, 39(39), 151-159.
- Ferreira, C., Pinto-Gouveia, J., & Duarte, C. (2013). Self-compassion in the face of shame and body image dissatisfaction: Implications for eating disorders. *Eating Behaviors*, 14(2), 207-210. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2013.01.005>
- Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7, 117-140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675400700202>
- Fong, M., & Loi, N. M. (2016). The mediating role of self-compassion in student psychological health. *Australian Psychologist*, 51(6), 431-441. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12185>
- Fredrickson, B. L., Hendler, L. M., Nilsen, S., O'Barr, J. F., & Roberts, T.-A. (2011). Bringing back the body: A retrospective on the development of objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 35(4), 689-696. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684311426690>
- Gao, J., Feng, Y., Xu, S., Wilson, A., Li, H., Wang, X., Sun, X., & Wang, Y. (2023). Appearance anxiety and social anxiety: A mediated model of self-compassion. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 01-06. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1105428>
- Gilbert, P. (2014). The origins and nature of compassion focused therapy. *The British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 53(1), 6-41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjc.12043>
- Gilbert, P., & Procter, S. (2006). Compassionate mind training for people with high shame and self-criticism: Overview and pilot study of a group therapy approach. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 13(6), 353-379. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.507>
- Gunnell, K. E., Mosewich, A. D., McEwen, C. E., Eklund, R. C., & Crocker, P. R. E. (2017). Don't be so hard on yourself! Changes in self-compassion during the first year of university are associated with changes in well-being. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 107, 43-48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.11.032>
- Han, A., & Kim, T. H. (2023). Effects of self-compassion interventions on reducing depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress: a meta-analysis. *Mindfulness*, 14(7), 1553-1581. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-023-02148-x>
- Hart, T. A., Flora, D. B., Palyo, S. A., Fresco, D. M., Holle, C., & Heimberg, R. G. (2008). Development and examination of the social appearance anxiety scale. *Assessment*, 15(1), 48-59. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191107306673>
- Huck, S. W. (2012). *Reading statistics and research*. Pearson.
- Jiang, Y., You, J., Hou, Y., Du, C., Lin, M.-P., Zheng, X., & Ma, C. (2016). Buffering the effects of peer victimization on adolescent non-suicidal self-injury: The role of self-compassion and family cohesion. *Journal of Adolescence*, 53, 107-115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2016.09.005>
- Jones, D. C. (2001). Social comparison and body image: Attractiveness comparisons to models and peers among adolescent girls and boys. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 45(9-10), 645-664. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014815725852>
- Kızılkaya, M., & Özkaya, A. S. (2023). Examination of social appearance anxiety through psychological theories. *Current Approaches in Psychiatry*, 15(3), 398-406. <https://doi.org/10.18863/pgy.1152765>
- Linardon, J., McClure, Z., Tylka, T. L., & Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, M. (2022). Body appreciation and its psychological correlates: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Body Image*, 42, 287-296. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.07.003>



- MacBeth, A., & Gumley, A. (2012). Exploring compassion: A meta-analysis of the association between self-compassion and psychopathology. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 32(6), 545–552. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2012.06.003>
- Maktar, A., Mohamed Sidik, M. S., Yahya, F., & Awang, A. (2025). Self-compassion from an Islamic lens: Fostering mental well-being. *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 0(0), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2025.2473048>
- Mathad, M. D., Rajesh, S. K., & Pradhan, B. (2019). Spiritual well-being and its relationship with mindfulness, self-compassion and satisfaction with life in baccalaureate nursing students: A correlation study. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 58(2), 554–565. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0532-8>
- Muris, P., Meesters, C., Pierik, A., & de Kock, B. (2016). Good for the Self: Self-compassion and other self-related constructs in relation to symptoms of anxiety and depression in non-clinical youths. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25, 607–617. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-015-0235-2>
- Muris, P., & Petrocchi, N. (2017). Protection or vulnerability? A meta-analysis of the relations between the positive and negative components of self-compassion and psychopathology. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 24(2), 373–383. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.2005>
- Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-Compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity*, 2(2), 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309032>
- Neff, K. D. (2011a). Self-compassion, self-esteem, and well-being. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 5(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00330.x>
- Neff, K. D. (2011b). *Self-compassion: the proven power of being kind to yourself*. Harper Collins.
- Neff, K. D. (2023). Self-Compassion: Theory, method, research, and intervention. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 74, 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031047>
- Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. (2018). *The Mindful self-compassion workbook: a proven way to accept yourself, build inner strength, and thrive*. Guilford Publications.
- Neff, K. D., Kirkpatrick, K. L., & Rude, S. S. (2007). Self-compassion and adaptive psychological functioning. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41(1), 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2006.03.004>
- Neff, K. D., & McGehee, P. (2010). Self-compassion and psychological resilience among adolescents and young adults. *Self and Identity*, 9(3), 225–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860902979307>
- Neumark-Sztainer, D., Paxton, S. J., Hannan, P. J., Haines, J., & Story, M. (2006). Does body satisfaction matter? Five-year longitudinal associations between body satisfaction and health behaviors in adolescent females and males. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 39(2), 244–251. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.12.001>
- Önalın, E., Sahin, S. Y., & Iyigün, E. (2021). Investigation of the relationship between university students social appearance anxiety and their attitudes towards aesthetic surgery. *Turkish Journal of Plastic Surgery*, 29(2), 116. [https://doi.org/10.4103/tjps.tjps\\_62\\_20](https://doi.org/10.4103/tjps.tjps_62_20)
- Özyeşil, Z., & Akbağ, M. (2013). Self-compassion as a protective factor for depression, anxiety and stress: A research on Turkish university students. *The Online Journal of Counseling and Education*, 2(2), 36–43.
- Pallant, J. (2020). *SPSS Survival Manual: A step by step guide to data analysis using IBM SPSS* (7th edn). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003117452>
- Papapanou, T. K., Darviri, C., Kanaka-Gantenbein, C., Tigani, X., Michou, M., Vlachakis, D.,

- Chrousos, G. P., & Bacopoulou, F. (2023). Strong correlations between social appearance anxiety, use of social media, and feelings of loneliness in adolescents and young adults. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(5), 4296. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054296>
- Raes, F., Pommier, E., Neff, K. D., & Van Gucht, D. (2011). Construction and factorial validation of a short form of the self-compassion scale. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 18(3), 250–255. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cpp.702>
- Sadrzadeh, F., Borjali, A., & Rafezi, Z. (2024). Self-compassion and social anxiety symptoms: Fear of negative evaluation and shame as mediators. *Practice in Clinical Psychology*, 12(4), 371–382. <https://doi.org/10.32598/jpcp.12.4.967.1>
- Şahin, S. (2019). Life goal as prediction of social appearance anxiety among university students. *Turkish Research Journal of Academic Social Science*, 2(2), 23–35.
- Shah, Z., & Qurat-ul-ain, A. (2023). The effect of perfectionism and self-compassion on positive and negative affect and appearance anxiety among adolescents. *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, 6(2), 617–627. <https://doi.org/10.52337/pjia.v6i2.809>
- Shin, H.-S., Black, D. S., Shonkoff, E. T., Riggs, N. R., & Pentz, M. A. (2016). Associations among dispositional mindfulness, self-compassion, and executive function proficiency in early adolescents. *Mindfulness*, 7(6), 1377–1384. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-016-0579-8>
- Stutts, L. A., Leary, M. R., Zeveney, A. S., & Hufnagle, A. S. (2018). A longitudinal analysis of the relationship between self-compassion and the psychological effects of perceived stress. *Self and Identity*, 17(6), 609–626. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2017.1422537>
- Szymanski, D. M., & Henning, S. L. (2007). The role of self-objectification in women's depression: A test of objectification theory. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 56(1–2), 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9147-3>
- Tran, M. A. Q., Vo-Thanh, T., Soliman, M., Khoury, B., & Chau, N. N. T. (2022). Self-compassion, mindfulness, stress, and self-esteem among Vietnamese university students: Psychological well-being and positive emotion as mediators. *Mindfulness*, 13(10), 2574–2586. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-022-01980-x>
- Wasylikiw, L., MacKinnon, A. L., & MacLellan, A. M. (2012). Exploring the link between self-compassion and body image in university women. *Body Image*, 9(2), 236–245. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2012.01.007>
- Werner, K. H., Jazaieri, H., Goldin, P. R., Ziv, M., Heimberg, R. G., & Gross, J. J. (2012). Self-compassion and social anxiety disorder. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, 25(5), 543–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2011.608842>
- Wilhoit, J. C. (2019). Self-compassion as a christian spiritual practice. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 12(1), 71–88. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790918795628>
- Yıldırım, M., & Sarı, T. (2018). Adaptation of the short form of self-compassion scale into Turkish: A validity and reliability study. *Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University Journal of Faculty of Education*, 18(4), Article 4. <https://doi.org/10.17240/aibuefd.2018.18.41844-452171>
- Zessin, U., Dickhäuser, O., & Garbade, S. (2015). The relationship between self-compassion and well-being: A meta-analysis. *Applied Psychology. Health and Well-Being*, 7(3), 340–364. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12051>