

The Effectiveness of Compassion-Focused Group Counseling Using Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing Techniques on Students' Body Image

Wulantika¹, Muslikah²

^{1,2} Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

Corresponding Author:  Wulantika23@students.unnes.ac.id

ABSTRACT

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Negative body image remains a prevalent psychological concern among adolescents, characterized by body dissatisfaction and persistent self-criticism regarding physical appearance. This condition highlights the need for interventions that address the underlying emotional mechanisms associated with negative body image. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Compassion Focused Group Counseling (CFG) using Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing techniques in improving senior high school students' body image. A quantitative quasi-experimental approach employing a randomized two-factor pretest–multiple posttest group design was used. The participants consisted of 16 students from SMA Teuku Umar Semarang selected through purposive sampling and assigned to two experimental groups. Data collection was carried out using the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire–Appearance Scales (MBSRQ-AS), developed by Cash (2000) and subsequently translated into Indonesian through a series of adaptation stages, resulting in 28 items that were deemed valid. Data were analyzed using Mixed Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (Mixed ANOVA). The findings indicated that Compassion Focused Group Counseling using both Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing effectively improved students' body image, and these improvements were maintained at the follow-up assessment. Furthermore, no significant difference in effectiveness was found between the two techniques. These findings suggest that both techniques are equally effective and may serve as evidence-based interventions for improving students' body image within school guidance and counseling services.

Keywords: *Compassion Focused Group Counseling, Compassionate Imagery, Compassionate Letter Writing, body image, adolescents.*

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INTRODUCTION

Body image is an important aspect of adolescent psychological development that reflects how individuals perceive, evaluate, and appraise their bodies and physical appearance (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Cash, 2012). During adolescence, biological changes associated with puberty, increasing concern about appearance, and strong social influences make body image an important component of identity formation and psychosocial adjustment (Santrock, 2023). However, research has shown that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to negative body image due to their tendency to engage in social comparison and internalize unrealistic body ideals (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Vuong et al., 2021). Globally, the proportion of adolescents experiencing body dissatisfaction remains relatively high (Glaser et al., 2024), and an analysis of 154,183 adolescents from 43 countries found that negative body perceptions were associated with increased feelings of sadness and various indicators of poorer mental health (Leite et al., 2025). In Indonesia, Aqilah and Trihandayani (2024) also reported high levels of dissatisfaction among adolescents regarding physical changes during puberty. Similarly, Saputra and Sosialita (2023) reported that a substantial proportion of adolescent girls experienced moderate to high levels of body dissatisfaction, indicating that acceptance of their bodies has not yet developed optimally.

A similar condition was identified in a preliminary study conducted at Teuku Umar Senior High School Semarang involving 153 students, using a psychological body image scale. The results showed that most students were classified in the moderate category, comprising 96 students (63%). In addition, 52 students (34%) were classified in the high category, 4 students (3%) in the low category, and 1 student (1%) in the very high category, while no students were classified in the very low category. This distribution indicates that, although most students demonstrated moderate to high levels of body image, some students still experienced low body image, and a positive and stable body image had not yet been fully developed among all students.

These findings were further supported by interviews with all guidance and counseling teachers at Teuku Umar Senior High School. The interviews aimed to explore students' body image and self-compassion, particularly their responses to and perceptions of their bodies and physical appearance. The aspects explored included tendencies toward self-criticism, the ability to self-soothe when experiencing negative emotions, social comparison, dissatisfaction with one's body and appearance, feelings of shame or inferiority, and acceptance of one's physical condition. The interview findings indicated that some students continued to experience dissatisfaction with their body shape, body weight, and physical changes during puberty, such as acne and changes in facial appearance. These concerns were associated with feelings of inferiority, low self-confidence, and a tendency to compare their appearance with that of their peers. Some students also tended to restrict activities related to their appearance and compare their physical characteristics with those of others. These findings suggest that body acceptance and the development of a positive body image had not yet been fully and consistently internalized among some students. Information obtained from this preliminary study was used to identify the phenomenon and to strengthen the need for body image interventions within the school setting.

Negative body image is not limited to dissatisfaction with physical appearance but may also affect various psychological aspects of adolescents. Palupi et al. (2023) found that adolescents with negative body image tended to experience higher levels of social anxiety due to fear of negative evaluation by others and a tendency to withdraw from social interactions. In addition, Stapleton et al. (2017) found that negative body image was associated with lower self-confidence and greater psychological distress. Previous research has also suggested that high levels of self-criticism and shame are among the psychological mechanisms underlying the

development of negative body image, causing individuals to perceive bodily imperfections as threats to their self-worth (Gilbert, 2009). Within the framework of Compassion-Focused Therapy (CFT), individuals with high levels of self-criticism tend to be dominated by the threat system, whereas the development of self-compassion through activation of the soothing system enables individuals to respond to bodily imperfections with greater acceptance rather than excessive self-criticism (Mahon & Hevey, 2022). Therefore, compassion-based interventions may have the potential to address the emotional mechanisms underlying negative body image rather than merely its symptoms.

The effectiveness of compassion-based approaches in improving body image has been supported by previous research. A systematic review by Brown and Ashcroft (2025) indicated that CFT consistently reduced self-criticism and external shame by strengthening compassion toward oneself and others. These findings are further supported by a meta-analysis by Vidal and Soldevilla (2023), which reported that CFT significantly enhanced self-soothing capacity while reducing self-criticism, as well as by Krieger et al. (2019), who demonstrated the effectiveness of compassion-based interventions among individuals with high levels of self-criticism. In a group format, Mehrabi et al. (2024) found that Compassion-Focused Group Therapy significantly improved body image and reduced interpersonal distress. Similar findings were reported by Carter et al. (2021), who demonstrated that a compassion-based group intervention was effective in reducing body weight shame, increasing self-compassion, and decreasing self-criticism. Among adolescents, Branch (2026) found that CFT was effective in reducing internalized shame and self-criticism among adolescent girls with body image concerns. Collectively, these findings suggest that compassion-based approaches have a strong empirical basis for use as an intervention to improve adolescent body image.

Within educational settings, the principles of CFT can be adapted into Compassion-Focused Group Counseling (CFGC), which utilizes group dynamics as a medium for developing emotional regulation, social support, and compassionate attitudes toward oneself. A group setting enables participants to share experiences, receive validation, and develop more adaptive responses to self-criticism and negative experiences related to appearance (Arimitsu, 2016; Taufik et al., 2025; Prayitno & Amti, 2004). Strengthening guidance and counseling services in schools is particularly important because adolescent psychological well-being is influenced by protective factors, including peer support and willingness to seek help when experiencing psychological difficulties. Therefore, schools need to provide preventive and remedial services that facilitate students' optimal psychological development (Kholiq et al., 2026). Sopian et al. (2023) also demonstrated that Compassion-Focused Group Counseling was effective in increasing students' self-esteem, suggesting that the principles and techniques of CFT can be conceptually and operationally implemented within school-based guidance and counseling services.

Two techniques commonly used within the compassion framework are Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing. Compassionate Imagery helps individuals develop a safe and compassionate mental representation through visualization, thereby reducing fear of compassion and modifying emotional responses to self-criticism (Gilbert, 2009). Varley et al. (2025) found that compassionate imagery exercises could reduce fear of compassion, which in turn contributed to improvements in self-image, while Butler et al. (2021) found that an imagery rescripting-based intervention significantly reduced state body dissatisfaction and increased body acceptance. In contrast, Compassionate Letter Writing facilitates the restructuring of internal dialogue through a compassionate writing process. Mahon and Hevey (2022) found that this technique contributed to increased body acceptance and reduced appearance-related self-

criticism, while Stern and Engeln (2018) demonstrated that the use of compassionate language in writing activities resulted in higher levels of body satisfaction and positive affect compared with the use of neutral language.

Although these two techniques share the same theoretical framework, research directly comparing the effectiveness of Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing remains limited. Richards (2020) reported that Compassionate Imagery was more effective than Compassionate Letter Writing in managing post-event processing; however, the study was conducted among adults in an individual intervention setting and recommended further research using a group intervention format. Meanwhile, Li et al. (2025) found that Compassionate Letter Writing helped individuals maintain positive body perceptions following exposure to social media content. However, the study examined only one compassion-based technique and therefore recommended comparative research involving other compassion techniques. Furthermore, most research on compassion-based interventions for body image has been conducted in clinical contexts and has not specifically implemented these approaches within school-based guidance and counseling services.

Based on the foregoing, a research gap remains regarding the effectiveness of two key techniques within Compassion-Focused Group Counseling for improving body image among high school students in the context of school-based guidance and counseling services. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of Compassion-Focused Group Counseling using Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing techniques in improving students' body image and to compare the effectiveness of the two techniques as a basis for developing evidence-based guidance and counseling interventions.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental research method with a randomized two-factor pretest–multiple posttest group design. This design was selected to examine the effectiveness of Compassion-Focused Group Counseling (CFGC) using Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing techniques in improving students' body image, as well as to compare the effectiveness of the two techniques across three measurement time points: pretest, posttest, and follow-up. The study was conducted at Teuku Umar Senior High School Semarang through six intervention sessions, with the follow-up assessment conducted two weeks after the intervention to evaluate the sustainability of the changes that occurred.

Participants

The sample consisted of 16 students selected using purposive sampling, in which participants were selected based on inclusion criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. The participants were then randomly assigned to two experimental groups, with eight students in each group. The first group received Compassion-Focused Group Counseling (CFGC) using the Compassionate Imagery technique, while the second experimental group received Compassion-Focused Group Counseling (CFGC) using the Compassionate Letter Writing technique.

Instrument

This study used the Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire–Appearance Scales (MBSRQ-AS), a 34-item instrument developed by Cash (2000), to measure body image. The instrument comprises five dimensions: appearance evaluation, appearance orientation, body

areas satisfaction, overweight preoccupation, and self-classified weight. Before its use, the instrument was adapted into Indonesian through a forward-backward translation process and expert judgment. The adapted instrument was subsequently pilot-tested with 80 Grade 11 students at Teuku Umar Senior High School Semarang. Item validity was examined using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation, with an r value of 0.220 used as the criterion for determining item validity. The validity testing showed that six items did not meet the established criterion and were therefore eliminated, resulting in a final instrument consisting of 28 valid items. Reliability testing yielded a coefficient of 0.779 (> 0.70), indicating high reliability and supporting the suitability of the instrument for use in this study.

Research Procedure

The study began with the administration of a pretest to all participants to obtain a baseline measure of body image. Subsequently, each group participated in six sessions of Compassion-Focused Group Counseling according to the assigned technique. The first group received Compassionate Imagery exercises focusing on the development of compassionate mental representations through visualization, whereas the second group received Compassionate Letter Writing exercises focusing on the development of compassionate internal dialogue through writing activities. After all intervention sessions had been completed, participants completed the posttest. A follow-up assessment was then conducted two weeks after the intervention to examine the sustainability of changes in body image.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Mixed Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance (Mixed ANOVA) with the assistance of IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The analysis began with assumption testing, including the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, Levene's test for homogeneity, and Mauchly's test for sphericity. Subsequently, within-subjects effects were analyzed to examine changes in body image across measurement time points, between-subjects effects were analyzed to examine differences in effectiveness between groups, and pairwise comparisons were conducted to identify differences in scores across measurement time points. The significance level was set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of Compassion-Focused Group Counseling (CFGC) using Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing techniques in improving the body image of students at Teuku Umar Senior High School Semarang. The results are presented through descriptive statistical analyses to describe changes in body image scores within each group, followed by inferential statistical analyses using the Friedman test, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, and Mixed ANOVA.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Body Image Scores

No	Group	Measurement Stage	Mean	SD
1	<i>Compassionate Imagery</i>	Pretest	81,25	6,36
		Posttest	90,25	9,97
		Follow-Up	93,13	9,69
2	<i>Compassionate Letter Writing</i>	Pretest	77,00	7,21

No	Group	Measurement Stage	Mean	SD
		Posttest	96,75	10,22
		Follow-Up	99,00	7,78

Table 1 shows the results of the descriptive analysis, indicating an increase in body image scores in both experimental groups from the pretest to the follow-up assessment. The Compassionate Imagery group showed an increase in the mean body image score from 81.25 at pretest to 90.25 at posttest, followed by a further increase to 93.13 at follow-up. Meanwhile, the Compassionate Letter Writing group demonstrated a greater increase, from a mean score of 77.00 at pretest to 96.75 at posttest and 99.00 at follow-up. These findings indicate that both techniques within Compassion-Focused Group Counseling contributed to improvements in participants' body image over time.

The Mixed ANOVA revealed a significant effect of measurement time on changes in body image scores ($F = 30.220$; $p < .001$). To identify the specific differences between measurement time points within each group, the Friedman test and Wilcoxon signed-rank test were conducted separately. In the Compassionate Imagery group, the Friedman test indicated a significant difference across measurement time points ($\chi^2 = 10.903$; $df = 2$; $p = .004$). Follow-up Wilcoxon tests showed significant increases from pretest to posttest ($Z = -2.524$; $p = .012$) and from pretest to follow-up ($Z = -2.371$; $p = .018$), whereas the difference between posttest and follow-up was not significant ($Z = -0.140$; $p = .889$). In the Compassionate Letter Writing group, the Friedman test also indicated a significant difference across measurement time points ($\chi^2 = 12.000$; $df = 2$; $p = .002$). The Wilcoxon test showed significant increases from pretest to posttest ($Z = -2.524$; $p = .012$) and from pretest to follow-up ($Z = -2.524$; $p = .012$), whereas the difference between posttest and follow-up was not significant ($Z = -0.842$; $p = .400$).

Table 2. Mixed Repeated Measures ANOVA Results

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Interpretation
Time (Within Subjects)	2	1333,563	30.220	.000	Significant
Group (Between Subjects)	1	88,021	0.638	.436	Not significant
Time x Group (Interaction)	2	145,646	3.301	.052	Not significant

The Tests of Between-Subjects Effects showed no significant difference in effectiveness between the Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing groups ($F = 0.642$; $p = .436$). Meanwhile, the interaction between measurement time and intervention group was also not statistically significant ($F = 3.301$; $p = .052$), although the value was close to the conventional significance threshold.

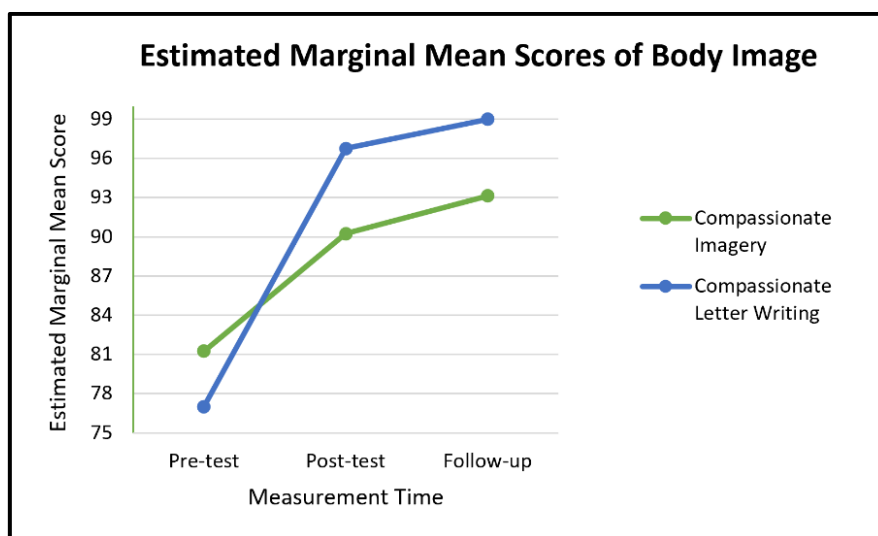


Figure 1. Estimated Marginal Mean Scores of Body Image

Figure 1 illustrates the pattern of increasing body image scores in both groups across the three measurement time points. The Compassionate Letter Writing group showed a greater increase in mean scores than the Compassionate Imagery group; however, the difference in the pattern of increase between the groups was not statistically significant ($F = 3.301$; $p = .052$).

Discussion

The results showed that Compassion-Focused Group Counseling (CFG) using the Compassionate Imagery technique was effective in improving the body image of high school students. The significant increase in body image scores from pretest to posttest, which was maintained at the follow-up assessment, indicates that the intervention was able to sustain the observed changes in the short term. This finding is consistent with Clapton et al. (2018), who found significant reductions in self-criticism and social comparison following six sessions of compassion-focused group therapy. In the Compassionate Imagery group, the effectiveness of the intervention is consistent with the mechanism described by Gilbert (2010), in which visualization of a compassionate figure or situation reduces threat responses and creates space for more balanced self-evaluation. However, not all group members demonstrated the same pattern of categorical change at follow-up. This variation is consistent with the review by Maner et al. (2023), which suggested that the effectiveness of compassionate imagery may depend on individual differences, such as levels of self-criticism and imagery capacity. This finding indicates that the internalization of compassion is a gradual process rather than a uniform effect across all participants.

In this study, the exercises began with breathing techniques designed to reduce threat responses, after which participants were guided to develop compassionate mental representations of themselves. This process helped participants reduce their tendency toward self-criticism and evaluate their physical condition more objectively. This mechanism is consistent with the findings of Kim et al. (2020) and Varley et al. (2025), which indicate that compassionate visualization can enhance emotional regulation and promote more adaptive responses to negative self-related experiences. These findings support the assumption that the improvement in body image observed in this study occurred through reduced self-criticism and an increased ability to respond to bodily imperfections with greater acceptance. Although individual variations in change were observed

during the follow-up stage, these variations did not diminish the overall effectiveness of the intervention. This suggests that the internalization of self-compassion is a gradual process influenced by individual characteristics.

In the Compassionate Letter Writing group, the increase in scores showed a reduction in variation among participants at follow-up, consistent with Lewis (2020), who found that compassionate letter writing consistently reduced body image concerns across both clinical and nonclinical populations. The characteristics of writing, which require explicit articulation of self-criticism, may have accelerated the internalization of a compassionate perspective from the early stages of the intervention (Swee et al., 2023). In addition, descriptively, the Compassionate Letter Writing group demonstrated a greater increase in mean scores than the Compassionate Imagery group, although this difference was not statistically significant. The improvement in body image may be explained by the characteristics of the Compassionate Letter Writing technique, which encourages individuals to express emotional experiences, understand their own suffering, and develop more supportive internal dialogue. Within the CFT framework, this technique involves writing a letter to oneself from the perspective of a compassionate figure, allowing participants not only to recognize their self-critical thoughts but also to learn to respond to these experiences in more adaptive ways (Gilbert, 2010). Unlike Compassionate Imagery, which relies primarily on visualization, this technique requires participants to explicitly articulate their thoughts and feelings through writing, making the process of internalizing self-compassion more concrete. Lewis (2020) also reported that compassionate letter writing interventions could increase body satisfaction, body appreciation, and self-esteem while reducing the internalization of ideal body standards. These findings further support the notion that writing activities from a compassionate perspective can help individuals develop greater acceptance of their bodies.

The absence of a significant difference in effectiveness between the two techniques, as well as the absence of a significant interaction effect between measurement time and intervention group, can be understood within the framework of Compassion-Focused Therapy, which proposes that both Compassionate Imagery and Compassionate Letter Writing aim to develop the soothing system through experiences of safeness (Gilbert, 2024). Compassionate Imagery emphasizes emotional experience through visualization, whereas Compassionate Letter Writing emphasizes cognitive reflection through writing activities. Turk and Waller (2020) demonstrated that self-compassion was consistently associated with reduced body image concerns regardless of the form of intervention, supporting the interpretation that the comparable effectiveness observed in this study may stem from their shared underlying mechanism rather than from a weakness of either technique. Although the two techniques differ in their mode of delivery, both ultimately target the same psychological mechanisms, namely increased self-acceptance and reduced self-criticism toward the body.

The findings of this study are consistent with the systematic review by Gutiérrez-Cabrero et al. (2025), which showed that various mindfulness- and self-compassion-based interventions consistently improved body image. Thus, the mechanisms underlying change appear to play a greater role than the specific form of the technique used. Nevertheless, Nightingale and Cassin (2023) found that improvements in body image could also occur across different forms of writing activities, with no significant differences between conditions. The systematic review by Wulantika (2025) further indicated that the effectiveness of self-compassion-based group interventions is not determined solely by the specific technique used, but also by their ability to develop self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness as core components of self-compassion. These findings suggest that changes in body image may not only be influenced by

self-compassion mechanisms but also by nonspecific factors, such as group dynamics, facilitator support, and participant engagement throughout the counseling process. Furthermore, the implementation of compassion-based interventions in school settings has broader implications for strengthening students' psychological well-being. School environments that promote social support, help-seeking behavior, and evidence-based counseling services may enhance adolescents' ability to cope with various developmental challenges in more adaptive ways (Kholiq et al., 2026). Therefore, future research should identify more specific mechanisms of change to provide a deeper understanding of the contribution of each technique.

CONCLUSION

Compassion-Focused Group Counseling (CFGF) using either Compassionate Imagery or Compassionate Letter Writing was effective in improving the body image of high school students. Both techniques supported participants in developing greater self-acceptance, reducing tendencies toward appearance-related self-criticism, and developing a more positive and adaptive view of their bodies. Although the Compassionate Letter Writing group demonstrated a greater increase in body image scores descriptively, the two techniques showed comparable effectiveness. These findings suggest that the development of self-compassion through group counseling represents a potentially useful approach for supporting adolescent psychological development, particularly in helping adolescents develop healthier and more adaptive perceptions of their bodies.

The findings also imply that Compassion-Focused Group Counseling may be considered as an alternative guidance and counseling service in schools for students experiencing body image concerns. School counselors may select either Compassionate Imagery or Compassionate Letter Writing according to students' characteristics and needs, as both techniques demonstrated relatively comparable effectiveness. Future research is recommended to involve larger samples, employ longer follow-up periods, and examine other psychological mechanisms involved in changes in body image so that the effectiveness and mechanisms underlying each technique can be understood more comprehensively.

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