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Comparative Study

Comparative Study on Impact of Social Comparison on Body Esteem Moderated by Cognitive Flexibility Among Millennials and GenZ

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to compare the impact of social comparison on body esteem, moderated by cognitive flexibility, among Millennials and Gen Z. A cross-sectional research design was employed with data collected from 195 participants, including both millennials and gen z using convenient sampling. The research found that Millennials engage in significantly higher levels of social comparison than Gen Z, which in turn influences body esteem. A moderate positive relationship between social comparison and body esteem was observed for both groups, but the effect was more pronounced in Millennials. Cognitive flexibility acted as a moderator in this relationship, helping individuals adapt to social comparisons, though this effect was stronger among Millennials. There was no significant difference between the two generations in terms of cognitive flexibility or body esteem, suggesting that other factors, such as emotional regulation or media literacy, might also play a role. These findings highlight generational differences in the way in which social comparison and cognitive flexibility influence self-perception in the context of body image.

Keywords: *Social Comparison, Body Esteem, Cognitive Flexibility, Millennial, GenZ*

Social Comparison, Body Esteem and Cognitive Flexibility

Social comparison has become more common due to the popularity of different social media platforms. Both millennials and Gen Z devote a considerable amount of time on the internet, leading to high exposure to carefully selected, perfected images of others that may impact self-image. The pressures of social comparison in the digital age have been associated with high levels of body dissatisfaction and mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Examining social comparison can show the variations in pressures experienced by millennials and Gen Z, who were raised in somewhat distinct technological and societal environments. Recognizing the importance of social comparison is key in explaining how individuals' body perceptions are influenced, particularly in settings that encourage ongoing comparison, which may result in negative effects such as low self-esteem or eating disorders.

Body esteem is the way in which people assess their own looks, and it impacts mental health

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and overall wellness. Millennials and Gen Z are at risk of body image issues because of societal beauty norms, peer pressure, and social media presence in image-focused cultures. Body esteem includes different aspects, like contentment with certain body parts, overall thoughts on one's appearance, and how one views their body compared to societal or cultural beauty norms. As worries about body image problems rise among young people, studying body esteem can help understand the mental impact of societal pressures and suggest ways to boost self-esteem and body contentment. Studying body image can help us comprehend the psychological effects of comparing ourselves to others, and is crucial in developing methods to foster a positive body image and inner strength against unattainable standards of beauty.

Cognitive flexibility is the capacity to adjust one's thinking in reaction to shifting circumstances, environments, or requirements. Adapting is a fundamental executive skill that requires making changes. A fundamental cognitive process is needed to modify one's thoughts when presented with new data, challenges, or unanticipated scenarios. Cognitive flexibility enables individuals to tackle problems from various viewpoints, switch between mental frameworks, and use diverse strategies to reach objectives. Within the realm of social comparison, cognitive flexibility may mitigate the adverse impacts of unfavorable comparisons by enabling people to alter their viewpoints or attitudes. Studying cognitive flexibility is important now because it could provide defenses that lessen the harmful psychological effects of comparing oneself to others. During a time of continual online presence, individuals with more cognitive flexibility may find it easier to handle societal demands, resulting in improved self-image and mental health. By studying cognitive flexibility as a moderating factor, you can determine if individuals who are more mentally adaptable are less vulnerable to the negative impacts of social comparison. This knowledge can aid in creating strategies to improve cognitive flexibility and build resilience.

The way people view and value their own physical appearance, known as body esteem, is an important factor in their overall self-esteem and mental well-being. In younger generations like millennials and Gen Z, self-perception of one's body can be greatly affected by comparing oneself to others in different social situations, known as social comparison. Millennials and Gen Z are two separate generational groups that have been raised in varying societal and cultural contexts. Various situations can cause people of different generations to perceive and react to social comparison in unique ways. Cognitive flexibility can help individuals better handle societal expectations and maintain a healthy self-image despite social comparison influences on body esteem. Exploring this could uncover significant coping strategies that can be fostered or cultivated in both age groups. Emphasizing the need to encourage mental flexibility.

METHODOLOGY

Hypothesis

- **H_1:** There will be a significant relationship between social comparison and body esteem among millennials and gen z.
- **H_2:** There will be a significant moderating effect of cognitive flexibility on relationship between social comparison and body esteem among millennials and genz.
- **H_0:** There will be no significant difference in the moderating effect of cognitive flexibility on the relationship between social comparison and body esteem is between gen z and millennials.

Sample

The sample comprised of one hundred and ninety-five persons. The sample were millennials who were born within 1980 to 1994 and gen z who were born within 1995 to 2012. 92 millennials and 103 gen z were included in the study. The sample is selected using convenient sampling.

Instruments

Three measures were used in this study,

1. **Social Comparison Scale (SCS):** Social Comparison Scale (SCS) was constructed and standardized by Steven Allan and Paul Gilbert in the year 1995. This scale is to measures self-perceptions of social rank on various dimensions. Participants are prompted to compare themselves to other people using 10-point bipolar scales. This scale consists of 11 Bipolar constructs and is a ten-point rating scale where 1 indicated an unfavorable rating on each dimension and 10 indicated a favorable rating on each dimension. This scale has Construct validity and a Cronbach alpha score of 0.96 for clinical population and 0.91 for students.
2. **Body-esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA):** Body-esteem scale was constructed and standardized by Beverley K. Mendelson, Donna R. White and Morton J. Mendelson in the year 1997. This scale is to assess self-evaluations of one's body appearance in adolescents and adults. The scale has three subscales BE-Appearance (general feeling about appearance), BE-Weight (weight satisfaction) and BE-Attribution (evaluations attributed to others about one's body and appearance). This scale consists of 23 items and is a five-point rating scale consisting of (0) never, (1) seldom, (2) sometimes, (3) often and (4) always. This scale has convergent validity and the test-retest correlations were given for the subscales of the scale like BE-Appearance = 0.89, BE-Weight = 0.92, BE-Attribution = 0.83.
3. **Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI):** Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (CFI) was constructed and standardized by Dennis and Vander Wal in the year 2010. This scale is to measure the three aspects of cognitive flexibility (a) the tendency to perceive difficult situations as controllable; (b) the ability to perceive multiple alternative explanations for life occurrences and human behavior; and (c) the ability to generate multiple alternative solutions to difficult situations. This scale consists of 20 items and is a 7-point Likert scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. The test-retest reliability value for the scale is 0.81 and has Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.84 to 0.91. The scale also has convergent and concurrent criterion validity.

Procedure

The variables were identified and the research question was framed. To identify the research gap and theoretical construct the review of literature part was done. Then hypothesis was conformed after clarifying with the previous literature. Then, a structured survey was formulated using validated scales to measure social comparison, body-esteem, and cognitive flexibility. After defining with the target population, convenient sampling was used. The survey was circulated to the participants in a google form. After the data was collected, it was scored and then statistical analysis was done with the SPSS software involving Pearson correlation, regression and independent sample t test. Finally, the results were tabulated and discussed, the hypothesis were verified. Then the limitations and implication for future research were also discussed.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the Pearson Correlation Matrix for Social comparison, Body-esteem and cognitive flexibility for Millennial population.

Variables		Social Comparison	Body Esteem	Cognitive Flexibility
Social Comparison	Pearson Correlation	1	.344	.339
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.001
Body Esteem	Pearson Correlation	.344**	1	.333**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001		.001
Cognitive Flexibility	Pearson Correlation	.339**	.333**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.001	

Table 1 indicates the Pearson correlation matrix for millennials (n = 92) shows significant relationship between social comparison, body esteem and cognitive flexibility. Social comparison is moderately and positively correlated ($r = .344$; $p < .01$) with body esteem indicating that individuals who frequently engage in social comparison tend to have moderately higher body-esteem. Research finding indicates that positive social comparisons were associated with improved body satisfaction, particularly when individuals perceived themselves favorably in relation to their peers or media representations (Myers & Crowther, 2009). The correlation between social comparison and cognitive flexibility is moderate and positive ($r = .339$, $p < .01$). This suggests that individuals who engage in social comparison may have better cognitive flexibility, which refers to the ability to adapt one's thinking and behavior to changing environments or perspectives. This result can be explained through social identity theory. Engaging in social comparison may require individuals to shift their self-concept based on how they view themselves in relation to others. This constant adjustment could promote cognitive flexibility as they adapt to different social roles or identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The relationship between cognitive flexibility and body esteem is positive and moderate ($r = .333$, $p < .01$). Body-esteem may contribute to better emotional regulation, which in turn can enhance cognitive flexibility. According to broaden-and-build theory positive emotions, such as those arising from high body-esteem, can broaden an individual's thought-action repertoire, enhancing cognitive flexibility (Fredrickson, 2001).

Table 2 shows the Pearson Correlation Matrix for Social comparison, Body-esteem and cognitive flexibility for Gen Z population.

Variables		Social Comparison	Body Esteem	Cognitive Flexibility
Social Comparison	Pearson Correlation	1	.355	.156
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.116
Body Esteem	Pearson Correlation	.355**	1	.061**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.539
Cognitive Flexibility	Pearson Correlation	.156**	.061**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.116	.539	

Table 2 indicates the Pearson correlation matrix for gen z (n = 103) shows significant relationship between social comparison, body esteem and cognitive flexibility. Social comparison is positively and moderately correlated ($r = .355$, $p < .001$) with body esteem suggesting that individuals who engage in social comparison tend to have a moderately

higher body-esteem. This aligns with social comparison theory which posits that people assess themselves by comparing with others. Positive comparisons might enhance self-esteem, particularly in relation to body image, as demonstrated by upward or lateral comparisons leading to body satisfaction when individuals perceive themselves positively relative to others (Festinger, 1954). However, other studies argue that frequent social comparison can also lead to negative body-esteem, particularly when individuals compare themselves to idealized or unrealistic body standards, such as those portrayed in media (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). The relationship between social comparison and cognitive flexibility is mild and positive ($r = .156$, $p = .116$). Although this correlation is not statistically significant ($p > .05$), it suggests a slight tendency for individuals who engage in social comparison to also demonstrate higher cognitive flexibility. There is a contrast finding indicating that excessive social comparison, particularly in competitive contexts, can reduce cognitive flexibility due to the pressure of conforming to rigid social norms. These comparisons may result in more fixed thinking and behaviors, especially when social comparison becomes obsessive or damaging to self-concept (Vogel et al., 2015). The correlation between body-esteem and cognitive flexibility is very mild and positive ($r = .061$, $p = .539$), indicating almost no relationship between these two variables, as the result is statistically insignificant. This suggests that the way individuals feel about their body does not appear to significantly influence their ability to think flexibly or adapt cognitively to different situations. There is a contrast finding indicating that low body-esteem could negatively affect cognitive flexibility. For example, rumination on negative body image can occupy cognitive resources, potentially leading to less flexibility in thinking (Koster et al., 2011).

Table 3 shows the regression analysis of cognitive flexibility with social comparison and body esteem among the millennial and genz.

Generation	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
Millennials	.414	.172	.153	.802
Generation Z	.355	.126	.108	1.043

Table 3 shows the regression analysis for millennials and gen z (n = 195). The result indicated that there is a moderate positive correlation between the independent variables (social comparison and cognitive flexibility) and body esteem for millennials with an R value of 0.414, suggesting a meaningful relationship. The R^2 value of 0.172 indicates that approximately 17.2% of the variance in body-esteem is explained by the predictor variables. While this is a modest amount, it shows that social comparison and cognitive flexibility significantly influence body-esteem in this group. The adjusted R^2 accounts for the number of predictors and sample size, confirming that around 15.3% of the variation is consistently explained when considering these factors. The standard error (0.802) represents the average distance that the observed data points fall from the regression line, indicating the model's accuracy According to the Broaden-and-Build theory individuals with high cognitive flexibility are better equipped to process negative comparisons more positively, which could explain why the relationship is moderate rather than strong (Fredrickson, 2001). Research by Koster et al. (2011) supports this, showing that people with higher cognitive flexibility are less likely to engage in negative self-evaluation following social comparisons.

The result indicated that there is a moderate positive correlation between the independent variables (social comparison and cognitive flexibility) and body esteem for gen z with an R value of 0.355, suggesting a slightly weaker relationship compared to Millennials, but still

statistically meaningful. $R^2 = 0.126$ indicates that 12.6% of the variance in body-esteem is explained by the variables in Generation Z, which is lower than that of Millennials. This might suggest that other unmeasured factors could play a more significant role in explaining body-esteem for Gen Z. Then the Adjusted $R^2 = .108$ accounting for moderation, around 10.8% of the variation is explained by the model, confirming a weaker relationship compared to Millennials. Standard Error = 1.043 implies that the predictions for Generation Z are less accurate, with greater variance around the regression line compared to Millennials. The weaker relationship between cognitive flexibility, social comparison, and body esteem in Gen Z is likely due to their exposure to diverse body representations, greater mental health awareness, and their higher cognitive flexibility, which together buffer the negative impacts of social comparison. Their ability to curate their online experiences and embrace self-expression further diminishes the strength of these relationships.

Table 4 shows the independent sample t-test for the difference between millennials and gen z

Variables	t	df	p	Mean Difference
Social Comparison	3.009	193	.003	7.009
Body Esteem	.541	193	.589	1.094
Cognitive Flexibility	.711	193	.478	1.446

Table 4 indicates the independent samples t-test results, which revealed a significant difference in social comparison between the millennials and gen z, millennials (M = 75.82; SD = 16.021) have high level of social comparison (M = 68.81; SD = 16.432) when compared to gen z. These findings suggest that the significant difference in social comparison scores (with millennials having a higher mean score) indicates that millennials are more likely to evaluate themselves against others in social contexts, possibly due to differences in social experiences, motivations, or the influence of media. This finding coincided with a previous study that explored the way social media platforms contribute to upward social comparison, finding that users often compare themselves to the idealized images of others, which can affect well-being and self-esteem. Millennials, who were early adopters of social media and have spent more time on these platforms compared to Gen Z, may be more prone to such comparisons (Vogel et al.,2014). Another study suggested that millennials are more susceptible to social comparison effects due to the constant exposure to peers' highlight reels on social media. The findings indicated that frequent social media users, which include a large portion of millennials, are more likely to compare their lives with others and report feelings of dissatisfaction (Chou & Edge, 2012)

DISCUSSION

The results were tabulated and discussed briefly. There is a positive moderate correlation between social comparison and body esteem among millennials and gen z. Hence the hypothesis (H_1) is accepted. Cognitive flexibility also has a significant relationship between social comparison and body esteem among millennials and gen z. Previous research evidence concludes that Cognitive flexibility allows individuals to adjust their self-concept in response to social comparison, which can promote resilience in the face of negative comparisons (Martin & Rubin, 1995).

There is a moderating relationship between the cognitive flexibility and social comparison along with body esteem among millennials and gen z. Hence the hypothesis (H_2) is partially accepted. But there is only a weak relationship among the variables as there may be other

factors that were influencing the moderating relationship of the variables. Additionally, research suggests that cognitive flexibility is related to adaptive coping strategies, but its effects might be mitigated by factors such as chronic stress or exposure to unrealistic body ideals (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Thus, while cognitive flexibility contributes to better adaptation in social comparisons, its moderating effect is only partial because other psychological and environmental factors, such as personality traits and social influences, are likely at play.

There is a significant difference in social comparison among the millennials and gen z. Millennials have high social comparison than gen z. Since the results show no significant difference in cognitive flexibility or body esteem between the two groups, this supports the hypothesis. And so, the hypothesis (H_0) is accepted partially. Research evidence suggest that gen z has grown up with a greater awareness of the negative impacts of social comparison and tends to engage more in self-expression and mental health awareness. These factors may buffer them against high levels of social comparison (Twenge & Campbell, 2018).

The study comparing the impact of social comparison on body esteem, moderated by cognitive flexibility, among Millennials and Gen Z found that Millennials engage in more social comparison than Gen Z. This leads to a more significant effect on body esteem for Millennials. Cognitive flexibility helps mitigate negative effects from social comparison in both groups, but the moderating effect is stronger among Millennials. Despite these differences in social comparison, there was no significant difference in cognitive flexibility or body esteem between the two generations. This suggests that other factors like media literacy or emotional regulation might influence these relationships.

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Conflict of Interest

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