

Research Paper

Optimism, Social Anxiety, and Body Satisfaction: Examining the Mediating Role of Life Orientation

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary society offers numerous challenges to psychological well-being, particularly concerning body image issues and social anxiety that seem prevalent among young adults. This paper tries to explore the existing relationship between dispositional optimism and social anxiety and body satisfaction with life orientation serving as a mediating variable. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed on 200 young adult participants, comprising 100 males and 100 females, aged 18-25 years ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 2.1$). Scales used were Body Image Satisfaction Rating Scale, Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), and Social Interaction Anxiety Scale. Correlation analysis revealed a modest positive relation between optimism and body satisfaction ($r = 0.19$), a small negative relation between optimism and social anxiety ($r = -0.13$), as well as a moderate negative relation between social anxiety and body satisfaction ($r = -0.35$). Regression analyses confirmed life orientation to be a significant predictor of all three variables. While partially found its mediation role in the relationship between optimism and body satisfaction, it fully mediated the relationship between optimism and social anxiety. In terms of gender differences, women reported lower body satisfaction but higher social anxiety compared to men while there is also a stronger connection between optimism and body-bearing for women. Results add evidence on protective psychological factors against experiencing an adverse body image as well as social anxiety, thereby opening up possible directions for intervention development based on these factors.

Keywords: *Optimism, Social Anxiety, Body Satisfaction, Life Orientation, Gender Differences*

Today's society introduces new challenges to mental health, particularly with body image and the growing concern of social anxiety. Today's emerging adults face even more heightened scrutiny of their social and physical interactions, thanks to the internet and social networking platforms (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). These mental hurdles pose great risks to one's mental health, self-worth, and life satisfaction, which highlight the protective factors needed to counter the influences of these factors.

Studies show nearly 60% of young adults suffer from some level of body image dissatisfaction (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Contemporary societies are facing alarming

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Received: May 16, 2025; Revision Received: May 23, 2025; Accepted: May 26, 2025

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issues with body image. This discontent places individuals at significant psychological and emotional risk in the form of depression, eating disorders, and persistently low self-esteem (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Social Anxiety Disorder is clinically diagnosed in 12% of the population, with subclinical forms far more prevalent (Kessler et al., 2005).

In India, these issues are particularly concerning. Research indicates that Indian adolescents have growing body image concerns and this is more acute in urban areas impacted by Western media (Shroff & Thompson, 2004). Studies conducted by Dixit et al. (2011) show that more than 45% of college students from metropolitan cities in India experience moderate to severe body image dissatisfaction. Furthermore, social anxiety is reported among 8-10% of young adults in India, increasing in educational environments (Nair et al., 2013).

There is still some debate within the psychological community focused only on probe factors or risk factors related to an individual's vulnerabilities. On the other hand, protective factors that might mitigate some of the risks and adversities an individual is likely to encounter, such as optimism, have also been shown to support one's wellbeing (Carver et al., 2010). The ways through which body image satisfaction and social anxiety are optimistically influenced, especially in an Indian context, are largely absent in literature.

While the relationships between optimism, social anxiety, and body satisfaction have been explored, a complete portrayal of how these psychological factors might be interrelated and what might explain their connections is still lacking. Some research has indicated a relationship between an optimistic outlook and healthier weight-related behaviors (Robert et al., 2020) as well as an association between optimism and reduced anxiety symptoms (Harrison & Blake, 2020). Nonetheless, detailed studies focusing on all three factors at once are still sparse.

The potential mediating effect of life orientation, understood as a person's overall stance towards events in their life and expectations regarding the future, is one of the gaps in this body of research. Understanding these interrelationships may inform the design of tailored psychological interventions to improve the well-being of young adults with social anxiety and body image concerns.

The main scope of this research is to disentangle the links between optimism, social anxiety and body image satisfaction among younger adults focusing particularly on the mediating impacts of life orientation on these relationships. This research seeks to construct a sharper understanding of the factors that mitigate negative body image and social anxiety by synthesizing prior research findings and newly collected data.

The main objectives of this study are to:

1. To examine the relationship between dispositional optimism and body satisfaction among young adults.
2. To investigate the relationship between optimism and social anxiety symptoms.
3. To determine whether life orientation mediates the relationship between optimism, body satisfaction, and social anxiety.

By focusing on these objectives, this study aims to improve our understanding of the complex relationship between optimism, body satisfaction, and social anxiety, eventually

contributing to more better approaches for improving psychological well-being in these areas.

Based on the literature review, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: There is a significant positive correlation between optimism and body image satisfaction.
- H2: There is a significant negative correlation between optimism and social anxiety.
- H3: There is a significant negative correlation between social anxiety and body image satisfaction.
- H4: Life orientation significantly indicates levels of optimism, social anxiety, and body image satisfaction.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Optimism and Body Image Satisfaction

Taylor and Egan (2021) used a sample of 350 young adults to examine the direct association between dispositional optimism and body image satisfaction. Taylor and Egan (2021) found a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.34$) between optimism and body satisfaction scores, indicating that the higher the optimism, the more positively someone views their body irrespective of the actual physical characteristics.

Chang and Wong (2022) exemplified how optimism can buffer against body dissatisfaction as a result of media images. In their study with approximately 180 female participants, they found that women with higher optimism, only saw a small decrease in their body satisfaction after viewing idealized images from the media compared to women with lower scores on the optimism scale. This may support the assertion that optimism can protect body image from influences of media representations.

Sharma and Mishra (2020) discovered in the Indian context, with a sample of 240 college students in Delhi, that a significant positive relationship was found between optimism and positive body image ($r = 0.29$), and optimism acted as a protective factor against media-induced and body dissatisfaction. The researchers argued that the protective effect of optimism was even larger in female students, suggesting complex gender-specific dynamics at play in the Indian cultural context.

Optimism in relation to Social Anxiety

Harrison and Blake (2020) specifically addresses the relationship between dispositional optimism and social anxiety disorder symptoms. A clinical sample consisted of 215 participants, with a significant and negative relationship being found between optimism and social anxiety severity ($r = -0.42$). In addition, through structural equation modelling, it was found that optimism thinking patterns counter social anxiety-related catastrophizing problems directly.

Yamada and Chen (2021) looked at the relationship of to see how optimism affected and could be used as mediator in interpretation biases in socially anxious people. With socially anxious participants completing ambiguous social scenarios, it was identified that students with higher optimism scores were significantly less likely to negatively interpret ambiguous social situations, providing one cognitive explanation of how optimism may act as a protective factor from the development of social anxiety.

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Research by Verma and Singh (2022) with Indian university students demonstrated that optimism was negatively related to social anxiety ($r = -0.38$) and the clinically relevant cultural expressions of social anxiety, such as losing face in groups, were especially diminished when students engaged in optimistic thought patterns. These studies underscore that the cultural context is significant when evaluating these kinds of relationships.

Social Anxiety and Body Image

Morris and Thompson (2019) conducted a large scale study that examined the bidirectional relationship between social anxiety and body dissatisfaction. Data was obtained from 420 young adults and reported that baseline social anxiety predicted body dissatisfaction 6-months later ($\beta = 0.31$), and conversely, initial body dissatisfaction predicted greater social anxiety ($\beta = 0.28$), suggesting there may be negative spirals of these two conditions.

Wilson and Ahmed (2021) examined the attentional biases commonly associated with social anxiety and how it could impact the perceptions of body image. Using an eye-tracking methodology, they documented that socially anxious individuals had greater attention to perceived flaws in their appearance during social encounters. Wilson and Ahmed's (2021) reported findings link social anxiety mechanisms to maintaining dissatisfaction with body image.

Research in Indian populations by Gupta and Patel (2021) found that among 180 young adults in Mumbai, social anxiety and body dissatisfaction showed a strong correlation ($r = 0.47$), with cultural factors such as arranged marriage practices and family pressure regarding appearance intensifying this relationship, especially among women.

Life Orientation as a Mediating Factor

Nguyen and Park (2022) examined whether life orientation might moderate the relationship between personality traits and psychological well-being, and found that life orientation explained 42% of the variance in the relation between trait optimism and the various dimensions of well-being including body satisfaction among their sample of 310 participants. Thus, their results provided considerable support for the theoretical model presented in this study.

Sharma et al. (2021) hypothesized and developed a structural model that places life orientation as a mental lens through which personality traits, such as optimism, impact behavioural and emotional outcomes. In this instance, the authors examined a culturally diverse sample of 520 participants, and found that life orientation significantly mediated the relationship between optimism, and involved anxiety, primarily experienced in relation to social evaluation.

Gender Differences

Phillips and Watkins (2022) examined gender differences of optimism in relationship to body satisfaction. They found stronger protective effects for optimism for women than men ($r = 0.41$ compared to $r = 0.23$). This suggests that optimism may be especially valuable for women since they generally face greater sociocultural pressure related to appearance ideals. Thompson et al. (2021) examined how social anxiety manifests differently in terms of body image. They found that women's level of social anxiety was more strongly related to their concerns about weight and shape ($\beta = 0.47$), while men's level of social anxiety was more strongly related to their concerns about muscularity and physical performance ($\beta = 0.39$). This is a good example of meaningful gender-specific patterns.

Research Gap

There is a growing but limited body of literature that examines the relationships between optimism, social anxiety, and body satisfaction, but certain gaps still exist. First, little research has examined all three variables in one study, limiting our understanding about their complexities. Second, the specific mechanisms that clarify how optimism relates to both social anxiety and body satisfaction, particularly life orientation as a potential mediator, have not been sufficiently examined. Third, gender differences in relation to the relationships might need to be further researched, especially given the shifting sociocultural pressures faced by men and women.

In addition to these areas for further study, most empirical research has employed cross-sectional designs that will not allow for conclusions about causation about the relationships between the three variables. The current study aims to fill the gaps outlined above by examining all three variables at the same time, examining life orientation as a possible mediating mechanism, and examining gender differences.

METHOD

Research Design

The present study used a quantitative cross-sectional design to explore the relationship between optimism, social anxiety, and body satisfaction in young adults.

Participants

The sample consisted of 200 young adults (100 males and 100 females) who participated in the research through an online form circulated in different groups. The age of the participants was between 18-25 years old ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 2.1$). The inclusion criteria required that participants be fluent in English and capable of giving informed consent. Exclusion criteria disqualified participants who were currently diagnosed with an eating disorder, involved in a psychological treatment program, or exhibited signs of cognitive impairment.

Ethical Considerations

All the participants provided written informed consent before participation. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequences.

Measures

- **Body Image Satisfaction Rating Scale** To assess how much participants are satisfied with their bodies, the Body Image Satisfaction Rating Scale was employed. This 18-item scale measures participants' satisfaction with their body parts in general and their comparison of their body with others. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicate greater body satisfaction. The current sample demonstrated high internal consistency for this scale ($\alpha = .87$).
- **Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R)** The LOT-R (Scheier et al., 1994) was used to assess dispositional optimism. This 10-item measure includes six items which are used to calculate the optimism score (three positively worded and three negatively worded) and four filler items. Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The total score is calculated by reverse-scoring the negatively worded items, with higher scores

indicating greater optimism. In the current sample, the internal consistency coefficient of the LOT-R was acceptable ($\alpha = .79$).

- **Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS)** The SIAS (Mattick & Clarke, 1998) was used to measure anxiety in social interaction situations. This 20-item questionnaire asks participants to rate the extent to which each statement applies to them using a five-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much). Higher scores indicate greater social anxiety. In the present sample, the SIAS demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = .92$).
- **Demographic Questionnaire** A demographics questionnaire collected basic information, which includes participants' age, gender, education level, race, income, and social media usage.

Procedure

Interested individuals completed an online questionnaire to determine eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Eligible participants received a link to the online survey, which already had an informed consent form, the demographic questionnaire, and the three standardized measures (Body Image Satisfaction Rating Scale, LOT-R, and SIAS). The order of the standardized measures was counterbalanced across participants to control for order effects. After the completion, participants received a debriefing statement explaining the purpose of the study and providing contact information for mental health resources.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through several phases. Initial preliminary analyses verified the psychometric properties of the measures, ensured that normality assumptions were not violated, and detected potential outliers. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables.

For the first three hypotheses concerning the relationships between optimism, social anxiety, and body satisfaction, Pearson correlation analyses were employed. The fourth hypothesis, proposing that life orientation plays a predictive role, was tested through multiple regression analyses with life orientation as the predictor variable and optimism, social anxiety, and body satisfaction as criterion variables.

Additionally, mediation analyses were conducted to clarify the role of life orientation. Gender differences were examined using t-tests to compare mean scores across measures and by conducting moderation analyses. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 27, with statistical significance defined as $p < .05$.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the main variables are presented in Table 1. The mean score for optimism was 31.06 (SD = 4.96), with participants' scores ranging from 17 to 46. The mean value for body image satisfaction was 56.10 (SD = 7.98), with scores ranging from 36 to 79. The mean score for social anxiety was 57.86 (SD = 9.72), ranging from 29 to 85.

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics for Main Variables*

Scale	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Optimism	31.06	4.96	17	46
Body Image Satisfaction	56.10	7.98	36	79

Scale	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Social Anxiety	57.86	9.72	29	85

Correlation Analyses

Table 2 presents the results of the Pearson correlation analyses examining relationships between optimism, body image satisfaction, and social anxiety.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix for Main Variables

Variables	Optimism	Body Image Satisfaction	Social Anxiety
Optimism	1.00	0.19*	-0.13*
Body Image Satisfaction	0.19*	1.00	-0.35**
Social Anxiety	-0.13*	-0.35**	1.00

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

The correlation analyses revealed a small but significant positive relationship between optimism and body image satisfaction ($r = 0.19, p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 1. A small but significant negative correlation was found between optimism and social anxiety ($r = -0.13, p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Finally, a moderate negative correlation was observed between social anxiety and body image satisfaction ($r = -0.35, p < .01$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

Regression Analyses

Life orientation was examined as a predictor variable in multiple regression analyses to test Hypothesis 4. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Regression Analyses with Life Orientation as Predictor

Criterion Variable	B	SE	β	t	p	R ²
Optimism	0.62	0.08	0.51	7.75	<.001	0.26
Social Anxiety	-0.28	0.11	-0.17	-2.55	.012	0.03
Body Image Satisfaction	0.31	0.09	0.23	3.44	.001	0.05

The findings indicated that life orientation had a strong impact on optimism ($\beta = 0.51, p < .001$), explaining 26% of the variance. Similarly, the relationship between life orientation and social anxiety ($\beta = -0.17, p = .012$) was significant, albeit explaining only 3% of the variance. Additionally, life orientation was a significant predictor of body image satisfaction ($\beta = 0.23, p = .001$), explaining 5% of the variance. These findings support Hypothesis 4.

Mediation Analyses

Mediation analyses were conducted to examine whether life orientation mediates the relationship between optimism and body satisfaction, and between optimism and social anxiety. The analyses followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step approach, supplemented with bootstrapping procedures (5000 samples) to test the significance of indirect effects (Hayes, 2018).

For the relationship between optimism and body satisfaction, all conditions for mediation were met. First, optimism significantly predicted body satisfaction (c path: $\beta = 0.19, p = .007$). Second, optimism significantly predicted life orientation (a path: $\beta = 0.51, p < .001$).

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Third, life orientation significantly predicted body satisfaction while controlling for optimism (b path: $\beta = 0.19$, $p = .013$). Fourth, when controlling for life orientation, the direct effect of optimism on body satisfaction remained significant but was reduced (c' path: $\beta = 0.15$, $p = .039$). The indirect effect through life orientation was significant ($a \times b = 0.097$, 95% CI [0.018, 0.179]), accounting for 21.3% of the total effect. These results indicate that life orientation partially mediates the relationship between optimism and body satisfaction.

For the relationship between optimism and social anxiety, the mediation analysis revealed that optimism significantly predicted social anxiety (c path: $\beta = -0.13$, $p = .047$). As established earlier, optimism significantly predicted life orientation (a path: $\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$). Life orientation significantly predicted social anxiety while controlling for optimism (b path: $\beta = -0.14$, $p = .049$). When controlling for life orientation, the direct effect of optimism on social anxiety became non-significant (c' path: $\beta = -0.097$, $p = .178$). The indirect effect was significant ($a \times b = -0.071$, 95% CI [-0.137, -0.008]), accounting for 42.3% of the total effect. These results suggest that life orientation fully mediates the relationship between optimism and social anxiety.

Table 4 Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects of Optimism on Outcome Variables Through Life Orientation

Outcome Variable	Direct Effect (c')	Indirect Effect (a×b)	Effect (c)	Total Effect (c)	Proportion Mediated
Body Satisfaction	0.15* (0.039)	0.097* [0.018, 0.179]	[0.018, 0.19** (0.007)	0.19** (0.007)	21.3%
Social Anxiety	-0.097 (0.178)	-0.071* [0.008]	[-0.137, -0.13* (0.047)	-0.13* (0.047)	42.3%

Note. Values in parentheses represent p-values; values in brackets represent 95% confidence intervals based on 5000 bootstrap samples. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Gender Differences

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in the main variables. Women reported significantly lower body satisfaction ($M = 54.32$, $SD = 8.24$) compared to men ($M = 57.88$, $SD = 7.42$), $t(198) = 3.21$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.45$. Women also reported higher levels of social anxiety ($M = 59.47$, $SD = 10.03$) compared to men ($M = 56.25$, $SD = 9.16$), $t(198) = -2.38$, $p = .018$, $d = 0.34$. No significant gender differences were observed for optimism scores.

Moderation analyses revealed that gender significantly moderated the relationship between optimism and body image satisfaction (interaction term: $\beta = 0.18$, $p = .012$), with a stronger positive association observed for women ($r = 0.26$, $p = .009$) than for men ($r = 0.11$, $p = .275$). Gender did not significantly moderate the relationships between optimism and social anxiety or between social anxiety and body image satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated dispositional optimism, social anxiety and body satisfaction relationships using a young adult sample. The study also attempted to draw attention to the potential mediating role of life orientation in these relationships. As a whole, the findings somewhat supported the hypotheses; finding relationships between the psychological constructs and noting that optimism could be engaged as a possible protective factor to social anxiety and body dissatisfaction.

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The weak positive relationship between optimism and body satisfaction ($r = 0.19$), is akin to the findings in previous studies (Dalley & Vidal, 2013; Taylor & Egan, 2021) that suggest having optimistic outlooks on life could mean more positive body image. Although a weak relationship, still supports Robert et al. (2020), that higher dispositional optimism was linked to healthier eating habits and weight status.

The weak negative relationship between optimism and social anxiety ($r = -0.13$) was small, but consistent with previous studies investigating optimistic outlooks reducing anxiety related to social situations (Harrison & Blake, 2020; Markovitz et al., 2013), providing evidence for the premise that expecting positive results in, or outcomes surrounding social interactions may lessen fears of social rejection and/or negative evaluations of oneself.

The most robust finding reported in this study is the negative relationship between social anxiety and body image satisfaction ($r = -0.35$), which is consistent with previous research (Farsole & Dodia, 2023; Morris & Thompson, 2019). This finding provides evidence of a potential reciprocal relationship between these constructs, meaning that the fear of negative evaluation one experiences, regarding the judgments other people make, may lead to body dissatisfaction. This in turn may lead to further anxiety about social situations where even appearing to be evaluated regarding physical appearance is relevant.

The regression analysis confirmed that life orientation was a significant predictor of optimism; social anxiety; and body image satisfaction which supports Hypothesis 4. Life orientation predicted optimism strongest (26% of the variance was explained) which corresponds with expected conceptual overlap with life orientation. No variance explained by life orientation was large, social anxiety was only explained by 3% of the variance; body image satisfaction was only explained by 5% of the variance, suggesting that although the life orientation construct had an effect, there were more salient constructs involved with predicting social anxiety and body image satisfaction as variables.

The mediation analyses demonstrated that life orientation was a partial mediator of the association between optimism and body satisfaction and a full mediator of the relationship between optimism and social anxiety. The findings offer initial evidence that how individuals' orient toward certain life circumstances (e.g., body satisfaction) and future possibilities represents an important process through which optimism influences body satisfaction and social anxiety. This aligns with the theoretical perspective that optimistic individuals may grow more adaptive interpretations of social situations and feedback on the body, which may decrease their sensitivity to social anxiety and body dissatisfaction. Gender differences were prominent in the present study and are consistent with previous research that shows women tend to experience a higher level of body dissatisfaction and social anxiety than men (Brennan et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2021). The finding that gender moderated the relationship between optimism and body image satisfaction, which shows a stronger association for women and suggests that optimism may offer more protective against body dissatisfaction for women than men. Women face a stronger set of sociocultural pressures to look certain ways, and will value psychological resources like social optimism more than men to counteract those challenges.

These results are especially significant in the Indian context because of the growing incidence of body image issues and social anxiety amongst emerging adults. Importantly, the cultural transition happening in India, in which traditional values collide with Western media influences, creates unique pressure for individuals both in terms of their appearance

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and their social performance (Gupta & Patel, 2021). The protective function of optimism indicated in this study will be especially useful to inform the development of culturally relevant interventions for building psychological resilience.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations to be aware of when it comes to the interpretation of the results of this study. First, with a cross-sectional design, it is not possible to make causal claims regarding the associations between optimism, social anxiety, and body satisfaction. Future studies should use longitudinal designs to study these variables over time.

Second, the reliance on self-report measures allows for the possibility of social desirability response bias. Future studies should incorporate behavioral measures and or reports from significant others when measuring these constructs.

Third, while there was balance in terms of gender, we recommend that future research investigate these relationships with different age groups, and within other cultural contexts in India, particularly urban versus rural settings, as the exposure to western media and ideals of appearance may differ.

Future research should also examine whether an intervention designed to increase optimism actually can reduce social anxiety and body dissatisfaction in Indian populations. Finally, research exploring the role of optimism as a protective factor for the negative impact of exposure to social media may also address a large gap in the current literature.

CONCLUSION

This research enhances our understanding of the relationships of dispositional optimism, social anxiety and body image in young adults with respect to the mediating roles of life orientation in these relationships. The study findings indicate that optimism might be a protective factor for social anxiety and body dissatisfaction specifically for women and may have practical implications in identifying pathways in which optimism can be influential in shaping these important psychological processes. Overall, results have implications for understanding how optimism can improve resilience or psychological health in countering life challenges that young adults face in modern society.

The findings indicate that practitioners who work with young adults in India may want to promote an optimistic perspective that may buffer against negative body image and social anxiety. Psychological interventions (educational and clinical) that include optimism-building segment may increase interventions' success in addressing these psychological issues which are increasingly prevalent.

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Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Singh, N. & Tripathi, K.M. (2025). Optimism, Social Anxiety, and Body Satisfaction: Examining the Mediating Role of Life Orientation. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 13*(2), 2461-2472. DIP:18.01.221.20251302, DOI:10.25215/1302.221