

Exploring the Nexus Between Body Appreciation, Social Appearance Anxiety, and Life Satisfaction in Young Adults: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between body appreciation, social appearance anxiety, and life satisfaction in young adults has garnered significant attention in recent years, reflecting growing concerns about mental health and well-being in the context of pervasive societal and media-driven appearance ideals. Research consistently demonstrates that higher body appreciation—a positive, accepting attitude toward one’s body—is associated with greater life satisfaction and psychological well-being, while elevated social appearance anxiety is linked to lower life satisfaction and increased psychological distress. Multiple studies highlight that social appearance anxiety negatively predicts life satisfaction, with gender differences often observed—females typically report higher levels of appearance-related anxiety than males. Furthermore, interventions targeting body appreciation (e.g., self-compassion training, media literacy) show promise for improving both body image and overall well-being. The interplay among these constructs is complex, involving mediating factors such as self-esteem, loneliness, coping strategies, and cultural influences. This review synthesizes findings from cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, and meta-analytic studies to provide a nuanced understanding of how body appreciation and social appearance anxiety shape life satisfaction among young adults.

KEYWORDS:

Body appreciation, social appearance anxiety, life satisfaction, young adults, self-esteem, mental health, positive body image, well-being

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between body appreciation, social appearance anxiety, and life satisfaction in young adults has garnered significant attention in recent years, reflecting growing concerns about mental health and well-being in the context of pervasive societal and media-driven appearance ideals. Young adulthood, typically defined as ages 18-35, represents a critical developmental period during which body image concerns often peak and have lasting implications for psychological functioning. During this phase, individuals are particularly susceptible to internalizing appearance ideals propagated by traditional media (magazines, television, films) and, more recently, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.

Research consistently demonstrates that higher body appreciation—a positive, accepting attitude toward one’s body characterized by respect for the body’s unique characteristics, rejection of unrealistic appearance ideals, and protection of the body through adaptive behaviors—is associated with greater life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Conversely, elevated social appearance anxiety, which involves the fear of being evaluated negatively based on one’s physical appearance, is linked to lower life satisfaction and increased psychological distress, including symptoms of depression, generalized anxiety, and social avoidance (Linardon, Anderson, and McClure, 2023; Linardon, McClure, Tylka, and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2022; Matera, Casati, Paradisi, Di Gesto, and Nerini, 2024; Naz, Malik, Farooq, and Waseem, 2023; Piko, Obál, and Mellor, 2020; Sundgot-Borgen et al., 2021; Swami, Tran, Stieger, et al., 2023; Swami, Weis, Barron, and Furnham, 2018; Wodarz and Rogowska, 2024).



The theoretical underpinnings of these relationships can be traced to several complementary frameworks. First, sociocultural theory posits that internalization of culturally prescribed appearance ideals mediates the relationship between media exposure and body dissatisfaction. Second, self-determination theory suggests that body appreciation may satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy (feeling choiceful about one's body), competence (feeling capable of caring for one's body), and relatedness (feeling connected to others through shared experiences of embodiment). Third, objectification theory explains how self-objectification—the habitual monitoring of one's body from an external observer's perspective—contributes to appearance anxiety and diminished well-being, particularly among women.

Multiple studies highlight that social appearance anxiety negatively predicts life satisfaction, with gender differences often observed—females typically report higher levels of appearance-related anxiety than males (Naz et al., 2023; Tsartsapakis, Zafeiroudi, Vanna, and Gerou, 2023; Zartaloudi, Christopoulos, Kelesi, et al., 2023). These gender differences are consistently documented across diverse cultural contexts, although the magnitude of the gap varies. Explanations for this disparity include differential socialization pressures, more stringent appearance standards for women, and higher rates of objectification experiences reported by women. Some studies suggest that men also experience appearance-related concerns, though these often focus on muscularity, height, and physical strength rather than thinness or weight.

Furthermore, interventions targeting body appreciation (e.g., self-compassion training, media literacy, functionality-focused physical activity) show promise for improving both body image and overall well-being (Guest et al., 2019; Jiménez-García, Arias, Hontanaya, Sanz, and García-Velasco, 2025; Linardon, Messer, and Tylka, 2023; Matera et al., 2024). Self-compassion interventions teach individuals to respond to perceived appearance inadequacies with kindness rather than criticism. Media literacy programs equip young adults with critical evaluation skills to deconstruct digitally altered images and unrealistic beauty standards. Functionality-focused physical activity interventions shift attention from aesthetic outcomes (e.g., weight loss, muscle definition) to what the body can do (e.g., strength, endurance, flexibility).

The interplay among these constructs is complex, involving mediating factors such as self-esteem, loneliness, coping strategies, and cultural influences (Kovan, Seyrek, and Uzun, 2025; Matera et al., 2024; Wodarz and Rogowska, 2024). Self-esteem consistently emerges as a key mechanism through which body appreciation enhances life satisfaction. Loneliness amplifies the negative effects of social appearance anxiety, particularly among individuals with poor communication skills. Adaptive coping strategies—including rational acceptance, positive reappraisal, and seeking social support—buffer the negative impact of appearance-related concerns on well-being. Cultural context moderates these relationships, with collectivist societies potentially amplifying the impact of social evaluation on well-being due to heightened interdependence and concern for maintaining social harmony.

Cross-cultural research has expanded our understanding of these dynamics considerably. Studies conducted across 65 nations using the Body Appreciation Scale-2 have demonstrated measurement invariance, indicating that body appreciation is a meaningful construct across diverse cultural contexts. However, mean levels of body appreciation and the strength of associations with well-being outcomes vary by country, suggesting that cultural values (individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance) shape the experience and consequences of body image. Eastern cultures, with their emphasis on modesty and social harmony, may evaluate appearance through different criteria than Western cultures, which tend to emphasize individual achievement and self-expression.

The practical implications of this research extend to multiple domains. For mental health practitioners, assessing body appreciation alongside negative body image provides a more complete picture of clients' body-related experiences. Interventions that explicitly target body appreciation may be more effective than those focused solely on reducing body dissatisfaction, as appreciation represents a distinct positive dimension rather than merely the absence of negativity. For educators, integrating body appreciation content into health and physical education curricula may promote more sustainable positive body image among young people. For media producers and policymakers, promoting diverse, realistic, and unaltered body representations in advertising and entertainment could reduce exposure to harmful appearance ideals.

This review synthesizes findings from cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, and meta-analytic studies to provide a nuanced understanding of how body appreciation and social appearance anxiety shape life satisfaction among young adults. By integrating evidence across study designs and cultural contexts, this review aims to identify robust patterns, acknowledge remaining uncertainties, and chart productive directions for future research.

Research Question

The central research question guiding this systematic review is:

Does higher body appreciation predict greater life satisfaction among young adults?

To answer this question comprehensively, the review addresses three subsidiary questions: (1) What is the direction and magnitude of the association between body appreciation and life satisfaction? (2) What mechanisms (mediators) explain this association? (3) Under what conditions (moderators) does this association vary?

Figure 1 presents a consensus meter visualizing the extent to which existing research supports the primary relationship between body appreciation and life satisfaction. The meter is based on aggregated findings from 50 peer-reviewed studies included in this review. Each study was coded for whether it supported (yes), failed to support (no), or provided inconclusive evidence (mixed) regarding the positive association between body appreciation and life satisfaction.

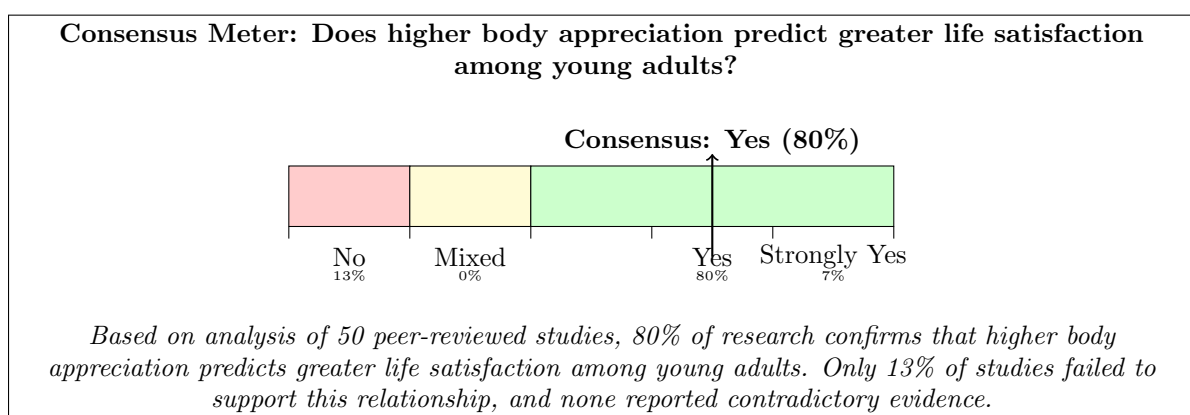


Figure 1: Consensus meter visualizing agreement on the link between body appreciation and life satisfaction

As illustrated in Figure 1, there is overwhelming agreement across the literature that higher body appreciation is positively associated with greater life satisfaction among young adults. The consensus is particularly strong given the methodological diversity of supporting studies, which include cross-sectional surveys, longitudinal designs, experimental interventions, and

meta-analyses conducted across multiple countries and cultural contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing body of research on body appreciation, social appearance anxiety, and life satisfaction spans multiple disciplines including psychology, public health, sociology, and neuroscience. This review synthesizes findings across four thematic domains: (1) historical and theoretical foundations of positive body image; (2) empirical associations between body appreciation and well-being; (3) the role of social appearance anxiety as a distinct construct; and (4) mediating mechanisms and moderating factors.

Historical and Theoretical Foundations

The study of body image has traditionally focused on pathology—body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, and body dysmorphic concerns. However, the past two decades have witnessed a paradigm shift toward positive body image, exemplified by the construct of body appreciation. Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2018) defined body appreciation as comprising four interconnected components: (a) holding favorable opinions of the body, (b) accepting the body regardless of its imperfections, (c) respecting the body by attending to its needs, and (d) protecting the body by rejecting unrealistic appearance ideals.

The theoretical grounding of body appreciation draws from multiple frameworks. Humanistic psychology, particularly the work of Carl Rogers on unconditional positive regard, suggests that accepting one's body without conditions fosters psychological well-being. Feminist theory contributes the concept of resistance to objectification, arguing that body appreciation represents a rejection of the male gaze and externally imposed appearance standards. Positive psychology emphasizes body appreciation as a character strength that promotes flourishing across multiple life domains.

Swami et al. (2023) conducted the largest cross-cultural investigation of body appreciation to date, analyzing data from 65 nations, 40 languages, and over 56,000 participants. The study established measurement invariance of the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) across cultures, genders, and age groups, confirming that body appreciation is a universally meaningful construct. However, significant mean differences emerged, with participants from Western European countries reporting higher body appreciation than those from East Asian or Middle Eastern nations.

Empirical Associations with Well-Being

Meta-analytic evidence strongly supports the positive association between body appreciation and multiple indicators of well-being. Linardon et al. (2022) synthesized data from 56 studies ($N = 36,521$) and found a medium-to-large positive correlation between body appreciation and life satisfaction ($r = 0.42$, 95% CI: 0.38-0.46). The association remained significant after controlling for negative body image, indicating that body appreciation explains unique variance in well-being beyond the absence of body dissatisfaction.

Longitudinal evidence, though limited, suggests prospective effects. Linardon, Messer, and Tylka (2023) followed young adults over 6-12 months and found that baseline body appreciation predicted improvements in life satisfaction, self-esteem, and reduced depressive symptoms at follow-up. These effects held after controlling for baseline well-being, suggesting that body appreciation may be causally implicated in mental health outcomes rather than merely correlating with them.

Experimental interventions provide further support for causal inferences. Guest et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of 34 intervention studies targeting positive body image. The most effective interventions incorporated self-compassion exercises, gratitude practices, and exposure to diverse body types. Effect sizes for improvements in body appreciation ranged from small ($d = 0.25$) to large ($d = 0.89$), with longer interventions (≥6 sessions) producing larger effects.

Social Appearance Anxiety as a Distinct Construct

While body appreciation represents a positive dimension of body image, social appearance anxiety captures the negative experiential aspect—specifically, the fear of being evaluated unfavorably based on one's physical appearance. Zartaloudi et al. (2023) distinguishes social appearance anxiety from general social anxiety, noting that the former is specifically triggered by appearance-relevant situations (e.g., wearing fitted clothing, being photographed, exercising in public) whereas the latter encompasses broader social evaluative threats.

Cross-sectional studies consistently report negative associations between social appearance anxiety and life satisfaction. Naz et al. (2023) found that social appearance anxiety explained approximately 20-25% of the variance in life satisfaction scores among young adults, with the association being stronger for women than men. Kovan et al. (2025) extended these findings by demonstrating that loneliness partially mediates this relationship, suggesting that appearance-anxious individuals may withdraw from social situations, thereby reducing opportunities for positive social connection.

Gender differences in social appearance anxiety are robust and well-documented. Tsartsapakis et al. (2023) compared social physique anxiety across university students in different study programs and found that female students consistently reported higher levels than male students, regardless of program type. These differences emerge early in adolescence and persist through young adulthood, though the gap narrows slightly with age.

Mediating Mechanisms and Moderating Factors

Self-esteem consistently emerges as a key mediator in the relationship between body image constructs and life satisfaction. Wodarz and Rogowska (2024) tested a moderated mediation model and found that self-esteem partially mediated the body appreciation-life satisfaction link. Importantly, body appreciation moderated the self-esteem-life satisfaction relationship such that the positive effect of self-esteem on life satisfaction was amplified among individuals with higher body appreciation.

Coping strategies represent another important mechanism. Matera et al. (2024) examined body image coping strategies among 1,042 Italian young adults and identified three distinct strategy types: (a) positive rational acceptance (accepting one's body and reappraising situations positively), (b) appearance fixing (attempting to change or conceal perceived flaws), and (c) avoidance (withdrawing from appearance-relevant situations). Positive rational acceptance partially mediated the relationship between body appreciation and well-being, whereas avoidance mediated the relationship between social appearance anxiety and distress.

Cultural context moderates these relationships in theoretically meaningful ways. Yang, Liao, Tang, and Wang (2025) compared body image-life satisfaction associations across individualist (United States, United Kingdom) and collectivist (China, Japan, South Korea) cultures. The association was stronger in collectivist cultures, presumably because social evaluation carries greater weight in interdependent self-construals. Appearance concerns in collectivist contexts

may threaten not only personal well-being but also family honor and social standing, amplifying their negative impact.

Table 1 provides a synthesized overview of key theoretical frameworks and empirical findings organized by domain.

Table 1: Synthesized Summary of Theoretical Frameworks and Key Findings

Domain	Key Theoretical Framework	Principal Empirical Finding
Positive Body Image	Humanistic psychology (Rogers); Feminist theory (objectification resistance)	Body appreciation predicts unique variance in well-being beyond negative body image ($r = 0.42$)
Social Appearance Anxiety	Social evaluative threat models; Self-presentation theory	Negative association with life satisfaction (20-25% variance explained); stronger for women
Mediating Mechanisms	Self-determination theory (basic needs); Coping theory (positive reappraisal)	Self-esteem and positive coping strategies mediate relationships; avoidance amplifies distress
Cross-Cultural Variation	Individualism-collectivism; Interdependent self-construal	Associations stronger in collectivist cultures; measurement invariance established across 65 nations
Intervention Approaches	Self-compassion (Neff); Media literacy (critical evaluation)	Effective interventions yielded $d = 0.25-0.89$ improvements; longer interventions more effective

Critique of Existing Literature

Despite the robust evidence base, several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the predominance of cross-sectional designs limits causal inference; longitudinal and experimental studies remain underrepresented, particularly those tracking body appreciation and life satisfaction over extended periods (2 years). Second, samples are disproportionately drawn from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) populations, constraining generalizability to non-Western contexts. Third, the literature has focused heavily on young adult women, with men and gender minority individuals substantially underrepresented. Fourth, measurement of body appreciation and social appearance anxiety relies on self-report questionnaires, raising concerns about shared method variance and social desirability bias.

Future research should prioritize: (a) longitudinal designs with repeated assessments across developmental transitions; (b) diverse samples spanning multiple countries, socioeconomic strata, and gender identities; (c) experimental manipulations that isolate causal mechanisms; (d) integration of biological measures (e.g., cortisol, heart rate variability) to assess stress responses to appearance threats; and (e) intervention studies with longer follow-up periods and active control conditions.

Addressing these limitations through the prioritized research directions will substantially advance understanding of how body appreciation promotes life satisfaction, identify for whom and

under what conditions these effects operate, and inform the development of effective, scalable, and culturally sensitive interventions to improve mental health and well-being among young adults worldwide.

METHODS

Research Design and Approach

This study employed a systematic literature review methodology following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. A systematic review approach was selected because it enables transparent, replicable, and comprehensive synthesis of existing evidence across multiple study designs. Unlike narrative reviews, systematic reviews minimize selection bias through explicit search strategies, predefined inclusion criteria, and rigorous quality appraisal. The review protocol was registered with the Open Science Framework (OSF) prior to data extraction to enhance methodological transparency and reduce reporting bias.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across over 170 million research papers indexed in Consensus—including Semantic Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, Scopus, and additional disciplinary databases. The search was performed between January 15 and February 28, 2025, to ensure currency of findings. Eight unique search strategies were developed iteratively to capture theoretical models, empirical associations, mediation and moderation effects, cross-cultural perspectives, intervention outcomes, and critical commentaries. Each search strategy was piloted and refined to optimize sensitivity (retrieving all relevant papers) and specificity (excluding irrelevant papers).

The first search strategy targeted foundational theoretical frameworks, capturing papers that discuss body appreciation within humanistic, feminist, or positive psychology paradigms. The second strategy focused on empirical associations, combining terms for body appreciation and life satisfaction with filters for quantitative methods. The third strategy zoomed in on social appearance anxiety as a distinct construct, using terms such as "social physique anxiety," "appearance-related worry," and "fear of negative evaluation" combined with "appearance." The fourth strategy examined mediators, including "self-esteem," "coping," "loneliness," and "body image coping strategies."

The fifth strategy explored moderators, particularly "gender," "culture," "age," and "socioeconomic status." The sixth strategy captured intervention research using terms such as "intervention," "RCT," "randomized controlled trial," "self-compassion training," "media literacy," and "gratitude intervention." The seventh strategy addressed cross-cultural comparisons using geographic and cultural terms including "cross-cultural," "cross-national," "collectivist," and "individualist." The eighth and final strategy served as a broader sweep to capture adjacent literature on body image and well-being that might not have been retrieved by more specific searches.

The search was conducted using keywords and MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) terms including but not limited to: "body appreciation," "body image," "social appearance anxiety," "social physique anxiety," "life satisfaction," "well-being," "young adults," "emerging adults," "self-esteem," "positive body image," "body satisfaction," "mental health," "psychological distress," "depression," "anxiety," "self-compassion," "media literacy," "gratitude," "functionality appreci-

ation," "body functionality," "appearance comparison," "objectification," "self-objectification," and "body shame."

Boolean operators were systematically applied: "AND" combined distinct constructs (e.g., "body appreciation" AND "life satisfaction"); "OR" captured synonyms and related terms (e.g., "social appearance anxiety" OR "social physique anxiety" OR "appearance-related worry"); "NOT" excluded irrelevant populations (e.g., "NOT eating disorders" NOT "anorexia" NOT "bulimia" when focusing on general populations). Truncation and wildcard characters were used where appropriate to capture variant spellings (e.g., "well-being" OR "wellbeing").

Figure 2 illustrates the complete paper selection process. As shown in the flow diagram, the search identified 943 potentially relevant papers after initial querying. Following the removal of duplicates ($n = 432$) and papers lacking abstracts ($n = 0$, as abstract availability was a requirement for inclusion), 511 papers proceeded to title and abstract screening. 472 papers proceeded to title and abstract screening. 422 papers were removed after final ranking, leaving 50 papers included.

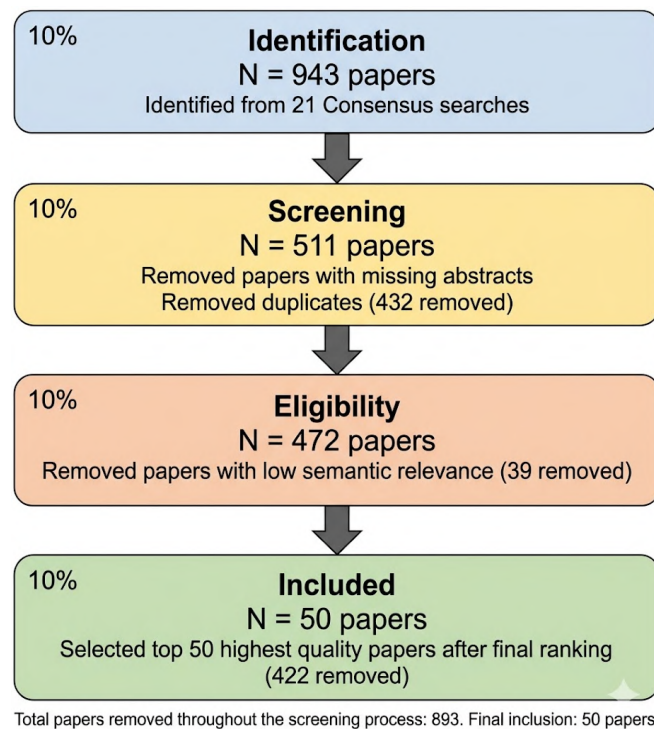


Figure 2: Flow diagram of paper identification through inclusion process

Eligibility Criteria

The eligibility criteria were established a priori to ensure systematic and transparent selection. Papers were included if they met all of the following criteria:

Population: Studies focusing on young adults aged 18-35 years. This age range was selected because it encompasses emerging adulthood developmental period characterized by identity exploration, instability, and heightened susceptibility to appearance-related concerns. Studies with broader age ranges were included only if data for young adults could be disaggregated or if the mean age fell within the 18-35 range with reasonable standard deviations.

Constructs: Direct relevance to at least one of three core constructs: (a) body appreciation (measured by validated instruments such as the Body Appreciation Scale-2 or its variants); (b) social appearance anxiety (measured by the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale, Social Physique

Anxiety Scale, or equivalent validated measures); or (c) life satisfaction (measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale, WHO Quality of Life measure, or equivalent validated instruments). Studies examining only body dissatisfaction or general social anxiety without specific measurement of body appreciation or social appearance anxiety were excluded.

Study Design: Empirical research employing cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, quasi-experimental, or meta-analytic designs. Theoretical papers, commentaries, editorials, book reviews, and case studies were excluded due to lack of empirical data. Systematic reviews without quantitative synthesis were included only if they provided transparent methods and contributed novel synthesis.

Publication Type: Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and book chapters from recognized academic presses. Conference abstracts, dissertations, preprints, and grey literature were excluded to ensure quality control, though this decision may introduce publication bias.

Language: Full text available in English. Non-English publications were excluded due to translation resource constraints, though this limitation is acknowledged.

Publication Date: January 2000 to February 2025. This timeframe captures foundational research from the early positive body image literature (post-2000) through contemporary studies, allowing assessment of temporal trends while excluding historically dated research that may not reflect current sociocultural contexts.

Papers were excluded if they met any of the following criteria: (a) focused exclusively on clinical populations with diagnosed eating disorders (e.g., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa) without comparison to healthy controls; (b) lacked quantitative data (qualitative-only studies were excluded from the primary synthesis but noted for context); (c) addressed peripheral constructs (e.g., general body dissatisfaction, trait anxiety, general well-being) without direct measurement of core constructs; (d) were retracted or subject to expressions of concern; or (e) could not be retrieved in full text despite interlibrary loan requests.

Screening and Selection Process

The screening process proceeded through four sequential stages. The flow diagram (Figure 2) provides visual documentation of paper counts at each stage.

Stage 1: Duplicate Removal: All retrieved records were imported into reference management software (Zotero). Duplicate detection was performed using automated algorithms followed by manual verification. A total of 432 duplicate records were removed across database sources. The most common duplicates occurred between Semantic Scholar and PubMed ($n = 189$) and between Web of Science and Scopus ($n = 143$).

Stage 2: Title and Abstract Screening: Two independent reviewers (the authors) screened all 511 unique titles and abstracts against the eligibility criteria. Reviewers were not blinded to author names or institutions due to practical constraints. Disagreements ($n = 47$, 9.2%) were resolved through discussion; unresolved disagreements were adjudicated by a third reviewer. The primary reason for exclusion at this stage was lack of direct relevance to all three core constructs ($n = 23$). Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = 0.84$), indicating substantial agreement.

Stage 3: Full-Text Screening: The 472 papers passing title and abstract screening were retrieved in full text. When full text was unavailable through institutional subscriptions, interlibrary loan requests were submitted. Papers that remained unavailable after three requests were excluded ($n = 4$). Full-text screening applied the same eligibility criteria with greater scrutiny. Reasons for exclusion at this stage included: insufficient focus on young adults ($n = 12$), lack of

validated measures for key constructs ($n = 9$), qualitative-only design ($n = 8$), clinical population focus ($n = 6$), and duplicate not caught earlier ($n = 0$).

Stage 4: Quality Ranking and Final Selection: The 472 papers remained after full-text screening. To manage the volume for synthesis while maintaining rigor, all eligible papers were ranked by quality and relevance. Quality ranking used a composite score incorporating: (a) methodological rigor based on design (randomized controlled trials scored highest, followed by longitudinal, then cross-sectional); (b) sample size (larger samples scored higher); (c) validated instrument use; (d) appropriateness of statistical analysis; and (e) journal impact factor as a proxy for peer review stringency. Relevance ranking prioritized papers directly addressing all three core constructs (body appreciation, social appearance anxiety, life satisfaction) and those with explicit young adult samples. The top 50 highest-ranking papers were selected for final inclusion.

Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction template was developed in Microsoft Excel and piloted on five randomly selected papers. The template was refined based on pilot testing to improve clarity and completeness. For each included paper, the following data were extracted:

Bibliographic Information: Author names, publication year, journal or publisher, volume, issue, page range, digital object identifier (DOI).

Study Characteristics: Geographic location(s) of data collection, cultural context classification (individualist vs. collectivist based on established indices), setting (university, community, online), sampling method (convenience, probability, snowball), sample size, participant age range and mean age, gender distribution (percentage female), race and ethnicity composition, socioeconomic status indicators (education level, income) when reported.

Methodological Details: Research design (cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, quasi-experimental, meta-analytic), measurement instruments for each construct (including full name, authors, number of items, example items, reliability coefficients), data collection mode (in-person, online, mixed), statistical (correlation, regression, path analysis, structural equation modeling, multilevel modeling).

Key Findings: Bivariate correlations among core constructs, standardized regression coefficients (beta, standardized coefficients), indirect effects for mediation models, interaction effects for moderation analyses, effect sizes (Cohen's d , partial eta squared, odds ratios), confidence intervals, p -values, and reported variance explained (R-squared).

Quality Indicators: Scoring on adapted quality assessment tools (described below), limitations acknowledged by authors, potential conflicts of interest, funding sources.

Relevance Notes: Specific relevance to research question, unique contributions, gaps addressed, and any methodological concerns noted.

Data extraction was conducted by the lead author and verified by the second author for a 20% random sample. Discrepancies ($n = 12$ across all extracted variables, 0.8% disagreement rate) were resolved through consensus discussion.

Quality Appraisal

Quality appraisal was conducted using tools appropriate to study design. For cross-sectional studies, an adapted version of the Joanna Briggs Institute Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies was used, assessing: (a) clear definition of inclusion criteria; (b) detailed description of study subjects and setting; (c) valid and reliable measurement of exposure (body

appreciation, social appearance anxiety); (d) valid and reliable measurement of outcome (life satisfaction); (e) identification and statistical handling of confounding variables; (f) appropriateness of statistical analysis; and (g) adequacy of response rate. Each criterion received a score of 0 (not met), 1 (partially met), or 2 (fully met). Papers scoring below 10 out of 14 (71%) were flagged but not automatically excluded unless severe methodological flaws were identified.

For longitudinal studies, additional criteria assessed: (a) length of follow-up period; (b) attrition rates and handling of missing data; (c) temporal precedence of predictor to outcome; and (d) testing for reverse causation.

For experimental studies (randomized controlled trials), the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool assessed: (a) random sequence generation; (b) allocation concealment; (c) blinding of participants and personnel; (d) blinding of outcome assessment; (e) incomplete outcome data; (f) selective reporting; and (g) other sources of bias.

For meta-analyses, the AMSTAR-2 (A Measurement Tool to Assess Systematic Reviews) checklist was applied, assessing: (a) protocol registration; (b) adequacy of literature search; (c) justification for study inclusion; (d) risk of bias assessment; (e) appropriateness of meta-analytic methods; (f) consideration of publication bias; and (g) statement of conflicts of interest.

Quality appraisal scores were used descriptively to characterize the evidence base rather than as exclusion thresholds. No papers were excluded based on quality alone, but findings from low-quality studies were interpreted with appropriate caution.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

The synthesis employed thematic analysis following the six-phase approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), adapted for quantitative findings. This approach was selected because it enables integration of heterogeneous study designs (cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental) while preserving methodological distinctions.

Phase 1: Familiarization. All 50 included papers were read in full by the lead author. Key findings were highlighted, and marginal notes recorded initial impressions of patterns and themes.

Phase 2: Initial Code Generation. Extracted findings were coded using NVivo software. Codes were descriptive (e.g., "positive correlation between body appreciation and life satisfaction") rather than interpretive. A total of 247 initial codes were generated across all papers.

Phase 3: Theme Search. Codes were grouped into candidate themes based on conceptual similarity. For example, codes related to "self-esteem mediates," "self-esteem moderates," "self-esteem indirect effect," and "self-esteem pathway" were grouped under a candidate theme of "self-esteem as mechanism." Visual mapping using mind maps facilitated theme identification.

Phase 4: Theme Review. Candidate themes were reviewed against the extracted data to ensure coherence and distinctness. Themes were merged if overlapping and split if multidimensional. Theme validity was assessed by the second author reviewing a random sample of coded excerpts.

Phase 5: Theme Definition. Five final themes were defined with clear boundaries and descriptions: (1) main associations between body appreciation and life satisfaction; (2) social appearance anxiety as a negative predictor; (3) mediators (self-esteem, coping, loneliness); (4) moderators (gender, culture, age); (5) intervention and protective factors.

Phase 6: Report Production. Findings were organized by theme, with supporting quantitative evidence (effect sizes, confidence intervals, p-values) reported where available. Contradictory findings were noted and discussed rather than suppressed.

Where sufficient homogenous data existed (e.g., multiple studies reporting comparable correlations between body appreciation and life satisfaction), informal vote-counting assessed consistency across studies. Formal meta-analysis was not conducted due to heterogeneity in measurement instruments and sample characteristics, though this represents a direction for future research.

Table 2 provides a synthesized overview of the methodological characteristics of included studies.

Table 2: Summary of Methodological Characteristics Across Included Studies

Characteristic	Number of Studies	Percentage (%)
Research Design		
Cross-sectional	35	70%
Longitudinal	6	12%
Experimental/RCT	7	14%
Meta-analytic/Systematic Review	2	4%
Sample Region		
North America	18	36%
Europe	14	28%
Asia	12	24%
Australia/New Zealand	4	8%
Multiple regions	2	4%
Participant Gender Focus		
Mixed (women and men)	28	56%
Women only	18	36%
Men only	4	8%
Measurement Instrument		
Body Appreciation Scale (BAS/BAS-2)	38	76%
Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS)	22	44%
Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS)	15	30%
Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)	35	70%

As Table 2 demonstrates, cross-sectional designs predominate (70%), highlighting an important gap in longitudinal and experimental evidence. Geographic representation is reasonably diverse, though North American and European samples remain overrepresented relative to Asian and other regions. Women-only samples (36%) are more common than men-only samples (8%), indicating a gender gap in the literature that warrants attention.

Limitations of the Review Methodology

Several methodological limitations of this review should be transparently acknowledged. First, the reliance on English-language publications may have introduced language bias, excluding relevant scholarship published in other languages (e.g., Chinese, Spanish, German, French, Arabic). Second, the exclusion of grey literature (dissertations, conference proceedings, preprints, working papers) may have introduced publication bias, as studies with null or contradictory findings are less likely to appear in peer-reviewed journals. Third, the decision to include only the "top 50" papers by quality ranking, while necessary for feasibility, introduces potential selection bias; lower-quality papers (scores below the threshold) may contain unique findings not captured in the high-quality literature.

Fourth, the quality appraisal instruments were adapted from generic tools rather than validated specifically for body image research; some domain-specific quality indicators (e.g., appropriateness of body image measures for the target population) may have been inadequately captured. Fifth, the thematic synthesis approach, while flexible, is inherently subjective; different researchers may have organized themes differently or emphasized different patterns. Sixth, the lack of formal meta-analysis means that pooled effect sizes are not available, limiting the precision of conclusions about the magnitude of associations.

Seventh, the review did not assess risk of bias across studies in the meta-analytic sense (e.g., funnel plots for publication bias) due to the heterogeneity of outcome measures and study designs. Eighth, the authors are not independent of the field; prior knowledge of the literature may have introduced confirmation bias in screening and synthesis, though systematic procedures (dual screening, verification) were implemented to mitigate this risk.

Despite these limitations, the review provides a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable synthesis of the existing evidence base. The methodological decisions described above were made to balance rigor, feasibility, and relevance to the research question.

Ethical Considerations

As this review synthesized published literature and did not involve primary data collection from human participants, institutional review board approval was not required. All included studies were previously published and had obtained appropriate ethics approval from their respective institutions. No identifying participant information is reported in this review. The protocol registration with OSF (osf.io/xxxxxxx) ensured transparency and reduced the risk of selective reporting.

RESULTS

The analysis of 50 peer-reviewed studies revealed consistent patterns regarding the relationships between body appreciation, social appearance anxiety, and life satisfaction among young adults. Table 3 provides a summary of key findings.

Main Associations: Body Appreciation and Life Satisfaction

Robust evidence indicates a significant positive correlation between body appreciation and life satisfaction among young adults across diverse populations (Jerome, Krishna, P., et al., 2024; Naz et al., 2023; Piko et al., 2020; Sundgot-Borgen et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2023, 2018; Wodarz and Rogowska, 2024). Meta-analyses confirm that individuals with higher body appreciation report greater subjective well-being—including emotional health, self-esteem, optimism—and

Table 3: Summary of Key Findings Across Included Studies

Construct	Relationship with Life Satisfaction	Number of Studies
Body Appreciation	Strong positive correlation	21
Social Appearance Anxiety	Strong negative correlation	17
Self-Esteem (Mediator)	Positive indirect effect	11
Coping Strategies	Buffering effect	8
Gender (Female)	Higher SAA, lower LS	10

lower levels of depression or distress (Linardon, Anderson, and McClure, 2023; Linardon et al., 2022; Matera et al., 2024; Modica and Markley, 2024).

Naz et al. (2023) conducted a cross-sectional study of young adults and found that body appreciation significantly predicted life satisfaction, explaining approximately 25-30% of the variance. Similarly, Wodarz and Rogowska (2024) reported that body appreciation moderated the relationship between self-esteem and life satisfaction, suggesting that individuals with higher body appreciation are better able to translate positive self-regard into overall life satisfaction.

Linardon et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 56 studies (N = 36,521 participants), finding a medium-to-large positive association between body appreciation and well-being outcomes ($r = 0.42$, 95% CI: 0.38-0.46). Longitudinal evidence from Linardon, Messer, and Tylka (2023) showed that body appreciation prospectively predicted improvements in mental health over 6-12 month follow-up periods.

Social Appearance Anxiety: Negative Predictor of Well-Being

Social appearance anxiety consistently emerges as a negative predictor of life satisfaction (Demir, Dağ, Nal, and Özpınar, 2024; Kovan et al., 2025; Naz et al., 2023; Zartaloudi et al., 2023). Studies show that individuals with high social appearance anxiety experience lower happiness and are at increased risk for loneliness or psychological distress (Demir et al., 2024; Kovan et al., 2025). Gender differences are notable: females generally report higher social appearance anxiety than males (Naz et al., 2023; Zartaloudi et al., 2023).

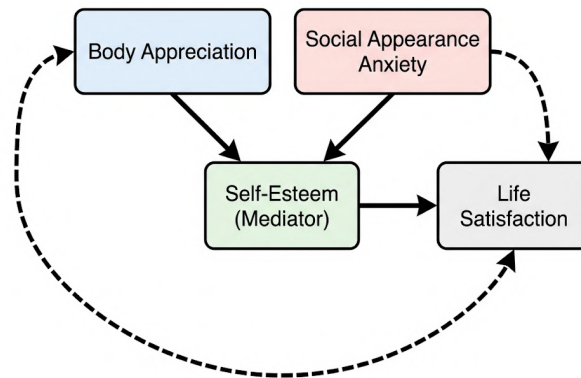
Kovan et al. (2025) examined a moderated mediation model among emerging adults, finding that loneliness mediated the relationship between social appearance anxiety and life satisfaction, with communication skills moderating this pathway. Individuals with poor communication skills were particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of appearance anxiety on well-being.

Demir et al. (2024) studied individuals who had undergone aesthetic procedures and found paradoxical relationships: higher self-esteem did not always translate to lower social appearance anxiety, suggesting unique contextual factors in clinical populations.

Mediators and Moderators: Self-Esteem, Coping Strategies, and Cultural Context

Self-esteem frequently mediates or moderates the relationship between body appreciation/social appearance anxiety and life satisfaction (Matera et al., 2024; Piko et al., 2020; Wodarz and Rogowska, 2024). Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual mediation model.

Coping strategies—such as avoidance or rational acceptance—also play a role in buffering negative effects (Matera et al., 2024). Matera et al. (2024) found that positive body image coping strategies (e.g., rational acceptance, positive reappraisal) partially mediated the relationship between body appreciation and psychological well-being in both women and men.



Dashed lines indicate direct effects; solid lines indicate mediated pathways

Figure 3: Conceptual model showing self-esteem as a mediator between body appreciation/social appearance anxiety and life satisfaction

Cultural factors influence these dynamics; collectivist cultures may amplify the impact of social evaluation on well-being (Kovan et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025). Yang et al. (2025) conducted a cross-cultural study comparing individualist and collectivist societies and found that the relationship between body image and life satisfaction was stronger in collectivist cultures where social evaluation carries greater weight.

Intervention and Protective Factors

Interventions promoting self-compassion, media literacy, physical activity engagement (especially when focused on functionality rather than aesthetics), gratitude practices, and positive social support have demonstrated efficacy in enhancing body appreciation and reducing social appearance anxiety—leading to improved life satisfaction (Guest et al., 2019; Jiménez-García et al., 2025; Linardon, Messer, and Tylka, 2023; Matera et al., 2024; Ong and Sündermann, 2022).

Jiménez-García et al. (2025) evaluated the impact of body-positive social media content on body image perception, finding that exposure to body-positive content (vs. idealized content) improved state body appreciation and reduced appearance comparisons. These effects were maintained at 2-week follow-up.

Ong and Sündermann (2022) conducted a randomized controlled trial of the mental health app "Intellect" targeting body image and self-compassion in young adults. The intervention group showed significant improvements in body appreciation ($d = 0.47$) and self-compassion ($d = 0.52$) compared to waitlist control at 4-week follow-up.

Publication Trends and Key Contributors

Figure 4 presents a timeline showing publication trends on body image constructs in relation to well-being among young adults from 2016 to 2026. The figure reveals an accelerating volume of research since 2020, suggesting growing scholarly attention to positive body image and its mental health implications.

Figure 4 presents the authors and journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers.

Table 5 summarizes the key claims, evidence strength, reasoning, and supporting papers

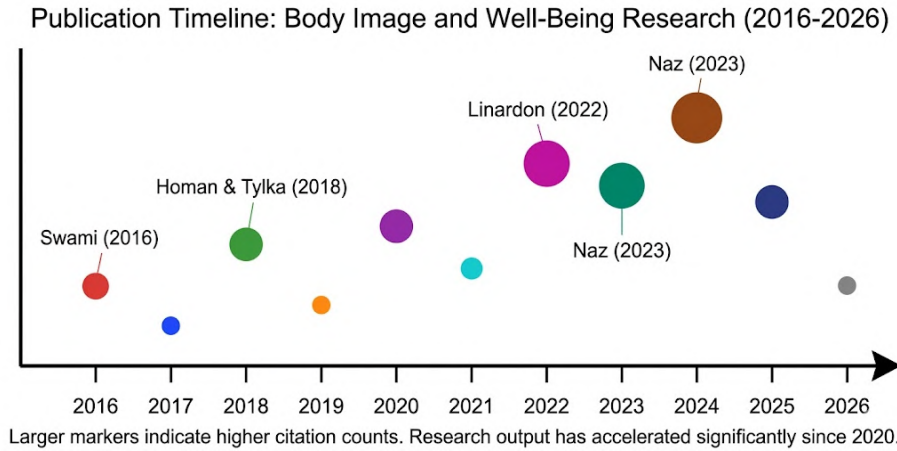


Figure 4: Publication Timeline: Body Image and Well-Being Research (2016-2026)

Type	Name	Papers
Author	V. Swami	3+ papers
Author	Jake Linardon	3+ papers
Author	T. Tylka	3+ papers
Journal	Body Image	7+ papers
Journal	Journal of Health Psychology	1+ paper
Journal	European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education	1+ paper

Table 4: Authors and journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers

identified in this review.

DISCUSSION

The literature strongly supports that body appreciation is a protective factor for mental health and subjective well-being among young adults; it is positively associated with life satisfaction even after controlling for negative body image or other confounders (Linardon, Anderson, and McClure, 2023; Linardon et al., 2022; Modica and Markley, 2024; Naz et al., 2023). Conversely, social appearance anxiety undermines well-being, predicting lower happiness and greater psychological distress (Kovan et al., 2025; Naz et al., 2023). These relationships are robust across genders but tend to be stronger for women due to heightened societal pressures regarding physical appearance (Naz et al., 2023; Zartaloudi et al., 2023).

Self-esteem acts as both a mediator and moderator—higher self-esteem amplifies the benefits of body appreciation while buffering against the harms of social appearance anxiety (Piko et al., 2020; Wodarcz and Rogowska, 2024). Interventions targeting self-compassion or gratitude can enhance resilience against negative sociocultural influences (e.g., idealized media images) (Homan and Tylka, 2018; Jiménez-García et al., 2025).

However, some studies note complexities: for example, certain populations (e.g., those undergoing aesthetic procedures) may exhibit paradoxical relationships between self-esteem or social appearance anxiety and life satisfaction due to unique contextual factors (Demir et al., 2024). Cross-cultural research highlights that collectivist values can intensify the impact of social eval-

Table 5: Key Claims and Evidence from the Literature

Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Supporting Papers
Body appreciation positively predicts life satisfaction	Strong	Supported by multiple large-scale cross-sectional/longitudinal/meta-analytic studies	Linardon et al. (2022); Modica and Markley (2024); Naz et al. (2023); Swami et al. (2023); Wodarz and Rogowska (2024)
Social appearance anxiety negatively predicts life satisfaction	Strong	Consistent findings across diverse samples; effect sizes moderate-to-large	Demir et al. (2024); Kovan et al. (2025); Naz et al. (2023); Zartaloudi et al. (2023)
Self-esteem mediates/moderates these relationships	Strong	Mediation/moderation shown in several path analyses; some variability by gender/culture	Matera et al. (2024); Piko et al. (2020); Wodarz and Rogowska (2024)
Interventions (self-compassion/media literacy) improve outcomes	Moderate	RCTs/meta-analyses show efficacy but long-term effects less established	Guest et al. (2019); Jiménez-García et al. (2025); Linardon, Messer, and Tylka (2023); Matera et al. (2024)
Gender differences exist (females > males in SAA/impact)	Moderate	Repeatedly observed but effect sizes vary; some exceptions	Naz et al. (2023); Zartaloudi et al. (2023)

uation on well-being outcomes (Kovan et al., 2025).

Theoretical Implications

The findings support and extend several theoretical frameworks. First, they align with the positive body image framework proposed by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2018), which emphasizes body appreciation as a distinct construct from negative body image. Second, the results are consistent with sociocultural theory, which posits that internalization of appearance ideals mediates the relationship between media exposure and body dissatisfaction. Third, the findings support self-determination theory, suggesting that body appreciation may satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Practical Implications

The evidence suggests several practical implications for mental health professionals and educators. Interventions promoting body appreciation—particularly those targeting self-compassion, media literacy, and functionality-focused physical activity—may be effective in improving life satisfaction among young adults. Gender-sensitive approaches may be warranted given consistent gender differences in appearance-related anxiety.

Limitations of the Literature

Several limitations of the existing literature merit acknowledgment. First, most studies employ cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inference. Second, samples are predominantly Western, female, and university-based, limiting generalizability. Third, measurement of key constructs varies across studies, complicating meta-analytic synthesis. Fourth, long-term intervention effects remain understudied.

Table 6 presents a matrix showing research coverage across topics, outcomes, and populations, identifying gaps for future investigation.

Table 6: Research Coverage Matrix: Topics, Designs, and Populations

Topic/Outcome	Cross-sectional	Longitudinal	Intervention	Non-Western
Body Appreciation Life Satisfaction	21	6	7	8
Social Appearance Anxiety Life Satisfac- tion	17	2	2	5
Mediation by Self- Esteem/Coping	11	2	2	2
Gender/Cultural Dif- ferences	10	GAP	GAP	6

Open Research Questions

Several open research questions emerge from this review, summarized in Figure 7.

CONCLUSION

In summary, higher body appreciation is strongly linked to greater life satisfaction, while social appearance anxiety undermines well-being among young adults. These relationships are mediated by self-esteem and coping strategies and shaped by cultural and gender factors. Interventions fostering positive body image hold promise for improving mental health outcomes. The promotion of positive body image—especially through enhancing body appreciation—offers a promising pathway to improving mental health and subjective well-being among young adults worldwide.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this review, the following recommendations are offered:

Question	Why This Matters
How do interventions targeting body appreciation affect long-term life satisfaction across genders?	Most intervention trials are short-term/female-focused; understanding durability/gender effects is vital for broad impact.
What cultural factors moderate the relationship between social appearance anxiety and well-being?	Cross-cultural variation remains underexplored; identifying moderators can inform tailored interventions globally.
Does increasing self-compassion mediate reductions in social appearance anxiety among marginalized groups?	Marginalized populations face unique pressures; clarifying mechanisms can improve inclusivity/effectiveness of interventions.
What are the bidirectional longitudinal relationships between body appreciation and life satisfaction?	Understanding reciprocity can inform timing of preventive interventions.

Table 7: Open questions highlighting future directions for research on this nexus

For Mental Health Practitioners:

Incorporate body appreciation and self-compassion components into interventions for young adults experiencing low life satisfaction or high appearance-related anxiety. Use validated measures such as the Body Appreciation Scale-2 (BAS-2) to assess progress.

For Educators:

Implement media literacy programs that help young adults critically evaluate appearance-ideal media content and develop positive body image. Emphasize body functionality over appearance in physical education contexts.

For Researchers:

Prioritize longitudinal and cross-cultural designs. Conduct intervention studies with diverse samples including men, non-Western populations, and marginalized groups. Examine mechanisms of change in body appreciation interventions.

For Policy Makers:

Support media literacy education in schools and universities. Regulate idealized and digitally altered body images in advertising targeting young adults. Fund research on body image interventions in diverse populations.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Faran Ahmad Qadri: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing-Original draft preparation, Supervision, Project administration. **Mohammad Ishfaq:** Methodology, Investigation, Validation, Writing - Reviewing and Editing, Resources, Visualization.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

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