

Self-compassion and Sexual Satisfaction in Women: The Mediating Role of Body Appreciation.

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Abstract

Previous literature on body image has mainly focused on the negative aspects of bodily concerns, such as bodily dissatisfaction. Researchers have begun to explore how positive body image is associated with other important positive aspects of life such as sexual satisfaction. The present study aimed to explore the association between self-compassion and body appreciation and the mediating role of body appreciation in that association. In a cross-sectional design, 143 women completed an online survey measuring levels of self-compassion, body appreciation and sexual satisfaction. Data was analysed using a correlational analysis and a mediational analysis with self-compassion as independent variable, sexual satisfaction as dependant variable and body appreciation as a mediator. Results of the mediation showed, that as predicted, that self-compassion was indirectly related with sexual satisfaction via body appreciation. No direct relationship between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction was found.

Introduction

In recent decades there has been an explosion of literature in the field of positive psychology. This scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits concerns itself with well-being and optimal functioning (Duckworth, Stein & Seligman, 2005). In recent years, body image scholarship has shifted away from a sole focus on body image disturbances towards a more holistic understanding of body image. Body image has previously been primarily focused on assessing to which extent individuals adopt a negative orientation towards their body (Cash, 2002). Research has indicated that negative body image is associated with several aspects of poor mental health such as depression and disordered eating. However, more recently the framework that appears in the scholarly research is positive body image. Positive body image has been conceptualised theoretically as an overarching love and respect for the body (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015). This multidimensional construct can be attributed to the healthy behaviours and attitudes that are concerned with a healthy acceptance of an individual's body. Positive body image is not just the absence of body dissatisfaction but going above and beyond the negative feelings and instead respecting one's body. By exploring and understanding the determinants of positive body image, it may help increase our understanding of identifying and preventing negative body image concerns (van den Brink, Smeets, Hessen, Talens & Woertman, 2013). Previous studies have suggested that positive body image is a multifaceted construct made up of body appreciation, an internal orientation towards the body and satisfaction with the body's capabilities (Homan & Tylka, 2015). Recently body appreciation has begun to be explored as an individual construct being defined as "holding favourable opinions towards the body regardless of its appearance" (Homan & Tylka, 2015, p.1). It includes numerous facets of respecting, accepting, and enjoying one's body, regardless of the unrealistic images of women's bodies portrayed in media still engaging in health behaviours. However, it has been extensively less researched than body dissatisfaction, whose causes and correlates have been much more explored. (Homan & Tylka, 2015). Individuals who appreciate their body are not simply lacking body dissatisfaction but recognise their uniqueness and understand and accept their flaws as well as their virtues (Homan & Tylka, 2015). Winter and Satinsky (2014) made the distinction between lack of body dissatisfaction and body appreciation in that body dissatisfaction solely encompassing evaluative dimensions of body image. Additionally, in

recent decades body image has been extensively researched for its association with sexual outcomes in women. Positive body image (i.e. the presence of satisfaction, love, respect, acceptance, and appreciation held for one's body) has been in recent literature identified as a vital predictor of sexual satisfaction among women (van den Brink et al., 2018). However, most of the literature on body image and sexual functioning in women has focused mainly on the negative aspects of these constructs (e.g., body dissatisfaction and sexual dysfunction). In an attempt to explore the effects of body appreciation further, Winter and Satinsky (2014) carried out a cross sectional study to examine the association between body appreciation and sexual risk reduction in women. One of their hypotheses, which hypothesized that sexual relationship status moderated the relationship between body appreciation and current male condom use, was partially supported. This is in line with the existing literature which suggests that women who report higher levels of body appreciation have higher levels of sexual functioning and satisfaction (Satinsky et al., 2012; Gillen, Lefkowitz, & Shearer, 2006; Schooler, Ward, Merriweather, & Caruthers, 2005).

Sexual satisfaction can be defined as “affective response arising from one's subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one's sexual relationship” (Lawrence & Byers, 1995, p.268). In a nationally representative sample of US adults, more than 50% of sexually active men and more than 40% of sexually active women of all ages rated sexual health as highly important to quality of life (Flynn et al., 2016). There have been various theoretical approaches to sexual satisfaction and attitudes. In 2016, van den Brink et al., explored positive body image and sexual functioning in women with a focus on attachment. Their research found that attachment anxiety was negatively related to body appreciation which, in turn, was positively related to sexual desire and arousal. In recent years, several studies have been conducted on the sexual satisfaction of women. Thomas, Hamm, Borrero, Hess and Thurston (2019) carried out 39 interviews with midlife women exploring body image, attractiveness, and sexual satisfaction. The results indicated that feeling confident and attractive was a key ingredient to sexual satisfaction. Two studies in the last decade have examined the association between sexual function, body appreciation and sexual satisfaction (Satinsky et al., 2012; van den Brink, Smeets, Hessen, & Woertman, 2016) In the study by Satinsky et al., the results suggested that body appreciation was a significant predictor of sexual arousal, satisfaction, frequency of orgasm and general sexual function, after controlling for a relationship status. However, there was no significant relationship found with sexual desire, pain, or lubrication. Interestingly this is in contrast with

the study by van den Brink et al., in a sample of Dutch university women, which found that body appreciation predicted sexual desire and arousal while not contributing to sexual satisfaction, lubrication, orgasm or pain. Given the emphasis placed on the body in the context of sexual activity it can be expected that there is a considerable association between body appreciation and experiences of sexuality (van den Brink et al. 2013).

Moreover, literature on body image consists mainly of the prevalence of negative body concerns among women from Western cultures. In search of a new and more positive approach to body image, Neff (2003) proposed the idea of self-compassion. As Neff (2010) described, in simpler terms, self-compassion is compassion turned inwards. Due to the strong negative components linked to self-esteem Neff proposed a qualitatively different approach (Neff, 2003a). This new approach provides an alternative idea for thinking about self-views that aim to promote resilience (Neff,2003a). Self-compassion (a concept that comprises of self-kindness, mindfulness and common humanity) offers three core features which may be the cause of why self-compassionate people are better at coping with stressful events. (Clegg, Sirois, & Reuber, 2019). Neff, Hsieh, and Dejittera, and Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, and Hancock (cited in Jennings & Tan, 2014) offered support that self-compassion was positively associated with psychological constructs such as life-satisfaction, happiness, optimism, and emotional resilience. This is in contrast to self-esteem, which psychologists have offered various definitions of, which date all the way back to William James' (1890/1983) who proposed that self-esteem is the "degree to which the self is judged to be competent in life domains deemed important" (Neff & Vonk, pp.24, 2009). This distances people from confronting their flaws which may cause inner conflict and prompt self-enhancing illusions, whereas self-compassion is acknowledging and embracing one's faults or inadequacies which in turn, can lessen psychological distress (Neff & Vonk, 2009; Homan & Tylka, 2015). Similarly, to van den Brink et al (2015) who explored positive body image, sexual functioning and romantic relationships from an attachment perspective, Aktaran and Üstündağ-Budak (2019) carried out research linking self-compassion and body appreciation to attachment theory. This discussed that our experiences influence the self and others and is transferred from childhood to adulthood. Wasylikiw et al., (2012) reported that there is literature holding the view that having compassion towards oneself may contribute to positive evaluations of one's body and has been highly stressed in body image studies due to its close relation to psychological health (Neff, 2003b). The literature has suggested a common result that self-compassion is related to higher levels of body appreciation and lower levels of body

dissatisfaction (Wasyliw, et al., 2012). As well as body appreciation, self-compassion has been linked to sexual satisfaction, however it has been much less explored. Given that self-compassion is such a strong predictor in overall life satisfaction, it is reasonable to assume that it would play a vital role in sexual satisfaction, especially with the added role of body appreciation. In 2020, Ferreira, Rigby and Cobb explored the associations between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction in married couples. They expected that self-compassion would “help married couples to cope effectively with sexual problems in their relationship and to reduce the negative effects of daily sexual distress on couples’ daily satisfaction”.

The Present Study

Consistent with the paradigm of positive psychology, the current study focuses on the relationship between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction and the mediating role of body appreciation in women. The aim of this study is to expand upon previous literature by examining the link between self-compassion, positive body image and sexual satisfaction. Firstly, it is hypothesised that self-compassion and body appreciation will be associated with sexual satisfaction. Based on previous research it is expected that higher levels of self-compassion will be associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Homan & Tylka, 2015; Santerre-Baillargeon et al., 2018; Satinsky et al., 2012). Secondly, the mediating role of body appreciation will be tested. Based on previous research (van den Brink et al., 2016; Santerre-Baillargeon et al., 2018), it is hypothesised that body appreciation will be an explaining factor between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction. More specifically, it is expected that higher levels of self-compassion will be associated with higher body appreciation, which in turn will be associated with higher levels of sexual satisfaction.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study used convenience sampling methods to recruit participants. Women aged 18 or over were invited to take part in this study created using the online platform Qualtrics. The online address (URL) was distributed through social media and through Utrecht University's SONA platform for research from December 2020 to February 2021. SONA is an online platform for researchers to upload their studies where students can take part to receive course credit. After accessing the survey, participants were provided with information about the study and the questionnaires and were asked to give informed consent (by ticking a box) to proceed. All participants were told that participation was voluntary, and they were assured of their anonymity. Next, participants were asked to fill out ten demographic questions (eg., age, current work or study status, sexual orientation) followed by the questionnaires about self-compassion, body appreciation, and sexual satisfaction. Finally, social science students from Utrecht University were given the option to provide their student number in order to receive course credits; other participants were exempted of any kind of compensation for participation. The survey took an estimated 5 minutes to fully complete. A **debrief** explained the purpose of the study to the participants and provided the contact information of the researchers should they have any questions. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Social of Behavioural Sciences of Utrecht University, the Netherlands (FETC # 20-0382).

Participants in this study included 143 females between the ages of 18 and 43 ($M=21.39$, $SD= 3.556$). Highest level of education completed, or current was high school 11.2% ($n=11$), bachelor's degree 72.7% ($n=104$), master's degree 16.1% ($n=23$). In the total sample 82.5% ($n=118$) were heterosexual, 3.5% were homosexual ($n=5$), 13.3% ($n=19$) were bisexual and .7% ($n=1$) indicated "other" sexual orientation. In the total sample, 59.4% ($n=85$) of participants indicated that they were in a sexual relationship and 40.6% ($n= 58$) were not.

Measures

All scales were translated into English, German and Dutch for the purpose of the study with the translate-retranslate method (retranslation by a native speaker).

Self- Compassion

Self-compassion was measured using the Dutch version of the Self-Compassion-Short Form (SC-FC), consisting of 12 items, a shortened version of the 26 item Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003). The scale is answered on a seven-point response scale ranging from 1=almost never to 7=almost always (eg. When I fail at something important to me I become consumed by feelings of inadequacy). Scores of the scale were added together with higher scores reflecting higher levels of self-compassion. Raes, Pommier, Neff and Van Gucht (2011) found in their research that the shortened scale exhibits a near-perfect correlation with the full SCS ($r \geq 0.97$). They also found that although the number of scale items was reduced by half, the shortened version yields no substantial loss in terms of internal consistency for total scores and had a Cronbach's alpha of > 0.86 . The present study found that the SC-SF had a Cronbach's alpha of >0.79 which shows good internal consistency.

Positive Body Image

The Dutch version of the 13-item Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) (Alleva, Martijn, Veldhuis, & Tylka, 2016; Avalos, Tylka, & Wood-Barcalow, 2005) was used to assess the participants' body appreciation and acceptance of their bodies. Its items (e.g., "Despite its flaws, I accept my body for what it is") are rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Item responses are averaged, with higher scores reflecting greater body appreciation. Among college women, scores on the BAS-2 demonstrated internal consistency reliability and 3-week test-retest reliability, a unidimensional factor structure, and positive relationships to appearance evaluation and body esteem (Avalos et al., 2005). The BAS-2 is currently regarded as the most comprehensive measure of positive body image (Menzel & Levine, 2011). In a study by Homan and Tylka (2015) exploring Body Appreciation and Self-Compassion, a Cronbach's alpha of .95 was found. The present study found that the BAS had a Cronbach's alpha of .94.

Sexual Satisfaction

The Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX; Lawrance & Byers, 1998) was used to assess overall sexual satisfaction in the participants' sexual relationships. The scale

was also translated to Dutch for the purpose of the current study. Participants were asked to rate their sexual relationship using five 7-point bipolar subscales (Very Bad/Very Good; Very unpleasant/Very pleasant; Very negative/Very positive; Very unsatisfying/Very satisfying; and Worthless/Very valuable.) The scale is scored additively, with higher scores indicative of greater sexual satisfaction. The GMSEX has been shown to have good test-retest reliability and internal consistency (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). In a study by Humphreys et al. (2009) a Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the five items was .94. The present study found that the GMSEX had a Cronbach's alpha of .94 which shows good internal consistency.

Statistical Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences IBM version 25 (SPSS) conducted all analyses. First, bivariate associations between self-compassion, body appreciation, and sexual satisfaction were analysed using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Second, the mediating role of body appreciation was analysed using Hayes' Process Macro plug in for SPSS (Model 4; Hayes 2013), which perceived self-compassion as an independent variable, body appreciation as a mediator and sexual satisfaction as a dependant variable. The mediation analysis comprised of three sub-analyses. These estimate the total, direct and indirect effect of self-compassion on sexual satisfaction. In the first sub analysis, the effect of self-compassion on body appreciation was tested using simple regression analysis. In the second sub analysis, the total and direct effect of self-compassion and body appreciation on sexual satisfaction were estimated by means of a hierarchal multiple regression in which self-compassion was entered in the first step and body appreciation was entered in the second step. The total effect refers to the relationship between self-compassion between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction and the direct effect refers to the association between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction while controlling for body appreciation. In the third sub-analysis, the indirect effect of self-compassion on sexual satisfaction through the mediating role of body appreciation was estimated using bootstrap analysis with 5000 bootstrap samples. The significance of the indirect effect was based on bias- corrected 95% confidence intervals. The significance of this effect was based on the absence of the value 0 within the confidence intervals. The indirect effect refers to the relationship between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction through body appreciation. This study chose to report standardized findings.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Associations Between Self-Compassion, Body Appreciation and Sexual Satisfaction.

As expected, higher levels body appreciation was significantly associated with higher levels of self-compassion. Also, higher levels of body appreciation were associated with greater sexual satisfaction.

Table 1.

Means, Standard Deviations and Bivariate Associations Between Study Variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1 Self-Compassion a	48.35	9.38	-	-	-
2 Body Appreciation b	3.49	0.73	.51**	-	-
3 Sexual Satisfaction c	28.32	5.66	.24**	.28**	-

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

a) scale range (SC): 1-7 with higher scores indicating higher self-compassion.

b) scale range (BA) 1-5 item responses are averaged with higher scores indicating higher body appreciation.

c) scale range (SS) 1-7 with higher scores representing greater sexual satisfaction.

Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of Self-Compassion on Sexual Satisfaction Through the Mediation of Body Appreciation.

The assumptions of a linear regression analysis (i.e., normality, multicollinearity, homoscedasticity) were tested and met. A simple regression analysis revealed a significant positive direct effect of self-compassion on body appreciation. Regression analysis revealed a non-significant direct effect of self-compassion on sexual satisfaction (See Figure 1) indicating that self-compassion was not associated with sexual satisfaction. A total of 26% of the variance in the body appreciation could be explained by self-compassion, $F(1,141) = 49.46, p < .001$.

The results of a hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed a significant total effect of self-compassion on sexual satisfaction in Step 1 and non-significant direct effects of self-compassion and sexual satisfaction in Step 2 (see Figure 1). Furthermore, in Step 2 a significant direct effect of body appreciation on sexual satisfaction was found (see Figure 1). A total of 8.8% of the variance could be explained, $F(2,140) = 6.25, p < .001$.

The bootstrap analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of self-compassion, .055 BC 95% CI [.0077, .2228] on sexual satisfaction through body appreciation. This indicated, as expected, that lower levels of self-compassion were related to lower levels of sexual satisfaction through lower levels of body appreciation.

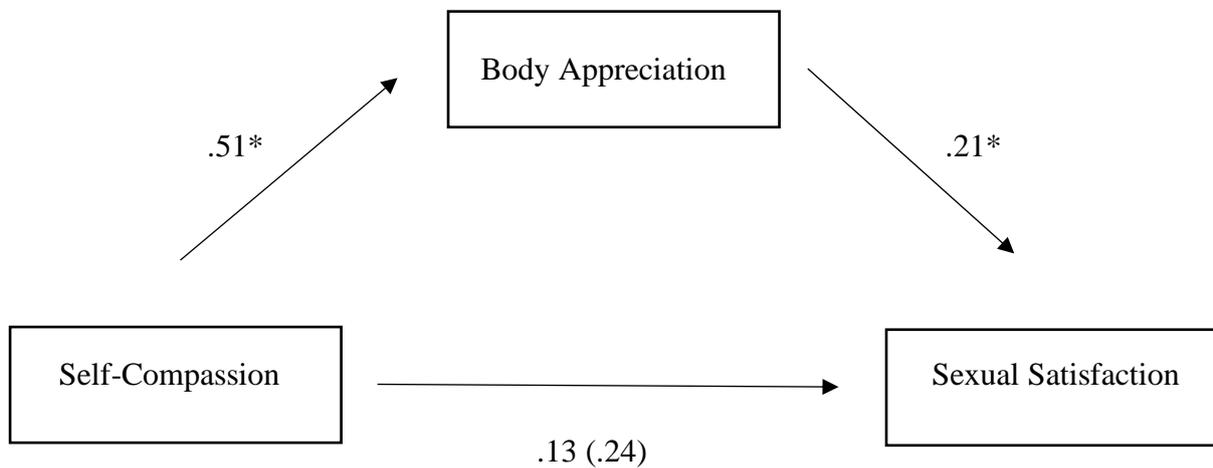


Figure 1. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction as mediated by body appreciation. The standardized regression coefficient between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction, controlling for body appreciation, is in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the associations between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction through body appreciation in women. Although many models of body dissatisfaction and negative body attitudes have been explored, models of positive image such as body appreciation still requires more attention (Avalos, Tylka, Wood-Barkalow, 2005). In line with the theory and previous literature, as expected, high levels of self-compassion were associated with high levels of body appreciation (Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick 2007). Furthermore, high levels of body appreciation were indicative of greater sexual satisfaction (Homan & Tylka, 2015). Furthermore, the results of the mediation analysis displayed that self-compassion and sexual satisfaction were not directly associated, indicating that body appreciation is an important contributing factor to sexual satisfaction (van den Brink, Vollmann, Smeets, Hessen, & Woertman, 2018).

These results are in line with the expectations that body appreciation will be an explaining factor between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction and reflect the findings of previous studies which underline the importance of positive body image in the context of women's sexual satisfaction. The results of the present study reflect previous literature that higher levels of positive body image are associated with more positive sexual behaviours and attitudes, and greater level of comfort such as undressing in front a partner (Ackard, Kearney, Cooke, & Peterson, 2000). The study also mirrors the research by Thomas et al., (2019) who performed a qualitative study with midlife women. Their study found evidence to support that feeling attractive was an important reason for sexual activity and how women responded to changes in their body impacted their sexual activity and satisfaction. Similarly, to the present study, they found that women who felt confident and attractive discussed better sexual satisfaction regardless of potential bodily changes.

The results of the mediation analysis suggest that self-compassion may be a preceding factor of the body appreciation and sexual satisfaction association. The findings displayed an indirect association between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction, while there was an absence of a direct link. This would suggest that the association can be fully explained by body appreciation. There is little research to date on the indirect links between self-compassion and sexual satisfaction however, the direct association between self-compassion

and body appreciation displayed in the results of this study reflects the previous literature by Wasylikiw et al. (2012.) The study carried out by Wasylikiw et al. (2012) found evidence to support that self-compassion is inversely related to women's bodily concerns. The researchers noted that it seems intuitive that those who are self-compassionate would be more accepting of their physical selves, as self-compassion entails less harsh judgements of the self, regardless of bodily size or unrealistic societal ideals. Though it has long been assumed that self-esteem is related to bodily concerns and attitudes, the present study is unique in that it solely focuses on exploring these concerns, taking a positive approach rather than also controlling for self-esteem or body dissatisfaction. For example, Wasylikiw et al., (2012) reported that unlike self-compassion, the link between self-esteem and bodily concerns may be attributable to comparing oneself to others. Being self-compassionate however, is the process of accepting oneself even if one perceives themselves as not being superior or even inferior (Wasylikiw et al., 2012). Prior literature has focused on indirectly linking self-compassion to life satisfaction (Yang, Zhang, & Kou, 2016). It may be beneficial in future research to incorporate sexual satisfaction in these studies as sexual satisfaction can be a vital predictor of overall life satisfaction.

In addition, the study has multiple implications for those who work with women in the area of body image and sexuality. Professionals can begin to focus on, not only alleviating negative attitudes surrounding an individual's body, but instead, teaching individuals to appreciate the positive aspects of their bodies. Prior research has suggested that self-compassion interventions could enhance the efficacy of psychological treatments for women and their partners. As self-compassion focuses on important aspects of sexual experiences and disorders such as shame and inadequacy, integrating self-compassion interventions may enhance compassionate attitudes towards oneself, thus leading to greater sexual satisfaction (Santerre- Baillargeon, 2018). As Satinsky et al., (2012) discussed, much of the literature surrounding women of higher body weight, promotes weight loss as a way of improving their sexual satisfaction. As the results of this study suggested, higher levels of self-compassion are associated with higher levels of body appreciation. In recent years, social and clinical psychologists have been striving to develop interventions to raise well-being and self-compassion which would reduce distress and dysfunction. A study by Adams and Leary (2007) explored self-compassion in 84 college women with rigid restrictive eating habits. The women would restrict their eating habits, however, if the diet is broken by something called a 'preload' they would tend to increase their food consumption to cope with the distress. In

their study, three separate groups (one non dieters and two restrictive eaters) consumed a preload. Only one of the restrictive eaters group received a self-compassion induction in advance of the preload. After the preload the group who received the self-compassion induction behaved like non-dieters and reported positive affect unlike the restrictive eaters who did not receive the induction (Bernard & Curry, 2011). The results of this study show that individuals with bodily concerns may benefit from a self-compassion induction. The results from the present study displayed that an increase in self-compassion can indirectly lead to greater sexual satisfaction, thus a self-compassion induction, such as this, could also be beneficial when aiming to increase sexual satisfaction.

Limitations

Though the study advances positive body image research there were several limitations which could be interpreted in future research. Although the came back as expected the results of this study must be taken into account. Prior research suggests that women who volunteer to participate in sex research studies tend to be more sexually experienced, hold less traditional sexual attitudes, and report higher sexual self-esteem and sexual sensation seeking (van den Brink, Smeets, Hessen, Talens, & Woertman, 2013; Wiederman, 1999). Though the study was anonymous, due to the nature of the study being rather sensitive it is possible that the participants may not have been completely honest in their responses. Prior research has shown that subjects such as sexual activities can lead to social desirability responding (DiFranceisco, McAuliffe, & Sikkema, 1998; van de Mortel, 2008). The participants were also asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire at the beginning of the survey however, the study did not ask them about the status of their relationship. The quality of their relationship may have an impact on their sexual satisfaction. In a study by Lehmilller, VanderDrift and Kelly (2014) individuals in a romantic relationship reported greater sexual satisfaction compared with 'Friends with Benefits' partners.

In future the researchers may also consider exploring the effects of ethnicity and culture within this study. Homan and Tylka (2015) also discussed in their research that self-compassion, which is derived from Buddhist thought, has been shown that there are cultural differences in self-compassion. Specifically, in countries which are predominantly Buddhist, such as Thailand, they have higher levels of self-compassion than individuals from America. This may be due to Buddhist cultures being more accepting of failures and imperfections (Neff, Pisitkagarn, & Hsieh, 2008). Also, to be noted in the study is that sexual relationships

are dyadic in nature meaning that the behaviours and perceptions of the partner may be of importance with regard to the quality of sexual experiences. Further studies should use dyadic designs, for example the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM), to take into account the interrelatedness of partners (Kenny & Ledermann, 2010; Mustanski, Starks, & Newcomb, 2014). Finally, given the cross-sectional nature of this study, direction of causality could not definitely be determined. (Maxwell, Cole, & Mitchell, 2011, van den Brink et. al, 2018).

Conclusion

Regardless of these limitations, this study is unique in that it takes a positive approach and makes a growing contribution to the research of self-compassion, body appreciation and sexual satisfaction. Our results suggest that self-compassion and body appreciation may be effective in the improvement of sexual satisfaction. The findings of the study offer incremental, yet preliminary, insight into the importance of body appreciation on the sexual satisfaction of women. It is the researchers' hope that the findings of the current study will serve to inform directions for future research. Specifically, that the associations between self-compassion, body appreciation and sexual satisfaction will be further explored. Further, the researchers hope that future self-compassion interventions may be employed to improve body appreciation and therefore improve sexual satisfaction among women (Homan & Tylka, 2015).

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