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The Effect of the Thin Ideal in Social Media on Body Image and the Moderating Effect of Self-Compassion among College Students in Mainland

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of exposure to thin-ideal and average-body images on social media on body image among female college students in Mainland China and Hong Kong, China, while exploring the potential moderating role of self-compassion. Employing a mixed experimental design, 191 participants were randomly distributed to one of four conditions: thin-ideal bodies, average bodies, landscapes (mood control), or eyeglasses (neutral control). Body image was assessed pre- and post-exposure using the Body Image States Scale (BISS), and self-compassion was measured via the Self- Compassion Scale (SCS). Results from repeated-measures ANOVA indicated a significant interaction between image type and time, with thin-ideal images reducing body satisfaction and average-body images enhancing it. Contrary to hypotheses, self- compassion did not significantly moderate these effects. The findings align with social comparison theory, highlighting the divergent effects of idealized versus realistic body portrayals. While self-compassion did not buffer against negative impacts, the study underscores the importance of promoting diverse body representations on social media to generate healthier body perceptions among young women. Limitations and cultural considerations are discussed, with recommendations for future research to explore longitudinal and contextual factors.

Keywords: thin-ideal media; body image dissatisfaction; self-compassion; social comparison; cross-cultural study

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1. Introduction

Body image refers to the psychological representation of an individual's emotions, cognitions, and perceptions regarding their physical form. In the digital era, social media has become a dominant force shaping body-related attitudes and ideals. Across various platforms, users encounter an abundance of idealized and highly curated images that prioritize aesthetic appearance over physical or psychological well-being. Among these portrayals, the thin ideal remains one of the most pervasive and influential concepts, implicitly promoting the belief that women should achieve and maintain an exceptionally slender physique. Empirical research has demonstrated that recurrent exposure to extremely thin body images can undermine young women's self-evaluation, intensify negative reflections about their own appearance, and exacerbate dissatisfaction with their bodies. Because social media environments frequently highlight and normalize such portrayals, the thin ideal presents a particularly significant challenge for young women, a population already vulnerable to body image concerns and disordered eating patterns [1].

Although the thin ideal exerts strong adverse effects on body image, individual characteristics such as self-compassion may buffer its influence. Self-compassion involves responding to personal setbacks, emotional distress, or perceived inadequacies with empathy, emotional warmth, and understanding rather than harsh self-criticism. This

disposition can weaken the negative impact of appearance-based comparisons and societal pressures to pursue thinness. Individuals who display higher levels of self-compassion tend to maintain more positive body image evaluations, even during situations that involve appearance-based judgments or comparison with others. While existing studies highlight the importance of self-compassion, much remains unknown regarding how it shapes responses to thin-ideal media exposure outside Western cultural contexts, where norms, values, and beauty standards may differ [2].

This study investigates the relationship between female college students' exposure to the thin ideal on social media and changes in negative body image among students in mainland China and Hong Kong, China, and examines whether self-compassion moderates that relationship. It is hypothesized that participants' body image scores will decline following exposure to thin-ideal images, and that the magnitude of this decline will be attenuated among participants with higher levels of self-compassion [3].

2. Literature Review

Body image is broadly defined as the psychological experience associated with how individuals perceive, think, and feel about their physical appearance [4]. It encompasses cognitive appraisals of bodily features as well as affective reactions related to appearance satisfaction. A central aspect of negative body image is body dissatisfaction, which reflects unfavorable evaluations of one's body size, shape, or weight. Higher levels of body dissatisfaction are closely associated with maladaptive eating behaviors, including binge eating, restrictive dieting, and purging [5]. These concerns may further contribute to mental health difficulties such as reduced self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and an increased risk of disordered eating [6].

Body image concerns tend to be especially prominent among young women, many of whom report dissatisfaction with their bodies or experiences of appearance-related stress. Frequent comparison with individuals perceived as thinner often results in lower self-esteem and worsened evaluations of one's own appearance [7]. Additionally, many cultural narratives emphasize the manageability of weight through personal effort, framing difficulties with weight control as individual shortcomings. This framing can intensify negative self-appraisals and further diminish self-esteem [8].

The sociocultural model of body image disturbances argues that media representations of thinness are central contributors to body dissatisfaction and disordered eating. A thin-ideal norm emerges when a social group collectively upholds the belief that a slender body represents an ideal form [9]. The internalization of this ideal influences body image through two primary mechanisms: adopting the belief that attractiveness is directly linked to thinness, and engaging in appearance-based comparisons with others who seem more desirable. When women internalize these standards and repeatedly compare themselves to idealized images, dissatisfaction with their own appearance often increases, thereby heightening risks for maladaptive eating behaviors. Large-scale evaluations of experimental and correlational studies support this view, demonstrating that media exposure tends to increase body dissatisfaction and problematic eating behaviors. Appearance comparisons in particular have been identified as a key mediator in this process [10].

Objectification theory provides a complementary perspective by examining how media-driven sexualization shapes women's body perceptions [11]. This framework posits that sexual objectification occurs when women's bodies are evaluated primarily for their appearance rather than valued for their abilities or personal attributes. Persistent exposure to objectified images, combined with reinforcement of the thin ideal, encourages self-objectification-a pattern in which individuals adopt an outsider's perspective toward their own bodies, focusing heavily on how they may be judged by others. This heightened self-surveillance contributes to body anxiety and intensified feelings of shame. Because media depictions of the ideal body are frequently unattainable, young women may

experience increased self-consciousness and shame, which in turn elevates risks for depressive symptoms, disordered eating, and other negative psychological outcomes. Empirical work with female college students shows that exposure to objectified images is associated with greater self-objectification, increased body-related anxiety, higher body dissatisfaction, and more pronounced eating-related concerns [12].

With the rapid rise of digital technology, young women now spend significantly more time on appearance-focused online platforms than on traditional media sources such as television or magazines [13]. Social media has thus become a central environment for the reproduction of body-related norms. Unlike traditional media, social media provides extensive opportunities for appearance-based social comparison because users are frequently exposed to images of peers rather than distant public figures. Social comparison theory argues that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing to others who share similar characteristics. As social networks predominantly feature one's peers, they facilitate frequent comparisons with individuals perceived to possess attractive physiques, and such comparisons can exacerbate body dissatisfaction [14].

Experimental evidence suggests that even brief exposure to images of slender and conventionally attractive people can reduce body satisfaction among young women, and that viewing images of attractive peers may intensify negative affect and appearance concerns. These findings indicate that social media, by presenting curated peer images and enabling rapid, repeated comparison, can have an especially potent impact on body image [15].

Despite these documented risks, several protective factors can mitigate the influence of the thin ideal. Self-compassion, rooted in the idea of treating oneself with kindness and understanding in the face of personal struggles, appears to buffer against harmful appearance comparisons and excessive self-scrutiny. Self-compassion comprises intertwined dimensions-self-kindness versus self-judgment, recognition of common humanity versus isolation, and mindful acceptance versus over-identification-that together promote a balanced and nonreactive stance toward one's flaws and setbacks. Practicing self-compassion helps individuals respond to perceived appearance shortcomings with supportive self-talk rather than harsh criticism, fosters a sense of shared human experience that reduces isolation, and encourages mindful awareness that prevents over-identification with negative body-related thoughts. As a result, higher self-compassion is associated with greater body appreciation, lower body shame, and an orientation toward health rather than appearance.

Although the thin ideal has roots in Western cultural norms, globalization and social media diffusion have spread this ideal across many non-Western contexts. In some societies that historically valued larger body shapes, preferences have shifted toward thinner ideals, contributing to a global rise in the drive for thinness. Nonetheless, research examining how the thin ideal and self-compassion operate in non-Western cultural contexts remains limited. This study thus aims to extend current understanding by investigating how exposure to thin-ideal images on social media affects body image among female college students in mainland China and Hong Kong, China, and by testing whether self-compassion moderates this effect. It is expected that exposure to thin-ideal images will reduce body image scores, and that individuals with higher self-compassion will exhibit a smaller decline in body image following such exposure compared with individuals with lower self-compassion.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used to address the research questions and describes the experimental design and analytical procedures adopted to collect and interpret data.

3.1. Research Philosophy

The philosophical foundation adopted in this study is positivism, which emphasizes empirical evidence, objective measurement, and the use of statistical analysis. A quantitative approach was employed because the study aimed to examine the effect of exposure to thin-ideal images on women's body image states and to evaluate whether self-compassion moderates this relationship. Addressing these questions requires a methodological framework capable of systematically measuring numerical data, testing hypotheses, and establishing potential cause-and-effect relationships. An experimental method was therefore adopted, as it enables direct observation of how specific visual stimuli influence changes in body image and supports the identification of causal associations between variables.

3.2. Participants

A total of 204 female college students were recruited through campus WeChat groups and various online social platforms. Participants were between 18 and 28 years old (Median = 24), and their body mass index ranged from 14.9 to 52.9 kg/m² (M = 21.9, SD = 6.7). None of the participants had taken part in similar experiments previously, and none had been diagnosed with current or past eating disorders or color blindness. All participants were Asian.

To determine the minimum required sample size, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7. With a medium effect size (Cohen's d = 0.5), a power level of 0.80, and a significance level of 0.05, the recommended sample size was 64 participants. This ensured that the study had sufficient statistical power to detect the expected effects while minimizing the risk of Type I error.

3.3. Design

The study employed a 2 × 4 mixed experimental design. The type of imagery viewed by participants served as the between-subject factor, and completion of body image measurements before and after exposure served as the within-subject factor. Self-compassion was examined as a potential moderator.

3.4. Manipulation

The experiment consisted of four distinct image conditions: thin-ideal body images, average body images, landscape images, and eyeglass images. All visual materials were selected from publicly accessible social media accounts on RedNote and Instagram to ensure representation of contemporary online imagery.

3.4.1. Thin-Ideal Image Condition

The thin-ideal image condition consisted of images depicting slim female bodies with minimal visible body fat. These images commonly appear on social media accompanied by descriptions such as "perfect figure," "comic figure," or similar expressions emphasizing extremely thin body proportions. This condition served as the primary experimental stimulus.

3.4.2. Average Body Image Condition

The average body image condition featured images of women with normal and healthy body proportions. These images provided a contrast to the thin-ideal images and were selected from social media posts using tags associated with healthy or confident female body representation. This condition allowed comparison of participants' reactions to typical body shape imagery.

3.4.3. Mood Control Condition

To control for potential emotional influences unrelated to body imagery, visually appealing landscape images were included as a mood control condition. These images served as neutral environmental stimuli, isolating the emotional effects of body images from background or contextual visual elements.

3.4.4. Neutral Control Condition

The neutral control condition consisted of images of eyeglasses in various styles and colors. This condition functioned as a baseline unrelated to body shape or emotional content, ensuring that participants' responses were not influenced by themes associated with appearance.

Across all four conditions, each set included eight images. All images followed a uniform selection standard: each contained only one subject and included no watermarks or logos. The thin-ideal and average body images were full-body photographs showing clear body proportions, with noticeably smaller body size in the thin-ideal group compared to the average group.

3.5. Measures

3.5.1. Self-Compassion Scale

The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS) includes 26 items that assess individuals' tendencies to respond to difficult or stressful situations with kindness, awareness, and connectedness rather than judgment or isolation. The scale includes six dimensions across positive and negative components, and responses are provided on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("almost never") to 5 ("almost always"). Negative items were reverse-scored, and the total score was computed by averaging all items. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-compassion. The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency.

3.5.2. Body Image States Scale

The Body Image States Scale (BISS) contains six items that measure momentary feelings and perceptions regarding one's appearance. Items assess perceptions of appearance, body shape, weight, physical attractiveness, comparison with typical feelings, and comparison with the average person. Responses are provided using a 9-point Likert scale. Half of the items are presented in a positive-to-negative direction and the other half in a negative-to-positive direction; positive-to-negative items were reverse-scored before computing the average. Higher scores indicate a more positive body image state. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency at both measurement points.

3.6. Procedure

The study was conducted online using the WJX survey platform. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four between-subject conditions: thin-ideal images, average-body images, landscape images, or eyeglass images. They first completed demographic questions including age, height, and weight, which were used to calculate BMI. Participants then completed the Self-Compassion Scale followed by the Body Image States Scale as a pre-test measure of body image.

Next, participants viewed eight images corresponding to their assigned condition. Immediately after exposure, they completed the BISS again to assess changes in momentary body image. The study received ethical approval from the departmental ethics committee. All data were collected anonymously, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the study.

3.7. Data Analysis Plan

Data were processed using IBM SPSS 31.0. Because the design involved a between-subject factor (image type) and a within-subject factor (pre-test and post-test body image scores), a two-way repeated-measures ANOVA was conducted to examine the main effects and interactions between image type and time. Multiple linear regression was used to assess the moderating effect of self-compassion, with the BISS change score (post-test minus pre-test) as the dependent variable. Since image type was categorical, dummy variables were created for inclusion in the regression model.

Correlations between the BISS change score and demographic variables such as age and BMI were examined to identify potential covariates. Any variable significantly correlated with the outcome was included as a covariate in the ANOVA. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

4. Result

4.1. Cleaning of Data

A total of 204 participants were initially recruited for the study. During data screening, one participant was excluded due to an abnormally high BMI value of 154, identified as an extreme outlier. Additionally, 12 participants were excluded because they completed the questionnaire in under 2 minutes, which was considered insufficient to provide thoughtful responses. Consequently, the final sample size for analysis was N = 191. According to the Shapiro-Wilk test, the sample data conformed to a normal distribution ($p > .05$), indicating that parametric analyses are appropriate.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the participants' characteristics and key variables. These statistics provide a foundational understanding of the sample distribution and initial relationships among variables.

4.2.1. Correlations, Skewness, and Kurtosis

Table 1 presents correlations among self-compassion (SCS), pre-test and post-test body image state scores (BISS_1 and BISS_2), age, and BMI, along with skewness and kurtosis for each variable. The correlations indicate that SCS is positively associated with both pre-test ($r = 0.50$, $p < 0.01$) and post-test BISS scores ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher self-compassion is related to higher body image scores. Age and BMI showed small, non-significant correlations with BISS scores, implying that these demographic variables are unlikely to confound subsequent analyses. Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables fall within acceptable ranges, supporting the assumption of normality.

Table 1. Correlations, Skewness, and Kurtosis of All Variables.

Variables	1. SCS	2. BISS_1*	3. BISS_2*	4. Age	5. BMI	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
1. SCS	-	0.50**	0.41**	0.16*	-0.04	3.23	.58	-0.33	0.29
2. BISS_1	-	-	0.84**	0.17*	-0.09	5.39	1.50	-0.11	0.19
3. BISS_2	-	-	-	0.14*	-0.12	5.50	1.52	-0.11	0.24
4. Age	-	-	-	-	-0.05	23.02	2.93	-0.27	-0.57
5. BMI	-	-	-	-	-	21.89	6.70	3.11	11.21

*BISS_1: pre-test score; BISS_2: post-test score, **p < .01, *p < .05.

4.2.2. Means and Standard Deviations for Each Condition

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation of age, BMI, SCS, and BISS scores for each experimental condition. Participants in different image exposure groups were similar in age and SCS, indicating successful randomization. BMI showed moderate

variation across groups, but as it was not significantly correlated with BISS score changes (see Section 4.3), it is unlikely to confound results. Initial BISS scores were comparable across conditions, whereas post-test scores suggest potential changes depending on the type of images viewed.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Each Condition.

Conditions	Thin Ideal	Average	Landscape	Glasses
N	49	46	46	50
Age	23.41 (2.73)	23.15 (2.52)	23.57 (2.33)	22.42 (2.47)
BMI	23.93 (8.51)	21.54 (5.07)	21.63 (6.94)	20.45 (5.30)
SCS	3.33 (0.61)	3.15 (0.63)	3.28 (0.51)	3.14 (0.52)
BISS_1	5.61 (1.16)	5.23 (1.47)	5.36 (1.65)	5.34 (1.20)
BISS_2	5.30 (1.74)	5.85 (1.41)	5.49 (1.63)	5.37 (1.15)

The table suggests that exposure to average-body images may increase BISS scores, whereas thin-ideal images may reduce them, consistent with the hypothesized interaction effect between image type and measurement time.

4.3. Covariate Check

Prior to main analyses, potential covariates including age and BMI were examined. Table 3 reports the correlations between BISS score changes and these variables. Neither age ($r = -0.04$, $p = 0.59$) nor BMI ($r = -0.05$, $p = 0.47$) was significantly related to BISS change scores. This indicates that demographic factors are unlikely to influence the effect of image exposure on body image state, supporting the decision to exclude covariates from the main ANOVA.

Table 3. Correlations Between BISS Score Change and Potential Covariates.

BISS	Age	BMI
Pearson's r	-0.04	-0.05
p	0.59	0.47

4.4. Comparison Between Conditions

Repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of image type and measurement time on BISS scores. Results are reported in Tables 4 and 5. The main effect of measurement time was significant ($F(1,187) = 4.45$, $p = 0.04$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.02$), indicating overall increases in BISS scores from pre-test to post-test. The main effect of image type was not significant ($F(3,187) = 0.13$, $p = 0.94$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.00$). A significant interaction effect ($F(3,187) = 11.49$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.16$) suggests that the impact of image type on body image varies across measurement times.

4.4.1. Within-Subject Effects

Table 4 presents the within-subject effects. The significant interaction indicates that the effect of viewing different image types depends on the time of measurement.

Table 4. Within-Subject Effects from Repeated Measures ANOVA.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2p
Measurement Time	1.36	1	1.36	4.45	0.04	0.02
Measurement Time × Image Type	10.53	3	3.51	11.49	< 0.001	0.16
Residual	57.12	187	0.31	-	-	-

Analysis of the interaction suggests that thin-ideal images lead to decreased BISS scores over time, while average-body images result in increased scores. Landscape and eyeglasses conditions show minimal changes.

4.4.2. Between-Subject Effects

Table 5 summarizes the between-subject effects. The non-significant main effect of image type confirms that differences between groups are primarily observable when considering the interaction with measurement time.

Table 5. Between-Subjects Effects from Repeated Measures ANOVA.

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p	η^2p
Image Type	1.65	3	0.55	0.13	0.94	0.00
Residual	794.68	187	4.25	-	-	-

4.4.3. Simple Effect Analysis

Given the significant interaction, simple effect analyses were conducted:

1) Thin ideal condition: BISS scores decreased from pre-test to post-test ($F(1,187) = 7.68$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2p = .04$).
2) Average condition: BISS scores increased significantly ($F(1,187) = 29.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .14$).
3) Landscape condition: No significant change ($F(1,187) = 1.28$, $p = .26$, $\eta^2p = .01$).
4) Eyeglasses condition: No significant change ($F(1,187) = .09$, $p = .76$, $\eta^2p = .00$).

These results indicate that exposure to thin-ideal images negatively impacts body image, whereas average-body images have a positive effect, with neutral images showing no significant effect.

4.5. Self-Compassion Moderation Analysis

Linear regression was conducted to examine whether self-compassion moderated the effect of image type on BISS change scores. Table 6 presents the overall model summary, and Table 7 reports the regression coefficients.

Table 6. Summary of Linear Regression Model Predicting BISS Change.

Model	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Incremental R^2	F(7,183)
Predictors: SCS, Image Type, Interaction Terms	.18	.15	.18	5.84***

***p < .001.

Analysis indicates that self-compassion did not significantly moderate the effects of image type on BISS change scores.

Table 7. Regression Coefficients for Self-Compassion Moderation Analysis.

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	-0.56	0.62	-	-0.90	0.37
SCS	0.07	0.18	0.05	0.41	0.69
Average	2.47	0.85	1.26	2.91	0.00
Landscape	1.18	0.96	0.60	1.22	0.22
Eyeglasses	0.95	0.92	0.49	1.03	0.31
Average × SCS	-0.49	0.26	-0.80	-1.88	0.06
Landscape × SCS	-0.22	0.29	-0.38	-0.78	0.44
Eyeglasses × SCS	-0.19	0.28	-0.31	-0.67	0.51

Pairwise comparisons showed no significant differences in BISS change between thin-ideal and other image conditions across levels of self-compassion.

4.6. Age and BMI Moderation Analysis

Moderation analyses were conducted to examine whether age or BMI influenced the effect of image type on BISS change scores. Results indicated that neither age nor BMI significantly moderated the relationship between image exposure and body image change ($p \geq 0.10$), suggesting that the observed effects of different image types were consistent across participants of varying ages and BMI levels.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. Main Findings Summary

This study examined the effects of exposure to thin-ideal and average-body images on social media on the body image of college students and evaluated the potential moderating role of self-compassion. Data from 191 valid participants were analyzed using repeated-measures ANOVA. The main effect of image type was not significant, indicating that the type of image alone did not produce overall differences in body image scores. However, a significant main effect of time and a significant interaction between time and image type were observed ($F(3,187) = 11.486$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.156$). This indicates that changes in body image over time depended on the type of image viewed. Specifically, participants exposed to average-body images showed increased BISS scores, whereas those exposed to thin-ideal images showed decreased BISS scores. Regression analyses revealed that self-compassion did not significantly moderate these effects, indicating that self-compassion did not alter the influence of image exposure on body image.

5.2. Theoretical Framework: Social Comparison

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of Social Comparison Theory. According to this framework, individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their characteristics with those of others. Social media imagery, particularly idealized body representations, often prompts upward social comparisons, which can increase self-criticism and reduce body satisfaction. Conversely, exposure to average-body images may facilitate lateral or downward comparisons, promoting greater acceptance of one's own body and more positive self-evaluations. In this study, differences in body image changes across image types are consistent with the psychological processes associated with social comparison.

5.3. Consistency and Contrast with Previous Studies

The findings align with literature indicating that thin-ideal images negatively impact body image. Participants in the thin-ideal condition exhibited significantly lower BISS scores post-exposure, supporting the notion that even brief exposure to idealized body images can trigger immediate negative changes in self-perception.

The observed positive effect of average-body images diverges from some prior findings, which suggested improvements only among individuals with pre-existing body dissatisfaction or low self-esteem. In contrast, this study found a significant increase in body satisfaction across a general sample, suggesting that exposure to non-idealized bodies may have broader beneficial effects. This discrepancy may reflect differences in the media platform (static vs. interactive images), cultural context (Mainland China and Hong Kong, China), or measurement timing (immediate post-exposure). These results support the value of promoting body diversity and normalizing non-idealized body types on social media to enhance body satisfaction.

5.4. Self-Compassion as a Moderator

Self-compassion is often considered a protective factor against appearance-based pressure. High self-compassion may enable individuals to respond to perceived flaws with kindness and emotional balance rather than self-criticism. While previous studies

suggested that self-compassion can buffer the negative effects of thin-ideal imagery, our results did not support this moderation. Interaction terms between image type and self-compassion were not significant, indicating that self-compassion did not meaningfully influence responses to different image types in this sample.

Several factors may explain this finding. First, the exposure in this study was brief and passive, potentially insufficient to activate self-compassion. Second, cultural context may influence the effectiveness of self-compassion, as social norms regarding thinness in East Asian societies could reduce its protective role. Third, self-compassion may primarily benefit individuals with existing body dissatisfaction, whereas our sample represented a general population. Lastly, the range of self-compassion scores was relatively narrow, limiting the ability to detect moderation effects. Overall, self-compassion remains an important concept, but its impact may depend on contextual and individual factors.

5.5. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to female college students aged 18-28 from Mainland China and Hong Kong, China, restricting the generalizability to other populations. Second, all variables were self-reported, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies. Third, the stimuli were presented on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), which may introduce platform-specific biases and limit generalization to other social media. Fourth, the study involved a short-term, single exposure, which does not reflect the cumulative effects of repeated social media engagement. Finally, the study did not directly measure psychological mechanisms, such as social comparison processes, that could explain changes in body image.

5.6. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could expand to more diverse samples in terms of demographics and culture, including participants from Taiwan, China, Japan, Western countries, or non-student populations, to examine cross-cultural effects of media exposure. Including additional psychological variables, such as self-esteem or self-evaluation styles, may help clarify individual differences in responses to thin-ideal imagery. Longitudinal or intervention studies could evaluate the effectiveness of self-compassion training, mindfulness, or body-positive programs in buffering negative media effects. Moreover, employing qualitative, physiological, or eye-tracking methods could provide more comprehensive insights beyond self-report data.

5.7. Contributions and Implications

Despite limitations, this study contributes to the literature by examining the psychological effects of thin-ideal imagery among Chinese-speaking college students, a relatively under-researched population. It highlights the importance of cross-cultural perspectives in understanding thin-ideal internalization. Practically, the findings suggest that increasing awareness of body diversity and promoting realistic body representations on social media may enhance media literacy and improve body satisfaction among young adults.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of thin-ideal and average-body images on social media on body image among Chinese female college students and evaluated whether self-compassion moderated these effects. Results indicated that image type influenced changes in body image over time, with thin-ideal images reducing body satisfaction and average-body images enhancing it. No moderation effect of self-compassion was observed. These findings underscore the psychological impact of body-related social media and suggest that promoting diverse and realistic body representations may support healthier

body image in young women. Future research should continue exploring long-term effects, potential mediators, and cultural differences in responses to social media imagery.

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