

## How Internalized Sexism Shapes Appearance Anxiety in College Students: The Mediating Effect of Self-Compassion

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**Abstract:** Based on objectification theory, this study explores the impact of internalized sexism on appearance anxiety among college students and examines the mediating role of self-compassion. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 318 college students. The analysis indicated that: (1) internalized sexism was positively correlated with appearance anxiety and significantly negatively correlated with self-compassion; (2) self-compassion was significantly negatively correlated with appearance anxiety; (3) the connection between internalized sexism and appearance anxiety was somewhat mediated by self-compassion, with a mediation impact of 22.4%; (4) female students scored significantly higher than male students on internalized sexism and appearance anxiety. The findings suggest that internalized sexism is a significant risk factor for appearance anxiety among college students, whereas self-compassion is a crucial psychological defense mechanism. To lessen the detrimental effects of internalized sexism on appearance anxiety, it is advised to develop self-compassion skills.

**Keywords:** Internalized Sexism; Appearance Anxiety; Self-Compassion; Mediating Effect

### 1. Introduction

In contemporary society, visual culture and social media increasingly render the body an object of gaze and evaluation. For college students navigating self-identity formation, appearance carries complex social meanings beyond its physiological nature [1]. This fosters appearance anxiety-persistent tension from excessive concern about and negative evaluation of one's appearance [2,3]. National mental health data reveal higher depression risk among youth, especially female students, underscoring gender disparities. As academic pressure

intersects with gender norms, individuals internalize biases into self-criticism. Thus, understanding how internalized sexism heightens anxiety is critical for university mental health efforts.

Examining socio-cultural mechanisms is essential. Social gender theory suggests women's bodies are sites of unequal power relations and normative discipline [1]. Internalized sexism-the internalization of gender stereotypes and biases into self-perception [4,5]-operates as a covert pathway. Objectification theory adds that persistent socio-cultural gaze leads to self-objectification, triggering body shame and anxiety [6]. Domestic studies confirm internalized sexism (e.g., self-objectification) predicts appearance and social anxiety among women [7,8].

Beyond risk factors, positive resources merit attention.

Self-compassion-comprising self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness-promotes a healthy self-attitude [9], directly countering the harsh self-criticism and rumination linked to internalized sexism. Preliminary evidence shows self-compassion buffers online objectification effects [10] and moderates appearance comparison and body dissatisfaction [11]. Integrating social and positive psychology perspectives, This research examines two things. First, how internalized sexism shapes college students' worry over their physical appearance. Second, how self-compassion acts as a moderator in this link. The findings can guide university mental health education.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1 Research on Appearance Anxiety

Appearance anxiety is a form of social-evaluative anxiety arising from concerns about aligning one's appearance with social ideals [3, 12]. Common measures include the

Appearance Anxiety Scale (AAS) and Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS). Influencing factors span physiological (e.g., BMI), psychological (e.g., low self-esteem), and socio-cultural levels (e.g., media ideals). Media exposure heightens appearance anxiety [13], which in turn predicts eating disorders and depression [14].

## 2.2 Research on Internalized Sexism

Internalized sexism reflects the incorporation of external gender biases into self-standards [4]. Objectification theory offers a foundational framework, positing that self-objectification leads to body shame and anxiety [6]. Common instruments include the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ) and Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS). Domestic studies confirm self-objectification predicts social anxiety [7], body dissatisfaction [8], and academic performance [15], moderated by factors such as sexual power beliefs [16] and self-compassion [10].

## 2.3 Research on Self-Compassion

Self-compassion comprises self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness [9], typically measured by the Self-Compassion Scale (SCS). It is negatively correlated with anxiety and depression [17] and positively correlated with healthy body image [18]. Recent work integrates self-compassion into objectification theory, demonstrating its buffering effect against objectification experiences [10, 11].

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Theoretical Analysis and Research Hypotheses

Grounded in objectification theory and the stress-buffering model, this study builds a theoretical framework. In this framework, internalized sexism is the predictor. Appearance anxiety is the outcome. Self-compassion is the factor in the middle.

According to objectification theory, individuals under socio-cultural scrutiny internalize an observer's perspective, leading to internalized sexism. This prompts habitual body monitoring and upward comparison with unattainable beauty standards, resulting in appearance anxiety [7]. Thus, H1: Internalized sexism is positively correlated with appearance anxiety.

Internalized sexism reflects internalized oppression, wherein external gender biases become self-demands [4]. But self-compassion is different. It rests on three pillars. First, you treat yourself kindly. Second, you recognize that everyone fails or suffers sometimes. Third, you pay attention to the here and now. These together make it easier to accept your own flaws. These opposing self-attitudes are negatively associated [10]. Hence, H2: Internalized sexism is negatively correlated with self-compassion.

Self-compassion enables healthier coping with appearance-related stress, reducing anxiety [18,19]. Therefore, H3: Self-compassion is negatively correlated with appearance anxiety.

The stress-buffering model suggests that positive resources mitigate risk effects. Self-compassion counters the self-criticism and rumination from internalized sexism, weakening its impact on appearance anxiety [10]. Accordingly, H4: Self-compassion helps explain how internalized sexism relates to appearance anxiety. It plays a bridging role.

### 3.2 Model Construction

A mediation model is specified with internalized sexism (X) as the independent variable, appearance anxiety (Y) as the dependent variable, and self-compassion (M) as the mediator:  $M = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 X + \varepsilon_1$ ;  $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 M + \varepsilon_2$ . Mediation is supported if  $\alpha_1$  and  $\beta_2$  are significant, and the absolute value of  $\beta_1$  is smaller than the direct effect without the mediator.

### 3.3 Sample Selection and Data Sources

This study targeted current college students nationwide. A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling was employed, and questionnaires were distributed through both online and offline channels. Online, the questionnaire was generated via the WJX platform and disseminated through social media platforms. Offline, paper questionnaires were distributed in university libraries and teaching buildings. This study obtained 318 questionnaires.

**Table 1. Demographic Attributes of the Study Group (n=318)**

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	164	51.57
	Female	154	48.43
Academic Year	Freshman	80	25.16

	Sophomore	70	22.01
	Junior	84	26.42
	Senior	75	23.58
	Graduate or Above	9	2.83
Hometown	Urban	140	44.03
	Rural/Township	178	55.97
Only Child	Yes	181	56.92
	No	137	43.08

### 3.4 Variable Measurement

The Body Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale was used, consisting of 8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. People who scored higher on this measure also showed more self-objectification. Body surveillance is merely an operational indicator and is not entirely equivalent to internalized sexism.

The Chinese version of the short form Appearance Anxiety Scale was used. Higher scores indicated higher levels of appearance anxiety.

The Self-Compassion Scale was used, consisting of 12 items. Higher scores indicated higher levels of self-compassion.

The researchers included four kinds of demographic control variables. They looked at gender, year of study, urban versus rural origin, and sibling status.

### 3.5 Calculation of Variable Scores

Based on the data, the total and mean scores for each scale were calculated as follows:

This Internalized Sexism (Body Surveillance Scale) consisted of 8 items, of which items 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8 were reverse-scored.

**Table 2. Scores of the Physical Monitoring Scale**

Item	Raw Mean	Scoring Direction	Reverse-Coded Score
1. I rarely think about how I look	2.69	Reverse	3.31
2. I think it's more important that clothes are comfortable than good-looking	2.69	Reverse	3.31
3. I think more about how my body feels	2.76	Reverse	3.24
4. I rarely compare my appearance to others	2.81	Reverse	3.19
5. Several times a day, I think about how I look	3.21	Positive	3.21
6. I often worry about whether my clothes make me look good	3.20	Positive	3.20
7. I don't worry much about how I look to others	2.79	Reverse	3.21
8. I care more about how my body functions	2.68	Reverse	3.32

The Body Surveillance Scale gave a total score of 26.00. The mean was 3.25, with a standard deviation of 0.71. When we compared this mean to the theoretical median of 3, it was higher. This finding suggests that college students show an elevated state of seeing oneself through an

external gaze.

The Appearance Anxiety scale consisted of 14 items, of which items 3, 4, 6, 11, 12, and 14 were reverse-scored. The original mean scores for each item, along with the scores after reverse coding, are displayed as the following.

**Table 3. Scores of the Appearance Anxiety Scale**

Item	Raw Mean	Scoring Direction	Reverse-Coded Score
1. I feel nervous about my appearance	3.30	Positive	3.30
2. I worry about how others evaluate my looks	3.27	Positive	3.27
3. I am satisfied with my appearance	2.75	Reverse	3.25
4. I like the way I am	2.74	Reverse	3.26
5. I want to change how I look	3.23	Positive	3.23
6. I am satisfied with my body shape or figure	2.75	Reverse	3.25
7. I feel uncomfortable about certain aspects of my appearance	3.19	Positive	3.19
8. I feel most of my friends are more attractive than I am	3.25	Positive	3.25
9. I wish I looked better	3.28	Positive	3.28
10. I worry about my ability to attract others	3.26	Positive	3.26
11. I feel comfortable with my appearance	2.88	Reverse	3.12
12. I am satisfied with my weight	2.75	Reverse	3.25
13. I feel nervous or excited when others comment on my appearance	3.29	Positive	3.29
14. I am confident others find me attractive	2.71	Reverse	3.29

The Appearance Anxiety Scale produced a total score of 45.50. Participants had a mean score of

3.25. The spread around that mean was 0.68. That average exceeded the theoretical median of 3. This finding suggests that college students' appearance anxiety falls into the moderately high range.

The Self-Compassion scale consisted of 12 items, of which items 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12 were reverse-scored. The original mean scores for each item, along with the scores after reverse coding, are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Scores of the Self-Compassion Scale**

Item	Raw Mean	Scoring Direction	Reverse-Coded Score
1. I remind myself that many people feel this way	3.29	Positive	3.29
2. I try to maintain emotional balance	3.25	Positive	3.25
3. I try to treat myself with kindness and warmth	3.31	Positive	3.31
4. I see this as part of the human experience	3.25	Positive	3.25
5. I try to face my feelings with curiosity and openness	3.28	Positive	3.28
6. I feel overwhelmed by a sense of isolation	2.72	Reverse	3.28
7. I am harsh toward myself	2.82	Reverse	3.18
8. I become overwhelmed by my emotions	2.70	Reverse	3.30
9. I feel inadequate	2.77	Reverse	3.23
10. I try to focus on positive things	3.26	Positive	3.26
11. I feel lonely	2.81	Reverse	3.19
12. I feel most people are happier than I am	2.76	Reverse	3.24

Based on the calculations, the total score for the Self-Compassion Scale was 39.05, with a mean score of 3.25 (SD = 0.53). This mean is equal to the theoretical median of 3, indicating that college students' self-compassion level is at a moderate level.

### 3.6 Profiling Analysis of Study Variables

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Each Variable (n=318)**

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Internalized Sexism	3.25	0.71	-0.12	-0.35
Appearance Anxiety	3.25	0.68	-0.08	-0.28
Self-Compassion	3.25	0.53	-0.15	-0.22

No variable showed an absolute skewness of 2 or higher. Also, no variable showed an absolute kurtosis of 5 or higher. Based on these criteria, the data were approximately normal.

### 3.7 Analysis of Demographic Differences

Results from independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA showed:

There was a significant gender difference in internalized sexism ( $t = 4.23, p < 0.001$ ), with

female students scoring significantly higher ( $M = 3.42$ ) than male students ( $M = 3.09$ ). There was also a significant gender difference in appearance anxiety ( $t = 5.16, p < 0.001$ ), with female students scoring significantly higher ( $M = 3.45$ ) than male students ( $M = 3.06$ ). No significant gender difference was found in self-compassion ( $t = 1.02, p > 0.05$ ).

No significant differences were found for any of the variables across grade level ( $F = 1.35, p > 0.05$ ), place of origin ( $t = 0.88, p > 0.05$ ), or whether the participant was an only child ( $t = 0.64, p > 0.05$ ).

### 3.8 Variable Association Examination

As shown in Table 6, Internalized sexism exhibited a robust positive link with appearance anxiety ( $r = 0.49, p < 0.001$ ); internalized sexism showed a marked negative association with self-compassion ( $r = -0.36, p < 0.001$ ); and self-compassion demonstrated a strong inverse correlation with appearance anxiety ( $r = -0.42, p < 0.001$ ). Hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 were preliminarily supported.

**Table 6. Correlation Matrix between Variables (n=318)**

Variable	1. Internalized Sexism	2. Appearance Anxiety	3. Self-Compassion
1. Internalized Sexism	/		
2. Appearance Anxiety	0.49	/	
3. Self-Compassion	-0.36	-0.42	/

### 3.9 Mediating Mechanism Examination

The study tested the mediating role of self-compassion. It used Model 4 from the

PROCESS macro for SPSS (version 4.0). The predictor was internalized sexism (X). The outcome was appearance anxiety (Y). The mediator was self-compassion (M). Several

demographic variables were held constant. The study estimated confidence intervals with a bias-corrected percentile bootstrap. The bootstrap repeated the sampling 5,000 times.

**Table 7. Regression Analysis of Mediation Effect Test**

Variable	Equation 1: Self-Compassion (M)		Equation 2: Appearance Anxiety (Y)		Equation 3: Appearance Anxiety (Y)	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Internalized Sexism	-0.34	-6.48	/	/	0.38	7.21
Self-Compassion	/	/	-0.40	-7.86	-0.28	-5.32
Gender	-0.04	-0.78	0.06	1.22	0.05	0.98
Academic Year	-0.03	-0.52	-0.02	-0.42	-0.03	-0.66
Hometown	0.02	0.38	0.03	0.58	0.04	0.82
Only Child	0.03	0.56	0.02	0.38	0.03	0.61
R <sup>2</sup>	0.14		0.18		0.29	
F	10.28		13.56		21.34	

As shown in Table 7, in Model 1, Internalized sexism was linked to lower levels of self-compassion. This link was significant ( $\beta = -0.34, p < 0.001$ ). In Model 2, higher self-compassion went with lower appearance anxiety. This pattern was significant ( $\beta = -0.40, p < 0.001$ ). In Model 3, after including both internalized sexism and self-compassion, the direct predictive effect of internalized sexism on appearance anxiety remained significant ( $\beta =$

0.38,  $p < 0.001$ ), although the coefficient was reduced compared to Model 1 (where the mediator was not included), indicating that self-compassion partially mediates the relationship between internalized sexism and appearance anxiety.

The bootstrap method was used to test the significance of the mediation effect, and the results are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8. Significance Test of the Mediation Effect**

Effect Type	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	Proportion of Total Effect (%)
Total Effect (c)	0.49	0.04	0.41	0.57	100%
Direct Effect (c')	0.38	0.05	0.28	0.48	77.6%
Indirect Effect (a × b)	0.11	0.03	0.06	0.17	22.4%

As shown in Table 8, the bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect was [0.06, 0.17], which does not include 0, indicating that the mediating effect of self-compassion was significant. The indirect effect value was 0.11, accounting for 22.4% of the total effect. Since the bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the direct effect [0.28, 0.48] also did not include 0, self-compassion helped explain part of the link from internalized sexism to appearance anxiety. Thus, H4 was supported.

both internalized sexism and appearance anxiety, highlighting their elevated psychological risk. (2) Internalized sexism was positively correlated with appearance anxiety, supporting objectification theory. (3) Self-compassion demonstrated opposing trends with both internalized sexism and appearance anxiety, positioning it as a protective resource. (4) Self-compassion mediated the internalized sexism–appearance anxiety relationship; higher self-compassion partially mediated the positive predictive effect of internalized sexism on appearance anxiety, consistent with the stress-buffering model.

**4. Conclusion**

**4.1 Main Conclusions**

Data for this study was derived from a targeted survey administered to 318 college students, and it examined the relationship between internalized sexism and appearance anxiety, along with the mediating role of self-compassion. Key findings include: (1) College students reported moderate internalized sexism and self-compassion, with appearance anxiety at a moderately high level. Female students scored significantly higher on

**4.2 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this study confirms the risk effect of internalized sexism on appearance anxiety, identifies self-compassion as a buffer within the objectification theory framework, and integrates social and positive psychology perspectives through a risk–protective interaction model. Practically, individuals can cultivate

self-compassion and shift focus from appearance to functionality; universities should offer self-compassion and gender-equality programs and foster diverse aesthetic cultures; society should promote diverse body imagery in media and regulate objectifying content online.

#### 4.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations include the cross-sectional design, limited sample representativeness, narrow measurement of internalized sexism (i.e., body surveillance served merely as an operational indicator and is not entirely equivalent to internalized sexism), and exclusive focus on self-compassion. Subsequent studies are advised to employ longitudinal frameworks or experimental methodologies to further validate findings, expand sample coverage, adopt multidimensional measures, and examine multiple protective factors such as social support and self-esteem, while attending to emerging digital contexts.

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